

SAREK [066-118-4.7]

By A.C. CRISPIN

Synopsis

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The wind, cooling now that Nevasa had set, plucked at Sarek's light-colored tunic and loose trousers. As he watched T'Rukh intently, his lean, long-fingered hands tightened on the balustrade of the terrace overlooking the eastern gardens. The ambassador was attempting to reach a decision.

Logic versus ethics... Should the needs of the many outweigh the conscience and honor of the one? Could he compromise what he knew to be right, in order to accomplish what was necessary?

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To Michael Capobianco, with love

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PROLOGUE

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Logic versus ethics ... Should the needs of the many outweigh the conscience and honor of the one? Could he compromise what he knew to be right, in order to accomplish what was necessary?

Sarek gazed across the Plains of Gol, considering. Long ago, he had studied with several of the Masters there. What would his teachers do if they were in his place?

The ambassador drew a deep breath of the evening air, then let it out slowly as he regarded the surrounding mountains. He had chosen this site for his private retreat decades ago, when he and his second wife had first been married. These remote hills were cooler, even during the daylight hours, and thus easier for humans--in particular, one special human--to endure than the scorching heat of the rest of his world.

Night deepened around Sarek as he watched T'Rukh.

Evening on this hemisphere of Vulcan did not bring darkness, though. T'Rukh, the huge world humans called Charis, provided forty times the light of Earth's full moon. At full phase, T'Rukh was a swollen yellowish half-sphere, a dissipated eye that never blinked, even when spumes and geysers of fire from her volcano-wracked surface penetrated her cloud cover. Sarek noted absently that a new volcano had erupted since yesterday; the large, fire-red dot resembled an inflamed abscess on the planet's sulfuric countenance.

T'Rukh was only one of The Warchef's names; her name varied according to the time of the Vulcan year. More than twice as large as Vulcan, T'Rukh boasted a moon of her own in a low, fast-moving orbit. Tonight T'Rukhemai (literally,

"Eye of The Watcher") was visible as a dark reddish sphere almost in the center of the planet--a pupil in a giant eye.

The little worldlet, slightly larger than Earth's moon, orbited The Watcher so quickly that its motion was almost perceptible to the naked eye. Sarek watched The Watcher, and she stared back at him balefully.

It was his habit to stand here and watch The Watcher whenever he faced a difficult decision. And the one he faced now was proving to be one of the most difficult choices of his career. Logic chains ran through his mind, presenting pros and cons relentlessly, over and over. Should he act? The action he was contemplating went against all the rules of diplomacy and interstellar law. How could he abandon those rules, he who had devoted his life to upholding the tenets of civilized society?

But ... if he did not act, did not gain proof of the insidious threat that faced the Federation, millions of innocent lives could well be lost. Perhaps billions.

Sarek's mouth tightened. Proving his theory would require that he break the law. How could he himself flout what he had helped engineer? And yet ... this was definitely a case where the needs of the many must be considered. Could he risk the impending threat of war?

Sarek stared fixedly at The Watcher as he thought. Somewhere in the distance, a lanka-gar called. The ambassador turned his head, catching the wheeling shape of the night flier as it swooped after prey on the slopes below.

Glancing over his shoulder, Sarek noted absently that the garish colors of sunset were muted now. In a few minutes they would be entirely gone, and T'Rukh, though no longer full, would rule the night.

The breeze touched him again, chill against his cheek. By midnight it would be cool even by human standards.

Even though the ambassador's aquiline features were composed, as usual, his mind would not be still.

The logic chains flowed, slowed--and the equation crystallized in his mind. The decision lay before him. In this case, logic and necessity must outweigh ethical considerations.

Sarek nodded slightly at T'Rukh, bidding the giant planet farewell, knowing that his decision would require that he journey off-world. The Watcher would wax and wane without his presence for many nights. He would leave as soon as possible.

Turning away from the vista before him, the ambassador headed back toward the house, his strides quick and sure.

For a moment he envisioned Spock's reaction if he were to discover what his father was planning, and experienced a flicker of amusement. His son would be surprised, possibly shocked, if he knew that his sire was

logically and rationally planning to commit a crime. The ambassador had little doubt that, in his place, Spock would choose the same course. But his son was half-human--he'd long ago learned to dissemble, to equivocate ... even to lie. Yes, Spock would condone his decision--which, in a way, made his father's conscience trouble him even more.

But there was no help for it--his logic was flawless. His course was clear. He would not turn back.

Reaching the villa, a low, sprawling structure with thick, protective walls, Sarek entered. The house was decorated for the most part in typical Vulcan fashion, austere, with only the most essential furnishings, but its very bareness lent a feeling of spacious comfort. In the living room, presence of the villa's human occupant was reflected in the antique desk with its faded petit-point chair, in the matching coffee table, and in the handwoven hangings that lent soft touches of rose, turquoise, and sea green to the walls. A water sculpture made a faint susurrant within the protective field that prevented evaporation of the precious liquid.

Sarek paused in his office and contacted his young aide, Soran, instructing him to make arrangements for them to travel off-world. The Ambassador's office was devoid of ornamentation, except for the painting of an icy world beneath a swollen red sun.

Next door to his office was the bedroom, and through that lay his wife's sitting room, with its view of the eastern gardens. Sarek already knew from the bond they shared that Amanda awaited him there. He hesitated for a moment before the caryen portal leading into their room.

Knowing that his wife had sensed his presence through their bond, Sarek opened the door and passed through the bedroom to the sitting room. Amanda occupied her favorite chair as she sat gazing out at The Watcher and the rocky spires of her garden.

The light from Vulcan's sister world shone on her face, revealing new lines that had not been there a month ago.

Her bones seemed more prominent, the lines of cheekbones and nose showing through flesh. He studied her for a moment, noting that Amanda's flowing garment now clearly outlined the angles of her shoulders and collarbone; she had never been a large woman, but during the past month she had clearly lost weight from her already small frame.

"Sarek," she greeted her husband, her mental and audible voice filled with warmth and welcome as she held out her hand to him.

"Greetings, my wife," the ambassador said, permitting himself the small smile that he reserved for her alone.

Extending two fingers, he ceremoniously touched them to hers. The gesture, so simple on a physical level, was, between a bonded couple, capable of nearly infinite shades of meaning--at times merely a casual acknowledgment, the mental equivalent of a peck on the cheek, at times nearly as passionate as anything experienced in the throes of passion.

Sarek's touch conveyed a depth of feeling that the ambassador had never voiced, for speaking of such things in words, aloud, was not the Vulcan way.

"Is it cool out tonight?" Amanda asked, gazing out at her garden. She had planted it shortly after Spock's birth, using unusually shaped and colored stones to complement the native Vulcan cactuslike trees, as well as desert plants from a dozen Federation worlds.

"The temperature is normal for the season and time of day," Sarek replied.

"I thought of joining you on the terrace," Amanda said, glancing out at the garden, "but I must have fallen asleep. I only awoke when I felt your presence next door."

Sarek sat down next to her, his gaze traveling over her features, noting with disquiet how drawn and pale she appeared. And she tired so easily these days ...

Concerned, the Vulcan raised the light level in the room, then studied his wife's face intently. Even without The Watcher's eerie illumination, Amanda appeared drawn and pale. No trace of pink remained in her cheeks, once so rounded and healthy.

As she grew aware of his fixed regard, her blue eyes, once so direct, refused to meet his own. She busied herself capping her old-fashioned pen, then closing her journal and placing it back in the drawer of her desk.

Sarek leaned closer to her, his eyes never leaving her countenance. "Amanda," he said quietly, "I noted the other day that you appear to have lost weight ... have you been feeling unwell, my wife?"

The thin shoulders lifted in a small shrug. "I expect I may have picked up a cold, Sarek. Please don't worry about me. I will be fine."

The ambassador shook his head. "I want you to contact T'Mal, and arrange for her to conduct a thorough evaluation of your physical condition."

Amanda glanced at him; then her eyes shifted quickly away. "All I need is a few days' rest, Sarek. There is no need to visit my physician."

"Please allow the Healer to make such a judgment," Sarek said. "Promise me that you will arrange to see her as soon as possible, Amanda."

She took a deep breath, and Sarek sensed through their bond that she was struggling to keep some strong emotion from him. "I have a great deal to accomplish this week," she demurred. "My editor wants to move up the publication date for the new book. She told me today that there is a tremendous amount of interest in having the writings of Surak's followers translated."

"Indeed?"

"Yes," Amanda said, clearly warming to her subject, "and when I told her about--"

"Amanda," Sarek interrupted, raising one hand, "you are changing the subject deliberately. Do not think that I did not notice."

His wife opened her mouth to protest, then closed it abruptly and stared fixedly at her hands. Sarek's concern sharpened. Amanda seemed to have aged a decade in a matter of a few weeks.

"I regret that I must leave you, tomorrow morning," Sarek said. "I must go to Earth to consult with the Vulcan consulate and arrange to meet with the Federation president.

It will aid me in concentrating on my work if I know that T'Mal will be monitoring your health while I must be away."

"You have to leave?" Amanda repeated, and something darkened her eyes. Sarek tried to catch her emotion, but she had been studying Vulcan mental disciplines as well as the Vulcan language for decades, and he was unsuccessful.

"How ... how long will you be gone?"

"A week, possibly two," the ambassador said. "If I could postpone this, I would, given your apparent ill health, but I cannot. The situation on Earth regarding the KEHL has worsened considerably in the past weeks."

"I know," Amanda admitted. "It makes me ashamed of my whole planet--the Keep Earth Human League used to be just a haven for ineffectual crackpots and ignorant fools.

But today's news said there had been demonstrations in Paris in front of the Vulcan consulate! It makes me furious!" For a moment her eyes flashed sapphire with indignation, and she almost appeared her old self. "Those idiots are trying to convince the entire planet that Vulcan is responsible for every disaster from the Probe's devastation to the Klingon raids along the Neutral Zone!"

"The KEHL does appear to be set on fomenting discord between my people and yours," Sarek said. "I have not heard any reports of incidents at

the Andorian or Tellarite consulates."

"Do you believe that the KEHL's sudden renaissance is due to Valeris's involvement with that secret cabal?" Amanda asked.

"The Terran news agencies certainly highlighted the Vulcan, Klingon, and Romulan conspirators far more than they did the activities of Admiral Cartwright or Colonel West when Chancellor Gorkon was assassinated and the Khitomer Conference disrupted," Sarek conceded. "Which, under the circumstances, is unfortunate, but not surprising."

His wife gazed at him intently. "Sarek ... does this resurgence of the Keep Earth Human League have any connection with your current project?"

Sarek sat back in his seat and glanced out the window at T'Rukh, its upper limb now shadowed. The ambassador was silent for nearly a minute before he spoke. "I have reached a number of conclusions of late, Amanda," he said. "I have a number of suspicions. However, I have no evidence to support my theory that is not statistical, circumstantial, or purely inferential. I need concrete proof before I can bring my findings before the Federation officials and the president."

"And that's why you are going to Earth? To get some kind of proof?."

"Yes." After a moment, the ambassador amended, "If possible."

"I see." Amanda's mouth tightened, but she did not pursue her line of questioning--which, almost more than the physical changes he had noted, alarmed the ambassador.

If his wife had been feeling like herself, she would never have given up so easily. She would have kept after him until she'd satisfied her curiosity. But now she leaned her head back against her chair, gazing out at The Watcher in silence, her eyes half-closed with weariness.

Sarek's breath caught in his throat as he regarded her, and he identified the feeling that had been growing within him ever since he had entered the room.

Fear.

"Amanda," he said, keeping his voice from betraying any shade of emotion, "I insist that you call the Healer and arrange to see her. If you will not promise, I will postpone my trip a day and do so myself."

She gazed at him, and he sensed deep emotion through their bond. Sorrow--but not for herself. Amanda's grief was for him. "Very well, Sarek," she agreed, at long last.

"You have my word that I will make an appointment this week."

"You will call tomorrow?"

"Yes."

The ambassador drew a deep breath, somewhat relieved, but still disquieted. "Perhaps I should call someone to stay with you while I am gone," he said. "One of your friends, perhaps ..." Swiftly, he reviewed options, and realized that most of his wife's human contemporaries had died within the past several years. "Another possibility is our son.

Perhaps he could take leave, return home for a visit if I contacted--"

"No!" Amanda's voice was sharp and final. "I don't want you worrying our son. There have been Klingon renegades raiding all along the Neutral Zone, and I'm sure the Enterprise is one of the ships patrolling out there."

"If Spock knew that you were feeling unwell--"

"Absolutely not," she said, in a quieter but even more positive tone. "I expect you to respect my wishes in this, my husband," she added, sternly.

Sarek hesitated. Amanda fixed him with a look. "My promise for yours, Sarek. Do we have a bargain?"

The ambassador nodded. "Very well, Amanda. You will contact the Healer, and I will not contact our son."

She nodded at him, her blue eyes softening until they were the color of her homeworld's skies. "I wish you a safe journey, Sarek," she said, and then added, with a faint, tender smile, "Whatever you're planning ... be careful.

Never forget that I love you ... illogically and madly.

Remember that ... always."

The Vulcan gazed back at her, his eyes never leaving hers.

Slowly, formally, he held out two fingers. "I will be careful, my wife."

In response to his gesture, his wife's fingers brushed, then settled against his own. The warmth of their bond enfolded them, eliminating the need for spoken words.

Sarek of Vulcan stood at the window of the Vulcan consulate in San Francisco, gazing out with growing disquiet. Today's demonstration by the Keep Earth Human League had begun with only a few picketers, some carrying homemade placards, others more sophisticated holosigns, but, even in the short time he'd been standing there, the crowd had grown

rapidly.

Now a full score of shouting humans milled before the gateway. Sarek's Vulcan hearing could easily make out what they were chanting "KEEP EARTH HU-MAN! KEEP EARTH HU-MAN!" interspersed with occasional, strident shouts of "VULCANS GO HOME!"

"Illogical," murmured a voice from beside him, and the Vulcan ambassador glanced sideways to see his young aide, Soran, standing beside him, his dark eyes troubled. "Last year, the Keep Earth Human League was considered a refuge for weak-minded racists. I examined the records ... there were no more than forty or fifty members on this entire planet. But now, Federation Security estimates their numbers to be in the thousands. Why this sudden growth, Ambassador?"

Sarek hesitated, on the verge of giving a vague answer, but instead shook his head slightly, warningly.

"Ambassador Sarek?"

The two Vulcans turned as one of the young diplomatic attaches, Surev, approached. A few minutes ago, the young Vulcan had asked the ambassador if he could spare a moment to be introduced to a human friend of his, and Sarek had graciously agreed. Now, however, Surev's unlined features were even more somber than usual. "Ambassador, I believe we must cancel the meeting I mentioned."

"Why?"

"I just received a communique from the Federation Security Office," he announced. "The security chief, Watkins, asks that we stay inside the building until they can dispatch sufficient officers to control the crowd. It is not safe to go outside, and they say that under no circumstances should you agree to meet with the KEHL leader, Ambassador."

Sarek raised an inquiring eyebrow. "Has such a meeting been requested by the leadership?"

Soran cleared his throat slightly. "As a matter of fact, it has, sir," he said. "A message arrived a few minutes ago from the demonstrators."

"Why was I not informed?" the ambassador demanded, turning to face Soran. His aide was obviously taken aback by the question.

"Ambassador, I never considered that you might wish to accede to their demand for a meeting--that would be most unwise. Possibly dangerous." Soran sounded faintly aggrieved, and Sarek could not blame him. But his aide, as yet, knew nothing of the ambassador's hidden agenda. He would have to take Soran into his confidence today, Sarek decided.

He would need help when he made his next trip. And the youth was good with computers--almost as talented as his own son. Those skills would prove useful.

"Who requested the meeting?" Sarek asked.

"The planetary leader of the KEHL," Surev said. "His name--or, at least, the name he goes by in the organization is Induna. He is from the African nation of Kenya."

Sarek looked out the window again. Surev pointed to a human who stood nearly a head above the others. "That is Induna," he said.

The Vulcan ambassador studied the imposing figure of a dark-skinned human, who wore a silk robe brilliantly patterned in black and red. "I will speak to him," he said, reaching a sudden decision. He needed more information about the KEHL, and firsthand observation would not be amiss.

"Ambassador--you must not! It is not safe, sir!" Soran half-barred the doorway, struggling to maintain his composure in the face of what must seem extremely anomalous behavior on the part of the senior diplomat.

Sarek merely looked at him for a long second. Soran hesitated, then stepped silently out of the way. Surev half-bowed. "May I at least accompany you as far as the gates, sir?"

Sarek nodded graciously. "Certainly, Surev."

Leaving the domed building and walking down the ramp, Sarek heard the crowd as it caught sight of him, flanked by Surev and Soran. Insults were hurled at the Vulcans, many of them personally directed toward the ambassador himself.

The sight of Federation security officers around the fringes of the crowd was reassuring.

The Vulcan approached the demonstrators, seeing that someone had closed the gates to the consulate, which had always stood open before this. Shouts and epithets filled the air

"They want to take over Earth! Spawn of the devil!"

"Dirty aliens, think they're so smart!"

"Go back to Vulcan!"

"Vulcans go home!"

Approaching the gateway, Sarek raised his voice to be heard. "I am Ambassador Sarek," he called out. "I understand that Induna wishes to

speak with me. Which of you is Induna?"

In response, the crowd (which now numbered forty or fifty people) parted, and the KEHL leader stepped forth. "I am Induna," he announced. His voice was a deep, bass rumble.

"Greetings, Induna," Sarek said, raising his hand in the Vulcan salute. "I wish you peace and long life."

"I accept no good wishes from Earth's enemy," Induna said coldly.

"I assure you that I wish only good relations between our worlds," Sarek said. "I invite you to enter the gates, so we may speak together."

The man drew himself up, clearly antagonistic. "I have nothing to say to you, Ambassador, that cannot be said within hearing of those who follow me. And I refuse to speak with a being so cowardly that he hides behind gates."

"I am not hiding, nor do I have anything to hide," Sarek corrected him, his tones civil but firm. The ambassador heard shouts from the crowd, but Induna appeared to be able to control his followers. "Very well, then, I will come to you, so we may speak together like civilized beings." Before either of his companions could remonstrate with him, Sarek reached out and opened the gate. Head high, still flanked by the young diplomats, he strode forward into the crowd, straight for Induna.

The moment he stepped into their midst, brushing against the demonstrators, Sarek was nearly sickened by the miasma of hatred that he sensed from the humans in the crowd.

His planet and this world had been allies and friends for over a century. How could such a thing be happening now?

The KEHL leader was clearly taken aback as the ambassador approached him, but recovered his aplomb quickly.

Turning to the crowd, he motioned for quiet--but instead the shouting intensified.

"Vulcans go home!"

"Sarek sold out Earth to the Klingons!"

Induna gestured again, more peremptorily. "Let me speak to this Vulcan, my friends and comrades," he ordered. "If I can make him see that he and his kind have no place on our world, then he will leave Earth! We do not want war, we want peace--they can keep to their planet, as we shall keep to ours!"

The protesters closest to their leader obeyed, but others, farther back in the crowd, continued to hurl abuse.

"Go back to Vulcan?"

"Vulcans go home! Vulcans go home!"

The crowd surged wildly, and then someone threw a clod of dirt. Other refuse followed. Sarek smelled rotting vegetables.

"Stop!" Induna shouted, and the missiles halted--but the crowd was clearly getting out of control. "Quiet down!" the leader commanded. The noise abated slightly.

"We have no designs on your world," Sarek cried, raising his voice to be heard above the demonstrators. "Our species have been allies for decades. We--"

"Go back to Vulcan, damn you!"

The angry shriek cut through Sarek's voice like a knife.

The crowd swelled and heaved like a storm-tossed sea.

"She's right! Go home!" screamed another protester. "Devil's spawn!" yelled yet another.

"Quiet!" Induna roared. "Let us speak--"

But the leader's words were lost as the crowd surged forward. Missiles filled the air. An egg spattered against Soran's robe. "Filthy aliens!" screamed an old woman.

The missiles grew harder, more dangerous. A rock struck Sarek on the arm with force enough to bruise. He flinched back, realized that Induna was still yelling for the crowd to quiet down, and knew the KEHL leader had lost all control of the mob--for mob it now was.

Federation security officers moved in with crowd-control stunners and forcefields. Sarek was shoved, hit hard on the back; he turned and grappled momentarily with his attacker.

With a quick thrust, he shoved the woman aside.

As the mob surged, shrieking and yelling, the Vulcan and Induna were thrust almost into each other's arms. Sarek struggled to free himself, felt the KEHL leader flail at him, whether out of fear or anger, he couldn't tell. It no longer mattered. Sarek's hand came up, searching for the correct location at the juncture of the human's neck and shoulder.

Steely-hard fingers grasped, then squeezed--Induna sagged forward bonelessly.

But Sarek did not release his grip on the leader's shoulder.

He fell to his knees, half-supporting the big human, his breath catching in his throat. He, like most Vulcans, was a touch-telepath, and the moment his fingers closed on Induna's flesh, Sarek had received flashes of the human's mental state--

flashes that literally staggered him.

Induna was not acting entirely of his own volition, Sarek realized, stunned by his discovery. The KEHL leader was under the influence of a trained telepathic presence. Using expert mental techniques, the unknown telepath had inflamed this man's tiny core of xenophobia into a raging firestorm of hatred and bigotry.

On his own, Induna would never have been more than mildly distrustful of Vulcans and other extraterrestrials.

Someone had exploited his incipient xenophobia, someone expert enough to enter his thoughts and influence them so gradually, so patiently, that the subject came to believe that everything in his mind had originated there.

Someone had molded and influenced and delicately reshaped this human's innermost desires and fears into all-out species bigotry--

and that someone was Vulcan.

Sarek could scarcely believe the evidence of his own senses. Such mental influence was contrary to every ethical and moral tenet his people had developed over millennia of civilized existence.

But he could not have been mistaken about the mental "signature" the telepath had left on Induna's mind. Sarek came back to the here-and-now, blinking, and realized that he was crouched in the center of a fighting, trampling mob.

Induna still sagged against him. The ambassador struggled back to his feet, heaving the KEHL leader up with him, lest his unconscious body be crushed in the frenzy.

Even as he gained his feet, he was nearly knocked down again by the panicked rush of retreating demonstrators.

Federation Security was routing the mob, stunning many and taking them into custody. Others were running away at full speed. In only seconds, it seemed, he was left alone, still supporting the KEHL leader's unconscious form. Soran and Surer were still on their feet, nearby. Both

young Vulcans had obviously been in the thick of the fray--their robes and hair were disheveled, and Soran was bleeding from a cut over his eye.

"We're terribly sorry about this, Ambassador Sarek!" exclaimed the head of the Federation security force, as he was hastening toward the Vulcans. "But we warned the consulate against having any contact with the demonstrators!"

"Your warning was received," Sarek said. "I chose to attempt to speak with the protesters personally. The decision was mine alone. I take full responsibility."

The human glanced sharply at the unconscious KEHL leader. "Is that Induna?"

Sarek nodded.

"We'll take him into custody, Ambassador," the officer said, reaching for the leader's limp figure. Sarek surrendered him to the authorities.

"I wish to state for the record," the ambassador said,

"that this man did not order the mob to attack us. In fact, he ordered them to desist, but they did not obey."

"Okay, Ambassador," the officer said, beckoning to a subordinate with a stretcher, "I'll be sure to put that in my report."

Sarek stood for a second longer, watching as Induna was placed in one of the emergency vehicles. Then he turned back to the two young Vulcans. "Let us go back inside," he said.

Safe once more behind the closed and electronically locked gates, Sarek dismissed young Surev to his duties, then turned to Soran. "As the humans would say, "One more piece has been added to the puzzle."

The young Vulcan raised an eyebrow inquiringly. "Indeed, Ambassador? To what puzzle are you referring?"

"The puzzle that has occupied me for over a year now," Sarek said. "There is a great deal to tell you, Soran. Let us walk in the garden, and talk. The weather is pleasant, today."

The young Vulcan seemed surprised. "You do not wish to go inside, Ambassador?"

Sarek shook his head. "I will be able to speak more ... freely ... in the garden, near the water sculpture," he said.

The youth stared at him for a moment; then his eyes widened

fractionally. "You suspect listening devices, sir?"

"Under the circumstances," the ambassador said, gravely,

"I would prefer to take no chances that what I am about to impart to you will be overheard."

Together, they walked around the curving path that circled the consulate, and were soon in a stone garden modeled on those on Vulcan. Sarek was reminded vividly of Amanda's garden, and wondered, briefly, what her visit to the Healer might have revealed. "What do you know of the Freelans, Soran?" Sarek asked.

The youth cleared his throat slightly. "Freelan ... an isolated world located in the middle of the Romulan Neutral Zone. Perhaps surprisingly, the Romulans have never laid claim to the planet, possibly because it is so inhospitable and remote. Freelan exists in the grip of an extensive ice age, with only the equatorial regions supporting life and agriculture.

The technological level of the inhabitants is high, especially in the cryogenic sciences and related products, but Freelan is resource-poor."

"Correct," Sarek said. "For someone who has only been my aide for forty-seven point six Standard days, you are well informed, Soran."

"You have been the diplomatic liaison between Freelan and the Federation for seventy-two point seven Standard years, Ambassador. It is my responsibility to be familiar with all your duties," the aide responded. Sarek nodded approvingly.

"Freelan," Sarek said quietly, "is, as you probably also know, something of an enigma."

Sarek was deliberately understating the situation. Freelan was unique in the explored galaxy. The Freelans did not possess space travel of their own, but their contacts with the Federation had, for decades, led to their world being included as a regular stop on local trade routes. The planet had never affiliated itself with any political or diplomatic alliance.

Freelan was not a member of the Federation, though it did send delegates to many trade, scientific, and diplomatic conferences. Its delegates, however, remained scrupulously neutral in all their dealings and contacts with other planets.

Cultural exchanges between Freelan and other worlds were virtually nonexistent, due to the Freelan taboo--religious or cultural, no one knew which--that prohibited Freelans from revealing their faces or bodies. When the natives had any contact with anyone not of their world, they shrouded themselves in concealing garments. Their muffling cloaks,

hoods, and masks were made from material impregnated with selonite, which prevented them from being scanned by tricorders or medical sensors.

Those wishing to meet with a Freelan on business or diplomatic matters had to travel to the mysterious world, where the Freelans maintained a space station to accommodate "guests." The station was fully automated, and all meetings were conducted via comm link with the surface below. Other than that concession to outside contact, Freelan remained a closed world. No off-worlder had ever landed on Freelan.

All that was known of the reclusive race that lived there was that they were bipedal, and roughly humanoid-shaped, with two arms. All else was conjecture.

"I had never encountered a Freelan personally," Soran said, "until I attended the conference at Camp Khitomer last month."

"Did you actually speak to the Freelan envoy?" Sarek asked.

"No, sir. As you know, the Freelans are not noted for mingling with people from other worlds. I did, however, meet the envoy's aide, a young Vulcan woman who introduced herself as Savel. During the evening break, we passed time by playing a game of chess."

The ambassador raised an eyebrow. "Indeed? It is common for Freelans to employ young Vulcans as aides. So you played chess with this Savel? Who won?"

Soran cleared his throat. "I did, sir. However, I found her a ... challenging ... opponent."

"I see," Sarek remarked, mildly, noting, with amusement, that his young aide was not meeting his eyes. "I have, for years, played chess with the diplomatic liaison from Freelan.

Taryn is a formidable opponent. This ... Savel ... I believe I recall her. Short hair? Slender figure? Wearing a silver tunic and trousers?"

"Yes, Ambassador," Soran said, shifting slightly on the bench. The young Vulcan was clearly uncomfortable under Sarek's regard.

The elder Vulcan raised an eyebrow. "Indeed. I am not surprised that you ... enjoyed your game. You are unbonded, are you not, Soran?"

The young Vulcan nodded. "Yes, Ambassador. My family does not ascribe to the ancient tradition of bonding while children. My parents chose each other as adults."

"I assume from her name that Savel was also unbonded?" Sarek inquired, blandly. Most young Vulcan women altered their names with the T' prefix

when they became betrothed.

"That is what I gathered from our time together," Soran said, somewhat puzzled by the ambassador's continuing interest in his brief encounter. "I found the information that she was unbonded ... to be of interest." He cleared his throat again. "Of interest to me personally, that is."

Sarek nodded encouragingly. "I do not find that fact surprising. Savel appeared ... quite intelligent."

"Yes," Soran agreed. "However, Ambassador, there was something ... odd about her."

Sarek was not surprised to discover this. Under the circumstances, he had been expecting as much. "What was that?" he inquired.

"I ... enjoyed ... the time I spent with Savel," Soran admitted. "I wished to encounter her again, but I realized, when the conference ended, that I had no way to contact her. Freelans curtail their interactions with the outside world, as you know. So, when we returned home, I made inquiries, intending to discover Savel's family, in the event they would consent to forward a message from me."

Sarek leaned forward, suddenly intent. "And what did you discover?"

The youth took a deep breath and met the ambassador's eyes squarely. "Sir, there was no record of a 'Sayel' being born on Vulcan within the last thirty years. According to Vulcan records--and you know how complete they are--no such person exists."

Sarek nodded, his suspicion confirmed. "Soran ... what I have to tell you now must remain strictly between us."

"Understood."

"For some time I have become increasingly suspicious of the Freelans. I believe they are ... not what they seem.

During the last year of studying them and their system, I have come to believe that Freelan presents a serious threat to the peace that currently exists in the galaxy."

"The Freelans, sir?" Soran did not succeed in concealing his surprise. "How could that be?"

"I do not wish to prejudice you any more than is necessary to gain your help, Soran. I would prefer that you draw your own conclusions, as a check on my own logic," Sarek said. "Suffice it to say that I believe the Freelans constitute a threat to the Federation, and I intend to gain proof of that threat before I can present my findings to President Ra-ghoratrei." Sarek paused. "When I first arrived, I had thought to

speak with the Federation president of my suspicions ... but he is currently off-world, and will not return for nearly a week. By the time he returns, I anticipate having the proof I need."

"But surely you could speak to the undersecretary, or Madame Chairman of the Security Council," Soran asked,

"if this threat is as grave as you believe?"

Sarek hesitated, then took a deep breath. "Soran ... today I gained proof--not demonstrable proof, except to a telepath, unfortunately--that undue mental influence may be at work on this world ... and possibly others. As a matter of fact ..." Sarek stared intently into the other's face. "If you will permit me?" He raised his hand in a meaningful gesture.

Soran, catching his intention, nodded permission. Sarek gently touched the side of his face for a moment, then nodded. "Your thoughts are entirely your own," he confirmed.-

Soran nodded. "So you intend to gain proof while the president is off-world, then present it to him upon his return?"

"If possible. I will require your help, Soran," the ambassador said. As the youth started to speak, he held up a warning hand. "I must caution you, before you agree too quickly ... gaining the proof I seek will require that we travel to Freelan and infiltrate the memory banks of their planetary computer system."

Soran's eyes widened. "Espionage? You intend to commit espionage, Ambassador? But that is ..." He trailed off, shaking his head.

"An interstellar crime, as well as a violation of every law of diplomacy. I know," Sarek said, heavily. "Nevertheless, I have determined it is necessary in this instance. Will you help me? If you say no, I will understand, and ask only that you say nothing of this to anyone."

The youth took a deep breath, and his eyes never left the ambassador's. "Serving as your aide is an honor I have aspired to for years, sir. If you have determined that your intended course of action is necessary to preserve the safety of the Federation, then it will be my privilege to assist you in gaining your proof."

Sarek nodded at the youth, genuinely touched by his loyalty. "Thank you, Soran. I will contact Liaison Taryn and arrange a meeting to review the current trade policies between Freelan and Vulcan. If he agrees to the meeting--and there is no reason why he should not--I wish to embark for the Freelan space station tomorrow."

"I will make the necessary arrangements, Ambassador." Sarek nodded, and

remained sitting in the garden as his aide left, moving quickly. Slowly, the ambassador climbed to his feet, and walked back around the consulate to stare thoughtfully at the area outside the gates. Discarded holosigns and placards still littered the area, but all the demonstrators were gone ... where?

Sarek, remembering the shock of touching Induna's altered mind, repressed a shiver. The sun had vanished behind clouds, and the breeze was now chilly ...

Peter James Kirk rifled through the selection of clothes available to him and swore impatiently. This is ridiculous, he told himself, and reached for a clean uniform. You don't spend this much time dressing for a date! Or did he? It'd been long enough since his last real date that it was hard to remember. Running a hand through his sandy-red hair, he sighed disgustedly. Well, maybe you do. Who cares? Make a decision, and let get out of here. He'd be late if he didn't hurry.

Your big chance to finally meet Ambassador Sarek of Vulcan, he thought, feeling a flare of nervous excitement, followed by chagrin. Yeah, and won't he be impressed if you're late?

He'd first become acquainted with Sarek through the Vulcan's writings and speeches, some of which were mandatory reading at Starfleet Academy, where Peter was currently a senior cadet. Then, when he'd attended a talk the diplomat gave at the Academy two years ago, Peter had found Sarek's approach to diplomacy so interesting, he'd studied the ambassador's eminent career during his spare time. Having met the ambassador's son many times gave his interest a personal aspect.

It was ironic, really. His uncle, Jim Kirk, had spent years working beside Sarek's son, Captain Spock. If things had worked out right, no doubt Spock, whom he'd met many times during his uncle's sporadic visits, would've been happy--or the Vulcan equivalent--to have introduced Peter to his father. If things had worked out right ...

Well, Peter mused, things had worked out well enough for someone who'd lost his parents tragically at the age of seven.

He glanced at their picture, taken on Deneva just months before their deaths. George Samuel and Aurelan Kirk were laughing, their hands on their gangly son's shoulder. Their twenty-five-year-old mementos still traveled everywhere with him, and thanks to family albums and vid records,

Peter had a clear recall of his mother's voice, his father's sense of humor, although his actual rearing had been entrusted to his late grandmother, Winona Kirk.

Peter was nearly half a head taller than his uncle, and built on slender, rather than stocky, lines. His hair, which as a boy had been a deep

auburn, had lightened over the years to a sandy red. Much to his relief, his freckles had also faded, though any exposure to the sun brought out a rash of them across his nose and cheeks. His eyes were a bright, clear blue, like Earth's sky at midday. Until his mid-twenties, he'd been gangling and awkward, but the years--and Starfleet's self-defense training--had solved most of that.

These days Peter moved confidently, even, at times, gracefully.

He'd inherited his looks from his mother, but the rest of the Kirk legacy that sometimes sat too heavily on his shoulders came straight from Uncle Jim. Staring at the cadet's uniform he was holding, Peter wondered if that was why, at the age of thirty-two, he was still in school.

Peter Kirk hadn't decided on a career in Starfleet until he was in his mid-twenties--almost a decade after most cadets entered the Academy. He'd spent that decade attending the best colleges, gaining degrees in xenolinguistics and xenocultural interfaces with minors in Terran/xenopolitical interaction, before deciding that he would finally follow the family tradition and join Starfleet. While Uncle Jim had always encouraged his varied interests, and never tried to influence his choice of careers, everyone else had automatically assumed he'd pursue Command track. He'd done so, though Peter was sure that he'd never possess his uncle's calm air of command.

We'll find out soon enough if you're a real Kirk, Peter told himself mockingly. After all the degrees, all the varied quests for knowledge, and these last few years in Starfleet Academy, Peter was, at last, in the final stretch. The past two weeks had been one grueling exam after another--most of which he'd aced. Just like a real Kirk. He'd had one just this morning, and that, too, he'd completed successfully.

Now there were only two more to go. One tomorrow, and the last a week from Friday. Then, three d ays after that, the final. The big one. The Kobayashi Maru.

He realized he was crushing the clean uniform in his hands and put it back. Why did he have to think about that now?

Because you can't ignore it anymore, it's just a few days away. They've completely reprogrammed the simulation.

There's a whole new situation, a whole new setup--and nobody knows anything about it. But that hasn't stopped them from taking bets as to whether or not you'll be the second Kirk to beat the no-win scenario. He rubbed his face tiredly. He had to stop worrying about it. It was just another test. Wasn't it?

The odds are twenty to one against you. Just being a Kirk isn't any guarantee of success, mister.

He shook his head, trying to shed his pessimistic musings.

The chrono chimed softly, yanking him back to his immediate problem. He had to get ready for lunch. He was meeting Surev, a young Vulcan he'd befriended while researching Sarek's work. Surev had invited him to have a meal at the Vulcan consulate because Sarek might be there, having arrived yesterday. Surev was distantly related to Sarek's aide, and while he was careful not to make a commitment, the young Vulcan thought he might be able to arrange an introduction. Peter was really looking forward to shaking hands (or rather, offering the Vulcan salute) to the diplomat he so admired. Lunch at the Vulcan consulate would provide a welcome respite from the drudgery of studying and finals. Maybe, for just an hour, he could forget about that damned Kobayashi Maru.

That's what you need to do, just forget about it, Peter decided. Forget about the Academy, Uncle Jim, ancient history, the whole thing. Reaching into his closet, he grabbed a stylish suit, a piece of "civilian" garb he hadn't worn in months. He wanted to seem totally professional in case he was introduced to Sarek. Peter wasn't normally self-conscious about being an older cadet, but today he didn't want to risk being prejudged. He didn't want to be Peter Kirk, Jim Kirk's nephew who's only now graduating Starfleet Academy. He just wanted to be another Terran who could discuss some of Sarek's ideas with him knowledgeably.

Donning the suit quickly, he smiled. The colors made his eyes bluer. Hey, who knows? he thought wryly. You can meet a lot of interesting people at the Vulcan consulate. I've seen some really nice-looking female attachés going in and out ... Of course, that was an area where he and Uncle Jim differed. Unlike the elder Kirk, Peter's luck with women was less than fabulous. Maybe that's something that comes with age.

As he adjusted the suit so that it hung right, then quickly combed his hair, he turned on the vid link to catch a glimpse of the news. Sarek might be featured on the noon report.

Instructing the link to search for any reports about Vulcans, Peter tensed when the headline EMBASSY PROTEST flashed on the link.

As Peter watched, images of San Francisco's Vulcan consulate--his current destination--filled the screen.

"The Vulcan presence on Earth," a fair-haired, attractive female reporter said solemnly, "has rarely generated controversy, but the peace that normally surrounds this quiet enclave was shattered today as the Keep Earth Human League announced their intentions to surround the consulate day and night."

Peter stood transfixed as the view of the front entrance of the stately domed building came on-screen. A group of humans were clustered before

the elegant gates, at least three dozen men and women, more than a few holding small children. Some carried traditional placards mounted on poles, while the rest brandished the more common holosigns. The image focused on one nondescript bearded man who had a holosign hovering over him that read, EARTH

BELONGS TO HUMANS--LET'S KEEP IT THAT WAY! Another sign came into view that said, JOIN THE KEEP EARTH HUMAN LEAGUE TODAY!--SAVE EARTH FOR YOUR CHILDREN!

Peter stared in consternation, although this wasn't the first time he'd heard of the KEHL. But he'd had no idea that this fringe-lement movement had been able to lure in enough members to mount such a large demonstration.

The reporter approached an attractive young woman in a shiny silver coat whose holosign read, VULCAS Trunk Tmy'RE

O SMART--AREN'T YOU SICK OF BEING PATRONIZED? Beside her stood a young boy with a hand-lettered sandwich board that simply demanded, VULCANS C,O HOME!

"Excuse me, Lisa Termant," the reporter asked the woman respectfully. "You're one of the leaders of the San Francisco branch of KEHL. Tell our viewers why your organization is staging this vigil in front of the Vulcan consulate."

"Members of the Keep Earth Human League are Terrans who have finally come to their senses," the woman told the journalist earnestly. She was of medium height, a little stocky, with dark skin and big black eyes. Her features were chiseled and delicate, except for a rather square chin, and she moved with confidence, as though she knew exactly what she was doing in life and how to go about it.

"Our president, Induna," the demonstrator continued,

"has called for a show of our support, so we have assembled." She indicated a tall, very dark-skinned man, probably African, who was standing near the consulate gates, lecturing to the crowd. "Vulcans are trying to take over our Federation, and make humans into second-class citizens," Termant continued. "We won't stand for it any longer!"

"But, Ms. Tennant," the journalist continued reasonably,

"most Terrans consider Vulcans our loyal friends, our closest allies. Many of Earth's politicians have been quoted as saying that we need them, that they're the most civilized people in the galaxy."

"I doubt seriously," the woman retorted coolly, "that we need friends the likes of Lieutenant Valeris. It's clear to us that she was the ringleader of the terrible plot against Earth, that she was working for

the renegade Klingon general, Chang."

Peter shook his head. The Romulan ambassador, Nanclus, and the two Starfleet officers, Admiral Cartwright and Colonel West, had also conspired with General Chang to assassinate the Klingon chancellor, Gorkon. Uncle Jim and his medical officer, Leonard McCoy, had been falsely accused and convicted of the crime, then sentenced to hard labor on the prison planet, Rura Penthe. It was strange, Peter thought, that, although the crime had only happened a month or so ago, the public's memory of those events appeared to be altering. Lately, even the media had a tendency to downplay the roles played by the humans and the Romulan, making it seem that General Chang and Lieutenant Valeris were solely responsible.

"Lieutenant Valeris," the KEHL leader continued, "is merely an example of the kind of subtle espionage Vulcans have been guilty of for years. But now the KEHL is on to them. There are chapters of the KEHL springing up all over--even on some of the Terran colonies. And we know exactly what we're dealing with!"

"What do you mean?" the journalist pressed.

"Everyone knows," Termant elaborated, "that Vulcans are telepaths. Lately, it's becoming increasingly obvious that they're using their abilities to influence minds, and make susceptible humans do things against their own kind!

Those politicians that are so quick to defend Vulcans are, no doubt, their unwitting victims. After all, everyone knows how easy it is to influence a politician's mind!"

Hard to argue with that, Peter admitted grudgingly. But the notion that Vulcans would use their telepathy in such an unethical way outraged him.

"The Keep Earth Human League is gaining new members every day," Termant told the reporter smugly. "We are funding our own candidates to run in local elections, people who are not so easily influenced. It's only a matter of time before the Vulcan conspiracy is completely exposed. Our vigil here is to let them know their days on Earth are numbered"

The woman's self-assurance shocked Peter. She didn't have that wild-eyed look of lunacy he usually associated with the off-kilter KEHL.

An old woman suddenly stepped in front of the reporter, demanding the journalist's attention. "Vulcans are the spawn of the devil," she hissed viciously. "Satan marked 'em as his own, anyone can see that. Don't you have eyes, woman?"

Now, that had to be a founding member, Peter thought.

He realized his jaw ached from clenching his teeth. Didn't these people

realize how crazy they sounded? What was wrong with them?

The crowd rallied around the Tennant woman. "Keep Earth Hu-man! Keep Earth Hu-man!" they chanted. Angrily, Peter slapped the vid off switch. Why did those nuts have to picket the consulate today, when Sarek would be there?

Good thing the Federation provided security to all off-world embassies and consulates. He felt confident that Security had the situation well under control. Yet, even though the vid link was now silent, Peter imagined that he could still hear that hate-filled mantra.

As the cadet left his room to head for the consulate, he found himself mulling over the news report. The KEHL had been around for centuries, ever since Zefram Cochrane invented the warp drive, and humans made it into space and met the Vulcans for the first time. It was nothing more than a small group of hard-line xenophobes. But lately, the KEHL was another story altogether. He wondered if Starfleet Security was mounting an investigation of their recent activities. If the KEHL kept gamering members and publicity at the same rate in the coming months, they could turn out to be a real problem.

Peter moved quickly out of his apartment and onto the streets that surrounded the Academy. If he hustled, he could still arrive in time to meet Surev.

As young Kirk turned the corner to approach the familiar consulate, he was shocked to find that the crowd of protesters he'd watched on the noon report had grown even larger.

While some of the people massing around the curving, neutral-colored compound must have been simply curious onlookers, there were now so many holosigns that the floating messages were blending all together into a huge mass of gibberish.

Peter slowed as he neared the gates, watching the Starfleet Security forces as they worked to keep the crowd from getting too close to the entrance. Was the mob actually going to rush the gates? Near the sculptured metal portal Peter spied Surev, but the Vulcan wasn't looking toward him, so he didn't bother to wave. Surev's attention was turned in the opposite direction, and Peter peered to see what he was looking at. He squinted. Was that ... could that possibly be ... Sarek himself?.

Peter realized it was the ambassador himself standing safely behind the gates, with his aide, Soran. Surev had arranged it! He was actually about to meet Sarek!

As Peter tried to skirt the fringes of the throng, a tall figure pushed his way through the opening crowd. Peter recognized the president of the KEHL.

Now Sarek and the KEHL president were face-to-face.

Starfleet Security drew closer to the crowd. Shouts filled the air.

"GO BACK TO VULCAN! STOP SELLING OUT EARTH FOR VULCAN INTERESTS!" three KEHL members shouted in unison.

"Back to Vulcan! Back to Vulcan!" the crowd chanted, surging forward threateningly.

Sarek was the picture of composure as he stood straight and tall in his Vulcan robes, his face the epitome of Vulcan control. Both Surev and Soran were young men, and their control was not nearly as perfect as the elder Vulcan's. Even from this distance, Peter could see the two younger Vulcans conferring with each other behind the ambassador's back, concern plain to read on their faces. Sarek merely nodded serenely. Then, to Peter's dismay, the ambassador opened the gate and calmly strode out into the crowd.

Dimly, he heard the KEHL leader telling the crowd to quiet down, but it was no use. A minute later, the mob completely broke ranks. They surged forward wildly, screaming, throwing things, overwhelming the outnumbered security forces. Within seconds the protesters had completely enveloped both Sarek and the two younger Vulcans.

"NO!" Peter shouted frantically, and flung himself unheedingly into the thick of the mob. Furious and sickened, he charged his way bodily through the crowd, shoving, pushing, not caring whether he crushed feet, or sent the bigots staggering. He had to do something to help Ambassador Sarek!

For a brief instant he found himself tantalizingly close to his goal. He glimpsed the ambassador's formal brown and gold robes only a meter or two away. By now the crowd was in a frenzy, hurling refuse and rotting vegetables at the beleaguered Vulcans. As a man beside Peter took aim with a fist-sized rock, the young Kirk managed to surge forward and knock his arm so that the rock landed on another KEHL member instead. Sarek's young assistants were defending themselves ably, and even the ambassador sent an attacker flying.

Almost at the same instant, Peter heard the whine of transporter beams, and knew that the Federation security forces must have beamed in reinforcements. The officers were busily using crowd-control stunners and forcefields, careful not to catch the struggling Vulcans in the beams.

Suddenly, Peter saw Sarek grappling with the KEHL president. To the young Kirk's relief, the Vulcan handled the tall human easily, rendering him helpless with a quick neck pinch. For just a second, Peter thought he saw a flicker of surprise pass over the ambassador's normally calm expression; then both attacker and Vulcan were lost to sight in the

press of the crowd.

Three KEHL members next to Peter suddenly collapsed, unconscious, and the cadet realized that he might be next.

He was wearing civilian clothes instead of his uniform, so there was no way anyone could differentiate him from these lunatics! In fact, there was a very good chance he was about to be arrested, if not stunned, mistaken for a KEHL member. He searched for Surer, desperately wanting to get his attention. The Vulcan could vouch for him ...

Out of the corner of his eye he spied a security officer taking dead aim at him.

"Hurry! Come with me, now!" a female voice shouted in his ear, at the same time a strong hand grasped his suit sleeve and hauled him back. Two people in front of him collapsed in the path of the stun ray. "We've got to go now!" the woman insisted, tugging at him and another woman near her.

He then recognized Lisa Termant, the KEHL's second-in-command.

"Come on!" she urged, pulling him behind her.

"We can't let them get all of us! Let's go. Follow me!"

Did this lunatic woman think he was part of her nutcase organization? Peter was infuriated by her assumption. Then four people directly in front of him collapsed under the minimized stun rays. If she hadn't pulled him out of the way ...

The security forces weren't asking questions, they were assuming the same thing about everyone in this crowd that she was. If he didn't get out of here, lunch wouldn't be the only thing he'd be missing. The next time Tennant yanked on his arm, he cooperated.

After a moment's pushing and shoving, they broke free.

Peter found himself running pell-mell down the streets, away from the screaming, hysterical demonstrators. Had Sarek made it through all right? he wondered, even as his legs moved automatically, running, running, as he followed the woman to safety.

They were on a side street now, Federation Security aircars following them, trying to round up all the demonstrators.

The cadet realized that if he didn't get out of this quickly, he was going to be spending the night in jail. He might even have to contact his Uncle Jim for a character reference! What would that look likemcaptain Kirk's nephew incarcerated for supporting a violent KEHL demonstration?

Envisioning his own face on the next news vid, he sprinted faster.

Tennant led her small crowd down a narrow street, then into an alley. There was a door, which opened as if by magic as they approached. The small group raced in, Peter entering right behind the dark-haired woman. When the door slid shut behind them, the group half-collapsed, heaving and panting for breath. Peter tensed as he listened to the sirens of the aircars that were still searching--searching for me, Peter realized disgustedly. What a mess!

"Everybody okay?" Tennant asked the group. "Anyone hurt?"

There were murmurs from the group of a half-dozen men and women, assurances that everyone was all right. Peter looked around at the ragtag group he'd found himself a part of.

A man came up to Tennant, someone new--the person who must've been here, ready to open the door for them in just such an emergency. "Do you know all these people, Lisa?" he asked quietly.

Peter's heart thundered in his ears. If they discovered who he was ...

"No, Jay," she said, looking over the group. "No, I'm sorry. Everything fell apart. There were massive arrests. I think one of the Vulcans might've killed Induna. These people were near me, fighting side by side with me. I couldn't leave them behind."

"Of course," Jay said, as he looked over the group.

"I'm Mark Beckwith," one of the men said by way of introduction as he caught his breath. Peter recognized him as the rock thrower. "I'm president of the Peoria branch."

Lisa shook his hand. "Of course, I've spoken to you many times."

To Peter's relief, the rest of the group were just average members, or people who'd seen the demonstration on the vid and "believed in the cause."

"I'm Peter ... Church," he finally said, when it was his turn. "I'm ... a data-recovery technician. I work nearby."

"I've ... always been interested in the KEHL," he lied glibly, "and when I saw that you were calling for support, I came on down."

"Thank you," the woman said sincerely, then repeated it to the others. "Thanks to all of you. What you did today was courageous and ambitious. Your personal involvement will make it easier for the millions who silently agree with our cause to come forward and join us. Thank you all so much."

Crazy, Peter thought, slumping tiredly. Would he ever be able to get out of here and back to reality?

"I think the security forces are gone," Jay announced, after checking with a computerized sensor. "It should be safe for you all to leave now, if you go out one by one."

Tennant thanked them all again, reminding them all of the next gathering. The demonstration at the consulate, she told them, wouldn't be able to continue until the arrested demonstrators had been freed from jail and the current permits renewed. Each person assured her before leaving that they would be at the consulate as soon as word reached them that it was time to assemble. Their faces were filled with a hatred and a commitment that made Peter's stomach lurch.

Peter plastered an appropriate expression of sympathy on his own face as Lisa finally turned her attention to him. She suddenly peered at him intently, and he found himself grateful that he didn't resemble his famous uncle more closely.

"I hope you weren't injured," she said quietly, her eyes never leaving his face. "You came awfully close to being stunned."

He blinked, gathering his wits about him. *Coum she be interested in me?* Peter wondered, taken aback. It figured, in a perverse way. His Uncle Jim seemed to be able to attract any woman in the universe with nothing more than a little-boy grin and a twinkle in his eye--an ability that, if it was an inherited trait, seemed to have skipped Peter. But every now and then the "Kirk charm," as the captain called it, did seem to shine on Peter--but only at the wrong moments. Like now. He gazed at the KE HL leader, his mind racing.

"I'm fine," he assured her. "Really. You ... saved me back there. I should be thanking you."

She smiled warmly at him. "I'm so glad you're all right."

That is ... there are so few of us ... true believers. We can't afford to lose ... even one."

She was attracted to him! Peter began to wonder if Federation Security had any real idea, before today's violent demonstration, how dangerous this group was becoming.

Whatever information they had on the KEHL couldn't have been very accurate, or the security forces would've never been caught so shorthanded at the demonstration.

Tennant thought he was a member, a "true believer." Could he string her along long enough to gain critical inside information--information he

could relay to Starfleet?

"Listen, Peter," Lisa said, guiding him to the door, "my assistant, Rosa, was one of the people stunned today. I'm going to be lost without her, and I know what it's like to be stunned. She won't be feeling well for a day or two. I need to make a lot of calls, arrange hearings, bail, tons of stuff. That means that my real work won't get done. So ... I was wondering ... you're used to manipulating data. Rosa was working on cross-referencing the membership lists with some special information we've received lately about ... a clandestine Vulcan operation. I really need to get this project completed. Do you think you could help me?"

How would Uncle Jim handle this? Peter wondered, but of course he already knew. James T. Kirk would simply lay on the charm, the famous Kirk charm, and within hours she'd be putty in his hands. Forget it. That won't work for you!

As he hesitated, she offered, "You'd be working with me directly ... but, I'll understand if you're not interested.

What happened today was enough to make anyone think twice about supporting the group ... "

"Oh, I'm interested!" he assured her. "I, uh, didn't realize ... we'd be working together. I'd like that, Ms.

Tennant. Uh ... working with you, I mean." Smooth, mister, real smooth. A Tellarite would've managed a classier delivery ...

She opened the door for him and touched his arm. "Call me Lisa, Peter. I'm glad you're willing to help me. I really

need an expert's assistance. How about ... Saturday?

Around noon? Can you find your way back here?"

"Sure," he said, managing not to stammer this time. "I'll see you then." His gesture of farewell included both Lisa and Jay. "Saturday, noon. I'll be here."

"It'll just be you and me, Peter," Lisa assured him warmly, following him a few steps into the alley.

"Jay ... will be busy with something else. I'll see you then."

He managed a credible grin despite his uneasiness.

"Great. Till Saturday." She stepped back and the door slid shut, leaving him alone.

Peter walked out onto the main street, then began a circuitous route back toward the Academy, suddenly nervously aware of every figure passing him on the street.

Whatever had possessed him to play Mata Hari with the KEHL's leader?

These people were definitely more dangerous than Federation Security realized. What should he do now? If he went to the security offices at the Academy, or to the officer of the day, and related this wild story, they'd no doubt tell him to stay out of it. His advisor, a grizzled old Tellarite lieutenant commander, would forbid him to have anything more to do with this group. She'd be right, too. He had exams to complete. And the Kobayashi Maru.

I don't have time for this. I have to stay focused. I've got a career to worry about.

But ... through sheer happenstance he'd managed to find himself on the inside. He had an opportunity to discover what was really going on with this radical group of dangerous xenophobes. Would Uncle Jim walk away from this opportunity? The hell he would! Captain Kirk would play the cards dealt him.

Can I do any less?

Peter scowled down at his feet as he moved along the sidewalk. What harm could there be in keeping his Saturday date? He'd just spend time with Lisa Tennant, work on her reports.

She said I'd get to work on the membership lists ... That would be a unique opportunity, one he doubted Security could manage. And, by talking to her, he could draw her out, discover something about this silly Vulcan "conspiracy" she purported to have discovered. Maybe he could find out other things, too. More serious inside information.

And, when he had that information, he'd take that to Starfleet. They couldn't ignore him then, not if he had information about how the KEHL had suddenly gained so many new members.

If his plan worked out, it certainly wouldn't hurt his career any. And ... it was something a real Kirk would do.

Something Uncle Jim would do in a heartbeat. Of that, Peter was very sure.

Sarek sat at the comm link in his assigned quarters aboard the Freelan space station, facing the cowled figure of a Freelan. Although there was no way to be sure, owing to the concealing cloak and mechanical-sounding voice interface, he thought he recognized the other as Taryn, the Freelan liaison he'd been dealing with for nearly seventy Standard years.

"Greetings, Taryn," he said aloud.

The cowled and muffled figure was suddenly very still.

"Greetings, Ambassador Sarek," the flat, mechanical voice said. "You recognized me?"

Sarek shook his head and dissembled, diplomatically, "I made a logical deduction as to your identity, Liaison. After all, during my meetings aboard this space station, you have been my contact during negotiations eightysix-point-three percent of the time."

The shrouded figure seemed to relax again. "I suppose I have. We have known each other a long time, Sarek of Vulcan."

"Indeed we have, Taryn of Freelan," the ambassador agreed solemnly.

"This time, you did not come alone," Taryn said.

Sarek beckoned, and Soran stepped forward from the back of the room and seated himself beside the ambassador.

"You are correct, Liaison. I brought my new aide, Soran, so he could begin familiarizing himself with Freelan/Vulcan trade agreements."

"Why?" the other asked, bluntly.

"My health is not what it once was since my heart trouble twenty-seven years ago," Sarek said, smoothly, having anticipated this question. His response was accurate, if deliberately misleading. Actually, his health was now better than it had been for decades. "Someday," the ambassador continued,

"perhaps in the not-too-distant future, I will retire. I cannot continue to be the sole contact between our worlds. I wish my aide to become familiar with our negotiations."

"I see," Taryn said slowly. "Very well. Greetings, Soran."

"Greetings, Liaison Taryn," the young Vulcan said, raising a hand in salute. "May you live long and prosper."

"Only if I can induce Vulcan to reduce their import tariffs!" the Freelan shot back. "It is difficult to prosper under the crushing weight of unfair tariffs!"

"As a matter of fact, tariffs were one subject I wished to explore today," Sarek put in, smoothly. "May we begin?"

The cowled figure inclined his head. "Assuredly, Ambassador."

Soran observed, for the most part in silence, as the two diplomats went over the trade agreements in question.

Sarek's mind was only partly on the subject at hand--with another portion of his mind, he was going over his plans for later that station-designated "night."

The two diplomats finished their discussion of tariffs, and went on to discuss modifications to a long-standing trade agreement.

Taryn seemed slightly suspicious of Sarek's motives in bringing up that particular agreement. "I must admit that I am surprised to hear you reopen this topic," he said. "I had thought that the agreement we forged regarding those cryo-memory inserts actually favored Vulcan. I fail to see why you would wish to alter or revise it ... "

"The modifications I have in mind are minor, Liaison," Sarek said. "They should not take long to discuss. Perhaps, after our talk, we could ... have a game?"

"As you know, I am extremely busy," Taryn said, but then he hesitated. "However, I must admit that you are one of the few players that I find ... stimulating. Very well, then. A game. When we are finished."

Sarek went ahead with his list of proposed changes to the trade agreement. They were, as he said, minor, most of them points that they had haggled over when the original agreement was forged, three years ago. He actually found himself losing some ground in the negotiations, partially because he was not devoting his full attention to the problem at hand.

Finally, they were finished. Soran excused himself as both diplomats keyed their terminals to produce a 3-D chess board. "Standard time limit per move?" Sarek asked, after graciously accepting white at Taryn's insistence.

"Of course."

The Vulcan studied the boards, planning his opening.

"I must warn you, Sarek," Taryn said, "our discussion has sharpened my wits. Prepare to lose, Ambassador."

Sarek inclined his head in a half-bow. "I am prepared, Liaison." After a moment's consideration, he moved a pawn. Taryn leaned forward, studying his representation of the board, then made his own move. "You know," the Freelan said, and the Vulcan gained the impression that he was confiding something highly personal, "I truly do find our games ... stimulating."

"You mean 'challenging,'" Sarek said dryly.

"As I recall"--Taryn's mechanical tones did not vary, but the ambassador thought he detected an edge in the quickness of the Freelan's retort--"I won, the last time we played."

"Yes, so you did," Sarek said, evenly. "My game was definitely off that day." He could not resist needling the liaison just a little. Taryn could, at times, be induced to play recklessly. The Freelan hated to lose, and Sarek had learned precisely what it took to bait him until he made a fatal mistake.

Sarek moved his knight onto the queen's level, then sat back to study his opponent's reaction.

Taryn's answering move caused the Vulcan to raise an eyebrow. "Stimulating indeed," he murmured, his mind running through moves and their consequences with lightning speed, even as part of his brain counted off the seconds remaining for him to reply to Taryn's bold strategy.

"Perhaps ... challenging." With a swift, decisive movement he transferred a rook to the king's level.

Taryn regarded the board, and Sarek thought he detected skepticism in the mechanical voice. "Jobeck's gambit?" His cowl moved slightly, as though he had shaken his head ruefully. "A human move ... and not a particularly inventive one, at that. I will taste victory today." He paused, his mitt hovering over the board as he considered his next move. "A human gambit ... a surprising move for one of your kind to make, Ambassador."

"My wife is Terran," Sarek said, "and I have spent many years on Earth. I learned that gambit there. Humans may not possess Vulcan logic ... but they can demonstrate surprisingly intricate strategy, at times."

"For myself, I have never had cause to respect their intelligence," Taryn commented, his mitt still hovering over the board. "Take this new organization that has sprung up, for instance. The Keep Earth Human League. From all reports, it consists of a collection of bigoted misfits with stunted intellects. They detest all nonhumans ... even your people, Ambassador."

Sarek had to guard against a betraying start of surprise. It was Taryn's turn to needle him--almost as though the liaison knew why the ambassador was here, hoping to gain proof for his theory about a Freelan conspiracy ...

"These fringe groups come and go," the Vulcan conceded blandly. "They hardly pose a concern to the long-standing amity between Earth and Vulcan."

"Of course not," Taryn said, sitting back in his seat, his shrouded head level, as though he were staring directly into Sarek's face, searching for any betraying emotions he might find there. "No one could hope to alter such a close alliance."

Sarek raised an eyebrow. "Really, Liaison, you surprise me. If this is a strategy on your part, I should think you could be more creative than to attempt something so ... antiquated."

The Freclan's cowl jerked slightly, as if he had stiffened.

"Antiquated? What ... what do you mean?"

Sarek gestured at the board. "Why, engaging me in conversation while you exceed your time limit for a move.

Or ... had you forgotten that it is your move?"

"My move ... oh, yes. Of course I had not forgotten." Taryn hastily moved his bishop.

As the game progressed, Sarek tried with all his diplomatic skills to gain information from his longtime contact.

Taryn, who had recovered his aplomb, fenced back at him, seemingly enjoying their verbal sparring.

It was a very hard-fought game, but, to his own surprise, Sarek won once again. Typically, Taryn was not a particularly good sport about his defeat. The moment endgame was in sight, he signaled his board to topple his king, then, with barely a civil word of leavetaking, broke the connection.

After dinner, the two Vulcans retired to the adjoining rooms in their suite. Sarek set himself to doze until the middle of "night" aboard the station.

Hours later, the ambassador opened his eyes, then rose quietly from his bed to pull on a dark tunic and trousers, and soft-soled desert boots he had brought with him for this occasion. With his minuscule Vulcan tricorder in hand, he seated himself before the Freclan comm link. The ambassador had been planning for this day for months, and had prepared programs to cover all of the most probable contingencies.

Sarek's first task was to disarm the alarms on the station's secured maintenance area. He studied the sleek, horizontal console for only a moment. "Manual input, please. Standard Federation interface." The manual control board slid out of a concealed opening, and he swiftly enabled the external data link. That was the easy part. Now came the challenging task of causing a calculated "malfunction" in the system that would camouflage his efforts to access the main data banks.

The Vulcan ambassador quickly set his tricorder to run through the standard external data conventions, sending handshake messages at various wavelengths. When the tricorder's screen indicated success, the Vulcan's lips tightened.

Not Federation standard. Working efficiently, he called up the most likely communications protocol and linked his tricorder into the Freelan comm link, then was gratified to see the connection established. The twenty-five-year-old espionage done by his son aboard a Romulan vessel would suffice to accomplish his goal.

Confident now of the specifics of this particular computer system, he downloaded the first of several valit programs and instructed the low-level operating system to execute. A valit was a small Vulcan creature that could burrow its way through the hardest soil, capable of adapting its complex mandibles to numerous functions. Unless the operating system was massively dissimilar to what Spock had reported, the valit program would be able to adapt and invade, opening up the secure portions of the software. And, by returning countless error messages to the central processors, this first valit program would effectively disguise his efforts to intrude further.

Although Sarek did not actually have to enter the central maintenance area to gain further access to the no-longer-secure data, he wanted to see the Freelan computer with his own eyes. The comm link in his quarters was encased in a shell that differed little from those found on any Federation world. In a sense, he had proven nothing so far. The Freelans could have purchased their comm units and software from the Romulans. The ambassador had to see the central computer itself, because he knew that the Romulan cloaking system depended on the massive processing capabilities of these machines; the Romulans would never willingly part with this technology to outsiders for mere profit.

Before leaving his quarters, Sarek tapped softly on Soran's door. Moments later, his aide emerged, also clad in dark clothes, with soft footwear. "The security alarms?" he whispered.

"Disabled," Sarek replied.

The ambassador had visited the Freelan station many times, and knew precisely where to go. When they reached the doors that were labeled MAINTENANCE--NO ADMITRANCE in several languages, including Vulcan, Sarek stopped, motioning Soran to stay back. He tapped on the entry pad, and the portals shot apart.

Sarek stepped into the maintenance area, Soran at his side. The young Vulcan halted suddenly at the sight of a surveillance vid unit, but the ambassador shook his head reassuringly. The valit was overloading the condition-recognition software to the point where it would not be on-line for the time of their visit.

"We must move quickly," Sarek said softly. (Even though there was no one in the area, the urge for silence remained, illogical though it was.)
"The valit will not delay the security system indefinitely." He led the way past a transporter room and into the nerve center of the station.

The enormous room contained a gigantic computer system, black metal without decoration, identical to the one Spock had seen a generation before. Apparently the Romulans were conservative about changes in a technology that worked. Sarek nodded grimly. It was as he had conjectured.

"Ambassador, you must know what you are looking for," Soran said.
"Otherwise you would not have been able to devise a valit program."

"Logical," Sarek said, approvingly, seating himself before the closest comm link and taking out his tricorder. "You have deduced admirably. If my theory about the Freelans is correct, then you shall soon see their true identity for yourself."

"This system bears no resemblance to any in the Federation," Soran said, watching as Sarek's experienced hands flew over the tricorder controls, feeding in another valit program, this one designed to follow on the heels of the first valit. It would make all areas of the memory accessible to external control, and display on the visual monitors whatever was accessed.

As the two Vulcans watched, random areas of memory began to appear on the screens. Soran's eyes widened as he made out the characters. "That script ..." he breathed.

"Romulan!"

"Indeed," Sarek said. "As I expected. But I must capture more than random kitchen requisitions to justify our suspicions." He held up the tricorder's photo chip to the screen.

"So the Freelans are Romulans?" Soran said slowly, obviously taken aback. At Sarek's quick glance, the young Vulcan hastily composed his features.

"Yes," Sarek said. "They are Romulans. I have suspected it for a long time, but gaining proof has been difficult.

Ah ... personnel data banks. We are in." Raw information began to flash across the screen--words in Romulan script, operating-system symbols, and numbers, all in a jumbled disarray. Hundreds of screens of data, most of it garbled, appeared in quick succession. Suddenly Sarek leaned forward and signaled the tricorder to backtrack through the images. A quick tap froze the output. Intently, he studied the scrambled data.

"What is it?" Soran asked.

"A name--one of the few Freelan names I would recognize.

Do you read Romulan, Soran?"

"No, sir. I will remedy the deficiency as soon as feasible," the young aide promised. "What does it say?" Sarek indicated a name in flowing Romulan script.

"Taryn," he said, simply. "This is a list of Romulan officers, along with their ranks. Taryn is listed, if I am reading this correctly, as a wing commander." The elder Vulcan raised an eyebrow. "A high-ranked Romulan officer indeed." He continued recording data, studying it. Slowly, he made sense of the scrambled information. He generated a decoding algorithm in his mind, and mentally overlaid it on the jumble, seeing order amid chaos.

Minutes later, he was reading it swiftly. Sarek scanned the shipping data first, noting with grim satisfaction that it, too, proved his theory. Military vessels from Romulus and Remus made regular voyages to Freelan, and Freelans voyaged to the Romulan worlds. Romulan officers were logged as being "detailed" to Freelan.

Freelan also had a small fleet of birds-of-prey located in probe-shielded hangars that were camouflaged by the simple expedient of placing them beneath massive ice shelves, with roofs impregnated with scionite.

The communications logs listed hundreds of subspace messages between the Romulan worlds and Freelan. Government communiquis listed Freelans on "missions" to various worlds, particularly Earth--and, nearly always, the Freelan merchant, diplomat, or scientist was accompanied by an aide with a Vulcan name.

Sarek automatically memorized those names, knowing however, that further checks would reveal that they--like Savel--were not Vulcan citizens.

None of the evidence Sarek uncovered was a direct link between the KEHL activity and the Freelans--or Romulans but the ambassador found the circumstantial evidence damning.

Without warning, a sudden, familiar sound made him freeze.

Soran heard it, too. "Ambassador--a transporter beam!"

"Attempt to distract the newcomers, while I disengage the valits," Sarek commanded, his fingers flying. Without a thought he abandoned his hope of copying further Romulan data banks. If he and Soran were caught here, spying, the Romulans would be within their rights to summarily execute them for espionage.

Quickly, he injected the last of the valits, the one designed to eradicate all evidence of his tampering. He could hear footsteps approaching from the direction of the transporter room as he leaped up, tricorder in hand, looking for a place to eliminate the evidence of his spying. Without the tricorder as evidence, he might be able to pretend to have awakened in the night, ill, and to have been searching for the station's automated med center. There was little chance that he would be believed, but, without hard evidence, the Freelans might hesitate to take him into custody. Seeing a disposal unit, Sarek dropped the tricorder in and cycled it, not without a pang at the loss of his proof. Logic dictated, however, that he save himself.

Glancing around him, the ambassador realized that the computer room was singularly devoid of hiding places.

Silently, he resigned himself to being caught, and having to feign illness, when a loud crash sounded next door, in one of the engineering chambers that held banks of automated equipment.

The approaching Freelans exclaimed--in Romulan!--and went to investigate. Peering out of the computer area, Sarek warily scanned the hallway; then he made a swift, soundless retreat back to the entrance. The ambassador knew that his young aide must have caused the crash that had distracted whomever had come to investigate the "malfunction." Would Soran be able to escape, also?

A second later Soran, soundless on his soft-soled shoes, hurried up beside him. Quickly, the two Vulcans left the maintenance area and returned to their quarters.

Later, as he relaxed in the narrow bunk, the ambassador allowed himself a faint, ironic smile in the concealing darkness. It is not endgame yet, Taryn, he thought. Today you may have had me in check, but mate is still a long way off.

The next day, Sarek waited tensely for some indication that his late-night foray had been discovered, but apparently the last valit had been successful. Taryn displayed no indication of suspicion during the morning's negotiating session.

The ambassador was just beginning the afternoon's session when Soran approached, a guarded expression on his normally calm features. "Ambassador? There are two messages coming in from Vulcan. They are ... important."

Hastily, Sarek excused himself and went to his quarters to view them in private. The first was a written message from his wife that read, simply, "Come home if possible, please.

Amanda."

Staring at it, the Vulcan experienced a rush of unease.

Never, in over sixty years of marriage, had his wife ever interrupted him in the midst of a mission to ask him to return home. What could be wrong?

His silent question was swiftly answered by the second message, prerecorded by his wife's physician, T'Mal. The graying Healer stared straight into the screen, as though she could see him. Her expression was calm, as usual, but the ambassador could discern a hint of sorrow in her eyes.

"Ambassador Sarek, you must return home immediately.

Your wife is gravely ill. I do not expect her to live more than another month ... possibly less. I regret having to impart such news in this manner, but I have no choice. Return home immediately."

The ancient, stone-walled room was buried deep in the foundations of the huge fortress-manor on Qo'nos, the Klingon homeworld. Outside those age-darkened stone walls lay nothing but soil. The room had been tested, retested, and verified to be free of all recording or surveillance devices, which was why such a dank, dark room had been chosen for this particular meeting.

Valdyr sat in one of the modern chairs that had been brought into the room, feeling the chill pluck at her body, even as the words she was hearing chilled her mind and soul.

Hesitantly, she glanced up at her uncle, the esteemed Klingon ambassador, Kamarag, as he spoke forcefully to the officers assembled in the room, around the venerable, dagger-scarred table that had undoubtedly been here for hundreds of years.

He is perilously close to treason, she thought, struggling to keep the shock she was feeling from showing on her face.

The officers watched the speaker with varying degrees of enthusiasm. The soft lights from the lamps glimmered off oiled black leather and polished studs.

"Warriors," Kamarag was saying, his trained voice carrying such conviction that it was nearly hypnotic, "we have all seen what is happening to our Empire in the past months, since Praxis was destroyed. The foundations of our existence are being eaten away! If this continues, soon there will be no place for our race in this galaxy! The Romulans will overrun us, for we will have grown soft, and weak as females!"

Valdyr, the only female present, glanced up at him, but was careful to

conceal the resentment his words caused. Her uncle was the head of her family. When her father had been killed attempting to board and conquer the Federation starship Enterprise, Kamarag had taken his widow and four children under his protection, providing for them, even sending Valdyr and her brothers to school.

And last month, when her mother and eldest brother had been killed during one of the devastating meteor showers that had bombarded Qo'nos ever since the destruction of Praxis, Kamarag had taken Valdyr and her brothers to live with him in the ancestral home.

Her uncle was the head of her family, and she owed him everything. If not for Kamarag, her brothers would never have been able to go to school and learn the skills necessary to serve aboard starships. They would all have been relegated to a backwater existence in some hamlet, grubbing for sustenance on land that was increasingly hostile to agriculture.

Valdyr owed Kamarag unquestioning loyalty. Still, his sneering reference to her entire sex made her grind her back teeth. Her fingers clenched against her own armor. At the mention of the word "females," one of the captains, Karg, cast Valdyr a leering glance.

"Females have their place--but what should that place be? Remember who now sits in the chancellor's seat of our government, my brothers! A woman, Gorkon's daughter, to be sure, but she is not Gorkon, as she has proved many times in the past days. Azetbur demands our loyalty, even as she opens her arms to Federation influence--influence which may well lead to Federation control. Who among us, brothers, wishes to live under the heel of the Federation?"

A concerted growl from the officers present was his only reply.

Azetbur's ascension to the chancellorship had given Valdyr the courage to continue her schooling past the age when most Klingons of her sex were relegated to the home, their only power whatever they could obtain by influencing the males in their lives. Valdyr respected Azetbur for attempting to forge a true and lasting peace between the Federation and the Klingon Empire.

To hear her revered uncle denouncing the new chancellor secretly enraged the young woman. She glanced up at him as he spoke. Kamarag had been a formidable warrior in his youth, and his stance as he addressed these officers was that of a combatant throwing down a formal challenge.

"Consider, my brothers!" he was continuing. "Consider what we must do, each and every one of us, to uphold our honor as warriors! Each of us must search his own heart to discover the best way to serve our Empire--even, should it prove necessary, by serving outside the strictures of official government policy. We must have the courage, the honor, the valor to serve our Empire as warriors, as leaders--not merely as those who blindly follow orders given by our nominal superiors!"

Valdyr's eyes widened. Her uncle was skirting the boundary of advocating sedition ... outright treason! Such talk was dishonorable! How could he speak so? Glancing over the faces of the assembled starship commanders, Valdyr saw that their eyes were fastened on the ambassador with an avid gleam-- all except one. Keraz had drawn back in his seat, and was shaking his head. Suddenly, the commander sent his gauntleted fist crashing down on the aged table so hard that the ironlike wood groaned in protest. "Kamarag, you go too far!" he growled. "I have no love for Azetbur, or her new policies, but I cannot disobey my oath as a Klingon officer!

There are more renegades raiding across the Neutral Zone every day, and I have no intention of becoming one of them!" Valdyr had to restrain herself from leaping up and saluting the commander.

Kamarag drew himself up, as though deeply offended--but his niece could tell that his indignation was feigned.

"Keraz, you mistake me! I have said nothing about disobeying oaths. I have merely requested that each and every one of us assembled here today spend some time in thinking about our current situation, and how it may best be improved!

There was no talk of oath-breaking in that!" Valdyr sighed inwardly as Keraz obviously lost some of his confidence. His brows drew together in consternation.

"Yes, Keraz, were you not listening?" Karg growled sarcastically.

"Did you stay out last night drinking and wenching, only to fall asleep just now and dream talk of oath-breaking?

For there was none of that voiced today!"

"Right!"

"Karg is correct?"

"We have our honor!" The other officers snarled their support of Karg's rebuke.

Keraz sat back in his seat. "Perhaps I misheard you, Kamarag," he said grudgingly.

The Klingon ambassador nodded, and within minutes the clandestine meeting had broken up. The moment she could do so without seeming suspect, Valdyr left her seat and hurried out into the corridor. She'd caught Karg ogling her with an appreciative eye, and she wanted to avoid the captain at all costs.

But her way out of the deep cellars was blocked by the officers, who

lingered, talking in groups, or waiting their chance to speak personally with Kamarag. Valdyr shrank back into an alcove that had once held wine casks.

She'd been standing there long enough to grow chilled from the damp stone surrounding her on three sides when she heard two familiar voices. Kamarag and Karg were talking softly.

"It went well, I thought ..." Karg was saying. "Except for Keraz. He should be Azetbur's personal servant, if he wishes to clean her boots with his tongue. I knew he would be trouble."

"We handled it, between us," Kamarag said smugly.

"Keraz may not join us--but he will not betray us to Azetbur. He has no love for her himself. Tell me, how did your latest raid go?"

"The best yet," Karg said. Valdyr could almost see him smacking his lips over the memory. "One of those mixed colonies, mostly Tellarites; you should have heard the females and the young ones squeal as we cut them down!"

There was very little worth taking on Patelva, true, but it was wonderful to feel the heat of battle and smell the richness of fresh-split blood again." Valdyr swallowed. Klingons gloried in war and battle, true, but there was no honor in mowing down noncombatants.

Karg's words made her belly tighten with disgust.

Suddenly a new voice broke into the conversation. One of the other officers had come up to slap her uncle on the shoulder and congratulate him on a stirring oration. Peering out from her niche, Valdyr saw that the newcomer's back blocked her from view, so she seized that opportunity to steal softly away down the corridor.

Later that evening, as she sat in her chamber studying for her next examination in Federation Standard, the Klingon woman heard a knock on her door. After bidding the visitor enter, she saw it was her uncle.

"Uncle!" she exclaimed, standing respectfully. Even though she did not agree with what he had done that day, he was still her family's savior and head. Klingon tradition decreed that her first loyalty be to him.

"I have something important to discuss with you, niece," he said in his deep, resonant voice. "It has come to my attention recently that you are of an age to wed." Valdyr's eyes widened. "Yes, I suppose so, Uncle," she said. "But I am so busy with school these days, I have not thought much on the matter of prospective husbands."

"Your mother arranged no marriage for you before her death," Kamarag said, seating himself on the narrow, shelflike bed. "Was that your choice?"

"We never discussed it," Valdyr said. "My mother married according to liking, not for family advancement. I believe she intended the same for me, but I do not know for certain."

"My sister married beneath her," her uncle said grimly.

Valdyr stiffened at hearing her beloved father denigrated so,

but Kamarag did not notice. "However, there is no point in rehashing her unfortunate choice, since it all lies in the past.

We must look to the future--your future. Someone offered for your hand today, and I accepted." Valdyr held her breath. Who? Keraz? I do not love him, but he is a warrior with honor ... no, that cannot be. Keraz is married, I remember hearing that. Who else? A sudden thought occurred to her, and, with a sinking sensation, she heard her uncle confirm her worst fears.

"Karg is a veteran of many battles, a warrior of considerable renown. He fancies you, niece, and he is well able to provide you with anything any female could want. I accepted his offer." Rising, he strode to the open door and beckoned. The Klingon captain stepped in from the hall, and grinned broadly at his promised bride.

"Karg ..." Valdyr whispered, faintly. The knot in her belly turned over, and she had to lock her knees to keep from trembling. To wed and bed Karg? NOT I would embrace my dagger as bridegroom before that dishonorable Denlbya'qatlh!

As though he could read her mind, Karg gave her a mocking half-bow. "My wife-to-be ... your uncle has done me a great honor."

"Hah!" Kamarag barked out a shout of laughter, and slapped the suitor on the back. "The honor is all ours, Karg!" He gave Valdyr a smug glance. "I do not wonder that she is speechless with joy." I cannot marry him, I cannot! I hate and despise him, Uncle. Do not make me do this. But, seeing the pleased expression on Kamarag's face, Valdyr forced herself to take a deep breath and regain her control. She might not be warrior material herself, being slender and not tall, but the blood of a noble house of warriors flowed in her veins. She would not dishonor herself by begging. "Uncle, I must think about this seriously. Karg needs a wife who has high social position and much ... beauty," she said, cautiously. "I have neither. I do not believe the match would be satisfactory for such a high-ranked warrior."

"Such modesty!" Karg chuckled richly as he stepped over to the young woman and ran a caressing hand up her arm, testing the muscle that lay beneath her sleeve. For a lingering moment his hand trailed perilously close to her left breast, and Valdyr went rigid. Would he dare to fondle her in front of her uncle? If he does that, I will kill him here and

now, she thought.

But Karg contented himself with kneading and prodding the muscles of her arm and shoulder. "Small, but there is good, wiry strength there," he remarked approvingly. Then, glimpsing the outrage in her eyes, he added, sardonically, "Ah, my bride ... you are so young, so innocent ... you warm my heart."

Grasping Valdyr's chin and forcibly turning her face to and fro, he continued to examine her as he might a prospective mount for his stables. "You know nothing of what excites a male ..." he said caressingly, obviously enjoying her humiliation. "But have no fear ... innocence excites me greatly. Do not worry, my targhoy. There is beauty in you. With the flowering of your womanhood, it will come, Valdyr-oy. When you are my wife, your beauty will blossom like chal flowers in spring."

His endearments and the love suffix attached to her name made the young woman long to shriek with fury. Her mind filled with images of her plunging the dagger she wore strapped to her forearm into his heart.

As his fingers touched her cheek, Valdyr could not repress a shudder of disgust. "Look, Kamarag, she trembles for me already? Karg chortled; then he seized her in a bruising embrace and pressed his face into her neck, his teeth fastening on her throat so hard that the woman gasped from the pain.

"Enough, Karg!" Kamarag ordered, and the captain released her. Raising her hand, Valdyr touched her throat, then stared unbelievably at the smear of blood on her fingers. "I know you are hot to take a bride, but the wedding will not take place until after our triumph. The taste of victory will add extra savor to your wedding night, Karg."

The captain was breathing hard as his eyes ran over Valdyr's body, and his voice, when he spoke, was thick.

"Very well, Kamarag. But she is sweet enough to tempt any male ..." He addressed the young woman then. "Do not concern yourself about your fitness to be my wife, Valdyr-oy.

Just as the beauty will come, you will learn the intricacies of society, until you are ready to take your place with me, to help my advancement. Your uncle assures me that you possess high intelligence, for a female."

Valdyr wanted to flay him alive for his words, but she held herself back. She must be clever, use all of her wits to escape this fate that loomed before her. Allowing Karg to see her true feelings would only make them watch her closely until the day of the wedding.

Perhaps she could run away. Or, if she could not refuse Karg, perhaps she could postpone the marriage for a while.

Karg was a warrior. Perhaps he would be killed. The thought made her smile.

So, steeling herself, Valdyr forced herself to say, "At the moment, school occupies all my time. Perhaps when I finish this term, I will find myself more ... prepared for marriage, Uncle."

Kamarag frowned. "You will not need further schooling now that I have arranged such a successful match for you, aldyr. Better you should turn your attention to the management of households. That in itself is a demanding life."

"Your uncle is right, Valdyr-oy. I have a large house, but it has suffered from the lack of a woman to care for it," Karg added.

"No further schooling?" Valdyr struggled to control her temper. If she made her uncle angry, it would bode ill for her brothers, as well as for her. She must not allow them to know what was in her mind. "But, Uncle ..."

Perhaps sensing her distress, her uncle said, "You may finish out this term, as long as it does not interfere with your duties here, and with your spending more time in the kitchens, learning the duties of a wife." He gave Karg a smug glance. "I will not have Karg say that you did not come to him properly trained for your new role."

"In addition to the kitchens," Karg said, his gaze roving over her body again, "do not forget that you must learn the ways of the nursery, Valdyr-oy." With a toothy grin, he slapped her uncle on the back and left the chamber.

Once they were alone, Kamarag regarded his niece with a touch of impatience. "Well, girl?" he barked, finally. "Have you nothing to say?" The young woman exerted rigid control as she forced herself to reply quietly, "Uncle, I will do as you say."

"See that you do," he grumbled. "You do not want to appear ungrateful, do you, niece?"

"No, sir." Relaxing visibly, her uncle rocked back on his heels, and smiled as he changed the subject. "The meeting went well today, did it not?"

"They all seemed to share your point of view," Valdyr said, treading a careful verbal path. "All except Keraz." Her uncle dismissed the commander with a wave of one blunt-fingered hand. "Hundreds of years from now, our names will be remembered as the ones who saved the Empire and the Klingon way of life," he said, earnestly, his deep-set eyes gleaming.

"But ... current policy of our government is to make peace with the Federation," Valdyr reminded him. "Peace with the Federation, friendship with our old enemies--even peace with James Kirk, who saved the chancellor's--"

"Kirk!" roared Kamarag so loudly that Valdyr started.

"Niece, I cannot hear that name without anger--do not think to provoke me by letting it fall from your lips so casually! May Kirk be devoured by ten thousand demons on his way to oblivion! Kirk lives still, and I have no peace!" Furious, the ambassador strode back and forth in the small chamber, his boots resounding on the floor like ancient war drums. "Kirk! Kirk is the enemy, and I will never regain my honor until he is dead, until I can dip my hands in his warm blood and dye them scarlet--I will never rest until Kirk and all his line are wiped out!"

"But, Uncle." Valdyr was taken aback. Kamarag's temper was legendary, but she'd never seen her uncle in such a rage.

"Kirk saved Azetbur's life. She will never agree to having him killed."

"I care nothing for her!" Kamarag was livid. "She is the spineless daughter of a spineless coward. She will not stop me, niece."

"Stop you in what, Uncle?" Valdyr asked, curious and repelled at the same moment.

"Stop me from carrying out my plan," the ambassador said, and smiled.

The sight of that smile chilled her, even though her chamber was warm. "What plan?" she asked.

His smile broadened, revealing a mouthful of teeth. A cunning, predatory expression replaced the anger that had been there. "You will see, Valdyr," he promised softly. "Just wait, and you will see ... "

Journal of Amanda Grayson Sarek September 16,2293 What is it like to die?

Vulcan& of course, have their katras ... a word no one has ever been able to translate with any degree of precision. Not quite a soul, not exactly a personality, more than a memory, less than a living being ... I suppose one has to be born Vulcan to have any hope of understanding Vulcan mysticism.

Spock and Sarek will live on, after their deaths. Will I?

Many of Earth religions hold that I will ... but there is no certainty. And if there is an afterlife, would individuals from different worlds mingle there?

Now I am getting metaphysical--and silly. Speculating about such things is fruitless ... illogical. Life after death will either happen, or it won't, and there is nothing I can do about it either way ... except bephilosophical.

I dread Sarek return from Freelan, even as I long for it. I suspect T'Mal contacted him, and that she was as blunt with him as she was evasive with me. No doubt she was concerned that the truth would be too much for a human to bear.

Little does she know this particular human. I have known what is happening to me for months, now. I can't remember when I first realized that my body was

running down, sputtering to its inevitable halt ... the knowledge just grew in me, day by day.

It seems that I have Reyerson's disease. It isn't always fatal, especially to those in the prime of life--but I am ninety-three. Luckily, it's not an illness that causes a great deal of pain. Its main symptom is continuous exhaustion, which, at my age, is fairly common anyway.

I've spent time these past few days reading over my old journals. The moments come back so clearly, it almost seems as though the past is the reality, and this present, with its exhaustion and inevitable ending, is merely a bad dream.

When I read about them, the memories revive, as fresh as if they happened only yesterday. I cannot believe I have lived this long--it all seems to have gone by at great speed. Every time I look in a mirror these days, I am shocked to see a woman who is, beyond a doubt ... old. I don't FEEL old--not inside. The aches and pains remind me of my true age, but my mind and my heart feel as young as ever. Young Amanda is in here with me, in my head, and Old Amanda has trapped us within this shell of aged bone and flesh.

Curious, isn't it? I wonder if every human feels this way ... or am I unusual? Vulcans, of course, feel exactly as old as their chronological age. Anything else would be illogical ... Can I really be ... dying?

At times I have to fight off panic, but those episodes are growing less and less frequent. They are simply too tiring, I suppose, for a body that is ... shutting down.

Of course, I would not want to live forever ... but I don't want to die, either. I want to live--there are still so many things to do, so many places to go, so many things to see-- I want to live ... yet I am coming to realize that I will not, at least, not for much longer. By this time next year, probably much sooner, the universe will be going on without me. Amanda Grayson, Madam Sarek, the Lady Amanda ... I will be

gone, will be no more.

I am dying.

There, I've admitted it. Writing it out in black and white like that has actually been a relief. Facing the worst the future has to offer is better than mincing around, shying away from an all-too-possible reality.

Of course, the Healers are treating me, trying to arrest the disease. But I know without asking that my prognosis is dismal. And, even if a miracle happened, and I were cured of this particular illness, at my age, the inevitable can only be staved off for a short time.

There is one journal entry that I've been saving as a treat, for when I feel particularly low. I believe that tonight is the night to read it

...

June 14, 2229 ... a few minutes past midnight My hand trembles as I write this ... I can scarcely believe what happened tonight! After all these months of seeing him, trying to make myself believe that his interest was not solely that of a diplomat befriending a student of his culture ... trying, but never quite succeeding--I can hardly believe what I am about to write--tonight Sarek kissed me/ It was not really a kiss as a human knows it--but it happened. Just the softest brush of his fingertips against my lips, but I trembled as we turned and walked home in silence. Even now, as I sit here writing, I feel as though I have caught some exotic fever.

Is it possible that we have known each other for only four months? It seems incredible that my life could have changed so radically, so irrevocably, in such a short time. Four months, almost to the day.

My work was everything to me ... teaching was my only passion. Being able to convey to my students the wonder and richness of alien cultures was my fondest dream, a goal to be striven for, my heart's greatest desire. The day I won the T'Relan Award for Excellence in Teaching was, I thought then, the pinnacle of my life.

All this time, these past months, wondering, trying to fathom why such a distinguished diplomat wanted to spend time with a teacher who happened to win an award for teaching and thus was invited to an embassy reception ...

Once or twice I thought, "Perhaps he's attracted to me," only to back away from the thought at warp speed.

Vulcans do not form romantic attachments, after all.

Either they bond at a very young age, or they make a reasoned, logical decision later in life. Romance? Don't be ridiculous, Amanda. But

tonight ... was romantic. I believe that even Sarek felt it, was affected by the spell of the night ...

The three-quarter moon was setting over the Pacific as the couple walked along the beach. Amanda Grayson picked her way over the wet sand, smiling as the white-tipped waves curled ever closer to her feet. Dinner had been excellent; Sarek had taken her to one of the finest restaurants in town.

As they'd eaten, she'd caught curious glances from their fellow diners. It was unusual, she knew, for a human woman and a Vulcan male to be seen together. And her escort was a noted diplomat at the Vulcan Embassy--a well-known public figure.

Thankfully, after they'd left the restaurant, none of the curious had followed them. Now, watching the moon slip down toward the waves, they were completely alone. The tide was coming in, lapping ever higher. Amanda watched her escort coverfly as he gazed at the ocean, his expression quiet and serene.

She was so intent on watching Sarek that an importunate wave caught her unawares. Amanda jumped and gasped as cold water sloshed over her feet, and she bumped hard against the Vulcan. Automatically, he caught her arm and steadied her. It was the first time he had touched her in the four months since she'd met him.

"Oh, thank you!" she exclaimed. "If I'd fallen in, I'd have gotten soaked." Glancing up at him diffidently, she caught her breath in surprise as she realized that he was ... smiling. There could be no doubt about it. Sarek's austere,

aquiline features had softened, and his normally stern mouth curved upward on both ends. The Vulcan's dark eyes held an amused spark.

Sarek is smiling. At me, she thought, amazed and touched.

I didn't know he could smile.

She smiled back at him, feeling a rush of happiness so pure and strong that it was like some euphoria-inducing drug. As they stared at each other, their eyes locked, the next wave caught both of them in its wash.

This time they both jumped. Amanda, glancing down, saw that the ambassador's boots were soaked. "Oh, dear.

Your boots."

"They will dry," Sarek said, ignoring his footwear.

"Amanda ... tell me something."

"What?"

"Is there anyone ... special in your life?"

He can't possibly know what that question means on Earth, she thought, blankly. "Of course there is," she said, struggling not to blush. "I have my parents, and my students, my family and my friends. They're all very special to me ... Sarek."

It had been hard for her to call him by only his name without his title--he was such a formal person, so reserved.

It was growing easier each time she did it. "And of course, back East I have several friends that I only see a few times a year, because they're--"

"Amanda ..." She couldn't believe that he'd interrupted her. He'd never done that before. The Vulcan stepped closer to her, so close she could feel the heat of his body against her face and throat.

"Yes, Sarek?"

"I wanted to know whether there is a special male in your life."

She stared at him unbelievably, but managed to compose herself. "No, Sarek. There is no special ... male." Her heart was pounding harder than the surf.

"So you are free to choose a ... mate?" he asked.

"Yes," she whispered, but hardly any sound emerged from her throat. The Vulcan leaned closer, indicating that even his acute hearing had not picked up her answer. "Yes," she repeated. "Yes, I am."

"That is good to hear, Amanda," he said quietly; then he leaned forward, slowly and deliberately, and kissed her mouth with his fingertips.

Even as he drew back, Amanda instinctively knew that her life had changed forever. There was only one possible explanation for Sarek's words and action--he wanted her for his wife. She knew from her studies that Vulcans did not waste time in casual dalliance.

For a moment he regarded her intently, his eyes filled with all the things he could not say aloud. Then, without another word, the Vulcan offered her his arm to help her back up the beach. Amanda went with him, her whole body conscious of his touch, of the heat of his skin beneath his sleeve.

I love him, she realized. I've loved him from the first, and didn't realize it until now.

September 16, 2293

Just finished rereading that journal entry. Oh, my/ Was I ever that young?

And yet ... if I close my eyes, I can still taste that kiss, even after sixty-four years.

I have had a good life. I have been blessed. There are few regrets ...

But for now, I am tired ... must rest ...

Captain James T. Kirk stood in the coruscating glow of the transporter beam, dreading what he would see as soon as he materialized on the world called Patelva. Yesterday the Enterprise had been summoned to the colony world that had been decimated by a raid. The captain had made one quick reconnaissance to the planet, then returned, sickened, to his ship, leaving Dr. McCoy and his medical staff to their grim work of trying to save as many of the pitifully wounded survivors as they could.

As the transporter beam faded around him, Kirk could hear the sounds of the wounded. The beam-down coordinates were in the center of a group of hastily thrown-up bubble tents, so, unlike yesterday, he was not surrounded by shattered and torn bodies ... which was a relief. But the sounds were bad enough.

Medical personnel scurried to and fro, racing frantically to beat their ancient enemy. In a distant field, filled with crops that would never be harvested now, security personnel stoically attended to the hideous work of disposing of the corpses.

"Captain ..." Kirk turned away from the grim scene to find his first officer at his elbow. "I have completed my interviews with the few uninjured survivors I could locate.

Their reports all concur Klingons did this."

The captain gazed around him, and sighed. There hadn't been much doubt about who the assailants were--the patterns were all there. "I know," he said. "I just finished speaking to Chancellor Azetbur on subspace communications.

She confirmed that their sensors have picked up a number of Klingon vessels crossing the Neutral Zone lately, but swore to me on her father's honor that none of them has been authorized to do so by her government."

"More renegades," Spock said, his normally expressionless features touched with sadness. "Chang has set a precedent, I fear."

"I'm afraid that Azetbur's going to go down, Spock," Kirk said.

"Everything looked so hopeful last month at Khitomer, but now ..." He shrugged slightly. "The media back on Earth are having a field day with these renegade raids. Many of the delegates to the Security Council are calling for Ra-ghoratrei to withdraw his support of Azetbur's government."

"I know. And without the support of the Federation, Azetbur has little chance to remain in power."

"The chancellor is the Empire's only hope for survival, Spock!" Kirk said wearily. "If I can see that, so can others."

The Vulcan nodded, his dark eyes bleak. He started to comment, but before he could do so, a familiar voice made both officers turn.

"What's the news on the Federation hospital ship?" Dr. Leonard McCoy demanded, coming up from behind the two officers. The chief surgeon's medical tunic was splashed and streaked with drying blood and even less pleasant substances, and his blue eyes were red-rimmed with fatigue.

"Dammit, Jim, my people are ready to drop, and I can't spare a one of em for a break. We've got to get some relief!"

"The ship's on its way, Bones," Kirk was quick to assure the medical officer. "ETA is thirty-six hours from now."

"Damn!" McCoy growled; then he sighed. "Can you at least beam down some more security people? They're not trained, but they can help clean up and make sandwiches for the staff." Kirk nodded and, taking out his communicator, quickly gave the order. McCoy busied himself dispatching the security teams to where they were most needed, then turned back to regard his friends wearily. "Thanks, Jim. This is one helluva mess ..."

"

"I know, Bones."

"Who did it?" McCoy demanded, staring out across the jury-rigged medical compound. "As if I didn't already know from the disrupter patterns on the bodies."

"Klingons, Doctor," Spock said. "But Chancellor Azet-bur has stated that they were renegades, not governmentally sanctioned troops."

"I suppose so," the doctor said, rubbing a hand over his face, leaving smears across his forehead. "Damn, but what I've seen in the past twenty-four hours almost makes me regret spending the past month studying Klingon anatomy and medical procedures."

"The Empire is in chaos, Bones," Kirk said. "Any time you get a situation like this, you find terrorism on the rise."

Any time you try paring down a huge standing army, you get soldiers that don't want to give up war."

"Especially considering that war has been the main focus of the Klingon culture for several thousand years," Spock said, quietly. "If the--" The Vulcan broke off as his communicator beeped. "Spock here," he said crisply.

"Mr. Spock, I'm receiving a Priority One personal message for you, sir," Commander Uhura's voice reported. "It's from your father."

"Relay it on screen, please, Commander." Kirk tensed as he watched the Vulcan scan the message on the tiny camp computer screen, noting the way his friend's eyes narrowed and the skin over his jaw tightened. When Spock looked up, he took a step forward and touched his friend's arm lightly with his fingertips. "What is it, Spock?" The Vulcan took a deep breath. "It is my mother, Jim. I just received a message from my father, saying that she is seriously ill." He paused, then seemed to force the words out, as though speaking them caused him pain. "Actually, Sarek used the word 'terminally' ill." Kirk had lost his own mother a few years ago ... Spock's words brought back the grief of those days all too vividly.

"Spock, does it say what's wrong?" McCoy asked, his blue eyes filled with concern.

"She has contracted a blood disease." Spock's normally even tones were strained. "Reyerson's disease is somewhat rare. It is extremely serious, especially to the very old or the very young. My mother," the Vulcan finished bleakly, "is in her nineties." Kirk's mother, Winona, had been in her late eighties at the time of her death. In the twenty-third century the human life span was longer on the average than it had ever been, but only ten percent of the population lived for a century or more. Kirk drew a deep breath. "Go home," he ordered. "Go now. Take the shuttlecraft to Starbase Eleven. You can get a transport from there, and reach Vulcan in five days," he said.

Spock hesitated, glanced around him. "But we are on a mission ... my duty is to my ship ..."

"Dammit, Spock, this is a medical mission," McCoy said.

"If you've got a medical degree it's news to me. Go. We don't need you here. Your mother does." The Vulcan finally nodded. "Very well. Thank you, Captain.

I will depart immediately." Moments later, Kirk and McCoy watched the last flicker of maroon vanish in the transporter beam, and knew the Vulcan was on his way.

"Jim, this is terrible," McCoy said, his eyes shadowed.

"We've known the Lady Amanda for so long ... and now we're all going to lose her? It's ... not fair."

"How many times have you said that when you're confronted with death, Bones?" Kirk asked.

McCoy gave him a grim smile. "At least ninety-five percent of the time, Jim. But that doesn't keep me from feeling it again, each time."

"After that hospital ship relieves us here," Kirk said,

"we're heading for Vulcan."

McCoy nodded. "Good. But how are you going to justify a trip to Vulcan with Starfleet Command?"

"Scotty has performed his usual miracle patching up the ship after Chang used us for a skeet target," Kirk replied,

"but he told me yesterday that he's completed all the repairs he can, working on the ship from the inside out. He said we'd have to put into spacedock for him to finish with the structural repairs and pressure checks. Vulcan has an excellent spacedock."

McCoy nodded, then wearily straightened his back. "No rest for the wicked," he said. "I've got a patient to check on."

Kirk looked at him. "Could you use one more pair of unskilled hands, Bones?"

"You bet," the doctor said. "C'mon, and I'll order you around for a change ... "

Together, they headed for the nearest bubbletent.

"Enough, Peter, enough!" Lisa Tennant insisted, getting out of the old-fashioned hard-backed chair and stretching her spine. "You're worse than Rosa. I never thought I'd find anyone who could work as hard as she did. How about some coffee?"

Peter nodded. "Sure, Lisa. Coffee's fine." He could use a cup right now. It was nearly midnight and because of the time he'd spent here, he'd have to pull an all-nighter to cram for his exam tomorrow. He rubbed his face tiredly. He

wasn't eighteen anymore. Staying up all night studying would take its toll ... and what did he have to show for it?

He'd been coming to this dingy basement room nearly every day since that Saturday. That first day, he'd thought that he'd be able to garner

enough information to take to Starfleet Security once he got into the KEHL files. But that Saturday, he never got near the computers. Instead, he'd ended up helping Lisa with the technicalities of bailing out most of the demonstrators.

He'd been right about her, too. She was interested in him, and kept him close by her side most of the time, flirting lightly, never saying or doing anything too forward, too aggressive. He played along in the same vein, waiting and hoping to get access to their computers. When that didn't happen, he'd ended up coming back the second night, and the third. Last night, he'd finally gotten into the machines, but the only thing she'd let him work on was a tedious reworking of the data structures, which told him little.

He promised himself that tonight was the very last time he'd come here. If he didn't get any information valuable enough to bring to Starfleet Security, he'd forget his brief sojourn into the world of cloak-and-dagger and force himself to focus on the really important matters in his life.

Like the Kobayashi Maru.

Peter groaned at the very thought of that test, only a little more than a week away. Just today, one of his friends had confided that the odds against him were mounting steadily.

Peter wasn't surprised. If he had been a betting man he'd have bet against himself, too. Was he studying the old scenarios to see how others handled them? Was he reading up on the theory behind the test itself, to get a handle on what the new scenario might require of him? No, he was hanging around a subversive organization, flirting with its leader, and coming up with nothing for all his efforts.

A cup of steaming coffee suddenly appeared by his elbow, along with a sandwich. "You've got to be starving," Lisa said quietly, sitting beside him. "You've been working steadily since you got here. I'm afraid I haven't been taking very good care of you."

"I didn't think that was your job," he replied. "As your impromptu assistant, I thought it was my role to take care of you."

She brushed against him, and the faint scent of her perfume made his nostrils twitch with the faintly musky, exotic odor. In the few days he'd been associating with her, he'd found her an enigmatic person. She was bright, sensitive, and quite intellectual. In many ways she was an intriguing, exciting woman, not the kind of person to spout the bigoted, paranoid nonsense she obviously believed wholeheartedly.

He thought more clearly when she wasn't quite so close to him. Finishing his sandwich, he eased out of the chair and wandered around her small, spare office. Curiously, he browsed the shelf of real-paper books she

had prominently displayed.

There was a mint-condition volume of Wuthering Heights, a slightly battered edition of Have Spacesuit, Will Travel a collection of Edgar Allan Poe's poetry, and ... He paused, staring at a slim volume perched neatly between the others. The Diary of Anne Frank.

"It's a nice collection," Peter said softly. "Do you read them?" Unlike his Uncle Jim, many collectors did not.

Lisa nodded proudly, coming to stand beside him. "I don't read the volumes themselves, of course--they're much too fragile. But every book I buy, I look it up in the library files and read it."

"That's great," Peter said, his voice low. He tried to imagine how she could've ever read the words of Anne Frank and still become so involved with the KEHL. "It's nice to meet someone who appreciates books."

She gave him a smile, and a spark of warmth touched her huge, obsidian eyes. "Are you a collector, too?"

"Not exactly," Peter admitted. "But my uncle is, and I enjoy his books." Peter hesitated, then bit the bullet. "You know, I've never gotten the chance to ask how you got so involved with the KEHL."

Lisa showed no sign of self-consciousness as she replied,

"I haven't been a member that long, Peter. Just a few months. It's funny ... I'm a sociology student, and I know something about how groups like this start ... Usually there's one charismatic individual--like Induna--who founds such a group, and he or she finds followers along the way, people who think along the same lines. But the KEHL, at least here in San Francisco, wasn't like that at all." She glanced at him, her black eyes earnest. "Which leads me to believe that we were just destined to be--that it was time for us to rise and make our voices heard."

"Have you always disliked aliens? Particularly Vulcanst' Peter was careful to keep his tone one of polite, if casual, interest.

She frowned a little as she thought. "It's funny, Peter. Up until a few months ago, I scarcely ever gave the matter much thought. I'd never known an alien personally, and only met a few as casual acquaintances. I'm from a little town in Indiana, and we don't get many outsiders--human ones, much less extraterrestrials. I guess it was just a subconscious decision I made back in August ... that humans evolved on Earth, so it's our planet, and they don't have any place here."

"Do you think Earth should stay in the Federation?"

"I don't know ..." She chewed on her lower lip, hesitating.

"Since Earth is the most powerful planet in the Federation, with only the Vulcans capable of posing a serious challenge to us, I suppose we shouldn't dissolve the Federation until the Klingons and Romulans have been dealt with.

As long as we can get the Vulcans out, that is."

Peter was having a difficult time staying civil. "Why?" he asked, struggling to keep the edge out of his voice.

She faced him, holding his gaze with her own intense one.

"Do you know anything about Vulcan history?"

"A little," Peter said cautiously.

"Let me show you something." She walked back to the computer terminal and selected a computer tape, then plugged it in.

As Peter seated himself in front of the screen, images coalesced in front of him. The predominant one was an image of the Plains of Gol, a scene familiar to anyone who watched popular media entertainment. Splashed across the desolate scene were the words *The True History of Vulcan*.

He groaned inwardly. Propaganda films were not among his personal favorites.

"Are you aware that the Vulcans fought major wars on their planet several thousand years ago?" Lisa asked, as the film moved forward, illustrating her question with vivid, computer-generated film sequences that seemed shockingly real. "Wars that make Earth's World Wars and the Eugenics War look like skirmishes by comparison?"

"I think I remember reading something to that effect," he mumbled.

"Well," Lisa leaned forward and murmured confidentially,

"they still have the weapons from those wars, stockpiled in secret installations. Weapons that could turn Earth into a smoking cinder in a matter of minutes."

As the images on the film confirmed her wild allegations, Peter's mouth dropped open, and he didn't have to feign astonishment. Where in hell did she get that idea? They had to have faked these images! Vulcan has no weapons except defensive ones--and hasn't for four thousand years! "You're kidding!" he managed, feebly. "Where did you find out about that?"

She shook her head. "Everyone in the KEHL knows.

We can't get the Terran government to admit it, but it's true."

"Wow," was all Peter could say. "That's hard to believe."

"You think that's bad, you haven't heard anything, yet," Lisa said. She touched the computer controls and changed the scene from massive stockpiles of terrifying weapons to another, more fantastic landscape. There was a towering cathedral-like edifice in a searing desert. Inside were cavernous, smoky, dimly lit rooms packed with peculiar, glowing orbs, pulsating as if with a mysterious force.

"The Vulcans are in control of ancient Vulcan ... personalities, I guess you'd call them," Lisa said. "Spirits

without bodies. They're called katras, and they have hundreds of thousands of them stored up, just waiting to turn them loose to possess the people on Earth. Unless we can stop them, they'll conquer us without a shot being fired!"

This last was almost too much for Peter. He knew he had to cajole her along, try to learn more, but all he wanted was to escape listening to such noxious paranoid fantasies.

"But don't worry," she consoled him, misinterpreting his expression. She placed a warm hand on his arm. "We're on to them now. And our membership is growing, bringing in new committed people--people like yourself. Our voices will be heard." When he didn't respond, she asked, "What made you join up?"

"Self-preservation," he said, letting her take it any way she wanted to. "But I ... had no idea ... things were so bad ... "Her bizarre accusations merely gave him more incentive to accomplish the task he'd come here to do.

"Lisa, you told me you needed my help in a special task.

Something about a Vulcan conspiracy ... ?"

She nodded. "Boy, you're inexhaustible! I wasn't going to bring it up tonight, but ..." She glanced through a number of tapes then pulled one up. "We've found information that's coming straight out of the Vulcan consulate that will shatter this whole holier-than-thou sham the Vulcans have set up. This information will prove that Vulcans are using their telepathy to influence powerful members of the Federation--perhaps even the president himself"

Peter's eyes locked on the small tape. In his pocket sat blank cassettes, enough memory to copy anything he should find of value here, but so far, nothing seemed significant.

"How can I help with that?"

"Needless to say, this information was very difficult to come by," she told him. "A lot of it has been lost in the transference--special codes, significant schedules. Since you're a data-retrieval technician, I thought ..."

He nodded. "Sure! I'd be glad to help. I can take it to work tomorrow and ..."

She shook her head. "Oh no, this can't possibly leave here.

In fact, Jay's not real happy with my even letting you see it.

But ... for some reason ... I can't help but trust you, Peter Church."

Lisa leaned forward almost imperceptibly, at the same time Peter felt his own body drawn toward her. When their lips met, his face flamed with embarrassment that his body had so little regard for his own internal ethics.

"I'll ... be happy to work on it here," he said huskily, when they drew apart. "I can probably ... tap into my workstation ... use my fries at work to decode some of the lost material."

She nodded. "That would be great." And kissed him again.

They both jumped when they heard the door behind them whoosh open. Jay stood there, frowning disapprovingly.

Lisa moved away from Peter self-consciously. "I ... didn't think you'd be back so early," she stammered.

Jay didn't respond, merely glanced at Peter and said to the woman neutrally, "Can I see you in my office a moment?"

Something's come up."

"Is it Induna?" she asked worriedly, standing. They'd found out that the president of KEHL had survived Sarek's "assault," but had been hospitalized (at his own insistence, Peter knew). "Is he all right?"

"Let's ... talk in my office," Jay reiterated, nodding his head in that direction.

"Wait for me," Lisa said to Peter, "and I'll show you the problem with those files."

He nodded and watched her walk toward Jay's office with the other man. The moment they were both out of sight and earshot, Peter snatched up the "conspiracy" tape and plugged it in. Grabbing one of his empty ones,

he downloaded the whole thing, sight unseen. After copying the secret cassette, he copied the extensive KEHL membership lists, and the propaganda films as well. He had just finished copying the annual agenda, and sliding his tapes back in his pocket, when Lisa came back into her office. Jay was not with her. Peter stood to greet her.

"Everything all right?" he asked. "Is Induna okay?"

Lisa nodded, smiling warmly. She slid her arms around him and he returned the embrace. "Jay is such an alarmist!

Induna's out of the hospital, and will be back here tomorrow."

"Great! Why don't we get started on those Vulcan files?"

She pulled him closer and murmured, "Is work all you think of, Mr. Church?"

He swallowed, unsure of how far he could take this charade. "Well ... this would be the best time for me to access my workstation ... "There wouldn't be many students in the Academy library at this time. He hadn't quite figured out how he was going to log on without revealing who he "worked" for ... or his real name.

"Tomorrow will be soon enough," she assured him, and reached up for another kiss.

He obliged her, realizing uneasily that his body was responding to her, even if his mind wasn't. Hastily, he raised his head, staring down at her. "Okay. Tomorrow. It is late.

"I'd better go."

"See you tomorrow, then," she agreed, and released him, smiling warmly as he let himself out of the basement.

With a twinge of regret, he thought, Not bloody likely. In spite of the late hour, he made a beeline for the Starfleet Security offices on the Academy's campus. Those offices were staffed all night. Someone would be there that would be interested in his story. And then he'd never have to go back to that basement again, never have to war within himself over Lisa's feminine charms and her absurd, even dangerous politics. One thing was for sure--no matter how many mixed feelings he might have about taking the Command track at school, he was now certain that he had no interest in working in Intelligence!

Twilight on Vulcan.

Sarek stood alone on his terrace, watching T'Rukh at full phase. The ambassador had returned from Freelan the previous night, and the day had been taken up with visits to the meal center and consultations with his

wife's physician.

Now, gazing at the full, bloated sphere, Sarek reached out and grasped the stone balustrade so tightly that his knuckles shone greenish white in the eerie glow of The Watcher.

Silently, the ambassador struggled for calm.

As he watched The Watcher, the gigantic world seemed to loom even closer, as though it were about to topple out of the sky and crush him. The chilling breeze stirred his thick, iron-gray hair, as refreshing as the touch of a cool, human hand on his brow. Sarek swallowed, feeling dull pain in his midsection. Surely he was not ill ... A quick assessment of his physical condition assured the ambassador that he was physically healthy ... the pain he was experiencing had no physical cause.

Sarek leaned heavily on the railing, experiencing again that rush of vertigo at the thought of Amanda. Amanda was with him now, for the moment, but soon, the Healer said, she would not be here anymore. Because Amanda ... Amanda was dying.

Dying. His wife was gravely ill, and, even though they were attempting to treat her condition, T'Mal held out little hope of recovery.

Dying ... Amanda. Dying. So the Healer said--and one glance at his wife's face yesterday had convinced him.

Sarek stared blindly at The Watcher, thinking of all the times he had stood here, during many of the epochs of his life.

How many times had he stood thus? Absently, the ambassador retrieved the number. He had not seen the giant world until he was an adult, when he had built his villa here. Also, he had spent much of his working life off-world. Still, Vulcan's days were shorter than Terran days, and Sarek was 138 Federation Standard years old. 122,474 times. 122,474 times ... The ambassador had watched T'Rukh the night that his firstborn had been declared outcast and departed his homeworld, and known within himself that he would probably never see Sybok again. Nor had he.

He'd watched T'Rukh during the early hours of his second pon farr, experiencing the heat of desire, concerned that human flesh and bone might not withstand the flames consuming him. But human flesh and bone had proved more resilient than he had thought. During that night, his secondborn had been conceived.

The ambassador had watched T'Rukh the night that Amanda had delivered their son, and again when Spock had announced that he had passed the entrance requirements for Starfleet Academy, and was forsaking the Vulcan Science Academy to go off-world. Memories of that "discussion" still had the power to make the ambassador's jaw muscles tighten.

T'Rukh's light had illuminated his son's tall form as he'd walked away without looking back. His father had thought never to see him again, either. But that time he had been in error, and never had he been more pleased to be mistaken.

Sarek drew deep, slow breaths of the cool air as he let his consciousness sink down, deep inside himself, seeking that place of quiet repose that every Vulcan was taught in childhood to retreat to during times of trouble.

He could not find the place. Calm acceptance continued to elude him. With a sigh that was almost a moan, Sarek sagged against the railing, raising both fists to press them against his temples in a gesture he would never have permitted himself had he not been alone. Every muscle in his body was taut; his indrawn breath hurt his lungs.

Logic ... his logic was gone, the core of his mental balance was gone and in its place was pain ... and fear.

And grief. Sorrow filled him, until he felt that he could hold no more. There was no quiet center that would release him from his pain, this fear, this grief. How could he stand it, if he could not find his center? How did humans manage, with no silent retreat or sanctuary to shield them from the constant onslaught of emotion--how could they stand this?

No wonder some of them broke with reality, retreating into insanity because they could not deal with their pain, their fear, their grief.

Sarek stared at T'Rukh unseeing, unblinking, until his eyes began to burn. The physical pain distracted him, and he found a brief respite in it.

Sarek ... The call resounded softly within his mind. Sarek ...

Immediately the ambassador turned and left the balcony.

He strode swiftly through the living room, down the short hall; then he hesitated before the carved portal. The call came again. Sarek ... Quickly he sent back a wordless reassurance, a sense of his proximity and imminent arrival. Then, drawing a deep breath, the Vulcan put out a hand and rested it against the carved portal, seeking strength from its solidity, its age.

Letting the breath out slowly, he summoned calm, seeking at least outwardly--control. When he was certain that his features betrayed nothing of his inner turmoil, he straightened. Squaring his shoulders, he pushed the door open and stepped into the room he had shared with his wife for more than sixty Earth years.

The chill of the air-conditioning struck him immediately.

Amanda's physician had insisted, over her protests, that she must not tax her remaining strength by enduring her adopted world's notorious heat. Cold air blasted against his face, driven constantly so a pressure lock would not be necessary.

The ambassador's gaze rested first on the bed, but it was empty, the light, silver-blue coverlet Amanda had woven decades ago thrown back. Even as he turned toward the small sitting room that looked out over the rear garden, he sensed her presence, waiting for him.

Quickly, Sarek strode through the bedroom and into the adjoining sitting room. Amanda occupied her favorite chair as she gazed out the window at her garden, her pale skin seeming doubly unearthly in T'Rukh's light. She sat quietly, not turning her head. During the past days she had lost even more weight ... now she seemed little more than a wraith. Only Sarek's iron control kept him from betraying his distress at her appearance.

Sarek ... Her mental "voice" filled his mind. "Amanda," he said, allowing just a touch of reproach to shade his voice, "you were supposed to rest for the remainder of the day. The Healer emphasized your need for rest. Logic demands that you heed her advice." When he reached her side and stood looking down at her, only her smile was unchanged ... gentle, full of affection.

"I'm tired of resting," she said, holding up two fingers toward her husband. "And you know how I love to watch The Watcher shine on the garden at night."

"I know," Sarek replied, touching her fingers with his own.

"Is it pleasant out tonight?" she asked, a hint of wistful eagerness tingeing her soft voice.

"Yes, it is," Sarek replied. "However, to answer the unspoken corollary to your query, no, it is not cool enough for you to go outside, my wife. The Healer's directions were quite specific on that point. Logic dictates that you must husband your strength ... and the heat depletes it."

"For heaven's sake, Sarek," Amanda said, her eyes flashing with indignation, "I've lived here most of my adult life! I know it's hot outside! But I have been cooped up in this house for nearly a week, and I am tired of seeing nothing but these four walls, tired of resting. I want to sit in my garden, damn it!" Her voice gained strength and volume as she spoke, but faltered and cracked on the last line.

Sarek was taken aback at her vehemence--he knew Amanda had a temper, had known that since before their marriage, but he could have numbered on one hand the occasions when his wife had resorted to profanity.

"Amanda ..." he began softly, then stopped.

"Besides," she added, her eyes filled with weary resignation,

"what difference will it make, really?" The ambassador gazed down at her. Under the circumstances, he could not find it in himself to deny her wish. It was such a small request ...

"Very well," he agreed. "Do you have your respirator with you?" Smiling, Amanda patted the pocket of her robe, indicating that she did. "What about the logic of following the Healer's orders?" she asked him.

"Logic tells me that you will expend far more energy arguing about this than you will in a brief interlude outside," Sarek retorted as he bent over and scooped her up as he would have a child. She was hardly heavier than one.

Perhaps, Sarek thought, a brief excursion outside would bolster her flagging appetite.

When Sarek reached the garden, he carefully lowered his wife's slight form onto a stone bench, then seated himself beside her. Amanda's eyes shone as her gaze took in the beauty of the night, the garden, and the hovering planet that dominated the sky. "It is lovely," she breathed. "I knew it would be."

"It is good to see you here again," Sarek said. "The garden's appearance is not aesthetically complete without its creator." Amanda, recognizing the compliment despite its subtlety, smiled roguishly at her husband. "Sarek, I do believe you are getting sentimental," she teased.

Her husband's lips curved upward as he permitted himself the faint, answering smile that few besides his wife had ever seen. "Nonsense, my wife. My comment was entirely logical. This is your garden; you designed it, planted it, and nurtured its growth. It is a reflection of your creative instincts, so, logically, it appears at its most attractive when you are present to complement and complete it. There is nothing 'sentimental' about that--I was merely stating a fact." Amanda chuckled, and to Sarek's ears the sound was more welcome than any strain of music. "Now you're rationalizing, my dear--as well as teasing me. It is a good thing our son isn't here to hear you. Spock would be shocked." Despite Sarek's control, the muscles in his jaw tightened fractionally at the mention of his son's name. Amanda was watching him intently, and her husband realized that she had not missed that tiny betrayal. Her smile faded. "Have you heard from Spock?" she asked anxiously. "You didn't--" She broke off at her husband's nod, and her eyes flashed again, this time with anger. "You didn't!" she exclaimed. It was an accusation, not a question.

Sarek gazed up at T'Rukh fixedly. "I sent a subspace message to Spock

before I left the Freelan system," he admitted quietly.

"How could you?" Amanda was furious--as he'd known she would be. "We had a bargain! You gave me your word! I did not want him told, you knew that! I--" She sputtered indignantly for a moment, then subsided, too angry to speak. Finally, her chin lifted and she glared at him, her eyes now cold. "Your action was entirely illogical, my husband," she said in slow, careful Vulcan, using one of the ancient, formal dialects. Then she turned away, staring fixedly at The Watcher. It was no longer full; its upper limb was now shadowed.

Sarek was taken aback by her accusation--in ancient days, it would have constituted an insult. "Amanda--" he began, then waited patiently for two point six minutes until she finally looked at him. "My wife," he said softly, hearing the tension in his own voice, "Spock had to be informed. If anything happened to you, and I had not told him, he would never speak to me again--and I could not fault him for his decision." Amanda sighed, and Sarek immediately knew that her anger had turned to resignation. "You're probably right," she said quietly.

"Amanda," Sarek said slowly, "I regret going against your wishes, but logic and duty demanded that I make my own decision."

"But our son has been through so much in the past couple of years!" she murmured, twisting her wasted hands in her lap. "He lost his ship, Valeris betrayed him, my god, he lost his very life--he needs to finish putting the pieces back together, not have other concerns added!"

"Would you deny him the chance to see his mother again?" Sarek said, and the phrase "for the last time" seemed to fill the quiet garden.

It was a long time before Amanda replied. "No, I suppose not. I suppose you did the right thing, as well as the logical thing. But I wanted Spock to--" She broke off on a ragged breath.

"You wanted him to what?" Sarek asked, quietly.

"I don't want him to see me," she admitted, dully. "I thought it would be better if he remembered me the way I used to be ... "

"That' never occurred to me," Sarek said, slowly. "Your attitude is illogical, Amanda ... and vain. Human vanity, I believe, is as foreign to my son as it is to me."

"I know that," she said softly. "I've lived here for decades, and never yet managed to figure out how Vulcans can be so arrogant without being at all vain."

"You have learned much about my people," Sarek conceded, quietly. "It is possible that no human understands us better."

Sarek crossed her fingers with his, but, in addition, he gently traced the contours of her face with two fingers of his other hand. The intimacy of the caress, outside of their bedroom, made Amanda's eyes widen; then she closed them, concentrating on their bond, and the closeness it gave them.

Finally both stirred, and Sarek dropped his hand. "We should go in, my wife," he said gently. "I sense your fatigue.

You must rest."

Amanda nodded, but, when he would have risen, put out a hand to forestall him. "Just five more minutes," she pleaded. "Who knows ... when ... or ..." She hesitated, but did not say "if" aloud. "Anyway, there is no way to know how long it will be before I'll be able to be with you in the garden again. Five minutes more, Sarek ... please?"

Sarek gazed down at her, then nodded. "Very well," he said. "But you must agree to put on your respirator, Amanda."

She frowned, but then her features smoothed into serenity once more, and she obediently slipped the little mask over her mouth and nose. Together, fingers once more touching, they gazed at The Watcher, while the night breeze caressed their faces.

Spock felt the surrounding heat even before his body was completely rematerialized. Nevasa was almost directly overhead, blazing furiously.

The transporter chief had beamed him down into the gardens behind his parents' mountain villa. It had been nearly five years since his last visit here, and Spock noted absently that Amanda had expanded the cactus garden to include species from the deserts on Andor, Tellar, and Rigel VI. The plants were brilliant shades of lime green, amethyst, and turquoise, doubly arresting next to the dusty greens and reds of the Terran and native Vulcan plants.

He walked slowly up the crushed stone path, feeling the heat envelop him like a blanket. He welcomed the hot caress. Vulcan. No matter that he had spent more of his life with deck plates beneath his boots than he had treading the sandy soil of his homeworld--when he was back on Vulcan, he knew he was home.

The mountain villa was a low, redstone building with solar panels set into its flat roofs. Its design was deceptively simple and austere; from outside it appeared smaller and more rustic than it actually was. The surrounding foothills and the paths leading up to the mountain crests were as familiar to Spock as the corridors of his starship.

Just as he reached the kala-thorn hedge that enclosed the garden, a door opened onto the rearmost of the roofs and Sarek emerged. At his father's signal, Spock halted and waited for him. Sarek took the side ramp down

to the ground, then skirted the edge of Amanda's garden until he stood before his son.

The Vulcan officer held up his hand in the salute of his people. "Greetings, Father," he said in their native tongue.

"I trust you are well?"

Sarek nodded. "Greetings, my son. Yes, I am well. It is good to have you here."

Despite his father's reassurance, Spock was concerned about the ambassador's health. The lines in Sarek's face had deepened, and his hair was grayer than it had been a month before. His shoulders seemed smaller, and the flesh of his hand, as he returned his son's salute, was tightly drawn over the bones of his fingers.

"How is Mother?" Spock asked.

"Sleeping," his father replied. "The monitoring devices will indicate when she awakes. The Healer has stressed her need for rest." The ambassador glanced around. "We should go in."

Spock nodded. "Nevasa is ... formidable today. One forgets, after years away."

Together they went into the villa, then sat down in the living room Amanda had decorated with handwoven wall hangings. Spock sipped appreciatively at a cup of relen tea, covertly watching Sarek as his father paced restlessly around the room, gazing at the bone-white walls and the desert-hued hangings as though he'd never seen them before.

Finally, Sarek turned to face his son. "Your mother ..." he began, then he fell silent.

"She ... is dying?" Spock asked, feeling his throat contract over the words.

"Yes," Sarek said, seeming relieved that his son had spared him having to say it aloud. "The Healer holds out little hope of recovery, even though she is being treated for Reyerson's disease. The illness, in one of her age, is too debilitating."

Spock nodded silent understanding.

Father and son occupied their time while waiting for Amanda to awaken by sharing a simple lunch. It had been years since he and his father had been alone together long enough to share a meal, Spock realized, and he found himself enjoying Sarek's company. They spoke of the Klingons and the Khitomer Conference, of the current political situation in the Federation, and a host of other diplomatic concerns.

Spock rose from his seat and wandered over to examine the water sculpture in the corner of the room. Every time he came home, its design and flow were slightly altered--Amanda changed it periodically. This time, there was something different about it--the flowing lines were sharper, more angular than before. The water ran in clear perfection, instead of taking on colors from the underlying crystal and stone.

"It is different," he said to his father, indicating the sculpture.

Sarek nodded. "I programmed it this time. Your mother did not have the energy to do the work herself, but she was tired of the old design."

Studying the piece of art, Spock finally nodded. "Yes, I can see that. This design is far more ... logical." He hesitated, trying to frame the rest of his thought in a way that would not offend.

"But not as aesthetically pleasing," Sarek finished for him. Taking in Spock's surprised glance, he nodded. "I saved the old designs, every one of them. As soon as Amanda grows tired of the current design, I will reactivate one of her programs."

Sarek hesitated for a long moment, then continued.

"There is something that has been concerning me for some time now. I need your advice on a problem I am facing."

Spock's gaze sharpened with curiosity. "A problem?" he prompted. Never before had Sarek asked him--or anyone else, insofar as he knew--for advice.

"Recent events have convinced me that a serious problem

is facing the Federation from an unsuspected quarter," Sarek said, steepling his fingers on the table before him.

"What do you know of the Keep Earth Human League?"

Just as Spock opened his mouth to reply, the monitor in the corner beeped softly. The ambassador quickly rose to his feet. "Your mother is awake."

Soft-footed, Spock followed his father down the hall to his parents' bedroom. Even though he had thought himself prepared for his mother's illness, he was shocked by her extreme pallor and thinness, as she lay in the middle of the huge bed.

"Mother ..." Spock said gently, leaning over her to take one of her hands in his own. The bones beneath her papery skin seemed no more substantial than those of a songbird.

"Spock ..." she whispered, even before her eyes opened.

Her familiar, loving smile shone out of her face, transforming it, making it suddenly familiar again. "Oh, Spock, it is so good to see you ... "

The first officer stayed with his mother for nearly an hour, talking quietly to her. When Amanda's eyes began to close, he squeezed her hand, then left.

Sarek was sitting at the table when his son reentered the dining room. Spock sank into a chair, and took a deep breath. "I did not want to believe it," he said, dully.

"I know. I experienced the same reaction," Sarek said quietly.

Father and son gazed at each other in silent accord.

Laser torch in hand, s'kara straightened up slowly from her crouch beside the massive combination planter-harvester.

Overhead, Kadura's small orange sun, Rana Delta Eridani), was trying to break through the winter cloud cover ... and almost succeeding. s'kara turned her face up, enjoying the brush of warmth against her dark green Orion skin. Her short, curly black hair, liberally shot with the gold threads of age, stirred in the chill breeze that cooled the sweat on her forehead.

Looking off across the fields, rusty brown instead of summer blue-green, s'kara let her gaze wander to her village of Melkai. There were snug little homes, painted in shades of blue, yellow, green, and mauve, their rooftops black and studded with solar collecting cells.

The Orion woman grimaced a little as she rubbed her back with one hand. Squatting beneath the combine all morning while she tried to weld its sequencer into position again was a sure guarantee of a backache to come. Still, the combine would have to be used soon for planting, for spring, despite the cold grayness of the sky, was only a few weeks away.

With a heartfelt groan, s'kara bent her knees and prepared to squat beneath the machine again, laser torch poised.

Just as she ducked to crawl beneath the combine, a dark shadow loomed overhead. s'kara caught it out of the corner of her eye and involuntarily looked up.

What was that? she wondered. It almost looked like a ship going by.

s'kara's heart pounded as she slid back out into the open and stood up. Her eyes widened with fear.

A ship was swooping in for a landing not half a tern away--a Klingon ship. Klingons! Great Mother of us all, help your children! Klingons! Heart slamming so hard she could scarcely breathe, s'kara fought the impulse to crawl back beneath the combine and hide.

Stories of rape, murder, and stomach-churning atrocities ran through s'kara's mind as she began to run toward the settlement. She had to warn them!

Hearing a shout from behind her, she forced her legs to an even swifter pace, the chill air hurting her lungs. The whine of a stun ray filled her ears. Dodging frantically, she raced across the field, her feet flying so fast that she feared she'd overbalance and fall, breath sobbing in her chest.

The whine came again and, without knowing quite what had happened to her, s'kara found herself lying on her face in the field, completely helpless. Her eyelids were closed, and she couldn't open them. Frantically, she tried to pray as she lay there, wondering how long the stun beam would hold her. Her muscles screamed with pain, but she couldn't adjust her position by so much as a sendisat.

Time went by ... s'kara finally began counting her own heartbeats, and had reached 412 when she heard footsteps approaching. A voice barked an order in Klingonese, and the whine came again. Abruptly, she could move, and her entire body convulsed in agony as all her muscles went into spasms. Rough hands grabbed her, hoisted her up.

Flingohs ... five of them, all armed. One of them grinned, showing a mouthful of snaggleteeth, and reached for the front of her insulated coverall, clearly intending to rip it open.

s'kara closed her eyes tightly. She braced herself--only to have another of the Flingons reach out and strike down the hand of her would-be attacker. He snarled something that sounded like an order, and the other Flingon reluctantly stepped back.

This Flingon was wearing a more elaborate metal sash across his broad shoulders. He eyed her, then said, with a strong accent, "Do you speak Standard, woman?" s'kara nodded. "Yes, I do."

"Good. We talk, you translate. Help us, and you will not be harmed."

A shrill shriek rent the air, and s'kara darted an anguished glance in the direction of the village. Another scream followed.

"We are under Federation protection, here," s'kara told the leader. "When they find out what you are doing, it will mean war with your government."

The leader uttered a short, ugly bark of laughter. "We have no

government, woman. We are our own law, our own government. I am Commander Keraz. You will address me as 'my lord.' Is that understood?"

s'kara nodded sullenly. One of the Klingons holding her cuffed her sharply. She took a deep breath. "Yes, my lord."

"Better."

All of them glanced up as yet another Flingon bird-of-prey hurtled out of the sky. Keraz gave an order to one of his men, and the Flingon trotted off.

"We will go into the village," Keraz said to s'kara. "We will assemble the people. You will speak to them in your own language. What you will tell them is this We are in control, and we will stay in control. As long as they obey us, they will not be harmed. Resist, and we will kill them--or worse. Is that clear?"

s'kara stared at him, wanting so badly to spit right into his swarthy face that her jaw muscles worked. He watched her as though she were some kind of mildly interesting insect. After long seconds, s'kara nodded, then, as one of her guards raised his hand, said hastily, "Yes, my lord."

Another scream rose out of the villagema scream that was cut off in the middle by a whine of disruptor fire. s'kara tensed, her throat an aching knot of despair. Keraz nodded at her guards, and they all started across the field, passing the big combine.

I will survive this, Klingon, s'kara thought grimly. When this is over, I will be alive, and free--and you will be sorry. By the Mother Goddess, I swear it ...

As the little party entered the village, s'kara forced herself to note every horror they passed, so she could tell the authorities when they came. They would come, she told herself. The Federation took care of its own. They would come ...

But would anyone still be alive to be rescued?

"What is this threat to the Federation, Father?" Spock asked, later that same day, as he and Sarek walked in the gardens behind the villa. Sarek's young aide, Soran, was watching the monitors that would signal when Amanda awoke again. "You aroused my curiosity with your reference to the Keep Earth Human League."

Overhead, Nevasa was past its zenith, declining toward the horizon, but sunset was still more than an hour away.

Sarek glanced about him at the stark beauty of his wife's garden. Then he quietly spoke of the Freelans, summarizing his discovery that they

were actually Romulans in disguise, and speaking of his discoveries aboard the Freelan space station.

"I have been collecting data for over a year," he finished.

"I would appreciate it if you would review it for yourself tonight." Spock nodded. "If it were anyone else telling me of this, I would dismiss his words as illogical paranoia," the Starfleet officer said slowly. "That you have seen proof of your theory convinces me, but ... how did you know? What made you suspect the Freelans?" Sarek had known that Spock would ask. The ambassador drew a deep breath, steeling himself. "It is a long story," he began. "One that I did not think I would ever speak of to another." His son raised an eyebrow inquiringly. "Obviously you have access to information the rest of the Federation does not. How did you obtain it? The Freelans are the most secretive of beings No one has ever seen a Freelan

his or her mask " Slowly, deliberately, Sarek shook his head from side to side.

"Not true," he said, heavily. 'I have seen the face of a Freelan.

When the incident first occurred, I remained silent about it for nearly seventy Standard years, because I could not be sure of what I saw that day. But now ... now the puzzle is complete, and I must inform the authorities of what I have discovered."

"Seventy years?" Spock was clearly taken aback. "Please elucidate."

to the bench that faced T'Rukh, Sarek sank down, arranging his robes meticulously while he searched for words.

"It began when I was a diplomatic attache at the Vulcan Embassy on Earth ... some seven years before I met your mother. I had been bonded to T'Rea, the priestess"--the ambassador used the archaic Vulcan word reldai, which in the old days, when Vulcan was ruled by the theocracy, meant both "female religious leader" and "female ruler or princess"--"as was traditional, when we were both seven years of age. I had not seen T'Rea since we were children; she was a stranger to me." Sarek paused, remembering his first wife as she'd looked the last time he'd seen her ... her intense black eyes, her

beauty, her proud, stern features. Mostly he remembered her hair, a rippling obsidian curtain that had hung down past her hips. It had felt as silken as her diaphanous wedding robe.

"As the newest of the diplomatic attaches on Earth, many of the routine or less-desirable tasks fell to me," Sarek continued after a moment. "One of those was being appointed the diplomatic liaison to Freelan. I was fifty-nine Standard years old, and had not yet experienced my first Time. I knew that most males undergo their first Time in their thirties

or early forties, so this delay was somewhat unusual ... "He shrugged slightly. "But I also knew that residence off-world could affect one's cycle, and I had lived much of the past fifteen years on Tellar, Earth, and several other worlds.

Many factors, as you know only too well, Spock, can affect the onset and frequency of our Times." Spock nodded gravely.

"It was raining that day in San Francisco when the ambassador summoned me to his office," Sarek continued, his voice deepening as the memories took hold, transporting him back to the past. "I was still new enough to Earth to find such an abundance of precipitation fascinating ... even mesmerizing.

"I been the liaison to Freelan for three years at that time. Freelan had only come to the attention of the Federation shortly before I was appointed, so, as it happened, I was the first person to travel to that distant world to discuss trade policies."

"How many trips had you made?"

"Over the course of three years ... seven in all," Sarek said, after a moment's thought. "Naturally, of course, I was not permitted to set foot on Freelan soil. I stayed on board their space station."

"Had you ever met a Freelan personally?" The ambassador shook his head. "No. At that time, no one had.

They did not leave their world until decades later. All contact was by comm link. Despite all this, my contact on Freelan, a diplomatic attache named Darov, was someone I had come to know and respect over the years. Darov and I had fallen into the habit, following a day's negotiation, of playing chess after our respective evening repasts. Darov was a challenging player," the older Vulcan continued after a moment. "Many of our contests ended in a draw, and, more than once, I lost."

His son raised an eyebrow in surprise. "That is indeed ... impressive," he murmured. It had been many years since father and son had sat down to a game, but the last time they had played, Sarek had still been able to win more than half the time.

"As we played, we talked ... about many things. Darov was careful not to reveal much in the way of information about his people, or himself, but, over the years, I learned some things about the Freelans that outsiders did not know.

For example, I knew that Darov was young, about my own age, that he was married, and had a family that he was quite ... devoted ... to. A son and two daughters, I believe."

"Did you gain any knowledge of Fredan society and culture?"

"Yes, though Darov was extremely cautious and secretive.

I gathered that his political leanings tended toward the moderate. Darov favored increased contact with other worlds ... while the Freelan government's official position was that outsiders constituted a potential threat to the Freelan way of life."

"Darov wanted to change the way his world interacted with others?"

"I gained that impression over the years," Sarek said,

"though he never said so specifically."

"Fascinating," Spock murmured. "You did indeed learn more than is generally known even now about Freelan and its people. I had no idea the Freelans had political parties, or that not all Freelans favored their isolationist policies."

"There are many things you do not know about the Freelans," Sarek said gravely. "That day in San Francisco, Ambassador Selden assigned me to travel to Freelan to conduct trade negotiations concerning ore that had recently been discovered on a moon in the Freelan system. This ore,

crysium, was a vital element in the construction and use of a new diagnostic and treatment machine recently developed by the Healers at the Vulcan Science Academy."

Sarek's mouth quirked ironically. "At the time the ambassador spoke with me, I was experiencing some minor physical symptoms of illness ... I had not been sleeping or eating well. I considered asking him to send another in my place. But I told myself that my symptoms were simply those of mild fatigue due to overwork, and that a chance to rest aboard ship would be beneficial ... "

As Sarek talked, the memory of that fateful voyage and its aftermath grew in his mind, eclipsing for the moment his surroundings. Amanda's garden faded into the neutral-colored walls of his tiny cabin aboard the freighter Zephyr ...

Soft skin beneath his hands, long, silken hair spilling over his body, the brush of a mind that inflamed him past all ability to resist ... Sarek groaned aloud as he reached for T'Rea. She wore only the diaphanous overtunic of her wedding garb, and he could clearly see her body beneath the silken fabric.

The sight of her made him gasp and tremble; his mind and body were aflame, hot as the sands of Gol, burning like the volcanoes that tormented T'Rukh, searing him beyond all ability to resist. Sarek reached for his bride, his hands catching in her garment, ripping it, and then he was touching her flesh ...

With a gasp and a muffled cry, he sat upright on his narrow bunk aboard the Zephyr, realizing that he had been dreaming. He was shaking violently, so aroused that it was several minutes before he could discipline his mind to overcome the fever racking his body.

So this is what it is like, Sarek thought finally, when he could once more think rationally. Port farr ... and I am parsecs away from Vulcan, and T'Rea ...

Through their bond, he could sense her, knew that her body was experiencing that drawing, even as his was. For a moment he wondered what it would be like to be married to her for the rest of his life, but the rest of his life seemed like an insubstantial, faraway thing in comparison to the heat of his desire.

The drawing was physical pain, his need to mate was torture. How long before he succumbed to the madness, the plak tow? Grimly, Sarek set about using biocontrol techniques to subdue the pon farr so he could reason logically.

Minutes later, he rose from his bunk, outwardly composed, inwardly more at peace. It was early, yet. He had several days ... perhaps a standard week ... before the blood-fever would consume him utterly.

Vulcan was five days away. Should he request that the captain take him to Vulcan instead of docking at Freelan's space station in an hour?

Sarek shrank from the idea that anyone--any outworlder, any human--might see him in his extremity. And yet surely he could hold out for a day, maintain control long enough to meet with Darov and formalize the ore-trade agreement. Much of the negotiation had already been accomplished via subspace messages back and forth.

Surely Sarek could handle one day's work before sealing himself into his cabin and preparing to wait out the agony before he could reach Vulcan and his wedding T'Rea ... He had met her only a few times, and not even in the past twenty years. T'Rea had become an Acolyte of Gol, and her mental skills were formidable. People spoke of her with respect, and a little awe. Rumor had it that she was a candidate to ascend to the rank of High Master.

Was she now High Master? What would it be like to be wed to the High Master of Gol, someone whose telepathic skills greatly exceeded his own modest ones? What would it be like to be wed to someone who had achieved kolinahr--a person who had succeeded in purging all emotion from her being? Someone who lived by Perfect Logic?

For a moment something in Sarek rebelled at the realization that there could be no personal sharing between himself and such a woman, no intimacy, no ... companionship. No warmth. No ... kindness, no

gentleness.

After a moment he pushed the thought away, rejecting it as illogical. His work was in the diplomatic corps ... he lived on his homeworld only a few days each year. He and T'Rea would live apart, that was the only logical solution.

They would meet during their Times, and that would be all.

And children? a voice whispered inside him. What if there are children?

It was unlikely that the High Master of Gol would have either the time or the inclination to raise children, Sarek decided. If a child should be born as a result of this Time ... his blood heated at the thought of the act necessary to engender a child ... then he would take that child to raise. His work was difficult, requiring much traveling, but a child, especially an older child, would gain much from such exposure to the universe and its varied cultures.

A soft chime came from the intercom; then the steward's voice informed the Vulcan that the Zephyr would be docking with the Freelan station in thirty Standard minutes.

Sarek spent half of those minutes in deep meditation, checking his biocontrol, verifying that the mental barriers he had set up against the heat in his blood were holding, would hold long enough for him to accomplish his duty. The moment the negotiations with Darov were concluded, he would return to Zephyr and order her captain to take him to Vulcan at the freighter's maximum warp.

Then he would lock himself in his cabin for the duration of the trip, and fight to keep control over the madness that would be nibbling at the fringes of his mind.

Minutes later, dressed and outwardly as cool and composed as usual, Sarek walked through the short tunnel linking the Zephyr's airlock with the Freelan station.

The station was empty at the moment, save for him ... there were no other outworlders staying here as they met with the Freelans on the planet below via corem link.

Sarek was relieved that he would be spared the necessity of engaging in small talk with other beings. He did not even enter his sleeping quarters--a neutral, pastel chamber as bland as any hotel room--but bypassed them to go directly into the adjoining office with its comm link.

Within moments, Darov's figure materialized before him.

Sarek was used to facing the cowed, swathed figure, completely muffled

in shimmering garments as colorless as a Taka moth's wing. Darov's mechanical voice echoed in his ears. "Greetings, Liaison Sarek! I was not expecting you until this afternoon."

"My ship made good time," Sarek said neutrally. "Greetings to you, Liaison Darov. I trust you are well?"

"Entirely, thank you," Darov said, and Sarek imagined that he could hear a touch of genuine warmth tingeing the artificial voice. "And you? Perhaps you will honor me with a game of chess after we conclude our meeting?"

Sarek bowed slightly. "I regret that I must respectfully decline, Darov. I am ... fatigued, and am looking forward to reaching my homeworld, so I may rest."

Darov's cowl jerked slightly forward, as if the Freelan had moved his head suddenly to peer at Sarek's face. But the liaison said only, "How unfortunate that you are not feeling up to playing. I will miss our game ... it has become one of the few pleasures I still allow myself, with my busy schedule." He straightened slightly, briskly. "If you are not well, let us by all means conclude these few points quickly, so that you may rest. Shall we begin?"

"Certainly," Sarek replied, activating half of the screen to show the data he had brought concerning the crysium ore.

"Now, concerning these subsidiary mining rights ..."

Hours later, they were nearly finished, when Darov suddenly turned his head, then announced, "Excuse me, Sarek.

I am being summoned on a priority channel. Would you wait for a moment?"

"Certainly, Darov," Sarek said. The Freelan's image vanished, and he busied himself going over the points they had negotiated. He experienced a brief flare of satisfaction at his own performance. He'd protected Vulcan's interests in all major areas, while giving in on minor points that would no doubt allow Darov satisfaction regarding his own negotiation strategies.

Halfway through the list, the Vulcan attache gasped suddenly as pain lanced through his mind and body like a

phaser blast. T'Rea! Her desire called to him, reached out for him, threatened to engulf him. Wait, he attempted to transmit along the bond, I am coming to you ...

"Sarek? Sarek? Sarek, are you--" Dimly, Darov's voice reached the Vulcan. He swayed, opening his eyes, found himself still in his seat, clutching the comm board as though it were a lifeline.

"I ... am fine," the Vulcan managed after a moment.

"Perhaps a brief rest ..."

"I did not know that Vulcans could lie ... until now," Darov said flatly. The shrouded figure of the alien nearly filled the comm screen, as though he were leaning forward, peering intently at the Vulcan attache. "Our station has a fully equipped automated med center. Perhaps you should--"

Agony lanced through Sarek again, rolled over him in waves so crushing that they left nothing in their wake except blackness ... a dark so deep that it had no end, a dark that should have been cool, but was instead an inferno of black flame, and he was burning, burning, burning ...

Hands on his shoulders, a voice in his ears, calling his name. T'Rea? He lunged blindly at the hands, at the body he sensed hovering over his, pulling at him, dragging him.

T'Rea! It had to be she, for the hands on his shoulders were not cool, as human hands were, but the same temperature as his own fevered flesh. It must be T'Rea!

Sarek called her name, reaching out, then opened his eyes to see a dark form bending over him. Moments later he was lifted in arms as strong as his own, lifted and carried.

"T'Rea ..." he gasped, only to hear a male voice say, "No,

she is not here. Come, I will help you."

Not T'Rea? A male? A rival?

He was being challenged! T'Rea had chosen the Icad-if fee--how dare she? Enraged, Sarek thrashed, striking out, then found himself falling. He crashed to the deck of the space station with stunning force.

Space station? Wasn't he on Vulcan?)

But he had no time to ponder his location, for his rival

was bending over him, grappling with him. With a bellow, Sarek struck out, grabbing madly at the other male's dimly seen figure, his hands seeking the challenger's throat.

Cloth met his fingers, impeded them from their goal.

Snarling, Sarek ripped savagely, felt the cloth give and come away in his hand.

But he was on the Freelan space station, wasn't he? I, Vasn't this Darov, who was trying to save him? This couldn't be a rival Vulcan.t)

But it was. As the shrouding cloth parted, Sarek saw features swim before his eyes--features that nearly mirrored his own! He was right! A Vulcan male was trying to take T'Rea from him! He must kill him, kill him ... kill him ...

A voice crying out, a voice he recognized, despite its lack of mechanical quality. Darov voice, calling his name ... and those were Darov features? Slanting black brows, proud black eyes, high cheekbones chiseled like his own, black hair, rumpled now from their struggle, and, amid the black locks, ears that were ... that were--)

"I regret this, my friend," the dimly seen figure said, as Sarek froze in shocked confusion. The arm drew back; then Sarek saw the shoulder roll forward with sudden movement.

Something struck him hard on the chin, and he knew no more ... "What happened then?" a voice said, pulling Sarek out of the haze of memory into which he had sunk. The sun was setting behind him, and, before him, T'Rukh loomed at full phase, T'Rukhemai disappearing behind it. Spock was gazing at him intently.

"Obviously you survived to reach Vulcan. How did you manage it, if you were deep in plak tow?"

"When I regained consciousness," the ambassador said,

"I was in the med center aboard the Freelan space station, and I was alone. The automated machinery had evidently diagnosed my condition, then administered sedatives and hormones that allowed me to function with some semblance of normaicy. It also helped that T'Rea, unknown to me, had contacted the consulate on Earth, discovered that I was several days' journey away from home, and was shielding her mind, blocking me from reading her ... desire ... through our bond.

"Under the influence of the medication, I reboarded my ship, which reached Vulcan before the end of the fifth day.

My marriage ceremony took place less than one hour after the Zephyr achieved orbit around Vulcan."

"And that was when Sybok was conceived?"

Sarek slanted a surprised glance at Spock. It wasn't like his son to ask such personal questions ... but perhaps that was because he'd never given him an opening before. "Yes," the ambassador replied simply. "T'Rea hid his birth from me, though. I did not know he existed until her death, years later. When she ascended to be High Master of Gol, two

years after our wedding, she divorced me. This was legal, under the ancient laws, because the High Master is expected to sever all ties to the outside world in order to more fully embrace kolinahr and the teaching of that discipline to the Acolytes."

"Did you regret her action?" Spock asked. Two highly personal questions!

The ambassador took a deep breath. "No, I did not. I was immersed in my work, and had just been appointed under-ambassador.

Besides," he added, with a glance at the villa, "if T'Rea had not divorced me, I would not have been free when I met your mother. My relationship with Amanda is eminently more ... satisfying ... than anything I shared with T'Rea during our single, brief encounter. She was ..." Sarek paused, remembering. "... a typical kolinahru."

"What really happened that day with Darov?" Spock asked. "Pon farr can ... distort ... one's sense of reality."

"Precisely. For that reason, I dismissed what had happened as a plak tow-induced hallucination," Sarek replied.

"I concluded that I must have blundered around the station, at one point running into a mirror and deciding that my own reflection was a challenger in the kal-ocfee ... then, by sheer happenstance, wandered into the med center, where the automated equipment took over and saved my life."

"Under the circumstances, that would be the most logical deduction," Spock agreed. "But now you know that is not "Yes. My first suspicion of that was when your ship, the Enterprise, discovered twenty-seven Standard years ago that the Romulans, whose faces no one had ever seen, were plainly of Vulcan stock."

"Indeed," Spock said, obviously recalling the incident.

One corner of his mouth twitched. "I recall the first moment when our viewscreen gave us a glimpse of the Romulan commander. It is odd that you mention that Darov bore a resemblance to you ... because this Romulan did, also. I was rather startled when I first saw his image on-screen."

"Perhaps he and Darov were related in some way," Sarek speculated. "At any rate, from that time on, I could not dismiss the notion that the Freelans were not what they seemed. Two years ago, when the Romulans began to emerge as a serious military threat to the security of the Federation, I began researching Freelan exhaustively. As I did so, a pattern emerged."

"What kind of pattern?" Spock asked.

"I believe that the Romulans are behind the sudden popularity and high-profile activities of the Keep Earth Human League," the ambassador replied.

Spock blinked. "Please explain that allegation. How could the Freelans have anything to do with the KEHL?"

The KEHL is against all extraterrestrials ... including Romulans."

Sarek rose from the bench and began pacing back and forth as he spoke. "Consider, Spock. Every time the KEHL has experienced an upsurge in growth, at least one Freelan has been attending a diplomatic, trade, or scientific conference within the same city."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Every time?"

His father nodded.

"What are you postulating, Father? Some form of mass coercion? Drugs? Hypnotism?" The younger Vulcan could not disguise his skepticism.

Pausing in midstride, Sarek turned to regard his son levelly. "Mental influence." His words were clipped, terse.

Quickly, he summarized his encounter with Induna, and what he'd discovered from the KEHL leader's mind.

"But Romulans do not have the ability to meld or mind-touch," Spock protested. "It could not have been a Freelan who influenced the KEHL president."

"I know that Romulans do not share the Vulcan telepathic ability," Sarek said, somewhat sharply. "I am not suggesting that they are influencing KEHL members personally. During the past three years, Freelans have begun using Vulcan secretaries and aides in increasing numbers. Have you noticed this?"

He watched his son in T'Rukh's lurid illumination as Spock mentally reviewed the data stored in his mind. "I have only recently begun attending diplomatic conferences, but you are correct. Every time I have seen a Freelan envoy, he or she has been accompanied by a Vulcan secretary or aide. The Khitomer Conference is a case in point."

"Yes," Sarek said. "Soran was rather taken with the Freelan aide he met there."

"Father, the practice of hiring Vulcans as administrative aides is hardly unusual."

"True," Sarek agreed. "Many young Vulcans take employment on other worlds as a way of traveling after completing the first stage of their

education. However ..." He fixed his son with an intent gaze, his voice dropping to a near-whisper.

"None of those Freelan secretaries or aides were born on Vulcan."

"Indeed?" Spock blinked, then his eyes narrowed.

"Fascinating ..." he murmured, suddenly comprehending what the other was saying. "None of them?"

The elder Vulcan shook his head. "None. Including the young woman named Savel. I have traced every young Vulcan traveling off-world for the past five years ... and no records show that any of them have been hired by Freelans."

"Yet I saw the Freelan envoy with her at his side myself," Spock said. "I recall them clearly."

"As do I," Sarek agreed. "But whoever that young Vulcan woman was, she was not born on this world."

"Then where did those young Vulcans who are influencing the KEHL leaders come from?" Spock asked.

"They came from Freelan." Sarek's voice was harsh and flat, and he swallowed to ease the dryness in his throat.

"Spock, the Romulans have been systematically hijacking ships with Vulcan passengers for decades. I have studied the shipping reports, the passenger lists, for every nearby sector, and there is an eighty-six-point-seven-percent correlation between the disappearance of a ship and the presence of one or more Vulcans on board."

"Continue," Spock said, his expression grim.

"It is my belief that those abducted Vulcans were taken to Freelan and forced to produce offspring. Their resulting children grew up under Romulan influence and training--and they serve the Romulans. These children learned to use their telepathy in ways Vulcans raised on this world are taught to abhor."

Spock was quick to follow the ambassador's logic. "So now we have Freelan envoys, merchants, and scientists traveling to Earth and the Terran colonies on a regular basis, most of whom are accompanied by a Vulcan secretary, or aide. And those young Vulcans, trained in Vulcan mental disciplines, but lacking our ethical prohibitions, are using their telepathy as they mingle among the populace. They influence humans with a buried streak of xenophobia, inflaming them into becoming prime material for the KEHL."

"Exactly," Sarek said. "I must admit that at first I doubted that Vulcan

telepathy, which is traditionally accomplished by touch, could be used for such a purpose." He paused for a second, then continued in a lower tone,

"However, recent events have convinced me otherwise."

Spock nodded, a shadow in his eyes mirroring the sadness in his father's. "Sybok," he said. "I saw him influence minds from a considerable distance. His mental powers were ... unusual, however. But the ability to influence minds more subtly ... I possess that capacity myself."

This time it was the ambassador's turn to raise an eyebrow. "Really? I did not know that."

"I have done so several times," Spock admitted. "Though never to effect any lasting mental impression or change in the subject's mind. But I did it on Eminiari Seven, and again on Omega Four." He paused. "And I am only half-Vulcan."

Thus I find the possibility of Vulcan offspring who possess the mental abilities, without the ethical constraints we are taught, entirely plausible. And ... disquieting."

Spock was silent for a moment; then he asked, "Did you ever discuss with Darov what happened that day you went into pon farr? You said that you were friends ... "

"I might have," the ambassador said. "Except for the fact that I never saw Darov again. I never discovered what had become of him. I suspect he was executed for helping me that day. Darov was replaced by Taryn. My impression of him is that he is considerably younger than Darov ... though I cannot be certain, of course, since I never knew Darov's age. He is a far different individual. Much colder ... and possessing, I believe, a formidable intellect."

We have never discussed politics, but I am certain that Taryn is far from the moderate Darov was." Sarek paused, thinking. "I have gained the impression, over the decades, that the liaison is ... patriotic. Possibly a zealot."

Spock raised an eyebrow as he considered the ambassador's words. "If he is indeed a wing commander, that would not be surprising. Many high-ranking Romulan officers favor all-out war with the Federation."

The Starfleet officer rose from the bench to pace beside his father along the garden paths. "My final question is, why?"

Obviously, all of this ... the Freelan base, the captured Vulcans, the KEHL--this entire plan took years ... decades ... to set into motion. What do the Romulans hope to gain?"

Sarek did not answer directly. Instead he asked, "What are the goals of the KEHL?"

"As I understand them ... to remove all nonterrestrials from Earth itself. Especially Vulcans."

"Not just from Earth," Sarek said. "From the Federation

itself. I have researched the KEHL, also. The organization is adamantly opposed to the continued presence of Vulcan as a member of the Federation." Spock nodded slowly. "That does not surprise me." His features tightened. "If the Romulans are successful in driving a wedge between Earth and Vulcan, to the point where Vulcan either secedes or is expelled from the Federation, then Earth will have lost its most powerful ally."

"Yes," Sarek said. "A Federation without Vulcan would be weakened in many ways. Also consider What is the current situation with the Klingons?"

"Extremely unstable. When I left the Enterprise, we were orbiting a planet whose colony had been devastated by a Klingon attack. Chancellor Azetbur assured us that the raiders were renegades, and that she was attempting to capture them and bring them to justice. I believe her, but many others will not. The entire Federation/Klingon situation is unstable. James Kirk referred to it last week as 'a powder keg waiting for a spark.'"

"An essentially correct, if somewhat dramatic way of putting it," Sarek said, dryly.

"Instability in the Federation could well provide such a spark," Sarek continued. "Azetbur's government is struggling to stay in power. She has popular support, but many of the older, high-ranking families object to having a woman as chancellor. A number of high-ranking officers have turned renegade, deserting the fleet and using their vessels to commit acts of piracy."

"Actions which only fuel the xenophobia the KEHL is fostering."

"Precisely." Bathed in T'Rukh's garish light, Spock's features were drawn so tightly they appeared fleshless, skull-like. "It is also possible that the Freelans are using their trained Vulcans to influence high-ranking Kling-Ohs ... fomenting dissent, inciting the Empire into civil upheaval, and then war with the Federation. The humans have an ancient phrase for such strategy"Divide and conquer."

"Indeed," Sarek agreed. He sighed wearily, feeling himself relax for the first time in ... how long? He could not tell ... "My son, it is a ... relief ... to speak of this all, after holding silent so long," the

ambassador said, sinking down onto another bench. "I have discussed my conspiracy theory with only two people before you--Soran, just recently, and your mother. It is difficult to know who to trust. Any high-ranking official could now be under Freelan influence." Spock shook his head slightly as he considered that. "A situation that might justifiably induce paranoia," he concurred.

"Last year, when I first began to suspect that the Freelans were using telepathy to influence people, I advised all members of Vulcan's diplomatic corps to work on strengthening their mental disciplines, so they could not only detect, but shield against, any attempt at mental influence. I traveled to Gol nearly every day for months, training with one of the high-ranking Acolytes."

"I learned similar techniques while I was at Gol," Spock was quick to assure his father. "My shielding is better than average."

"Good." Sarek gazed around him at the garden in T'Rukh's waning light. "All indications are that the Romulan plan is reaching fruition. I hypothesize that we may have only months ... perhaps less ... to act to stop them."

"What is your recommendation?"

"First, we must gain concrete proof of the Freelans' true identity and purpose in order to expose them. Your skills with computers equal my own. It is my hope that, working together, we can break into the Freelan system more successfully than I was able to that first time. Then we can download their memory banks."

"That would constitute indisputable proof," Spock agreed. "We must present that proof in open session of the Federation Security Council."

"I agree."

"We do have time," Spock said. "The KEHL is still a long way from influencing Earth to expel Vulcan from the Federation."

"Do not be too sure. Elections will be held in two months, and the KEHL is sponsoring many candidates ... some openly, others with secret affiliations. Some of these candidates are vying for offices at very high levels in Earth's government."

Sarek rubbed his forehead as fatigue washed over him so strongly it seemed to gnaw at his bones; he felt every one of his 128 years.

"Something else to consider, Spock. If the KEHL keeps growing, Vulcan will not struggle to remain a member of the Federation. Our people do not react well to being ... insulted."

Spock nodded grimly. "I suggest that we discuss the matter with James Kirk and ask his help in gaining positive proof, and in bringing all of

this before the Federation Security Council and the president."

"I agree," Sarek said.

It was full night now, and the temperature was dropping rapidly. The younger Vulcan glanced around him at the eerily lit garden and repressed a shiver. "It is late. We should go in."

"Yes. Your mother will be waking soon."

"So, you're Jim Kirk's nephew!" Commander Gordon Twelvetrees exclaimed, holding out his hand.

Standing stiffly at attention, Peter accepted the warm handshake from the tall, stately Lakota Indian who was Admiral Idota's aide. The admiral was one of Uncle Jim's friends, and while Peter hadn't really expected to find anyone in at such a late hour, he'd hoped to leave a message for Idota with the desk clerk. He was pleasantly surprised to find the admiral's aide still at work.

"Oh, at ease, son," the commander said, waving him to the couch in his office. He poured a cup of fresh, fragrant coffee into the fine Starfleet china that every admiral's office had, and handed it to the cadet.

Peter nodded his thanks, and took a sip. It wasn't anything like the brew at the cadet's commissary. This was a hearty, robust blend--Jamaican, probably. He relished the taste.

"You got lucky finding me here tonight," the commander said. "Usually I keep the same bankers' hours as the admiral."

The young Kirk smiled thankfully at his superior. "I'm glad you could see me. Why the late hours?"

"I was here waiting for a communique from the Neutral Zone. Something the admiral's been expecting. When they told me Jim Kirk's nephew had a problem ..."

For once Peter didn't flinch at the reference to his relative.

At times like this, being Uncle Jim's nephew came in handy.

"Thank you, sir. I'm most grateful for your time." He tugged his cadet's uniform into place, glad he'd taken the time to change and freshen up. He hesitated, trying to find the right place to begin, then finally started from the top, telling Twelvetrees about trying to meet Sarek for lunch, the demonstration, the riot and his involvement, and how he found himself at the local KEHL headquarters.

The story didn't take very long, and Twelvetrees never interrupted,

listening to every word with complete attention.

As he neared the end of his tale, Peter withdrew the three tapes with the pilfered information and showed them to the commander.

"I know it was probably a foolish thing for me to do, sir, to pretend to be a member of KEHL, but I felt it was a unique opportunity I couldn't pass up, in spite of the risks.

And I think it's paid off. These tapes hold the entire files of their membership rolls, their agenda, and the stolen information they obtained from the Vulcan consulate. I think they're enough to discredit this organization for once and all. They're really getting dangerous, sir, and they're no longer willing to work within the law. Their violation of Vulcan communications alone is proof of that."

Commander Twelvetrees took the computer tapes almost reverently, staring at the innocuous bits of flat plastic as he

turned them around in his big hands. "You certainly are a Kirk, son. That's the same thing Jim would've done in that very circumstance. He must be proud of you."

Peter was about to say that his Uncle Jim didn't know anything about this, when a troubling realization began gnawing at his gut. Despite the commander's words, he realized that the aide wasn't taking him seriously. Not at all.

Twelvetrees sat back against the couch, and pocketed the cassettes. "I want to thank you for the effort you took to obtain this information, Peter. Most people--working to complete their finals, cramming day and night--would only have their own personal problems in mind, and would've turned their back on this. You've got the kind of heart, the kind of backbone Starfleet needs to bring us successfully into the future. I won't forget what you've tried to do here.

However ..."

Peter felt as if ice crystals were forming in his stomach.

"... I have to tell you that Starfleet has had the KEHL under surveillance for quite some time. We've even had several people infiltrate the ranks. I can understand your alarm, but the truth is the KEHL is just a fringe-element, disorganized group. They've been gaining popularity due to the media exposure, and, unfortunately, we were under-staffed at the consulate the day of the demonstration. But the KEHL is no threat to anyone, Peter."

"But ... those tapes ..." Kirk protested.

"Oh, don't worry, Peter ... I'll take a look at these before I hand

them over to Starfleet Security--just in case there's something in there we can use. They'll probably decide to warn the Vulcans about the breach in their security. But don't forget, none of the KEHL's plans have ever come to anything. And we both know there's no such thing as a Vulcan conspiracy." He stood, indicating the interview was at an end. "You have your navigational final tomorrow morning, don't you?"

"Yes, sir," Peter responded desultorily, as the commander walked him to the office door.

"You focus on that, son. I barely made it through that one myself. Don't you worry about these tapes, the KEHL, or

anything but your exam. I'll make sure this information gets the attention it deserves, and if we find anything of any importance, I'll let you know." The commander extended his hand again as his doors whooshed open, practically demanding Peter's exit.

The young Kirk took the hand offered him. "Thank you, sir. And believe me, if you really look at that information, I think you'll be surprised ... and concerned."

"Don't you worry, Peter," the commander assured him, his deep voice calming and sincere. "Starfleet Security has the situation well in hand. Thanks again for your concern."

Peter watched the doors slide closed behind him and slumped against the wall, despondently. He hadn't been born yesterday; he knew a kiss-off when he saw one. Despite the commander's promise, Peter couldn't shake the feeling that the officer was probably going to toss his tapes in the nearest recycler.

The cadet shrugged.

He could still get in a few good hours of studying if he hurried. The commander was right about one thing. If he was going to ace the navigational final, he'd need to be sharp, focused. Peter straightened up and squared his shoulders.

He'd get focused, all right. As soon as he tended to one more thing.

Minutes later, young Kirk strode briskly up to the communications center that sat in the center of the massive Starfleet Security headquarters.

"Can I help you, sir?" the young man manning the desk asked.

"Yes. I want to send a message to a Federation starship." Peter realized that he had no idea where his uncle was right now.

"And what ship is that, sir?" the operator asked casually.

"The Enterprise. I want to send a message to Captain James T. Kirk."

The communications clerk glanced up, faintly surprised.

"Well ... that ship is currently on assignment. A message could take a long time to ..."

"Send it Priority One. I am Captain Kirk's nephew. It's regarding a family emergency."

"Of course, sir," the operator agreed, all business. He handed Peter a message pad and stylus. "If you'll encode your message here it will be sent on the private-messages channel, Priority One."

Peter picked up the pad, and, stylus poised, stood pondering just exactly what to say.

Spock stood waiting outside the door of his parents' room, forcing himself to remain still, hands clasped behind his back, his expression controlled, remote. Inwardly, however, the Vulcan wanted nothing more than to pace restlessly.

Movement would have aided him in dispelling some of his disquiet.

This morning, the Enterprise had entered the Vulcan spacedock, and, in response to Spock's request that he evaluate Amanda's condition, Leonard McCoy had beamed down to the villa.

The doctor was currently in Amanda's room, examining his mother.

Spock's sensitive hearing picked up the swish of the pressure curtain moving aside, so he was prepared when the door opened, framing McCoy. The doctor's expression was somber as he walked out into the corridor.

In silence, the two officers went into Sarek's office. When the ambassador saw them, he rose from his desk and the three walked out to the living room. McCoy sank down on the couch and glanced around. "You have a lovely home, Ambassador Sarek."

The elder Vulcan inclined his head. "My wife's doing, for the most part," he said.

"The view outside is magnificent, too. I never saw anything like the Forge on any world I've visited."

"It is a relatively unique configuration," Sarek agreed.

Spock, who was sitting beside the medical officer on the couch, shifted impatiently. "Doctor ... what did your examination indicate?"

McCoy shook his head. "I'm sorry, Spock. The Healers

are correct. The Reyerson's is, for the moment, in remission.

But I'm afraid that when I speak to Dr. T'Mal, I'm going to recommend that she halt your mother's treatments."

The first officer glanced quickly at his father, then back at the human.
"Why, Doctor?"

"Because they're causing a tremendous strain on your mother's already frail system. While I was examining her, she suffered a small stroke--and my findings indicate that wasn't the first one."

"A stroke?" Spock half-rose from the couch.

"It was a good thing I was there. I was able to arrest it, and prevent any significant damage. My sensor readings indicate that she's had at least two others within the past week or so.

Minor ones, but they take their toll."

"What is your prognosis, Dr. McCoy?" Sarek spoke for the first time in minutes.

"Well, I can't really say definitively. These things differ with individuals ..." the human began, evasively.

Sarek stared levelly at the Starfleet medical officer. "With all due respect, I must remind you that you are not speaking to a human family, Doctor. Please do not dissemble."

McCoy took a deep breath. "All right." He stared levelly at the ambassador. "The Healer was, if anything, optimistic.

I would say it's a matter of a few weeks ... possibly only days."

Spock drew in a soft breath as the doctor's words struck him like a blow. It wasn't until that moment that the Vulcan realized, bitterly, that he'd hoped his old friend would be able to work some kind of miracle. Illogical the Vulcan part of his mind whispered. Illogical if not irrational ... hope is a human emotion.

All at once he was acutely conscious of the automatic time sense marking off the hours, minutes, and seconds in his brain. Usually, the Vulcan never thought about it, unless he needed to, but suddenly, it was as pervasive as the ticking of some huge, old-fashioned Terran clock.

Time ... Amanda's time was running out. '

Without a word to the others, he rose from his seat and beaded for his room. Fingers numb, he pulled on rough, outdoor clothing and desert

boots. He was not thinking, he was simply obeying a strong, almost instinctive need to move, to be outside, to walk the rough soil and climb the jagged stone of his homeworld.

The heat struck him as he headed into the hills, but Spock ignored it. He was too conscious of the seconds ticking away inexorably in his head

...

"Ambassador?." Sarek looked up at the sound of Soran's voice. The ambassador was sitting by Amanda's bedside, her hand in his, so he would be there when she awakened.

On McCoy's advice, he had engaged a Healer's aide to monitor his wife's condition, but he and Spock had been taking turns remaining with her during most of their waking hours, ever since Dr. McCoy's revelation two days ago.

Now, seeing the concern in his young aide's eyes, the Vulcan hastily left the bedroom and stepped into the hallway. "What is it, Soran?"

"Ambassador, a priority call just came in for you from President Ra-ghoratrei," he said. "The president wishes to speak with you. He says it is urgent."

Sarek nodded a quick acknowledgment as he headed for his office. Moments later, he was seated before his comm link. A presidential aide recognized him, nodded briefly; then the image wavered and was replaced with that of the Deltan Federation president. Ra-ghoratrei nodded a somber greeting to the Vulcan.

"Ambassador Sarek. Your aide told me of your wife's illness. I regret having to call upon you at such a time, but I have no choice."

"What is it, Mr. President?"

"A band of Klingon renegades has captured an Orion colony--the planet Kadur and they are holding several thousand colonists hostage. The Klingon leader is threatening to kill the hostages unless the Federation agrees to negotiate a release and monetary settlement with him." The president took a deep breath. "Ambassador ... a great

many lives hang in the balance. For this mission we need our best negotiator--and that is you. The meeting will take place on Deneb Four."

Sarek briefly reviewed what he knew of the conference center on Deneb IV. It was at least three days' journey at maximum warp. A week to go there and return, as well as whatever time the negotiations would require ... he would probably be away from home for at least two weeks, possibly three ...

The ambassador knew without consulting T'Mal or McCoy that, given her

present condition, Amanda would probably not survive long enough for him to travel to the neutral site, handle the negotiations, and return. If he left his wife now, it was unlikely that he would ever see her alive again.

Nevertheless, there was only one logical course of action.

The Vulcan took a deep breath. It is my duty. I cannot risk so many lives. The needs of the many ... "I will go, Mr. President," he said, steadily.

Ra-ghoratrei breathed a sigh of relief. "The Federation thanks you, Ambassador. The hostages will now have the best chance to keep their lives and regain their freedom."

"I will need a complete report on the Klingon Commander," Sarek said. "I will depart this afternoon, provided my pilot can ready my transport. Send the information about this Klingon via subspace message, if you will."

"I will direct Admiral Burton, the head of Starfleet Security, to do so," the president promised.

"Very well. Sarek out."

"Thank you again, Ambassador. Out."

Rising from his seat, Sarek quickly gave Soran instructions to prepare for the journey. Then, knowing it was for the last time, he went to bid farewell to his wife.

"Amanda." The voice reached her in the darkness, pulling her back to light and awareness. The voice was familiar, known, beloved. An authoritative, precise voice with a faint resonance. Pleasantly deep, extremely cultured. The voice of her husband.

Amanda opened her eyes. Strong fingers grasped her hand gently but firmly. Sarek's fingers.

"Sarek," she murmured, gazing up into the face she had known and loved for so many years. "Have I been asleep long.*"

"Several hours. My wife, I regret having to wake you, but I must speak with you ... before I take my leave."

Amanda's eyes opened wider. "Leave?" she asked faintly, too weak to conceal the dismay his words caused her. "Why?"

"Where are you going?"

"There is an emergency on the planet Kadura," Sarek said. "I just

finished speaking to President Ra-ghoratrei. He asked me to negotiate the release of a Federation colony that has been seized by Klingon renegades. There are thousands of colonists whose lives are in jeopardy. I must go, Amanda.

"It is my duty."

Her heart contracted at his words. "How ... how long will it take?" she asked, her words scarcely audible above the faint hum of the medical monitors. "Must you go?"

"Yes. I must take ship for Deneb Four within the hour. It is difficult to say how long I will be gone. Ten days, at the minimum. If the negotiations proceed slowly ..." He trailed off and his fingers tightened slightly on hers.

"I see," Amanda whispered. "Very well, Sarek. I understand."

Her husband regarded her, his dark eyes shadowed with grief. Gently, he reached out and touched her hair, her cheek. "Amanda ... if I could, I would stay here with you.

"You know that, do you not?"

Silently, she nodded, fighting to hold back tears. His dear, familiar face began to swim in her vision. No! she thought, blinking fiercely. I will not cry. I will not let tears steal my last sight of you. I will not let weeping mar our last farewell.

"Sarek ..." she whispered, turning her fingers so her hand grasped his, returning the pressure. "I will miss you, my husband. I wish you did not have to go."

"I will return as soon as possible, Amanda," he promised, his eyes never leaving hers. "The instant Kadura is free, I will come home."

But you will almost certainly be too late, and we both know it, Amanda thought, her eyes never leaving his face for a moment. She hated even to blink. In a few minutes her husband would be gone, and she would never see him again ... at least, not in this life.

"I want you to remember something," she said, struggling to keep her voice even.

"What, Amanda?"

"Never forget that I love you, my husband. Always." She gazed at him intently, holding his eyes with her own. "You will need to remember that, Sarek, very soon now. Promise me you won't forget."

"My memory is typical for a Vulcan," he said, quietly. "I forget very

little, my wife."

"I know. But remembering my words in your head, and remembering them here," freeing her hand, she gently laid it on his side, where his heart lay, "are two different things.

Promise me."

"You have my word, Amanda," he said, his dark eyes filled with profound sorrow.

I know that you love me, she thought, gazing up at him.

But I will not embarrass you by telling you so ... "Spock will be here with you," Sarek said. "Do not forget that, my wife."

"His presence will be a great comfort," she said, softly.

Her gaze moved over his face, tracing the angular lines.

Putting her hand up, she touched his cheek, his eyes, his lips, thinking of the many times she had kissed him there.

"Sarek, hold me. I want to feel your arms around me. Hold me."

Gently, he reached forward, scooped her up, and cradled her against him. Amanda slid her arms around him and laid her head on his chest with a long sigh. Briefly, she abandoned herself to the moment ... her soul was content.

Finally she raised her head. "Sarek, I want you to promise me one more thing."

He had difficulty meeting her eyes ... Amanda could tell through their bond that he was profoundly moved. "What is it, Amanda?"

"I want you to read my journals ... afterward. Take the first one with you now, my husband. Promise me you'll read all of them. Please?"

Sarek nodded; then, with infinite gentleness, he helped settle her back onto the bed. Going into her sitting room, he returned with a slim, red-covered volume. On the spine was affixed the number 1. "This one?" he asked, holding it up.

"Yes, that one," Amanda said, regarding him steadily as she lay propped up on her pillows. "Read it. And when you've finished that one, go on and read the next ... until you've read them all."

"I will do so, Amanda."

"I know you will," she said, and holding out her hand, two fingers

extended, she smiled at him. Somewhere deep inside herself, she was crying, but she refused to let him see.

Let him remember me smiling, she thought.

Her husband held out his hand, brushed two fingers against hers, and they remained that way for many seconds.

Then, with a last, grave nod, Sarek walked away, pushing through the pressure curtain without looking back.

Spock saw the pressure curtain move; then his father appeared. The ambassador's eyes widened slightly as he realized that his son must have been listening to him as he bade farewell to his wife; then they narrowed with anger.

Before his father could speak, the first officer signaled curtly for silence and beckoned the ambassador out into the hall.

Only when the tekla wood door was firmly closed did Spock turn to regard his father.

"Eavesdropping is discourteous, my son," Sarek said, and Spock could tell he was irritated, though his voice was carefully neutral.

Spock ignored the mild rebuke. He held his father's eyes with his own, and his own voice was cold. "Soran told me that the president called, and why. He also told me that you have ordered your transport prepared. You intend to go to Deneb Four?"

"Yes," Sarek said, eyeing his son with a touch of wariness.

"I have just taken my leave of your mother."

"So I heard." Spock's voice cut like a shard of obsidian. "I must admit that I found it difficult to believe. You actually intend to leave her? In her present condition?"

"I must," Sarek said, quietly. "The needs of the many outweigh the needs--"

"To quote an appropriate human phrase, "To hell with that," Spock broke in, his voice rough with anger and grief.

"You cannot leave her like this."

"I recall a time," Sarek said, "when you chose to remain at your post, when only you could save my life."

Spock paused. "Yes," he said, after a moment, "but I have grown since then. It is a pity that you have not."

Sarek's eyebrow rose at his son's words and the unconcealed emotion. "Spock, we all have our duties to consider. The situation at Kadura is critical."

"So is my mother," the first officer said flatly. "She will not survive long enough for you to return, and you know it."

Your leaving in itself will very likely hasten her end." He regarded his father unwaveringly.

The ambassador paused, and Spock knew that the thought of his leaving actually harming Amanda had not occurred to him until now. "You will be here with her," he said, finally. "She will not be alone."

"She needs her family with her," Spock said obdurately.

"You are her bondmate--her husband. Your loyalty should be to her. There are other diplomats on Vulcan. Senkar has handled situations of this nature before. Let him negotiate for Kadura's release."

"The president requested that I handle the negotiations personally," Sarek said.

"He cannot order you." Spock's gaze never wavered as he held his father's eyes. "Refuse ... under the circumstances, no one will question your actions."

Sarek straightened his shoulders. "Spock, I have no more time to discuss this. I must leave now."

"You mean that you wish to leave," Spock said, his voice cold and flat. "You do not have the courage to stay and see her through this."

Answering anger sparked in Sarek's eyes. "I will not

remain to hear such acrimonious--and illogical--out-pourings, Spock. I suggest that you meditate and attempt to regain your control." He drew a deep breath, and added, in a tone that was intended to be conciliatory, "Remember, my son, you are Vulcan."

"At the moment, if you are any example, being Vulcan is hardly a condition to be desired," Spock snapped. Without another word, he brushed past his father and headed down the corridor. Behind him he could hear the ambassador's footsteps receding.

When Spock regained control, he gently opened the door to his mother's room, and entered, parting the pressure curtain with both hands.

Amanda was awake. Spock noted the unmistakable signs that she had been crying, but there were no tears present when she smiled at him wanly and

held out her hand. "I was just about to eat my lunch," she said, nodding at a tray placed across her lap by the Healer's aide. "Would you like to join me, Spock?"

The Vulcan nodded and drew a chair up beside her bed.

Amanda was making a valiant effort, he could tell, but she had to force herself to swallow several small mouthfuls. She smiled at him. "Do you know what I dreamt of last night?" she asked. "It was so strange ... after all these years on Vulcan, being a vegetarian ..."

"What, Mother?"

"I dreamt that I was eating an old-fashioned hamburger.

It tasted wonderful--nice and rare, with cheese and lettuce and tomato ... "She smiled, shaking her head.

"If you would like one," her son said, "I will contact my ship and ask them to beam one down immediately."

"Oh, no, don't," Amanda said. "I'm sure that eating meat after all these years would make me quite ill. And the real thing could never match how good it tasted in my dream ... "She chuckled slightly. "But it was odd to dream about that after what ... sixty years?"

"Indeed," Spock said, cautiously. He sensed that his mother was chattering on as a way of working herself up to

what was really on her mind. Sarek, he thought, was probably aboard his transport and leaving orbit by now.

"Spock," Amanda said, softly, putting down her spoon and gazing at him directly, "what is death like?"

Spock stared at her for a long moment. How many times had he been asked this same question in the past three and a half years? Never before had he attempted an answer, but this time ... he cleared his throat.

"Mother, I cannot tell you what death is like. In a way, since my katra departed to reside in Dr. McCoy when my physical body expired, I was not truly dead, as humans understand the term."

"Oh," she murmured, disappointed. "I'm sorry if that question was ... disquieting. My curiosity got the better of me ... under the circumstances."

Spock forbore to comment on her reference to her "circumstances." Instead he said, gently, "I cannot tell you what death is ... but I remember dying. I know what it is to die."

Amanda sat up a little straighter against her pillows, pushing her tray

aside. Her blue eyes never left his. "Really?"

Tell me if you can, Spock."

"It was painful," Spock admitted, and if he had been human, he would have shuddered. "I had been exposed to enough radiation to literally burn me. In addition, my mind, while clear in some ways, was affected, and thus I could not control the pain. I suffered, but I knew before I even entered the chamber that I would not survive, so I also knew that I would not have to endure for long ... "

Amanda's eyes filled with tears. Spock knew that imagining her son burned, poisoned, and dying of massive radiation exposure was upsetting her. He hesitated, watching her.

"Mother ... if this is too painful for you, I will ..."

"No," she said, fiercely. "It's a relief to talk about death, Spock. I couldn't, not with your father. It would have distressed him too much. But you ... you, of all people, you can understand."

"I do," he said, quietly. His hand slid across the coverlet and grasped hers, holding it tightly, reassuringly. "As my body shut down, the pain stopped, and I experienced relief when that happened. All the while I knew that I was dying, but as soon as the pain ceased, I realized with some surprise that I was not frightened, or distressed. It was more as if what was occurring was simply a further, entirely natural step in the order of things. I found myself at peace ... such peace as I have never felt."

"Peace," Amanda whispered. "No fear?"

"Fear," Spock reminded her, "is a human emotion. No, Mother, there was neither fear nor pain. Do not forget that I had established a link between myself and McCoy, so I knew that my katra would ... continue."

"No fear, no pain ..." she mused, plainly attempting to envision such a state. "What was there, then?"

"For a moment, I had a sense that knowledge was waiting for me, infinite knowledge. It was a heady sensation, and lasted only for a moment--then my consciousness blanked out, and I did not return to awareness until I awakened on that pallet with T'Lar standing over me."

"Did you have a sense of an afterlife?"

"No, there was none of that. However, my leira was residing within Dr. McCoy, so I cannot categorically state that there is no afterlife."

"Do you believe in an afterlife?" his mother asked slowly.

"I do not know. I have no objective data to allow me to draw a conclusion."

Amanda smiled dryly. "Spoken like a true Vulcan, Spock."

Attempting to lighten the moment, the first officer bowed slightly. "Mother ... you honor me."

"Oh, stop it," she said, chuckling despite everything.

"You and your father ... when you do that, I want to throw something at you!" She grasped one of the pillows, but her strength was not sufficient for her to make good on the implied threat ... instead she sank back against her pillows, gasping.

Amanda's mention of his father caused all of Spock's anger to return full force. His mother did not miss the change in his expression, slight as it was. "Spock," she said, putting out a hand toward him, "try not to be angry with

your father. Sarek is simply doing what he has to do, being who and what he is." Pride surfaced for a moment on her features. "And he is the best, Spock. Never forget that.

Those people on Kadura could not have a better champion than your father."

"Senkar is also an experienced diplomat who has handled situations of this kind before. My father could have allowed him to negotiate with this Klingon renegade."

"You're really angry with him, aren't you?" Amanda's eyes were huge and full of distress. "Oh, Spock ... long ago I begged Sarek to try and understand you, instead of simply judging you and finding you wanting. Now I ask you the same thing ... try to understand your father! Forgive him ... I know I do."

"Mother, I cannot," Spock said flatly. "You are his wife.

His place is by your side."

Visibly upset, his mother closed her eyes, shaking her head as she lay limply against her pillows. "Oh, Spock ... don't be so hard on him. We all make mistakes."

The Vulcan regarded her with concern, realizing that she was fighting back tears. He'd never meant to distress her ...

Spock put out a hand, closed it comfortingly over his mother's. "Very well, Mother. I will attempt to be more ... understanding."

Amanda nodded weakly, her eyelids drooping. "Thank you, Spock ... "

The Healer's aide suddenly appeared from out of the shadows in the sitting room, where the monitor screens were placed. Motioning to Spock to go, she whispered, "She will sleep now, Captain Spock. I suggest you leave and return later."

The Vulcan nodded quietly, and left the chill room and the slight, silent form of his mother.

Peter Kirk unfastened the front of his uniform jacket even before the door to his apartment opened. His garments seemed to have absorbed some of the sticky fatigue that he felt must be seeping out of every pore. Stepping inside, he

yanked the collar of his shirt open, feeling as if he were about to strangle.

He was so tired he wasn't even sure how well he did on his navigation exam. Oh, he was sure he'd passed, but this was one test he might not have aced. To know he might've dropped a grade because of the time he'd spent with the KEHL made him feel like a fool.

He tossed the tired uniform into the recycler. And as he did so, his comm link sounded, signaling an incoming call.

Fearing it might be Lisa, Peter braced himself and accepted the call. He blinked in surprise when he found himself staring at his uncle. He'd only sent Jim that message early this morning, and the elder Kirk was the last person he'd expected to hear from. Uncle Jim couldn't possibly have gotten his message yet ... could he?

"Hello, Peter," Kirk's image said, though he didn't smile.

"Uncle Jim!" the younger man exclaimed. "This is a surprise! I thought you were out near the Neutral Zone someplace?"

"I'm here in San Francisco," his uncle said, his words sounding clipped, as though he were rushed, or angry. He was wearing full uniform, but Peter couldn't tell where he was calling from ... his uncle's image filled nearly the entire screen.

"You are? Well, that's great!"

"I'm at my apartment," Kirk said, solemnly. "I need to see you, Peter. Can you come over?"

The younger Kirk felt his spirits rise. If anyone would know how to deal with the KEHL, how to get around the skepticism of Commander Twelvetrees, it would be James T. Kirk.

"I need to see you, Peter," Jim repeated. "Can you come over here immediately?"

"Well ... sure," Peter said, glancing at the chrono with an inward groan. He desperately needed about six hours' sleep. But if Jim needed him ... "I'll be there as soon as I can. About half an hour."

"Good," Kirk said, and the comm link went dark.

Peter stared at the screen for a moment, puzzled. Some thing about the call seemed odd, but Peter decided his brief association with the KEHL was making him paranoid. Oh, well. He'd find out what was going on when he got there.

After a brisk sonic shower, he wearily dragged on the first clothes that came to hand--a pair of loose exercise pants and a baggy white shirt. Glancing at his chrono as he hastily ran a comb through his hair, he saw that it was a few minutes after midnight; Peter groaned inwardly. Another night's sleep ruined--and tomorrow he was supposed to work with Lisa again, bright and early. Not to mention that there were only a few days left before his Kobayashi Maru test!

I've got to slow down, or I'll drop in my tracks, he thought, as he left his apartment and hurried down the corridor toward the elevator.

He decided to walk; his uncle's apartment was only ten minutes away, and the brisk fall air would wake him up. It was a weekday, so there were few people out this late. The cool breeze nipped at him, and Peter wished belatedly that he'd thought to put on a jacket.

As he strode quickly down the sidewalk, not allowing his steps to lag, something moved in an alley to his left. In the glow of the streetlight, he caught a flash of silver. Peter checked, peering into the darkness, and a voice reached his ears. "Peter?"

The voice, though choked and breathless-sounding, was familiar. The cadet frowned and started toward the alley.

"Lisa?" he called softly. "Is that you?"

A moment later, as his eyes adjusted to the darkness away from the streetlight, he saw her. She was walking toward him, obviously distressed. "Peter!"

"What is it, Lisa?" he asked, concerned. Much as he detested her bigoted views, he had grown attached to Lisa the woman. "Is something wrong?"

"Yes," she whispered, moving toward him. "It's ... it's Induna. He needs us, Peter, he needs us terribly. I need you to come with me!"

"Well, I--"

The cadet caught a flash of movement out of the corner of

his eye, felt a rush of air on his cheek, and, in accordance with all of Starfleet's training, ducked. As he moved to the side, a blow caught him across his upper arm with numbing force. Lisa gasped and frantically scuttled back, toward the mouth of the alley.

"Get help!" Peter yelled at her, as his assailants closed in.

Two men, one tall, the other short, both burly, both obviously experienced street fighters. Peter lashed out with a side kick toward the shorter one's chest, but the man was too fast, and he hadn't struck hard enough. Accustomed to pulling blows in class, he did not connect with enough force to disable his opponent. Before he could follow up with a front punch, the taller man's fist smashed against his cheekbone with head-spinning force.

Training stood him in good stead as he reacted without thought, grabbing the man's shirtfront and turning his fall into a back roll. As he went down with the man atop him, Peter brought his knee up into the other's stomach, hearing the breath whoosh from his attacker's lungs.

Letting his opponent sail on over his head, Peter regained his feet in time to meet a rush from the shorter man. He struck at the man's neck, but again this one was too quick to allow the blow to land full-on.

Peter leaped at him, his body twisting in midair, his foot coming up in a tornado kick. This time he had the satisfaction of feeling his instep connect solidly with the side of the man's head. Shorty went down, and stayed down.

Whirling, hands and feet at the ready, Peter was just in time to block a blow from the tall man, but seconds later he took a smashing kick to his rib cage. Gasping for air, he aimed a back punch at the man's chest, and followed it up with a quick foot sweep.

Two down. Panting from the stabbing pain in his ribs, Peter spun, half-staggering, half-running as he headed for the mouth of the alley. He glimpsed Lisa's silver coat just ahead of him. "Run, Lisa!" he tried to shout, but his breath was too short for much sound to emerge.

As young Kirk raced toward the mouth of the alley and the comparative safety of the well-lit street, Lisa stepped out to bar his path. The cadet had only one shocked instant to realize that the faintly shining object she held in her hand, pointed straight at him, was a phaser.

No! he thought, frantically. She set me up! It was a trap!

"Stop right there, Peter," she commanded, in a voice he'd never heard her use before.

Peter had been trained how to deal with an armed opponent. Hit her, hit her, his brain screamed, but for a critical instant he hesitated.

Damn! he thought bleakly. What would Uncle Jim do?

But he had no time to ponder the question, for, without further ado, Lisa Tennant gave him a brilliant smile, aimed carefully, and triggered the phaser.

Peter heard the whine, glimpsed a flash of energy, and then there was only blackness ...

Sarek sat at a comm link located in his private suite in the conference center on Deneb IV. Before him, on the screen, Chancellor Azetbur's three-dimensional image gazed out at him. "Ambassador Sarek ..." she said, inclining her head slightly, one equal to another.

"Madame Chancellor," the Vulcan returned the greeting.

"I gather that you have been briefed regarding the situation on Kadurat'

"I have," she said. "I regret what has happened, Ambassador Sarek."

"I understand, Madame Chancellor," Sarek said. "I discussed the matter with President Ra-ghoratrei upon my arrival last evening, and he informed me that you had spoken together regarding this crisis."

Azetbur's exotic features were tight with tension, and the mantle of leadership was clearly taking its toll on her. Sarek was vividly reminded that she had lost both husband and father barely a month ago. "This entire incident is unfortunate," she said. "Commander Keraz ... I must admit that when I heard that he had initiated this raid, I was surprised.

I have known the commander for years, and, while he can be ... headstrong ... he has always been loyal. Keraz is--was--a warrior who served the Empire with distinction, in the most honorable manner."

"I see ..." Sarek said. "I have yet to meet the commander.

Our first session begins in a few minutes. May I ask why you called, Madame Chancellor?"

"I want the renegades extradited, Ambassador Sarek.

Have the Federation take Keraz and his men, and hand them over to me, so that I may make an example of them ... an example that will speak vividly to any others who may be contemplating such treason against my government."

Sarek took a deep breath. Azetbur was many things, but "soft" or "merciful" was not one of them. "I regret, Madame Chancellor, that I cannot do that. I have no authorization from the president to do so ... and my priority in this unfortunate situation must be the safety of the citizens of Kadura. I must decline your request."

"I see." Azetbur stared at him, her jaw muscles tight.

Sarek had been prepared for her demand--Ra-ghoratrei had warned him last night of what the Empire wanted. "Do you propose, then, to simply let them go free?"

"If that is the agreement I negotiate, then that is what I must do," Sarek said. "However ..." He paused for a moment in feigned deliberation. " ... what happens to Keraz after he leaves the planet is not my affair."

"We will catch him, Ambassador. Of that you can be sure.

The honor of my people depends on these traitors being captured and dealt with."

Sarek nodded.

Azetbur's expression thawed still more, and she actually chuckled aloud. "Ambassador Sarek," she said, "I understand for the first time the strength of your people. You excel at making others decide that what you want is what they, also, desire most."

The Vulcan inclined his head. "You are most gracious, Madame Chancellor."

After both parties signed off, Sarek stood at the window, gazing out at the lush wilderness that lay beyond.

Sarek approved of Deneb IV, also called Kidta, precisely because of its extreme isolation. The strictest security was being maintained only a skeleton staff was allowed at the

conference center, and Sarek, Soran, and the Vulcan ambassador to Orion, Stavel, were the only Vulcans. If Sarek had to negotiate with Klingons, he wanted to make sure he was dealing with Klingons acting on their own, under no duress from an outside influence. As nearly as he had been able to discover (and he had run extensive checks), there wasn't a single Freelan in this sector, much less on this world, or at the conference center.

Which was the way Sarek wanted it.

Any moment now, his aide would call him to the table to begin negotiations with Commander Keraz and his captains.

Sarek had already braced himself to endure the presence of Klingons. Their emotions were primal and close to the surface, worse even than human emotions, and most Vulcans could sense them without being in physical contact.

Sarek had no reason to suppose that Keraz would be different.

He was still puzzling over the Klingon renegade's request for negotiation as a solution to this crisis. It was out of character for Klingons to sit down and talk their way out of a problem, rather than just blasting everything around.

"Ambassador," someone said quietly, from behind him.

Sarek turned to see Soran.

"Are we ready to begin?" he asked, and the young Vulcan nodded.

Sarek straightened his formal robe, making sure the heavy, bejeweled folds hung properly, then followed Soran down the hall, into the conference room. It was a medium-sized room, with neutral-colored walls, two of which could be made transparent to show a view of the forest. A long table occupied the center of the room, and chairs suitable for humanoids surrounded it. There were two doors, one at each end of the room. From the door on Sarek's left, Admiral Smillie and an aide emerged, and from the other, four Klingons. One of the Klingons held a green-skinned Orion woman by the arm, marching her along peremptorily, but without any intentional cruelty.

Sarek raised his hand in the Vulcan salute to the Klingon in the lead.

"Commander Keraz, I presume?"

The short, rather stocky Klingon nodded sharply. "Ambassador," he said. His voice was much more mellow than most Klingons'. His skin was very dark, the color of antique leather.

The representatives seated themselves around the big middle table. Sarek eyed the Orion woman and was relieved to see that, aside from stress and fatigue, she did not seem to have been harmed. She stared back at him levelly out of eyes the color of onyx. When the round of introductions reached her, she said quietly, "s'kara. I represent the people of Kadura."

Sarek nodded, then looked over at Keraz. The Klingon seemed nervous, fingering his sash, picking at his belt as though he could not believe there were no weapons hanging there. Feeling Sarek's glance, the leader looked up, then burst out, "We desire an honorable settlement to this situation, Ambassador. My ships and crews have not damaged the planet or its inhabitants"--at this, s'kara's eyes flashed indignantly, but she did not interrupt--"and, frankly, I have no interest in occupying a

colony world composed mostly of ... farmers." His mouth twisted with distaste.

"We are warriors, not colonists. We have no wish to become planetbound--Kadura is no fit place for warriors."

Sarek inclined his head, noting that, beneath Keraz's deliberately gruff exterior, the Klingon seemed genuinely eager to negotiate. "That is promising to hear," Sarek said solemnly. "What are your terms, Commander?"

"We are prepared to withdraw ... for the right price," Keraz said. "We must be allowed to take our payment and leave Kadura unmolested by any Starfleet vessel."

Sarek stared at the Klingon. Only a lifetime of habitual Vulcan control kept him from revealing his surprise. For Keraz to offer to withdraw at the beginning of the negotiations was the last thing he'd expected. Smoothly, giving no hint of his inner thoughts, Sarek said, "I am sure that, under the circumstances, something can be arranged."

For a moment Sarek thought about his discussion with Azetbur. If Keraz thought he could successfully leave Federation space and find refuge across the Neutral Zone, he was sadly mistaken.

Studying Keraz's face, as the Klingon began outlining his position, Sarek wondered with part of his mind what had induced the commander to turn renegade. Was it disagreement with his government's new, peaceful overtures to the Federation? Was it greed? Had Keraz snapped under pressure, and suffered some temporary madness?

Or ... was it something else?

With stern resolve, Sarek concentrated all his logic, all his experience, on bringing the Kadura situation to a peaceful, swift, and satisfactory resolution. Amanda was still alive. Perhaps he could fulfill his duty and still return home in time. Perhaps ..

Considering the circumstances, Peter Kirk decided, it would be better if he just didn't wake up.

His most recent attempts to swim toward consciousness had been so unpleasant, he'd come to the conclusion that it simply wasn't worth it. He'd much rather stay in this dark, muzzy netherworld, not asleep, but not awake, where he could keep his various aches and pains at bay and insist to himself that they weren't real. That none of this was real.

He'd just lie here, thank you, and think about the Kobayashi Maru. Pondering that dreaded event was infinitely preferable to opening his eyes and facing what had happened to him. Peter had a feeling that no simulation, no matter how real-seeming, could possibly equal the mess

he'd somehow gotten himself into.

He groaned. Here he was. Peter Kirk, nephew of the Federation hero James T. Kirk--a Starfleet cadet so clever, so bold, that he'd allowed himself to be duped and kidnapped by a bunch of reactionary bigots too disorganized to run a successful demonstration. No. It was worse than that.

He'd allowed his confused feelings for a woman he barely knew to cause him a critical moment of hesitation.

Why didn't you just surrender, mister, and save everyone the trouble? Would Uncle Jim have hesitated to slug a woman if the fate of the Enterprise was at stake? Hell, no.

Peter couldn't deny reality anymore; his conscience wouldn't let him. He was indisputably awake. Groaning aloud, he opened his eyes. His head throbbed as he struggled to focus on his surroundings. Squinting at the ceiling, he thought it seemed too high, and the wrong color. Wrong color for what? he wondered foggily, but couldn't remember.

Peter moved slowly, as painful awareness of his battle in the alley grew sharper, more persistent with every passing second. His arm and head hurt. His right side throbbed with every breath.

Cautiously, he turned his head, his gaze traveling across the small, narrow enclosure with its dingy, gray bulkheads.

Reality. He swallowed, as fear finally set in. Where the hell am I?

Biting his lip, Peter gingerly pushed himself up until he was sitting on the edge of the standard bunk, his head in his hands. And what is that smell?

Sighing, he turned his attention to the plain room. It was small, barely four meters by three, and, except for the bunk, which folded out of the wall, nearly featureless.

There were a few indentations that might indicate servo panels concealed in the walls, but no windows. Peter shuddered, swallowing a sudden surge of claustrophobia.

He felt light-headed and nauseated from the stun shot, and his knees were weak. Sitting silently on the bunk, he paused, just listening.

There was no sound, no sound at all.

Or was there?

After a moment's intense concentration, Peter began to sense something. Was it a faint noise? A vibration? Or just a sixth sense that told him

he was no longer in normal space-time? Suddenly, he knew.

His engineering instructor had said you could sense the spacewarp, even if you couldn't see it.

He was aboard a spaceship, traveling at warp speed, destination unknown. This wasn't a room, it was a cabin.

Peter's mouth went so dry that he couldn't even swallow.

Wanting to give himself something constructive to do besides panicking, Kirk rose and systematically began to explore the cabin's flat, drab walls.

The whole place had a well-worn, grimy patina that testified to extensive use, and the panels that made up the walls were uniform and interchangeable, allowing the dimensions of the cabin to be altered according to need. The only door was heavy, with no viewing ports. While he could see where the mechanism for manual overrides probably lay, there was no way he could get through it--even if he could figure out the system--to force the doors to open. He searched for a surveillance system and couldn't find one--but that didn't mean there wasn't one trained on him at all times.

Methodically, the cadet pressed one of the innocuous indentations on the wall, and a tiny water dispenser revealed itself. He stared, mesmerized by clear, fresh-smelling fluid, but in spite of his parched mouth, passed it by. The water, he suspected, would probably be drugged. It would be the most logical way to keep a prisoner under control. He went about examining the other wall indentations and discovered an odd hole in the floor. By its smell, he decided, it could only be a head--but the style was unfamiliar to him.

When was the last time this thing was cleaned? he wondered, realizing that this was the source of some of the smell.

Water and a toilet, he mused. But no food. His eyes strayed back toward the water fountain. So, how long do you think you can last without water? The memory of the cool-looking fluid was working on him already.

Just then a soft machinery sound hummed, breaking into his thoughts. He whirled, crouching, his instincts on override, but it was just a serving panel extruding from a niche in the wall. There was a tray on the panel, as colorless as the panel itself. Whoever had designed this starship had been really fond of monochromatic schemes. Peter approached the tray.

Piled in a small, equally colorless bowl were dry ration pellets. They didn't resemble the rations he was used to, but they had that same processed-food-for-space-travel look

about them--a soft gray green in color, tubular, about two centimeters

in length, and maybe half a centimeter in width.

He sniffed. The mealy-looking pellets had a pungent, fishy smell. They were entirely too reminiscent of the prepared food Grandma Winona used to feed her parrot.

Except this stuff is probably full of drugs, he suspected. He could see the packaging now-- UNT SYLVIA'S KIDNAPPER

CHOW. REDUCES STRESS. INCREASES COOPERATION. Yes, there'd be something in there to keep him quiet, calm ... cooperative. He frowned at the food. It wouldn't be long before even its unappealing scent would make his mouth water. While he could last without food a lot longer than he could without water, that didn't mean that he could afford to waste these.

He spilled the pellets onto the tray and started lining them up in rows until he'd spelled out, in English words, "Who are you?" Then he carefully pushed the tray back into the wall. Of course, the "leftovers" might be jettisoned directly into the recycler, but somehow, he didn't think so. They'd want to weigh how much he'd eaten, know how much drug he might absorb ... to determine just how much trouble he was going to be when they arrived.

Arrived where? he wondered, frustrated. It could be anywhere.

He didn't even know how long they'd been traveling.

If they'd stunned him repeatedly (and his headache argued that they probably had), he might have been unconscious for days.

Peter walked back to the bunk and sat down. Why in the world would the KEHL kidnap him, then ship him offworld? That was the part that really had his head spinning.

Or was that the safest way they could think of to deal with him, once they'd figured out who he really was?

Had he been sold to the highest bidder? There were still slave traders in the galaxy, though Starfleet had mostly shut them down. But would the KEHL have handed him over to aliens? That thought was the hardest to swallow, but there was little about this room that suggested a human-designed ship. Aliens would explain the smell, too. It was an alien odor, the smell of body chemistries that were not human in

origin. Every species had its own distinct smell, Peter knew, some more pleasant than others. While the soiled head's contribution was significant, the underlying scent was simply that of a different species none he'd ever encountered before. Not Tellarite, or Orion, or Andorian or Horta or Vulcan ... unfamiliar. Alien.

Peter could understand the KEHL wanting to get rid of him. But why not simply kill him? Why hand him over to aliens? Why go to all this trouble to get him off-world?

It had to be more than just the KEHL involved. Somebody had paid Lisa Tennant and her goons to set him up and hand him over ... but why?

Why in the name of the Seven Tellarite Hells would anyone want to kidnap him? He was only a cadet ... he had no access to restricted data. He had no rank, and he wasn't rich. Uncle Jim made a respectable living, he supposed. But enough to make the risk of abducting his nephew profitable?

Highly unlikely.

It didn't make sense. No rank, no riches, no enemies ... Wait a minute. Peter straightened suddenly. He didn't have any enemies, as far as he knew ... but he knew someone who did. Someone who'd led an adventurous life, taken plenty of risks, trodden on numerous toes. Someone who had certainly made enemies over the years ... more

enemies than you could shake a stick at ...

James T. Kirk.

Somebody intended to use him to get to Uncle Jim.

As for Peter, he expected to take his oath and become a Starfleet officer in a month. Did whoever was behind all this honestly think he would just sit here and allow his uncle's enemies to use him like that?

A prisoner's first responsibility was to escape. Right now, it didn't seem as if he had many options while trapped in this cabin. That meant he'd have to play a prepared hand when this ship finally stopped moving and those doors eventually opened. He'd have to overwhelm whoever was coming for him, steal this ship, and pilot it back home. He was a fair pilot, and a good navigator. That part wouldn't be difficult--it was the first part that could be trouble. How

many would there be? And what species? There were numerous aliens that Peter knew he could easily fight his way through, but there were also many others whose strength was far greater than the average human's.

And that you, mister--average. Maybe, in strength. But, he'd been studying self-defense and martial arts since he was in his teens. By the time he'd gotten to the Academy, he was already pretty good, and Starfleet put on the final polish. He could hold his own when he was thinking clearly. Unbidden, the image of him falling prey to Lisa Tennant's stun gun burned in his mind.

Peter wished he could exercise, keep up his skills, his physical

strength, but that wouldn't be possible. He must be under surveillance, so that meant he'd have to portray himself as passive, maybe even sickly. He'd have to sleep a lot, or pretend to, and act slow and weak. If he did that, the less on their guard they might be when they came for him.

And that might be his only advantage. He really would be weak from lack of food, and reduced water, so he'd have to rely on surprise, if he was to have any hope at all.

Yes, his kidnapers would do what they could to keep him cooperative, compliant. But Peter had already decided just how much trouble he would be. As much as humanly possible, mister.

He was a Kirk, after all. And he would not be surprised again. Not if they threw the most beautiful, most interesting, most desirable females of every species in the galaxy at him.

He would get out of here, or die in the attempt. And if it didn't make it, he thought, smiling to himself, at least I won't have to take the Kobayashi Maru.

Sarek sat at the negotiation table, listening as the Orion representative bickered with Admiral Smillie about Federation restitution for the attack on Kadura. To his right, the Orion woman, s'kara, stared expressionlessly at the Orion male, but Sarek sensed her distrust, her revulsion ... perfectly logical, under the circumstances.

Finally, he raised a hand, and as soon as Smillie and Buta, the Orion, noticed him, they fell silent. "These matters can

be resolved later," Sarek said. "For the moment, I request that we finalize the agreement with Commander Keraz concerning their terms for withdrawing from Kadura. As you will recall, the commander said that he ..."

Sarek continued, going over all the points agreed upon so far. They had come a long way in just a few days ... but not quickly enough for him. The speedy Vulcan courier ship was standing by, ready to take him home at warp eight, but Sarek doubted he could ever get home in time to comfort his wife.

Wearily, Sarek finished outlining Keraz's demands, received a confirming nod from the Klingon. Smillie made a counteroffer to one part of Keraz's plan, wherein the renegades would be provided with dilithium as a ransom for the safe release of Kadura. Keraz countered, lowering his demand fractionally. Sarek listened with part of his mind as they came closer and closer to an agreement. If they could reach agreement, then perhaps he could be finished today ...

The wrangling continued for the next two hours, with Sarek mediating

between them, attempting to find compromises that would work.

Finally, he realized a refreshment break was long overdue, so he dismissed the factions. The room emptied rapidly as the occupants left in search of food, lavatories, or comm links. Finally, only Sarek, Soran, Keraz, and his second-in-command, Wurfi, were left.

The Vulcan wished once again that he could arrange to speak to Keraz alone. The commander's demeanor at the negotiation table during the past days was not what one would logically expect of a Klingon renegade. Keraz was entirely too eager to negotiate, to give ground. It was almost as though he regretted having taken Kadura, and would like nothing better than to wash his hands of the whole business ...

Barely noticing his surroundings, occupied with his thoughts, Sarek walked slowly toward the door. Soran and Keraz were ahead of him. The Vulcan looked up, wondering where the Klingon's aide was. Movement--there was movement behind him--

a bloodcurdling battle yell filled the air as the Klingon officer, Wurrl, leaped at the Vulcan ambassador. Sarek flung up an arm, glimpsed a flash of metal, even as something sharp sank deeply into his left bicep. He grappled with the Klingon, managing to hold him off despite his injured arm, grateful for superior Vulcan strength.

The ambassador groped for a neck pinch, but his fingers could not penetrate the heavy leather and metal of the Klingon's armor. He changed tactics, struck Wurrl sharply on the bridge of the nose, and saw the assailant's eyes cloud over. Contact with the would-be assassin's bare flesh told him that he was dealing with another case like Induna's.

Tal-shaya? Sarek wondered whether he would have to kill the Klingon outright in self-preservation. Would it work on a Klingon?

Locked together in a grisly parody of an embrace, the ambassador and the Klingon careered across the room, slamming into the conference table, scattering chairs. Suddenly Keraz was there, bellowing Klingon obscenities and threats at his aide, as he slammed a knife-hand blow into Wurfi's throat. The treacherous aide staggered, his grip on the ambassador loosening. Wurrl's breath rattled in his throat, even as steely hands grasped him and lifted, hoisting him clean off his feet. Soran swung the Klingon in an arc, then sent him crashing against the wall. Wurfi slid down it, and lay there, unconscious.

"Ambassador! Ambassador, you are wounded!" Keraz sounded thoroughly shaken. Sarek grasped his bicep, applying external pressure, even as he sought within himself for his training in biocontrol. A moment later, he felt the bleeding slow to a trickle, then stop. Automatically, he controlled the pain.

"I am not seriously injured," Sarek said. "Where did he get that

dagger?" All participants in the conference were screened automatically each time they walked through the door.

Keraz went over to the downed Wurd, and, bending over and using the tip of his metal-reinforced gauntlet, he picked up the green-smearred dagger. "Assembled," he growled, holding it out. "See? Pieces of trim from his uniform, altered so they would slide together and form a weapon. He must have put it together under the table while we met today."

Sarek raised his voice. "Security, please report to the conference chamber," he said.

His verbal request was not necessary. Barely a second later, the doors burst open, admitting four guards and Admiral Smillie. Quick questions and answers followed.

Smillie, Sarek saw, was all for taking Keraz into custody along with the seriously injured Wurr. The Vulcan raised his hand, forestailing the Starfleet admiral. "Commander Keraz was not responsible for this incident," he said. "I am certain of that."

As Sarek spoke, he caught a quick glance from Keraz, saw the flash of gratitude in the Klingon's eyes. "Commander," Sarek said, gesturing to the open door, "let us leave security to its job. I would like to speak with you privately."

Sotart stepped forward to protest, and so did Smillie, but both gave way before the ambassador's determination.

Keraz nodded, and together the two left the wrecked conference chamber.

As they walked down the corridor, Sarek said, blandly,

"Commander ... I know that you are not responsible for that attack just now. I have some idea, at least generally, who is, though. Could you answer a few questions, please?"

"What kind of questions?" Keraz growled.

"In the first place, after days of discussion, I still do not have a clear idea of what you hoped to gain by your occupation of Kadura. Perhaps you might enlighten me as to your reasons?"

When Keraz only stared stonily, the ambassador added,

"The greater my understanding of what you hoped to gain, the more smoothly I will be able to conclude matters. I understand the Federation mind-set on this matter ... but I am still uncertain as to yours."

The Klingon commander hesitated; then he walked out into a courtyard and sat down by a tinkling fountain. Sarek, understanding that he thus hoped

to foil any listening devices, sat down with his knees almost touching the Klingon's. "What did I hope to gain?" Keraz's effort to keep his tones low only accentuated the mellowness of his baritone. "Ambassador, at one time my actions seemed as clear as a Darlavian crystal to me, but ... no more."

"What do you mean?"

"I cannot explain!" Keraz said, his voice lowering to a growl. "I have thrown away my warrior's honor, and my life will likely be forfeit, along with the lives of my crew ... " He glared at Sarek. "Do not by any chance think, Vulcan, that I am unaware that my government stands ready to capture me and punish me as a traitor without honor. If I have any hope in conducting these negotiations, it is that all of the responsibility for my actions will be focused on me, not on my crew."

"You are speaking as though you regret your actions since you ... broke with your Empire," the Vulcan observed, his heart quickening. He'd never heard a Klingon speak like this before.

"I do regret them," Keraz said simply. "I did not agree with the Empire's new, craven policies toward the Federation, and I told anyone who cared to listen that. But turn renegade? Traitor? Pah!" He spat on the flagstones at his feet.

"But your actions recently have gone against orders," Sarek pointed out.

"I know!" Keraz's voice was a muted howl of frustration.

"My loyalty to the Empire was complete, until ... until one day I realized that I was being a fool, that there were riches waiting for me, and glory ... and I realized that I could wage war on the Federation whether or not my government had the courage and the honor."

The Klingon scowled, his corrugated brow even more wrinkled than usual. "My path seemed clear, until, two days after Kadura was mine ... I awoke one morning, realizing exactly what I had done. How my government would regard

me. I knew that I would soon be surrounded by half the Federation's starships." He gave a short, bitter growl of laughter. "And you ask me why, Vulcan? That is your answer--that I have no answer! I do not know why!"

"But I do," Sarek said. "Or, at least, I believe that I know, Commander. Recently, I have encountered two individuals who became violent as a result of outside mental influence ... telepathic influence. One was a human, on Terra. The other was ... your aide, Wurril. Just now."

"Wurril?" Keraz stared at the ambassador incredulously.

"What are you saying, Vulcan? That I have also been influenced? That some telepath made me take Kadura?"

"I do not believe they can control actions," Sarek clarified.

"But they can influence, provide mental catalysts, as it were. Yes, I do believe that, Commander."

The Klingon had paled as they spoke. Not surprisingly, he found the idea of not being his own master repugnant, revolting. "How can you tell?" he whispered hoarsely.

"How did you know about Wurr!"

"I touched him," Sarek said.

"Could you tell with me?"

Sarek nodded silently. Keraz took a deep breath, then, sitting stiffly, rigidly, nodded. "Do it," he commanded.

Slowly, the ambassador raised his hand and brushed it across the Klingon's high, bony forehead. He found what he had expected to find, and Keraz read the truth without Sarek having to say it aloud. The commander threw back his head and voiced a wordless bellow of rage and frustration, then cursed vividly in at least six different languages.

Finally, Keraz subsided, panting, and sat glowering in silence for several moments. "Kamarag," he said. "This is his doing. That cursed, dishonorable slime devil has stolen my honor. For this I will rip out his gizzard and feed it to my targ!"

"What do you mean, he stole your honor?"

"He was trying to persuade us all to turn renegade, and ever since that meeting most of the warriors there have committed honorless raids on noncombatants--just as I did."

"What meeting?" Sarek asked.

With a savage glare that the Vulcan knew wasn't directed at him, Keraz explained about Kamarag's clandestine conclave.

"Fascinating," the ambassador murmured, trying to picture Kamarag in that setting.

"Kamarag has no honor, Vulcan," Keraz said bitterly.

"But you ... you are different. You have courage, as well as honor. A coward would not have been willing to be alone with me after Wurr's attack."

"You possess a warrior's honor," Sarek said, honestly. "I knew you would not attack me."

Keraz gave him a sideways glance. "I heard that your woman is ... gravely ill," he said, gruffly. "You have also shown honor in remaining here in performance of your duty. I respect such honor, Ambassador."

"Is that why you agreed to speak frankly with me?" Sarek asked.

"Yes," Keraz said. "Such a demonstration of honor is admirable, no matter what species displays it."

The Vulcan inclined his head in recognition of Keraz's words. "Perhaps we may conclude the negotiations quickly," he said.

"I will keep that in mind," the Klingon replied. With a curt nod, he rose and left Sarek alone beside the fountain.

Spock sat alone in the small courtyard of the med center.

This area was designed to be a peaceful refuge where friends and relatives of patients could meditate and wait in peace.

The walls were pale yellow, the floor was red-ocher tiles.

Benches stood ranged around the central water sculpture, facing the shining spray within its protective field. Spock gazed at the water sculpture without really seeing it.

The Vulcan was attempting to make his mind a blank, preparatory to meditating, but every time he thought he'd succeeded, thoughts, like thieves in the night, tiptoed into his consciousness.

His mother was much worse. Last night she'd had another stroke, a major one. T'Mal had ordered her beamed directly to a hospital room in the med center.

Hearing footsteps, the Vulcan glanced up to see Leonard McCoy enter the solahum. As he took in the expression on the doctor's face, the Vulcan rose slowly to his feet.

"How is she?" Spock demanded, hearing his voice ring hollowly in the silence.

Silently, the doctor shook his head. "Not good. She's still alive ... but she can't last for long, Spock. Vital systems are just ... closing down." Spock stared at his friend, speechlessly. He'd thought he was braced against any eventuality, but now shock held him silent.

McCoy sat down on a bench opposite his. The doctor's face was drawn and

haggard with mingled fatigue and sorrow. "We've managed to stabilize her again, but her body is just worn out. The strokes have caused metabolic imbalances and neural damage, despite everything the Healers and I could do to prevent that. Now her kidneys are shutting down ... and her heart is compromised. I'm afraid it's just a matter of time."

"How long?" Spock asked, forcing the words past the tightness in his throat.

"Not long. Days ... possibly only hours." Spock rose to his feet, paced back and forth, his boot heels echoing on the tiles. McCoy's blue eyes followed his movements.

"Spock," the doctor said after a moment. "If there's anything I can do ... if you want someone to talk to, I'm here. Jim should be beaming down any minute."

"I must make a call," Spock said, turning abruptly. "Wait here for me. I will not be long." Minutes later he sat at the nearest public comlink, facing Sarek's aide, Soran. "Greetings," he said, curtly, in his native language. "I would speak with Sarek. It is urgent." The young Vulcan's forehead creased, ever so slightly.

"That will be difficult. The ambassador is in the midst of the afternoon's negotiations. May I relay a message?"

"No," Spock said flatly. "I must speak with my father personally. Be so kind as to summon him at once." Soran hesitated for a long moment, then, after studying Spock's face, nodded. "I will inform him immediately, Captain Spock. Please wait." Several more minutes passed, while Spock sat rigidly, words running through his mind. Finally a figure moved before the screen in a flash of formal ambassadorial robes, and then he was looking at Sarek. "Greetings, my son. You required a conversation with me?" Spock nodded stiffly. "Yes, sir. Mother has suffered another stroke. Dr. McCoy says that her time is very short."

"It will not be possible for me to leave," Sarek said, his voice betraying no emotion whatsoever. Had Spock seen something flicker behind his eyes? There was no way to be sure.

"You said the negotiations were proceeding smoothly.

Cannot Ambassador Stayel take over?"

"That is not an option," Sarek said firmly. "I must handle this personally. There is more at stake here than I realized." Spock drew a deep breath. "I ask that you reconsider," he said, tightly. "My presence does not comfort her. She is calling for you." Sarek's eyes closed, and this time the pain on his features was not masked to someone who knew him well. "Spock I cannot." His face smoothed out, became impassive once more. "Farewell, Spock. I must return to the negotiation table now." The

connection was abruptly broken. Numbly, Spock rose from his seat and returned to the solarium. There he found Kirk and McCoy waiting for him. McCoy checked the tricorder he was holding. "The monitors say she's sleeping, Spock," he said. "I'll know the instant she wakes up. Sit down for a minute. You look done in." As the Vulcan obeyed, Kirk glanced at McCoy. "How is she?" Quickly, the doctor summarized Amanda's condition.

"Is Sarek coming home?" Kirk asked Spock.

The Vulcan's eyes narrowed. "No. The negotiations take precedence." Kirk's hazel gaze widened slightly as the captain evidently realized he'd touched on a sensitive subject.

McCoy shook his head grimly. "Lousy timing. That Klingon commander was out of his mind to pull a stunt like this. He couldn't possibly have thought he'd get away with it!"

"Having seen Klingon 'justice' close up, I'm surprised that any amount of greed could induce a commander to commit treason against the Empire," Kirk agreed.

Spock stared at his captain for a long moment. "Interesting that you should employ that particular word, Jim.

Perhaps that is indeed the case ... that Keraz was induced to invade Kadura."

Kirk's hazel eyes were bright with curiosity. "What do you mean, Spock?"

The Vulcan hesitated, then said, "I had hoped to broach this subject when Sarek was here, so he could relate events firsthand, but ... there is no way of knowing when my father will return to Vulcan." His voice was hard and flat in his own ears, and Spock saw Kirk and McCoy exchange quick glances.

"What do you mean? What's going on?" the captain asked.

Spock reached out and took McCoy's medical tricorder, propped it where they could all see Amanda's monitors displayed. "If she wakes, I will have to stop," he warned the others. "Sarek told me the entire story only a few days ago ... "The Vulcan continued, summarizing Sarek's findings about the Freelans and the KEHL.

When the first officer finished, the captain and chief surgeon exchanged glances; then both officers shook their heads dazedly. "I swear, Spock, if this were anyone but you tellin' me this," McCoy said, "I'd say he wasn't firm' on all thrusters. Romulans walking around the Federation without a by-your-leave? It sounds like the worst kind of paranoid delusion!"

"If it were anyone but a Vulcan saying this, I'd agree, Bones," Kirk

said. "But Sarek is definitely sane ... and if he's right about all this, he's right that this poses a serious threat to Federation security."

McCoy, catching sight of a change in the monitor, pointed wordlessly. Amanda was awake.

Quietly, the three officers entered the sick woman's room.

Spock sat by Amanda's bedside, and his friends sat in the back of the room, their silent presence offering quiet support.

Even though Amanda was conscious, she seemed unaware of their presence. Occasionally she would call "Sarek?" in a questioning tone, then pause, plainly listening for a reply.

Spock's murmured "I am here, Mother, it is Spock" made no difference. Amanda remained unresponsive to the voice of her son.

After a half-hour had passed, the Vulcan rose and motioned his friends to join him in the corridor so he could speak freely.

"I will stay with her," he said. "I appreciate your presence, but I know you have duties aboard ship."

McCoy nodded, understanding the Vulcan's unspoken plea for privacy.

Kirk cleared his throat. "If you would like some company, Spock ..."

The Vulcan nodded. "Your offer is appreciated, Jim, but at the moment ... I would prefer to be alone with her."

"I understand completely. If you change your mind ..." Spock was wearing civilian clothing, a Vulcan robe, but he reached into the pocket and removed his communicator and held it up.

"Okay," Kirk said.

McCoy put a hand on Spock's arm. "The same goes for me, Spock. She could go on like this for some time. Don't forget to eat something today, okay?"

The Vulcan nodded. "Is she in pain?"

"No, I don't believe so," McCoy said. "And, Spock?" He cleared his throat awkwardly. "It's common for stroke victims to fixate on one person or one thing. Sometimes the person can be sitting right there, but the patient won't recognize them, so ... there's not much you can do about it. Even if your father were here, she might not realize it."

"I understand, Doctor."

Spock gazed at his two friends, knowing there was nothing more to say. Both Kirk and McCoy hesitated, then nodded, and silently turned away.

Sarek paced slowly down the corridor toward yet another negotiating session. It was morning on Kidta, but the new day brought no lightening of his spirits. The Vulcan wondered whether he should attempt to contact Spock and inquire about his wife's condition. Sarek knew, only too well, how angry Spock was over his failure to return home.

He knew that, under most circumstances, his son was as logical as any Vulcan ... but he also knew how deeply Spock cared for his mother. As he himself had once said to T'Lar, when it came to questions about the welfare of a family member, one's logic became ... uncertain.

As the ambassador hesitated in the corridor of the conference center, wanting to contact Spock, he was strangely reluctant. Sarek found himself concentrating on Amanda, trying to feel her presence, sense her mind through their bond. He closed his eyes, concentrating ... concentrating ...

A thread, so faint ... he traced it, followed it, opening his mind, sensing it. Amanda ... she was there, in his mind, but her mental thread was weak ... was weakening, even as he touched it. Sarek's breath caught in his throat as he realized that he was too late ... too late. As he stood here in this hallway, his wife was dying.

Amanda/It was a mental cry of anguish that resonated within his mind. Grief struck him like a blow, grief and regret so agonizing that he swayed as he stood.

Quickly, realizing he needed solitude, Sarek turned to a small, empty conference chamber and entered it, not activating the lights. In the darkness, with nothing to distract him, perhaps he could find her, could reach her mind, even across space. It had been done before, by stronger telepaths than he ... although he'd never been able to accomplish it.

But he had to try ...

Spock sat by his mother's bedside, holding her small, cold, wasted hand in both his own, as though he could somehow transfer some of his own strength to her by so doing. Amanda's blue eyes were open at the moment; she had been semiconscious all afternoon.

The room was bathed in sunlight, and the monitoring devices were subdued, nonintrusive.

As Spock watched her, wondering whether she would take a sip of water if he offered it to her, Amanda's lips parted, and she spoke. Barely more than a breath escaped--a breath that was a name.

"Sarek ..."

She had been calling him for hours, and the sound of it wrenched her son's heart as nothing in his life ever had.

Spock leaned over and said, softly but distinctly, "I am here, Mother, I am here. Spock ... I'm here with you, Mother."

She opened her eyes again, stared vacantly at him.

Fretfully, she tugged her hand away from his. "Sarek?" she murmured, turning her head on the pillow, seeking someone who wasn't there.

"Mother?" Spock called softly. Amanda turned her head to gaze at him, and for a moment he thought he saw a flash of warmth and recognition in her eyes; then it faded. Her eyes moved again, and she stirred restlessly.

"Sarek?"

Spock sighed. A few minutes later he coaxed her to take a sip of water from a straw; then she seemed to slip off into a doze.

An hour later Amanda's right hand moved restlessly, plucking at the coverlet. The Vulcan reached over to hold it.

This seemed to calm her for a few minutes, and she dropped off again.

Spock fell into a doze himself; he'd scarcely slept since this had begun, and even his Vulcan constitution was wearing down. He jerked awake an hour and thirty-two point nine minutes later, hearing his mother call, "Sarek?" Her voice held such sadness, such utter desolation that his throat tightened.

Glancing up at the monitors, he saw that the levels were

dropping ... she was fading, fading away. Healer T'Mal came in, checked her patient, and when Spock, with a glance, whispered, "How long?," the physician simply shook her head.

"Sarek?" Amanda's voice cracked on the word. Spock attempted to give her some water, but she turned her head away, fretfully.

"Mother, it is Spock. I am here," he said aloud, seeing that her eyes were wide open, and she was staring straight at him.

"Sarek?" she called.

This is unbearable. Spock got to his feet and paced restlessly around the room. There is almost no possibility that Sarek will arrive in time. But ... unless he is here, she will have no peace. I must find a way to

help her achieve tranquility, serenity ... but how?

Suddenly, an idea occurred to him. But was Amanda strong enough to withstand what he had in mind?

Sarek sat alone in the dark, his head bowed in his hands, struggling to reach his wife. With all his being he wanted to be with her at the end, wanted to give her a sense of his presence along the tenuous pathway of their bond. Sarek pressed his hands to his eyes, shutting out all light, and proceeded to systematically blank out everything except the sense of Amanda's presence in his mind. Am anda, I am here. My wife, I am with you. Amanda ... I am with you ... hear me, know it is I. Amanda, my wife, I am with you ...

Over and over he repeated his message, casting his mind along that fragile link, not knowing whether he was succeeding. His sense of her presence grew, eclipsing everything else; his entire existence was centered on the mental link he shared with her. Memories flashed through his mind, memories of times past--their wedding night, Spock's birth, his Times with her, the heat of the passion between them seeming to fill the whole world--and for a moment he thought he sensed that she was sharing those memories with him. But he could not be certain ... could not even be sure that she was aware of him. If she was unconscious, he might be touching some last dream, instead of her thinking, conscious mind.

Amanda ... my wife, I am with you. You have made my life better in so many ways, and I thank you ... Amanda, feel my presence. I am with you ... Spock glanced reflexively at the monitors, and what he saw there made him cross the room in one long stride. Am I too late? Spock's fingers went to her head, brushing aside Amanda's hair, seeking the proper contact points.

The Vulcan sent his mind out, searching, seeking his mother's consciousness. She was almost gone ... Dimly he sensed her personality, the last sparks of life and consciousness, and sent his mind surging toward hers, seeking for contact. Desperately, he tried to locate and link with that last, faint spark of life. He was determined to give her peace, give her what she wanted so badly--her husband's presence.

He would call up a memory of Sarek so vividly that she would believe his father was actually present.

As he struggled to establish contact, time seemed to stretch, as though some uncanny relativistic space-time pocket had taken over the room--even though Spock's inner chrono told him that less than a minute had passed.

He was failing ... the spark that was her life, her consciousness, was falling away in the dark, fading like a burnt-out cinder. Spock tried,

but he could not touch her mind, could not capture that dying spark. Beneath his fingers, Amanda twitched, then gasped reflexively, once, twice--

Spock summoned all his mental strength for one last attempt, sending his mind hurtling after that fading life-spark ... My mind to yours ... our minds are one ...

But it was no good. She eluded him, fading out, falling away, going too deep for him to catch and still live. Mother. t Spock whispered silently, and knew she did not hear him ... was not aware of him ...

Amanda was aware, faintly, of the presence trying to touch her mind, but she had gone too far to turn back ... From where?

She had no idea where she was, where she was going. All around her was darkness, shot with strange colors, hues that even Vulcans had no names for ... She regarded the colors with passing interest, but continued to move. Was she walking? Floating? She did not know. All she knew was that she was moving.

Spock ... she realized, recognizing the presence that was questing after the tiny spark that remained of Amanda Grayson. She felt a rush of love and warmth for her son, but she could not halt and let him catch up to her ... she knew only that she must keep moving, that she had no choice.

For a moment she wondered where she was going, but rational thought did not seem important to her anymore.

Only the need to quest, to seek ... to move ... Seek? she wondered, vaguely. Yes, she was seeking something ... or was it someone. And that someone was ...

Sarek. She wanted Sarek. He was here, somewhere, he had to be. Her husband had been part of her mind, part of her universe for so long ... he must be here, somewhere.

Was she moving toward Sarek?

She must be, Amanda thought. Spock's presence was far behind her now, and she did not let him distract her any more. She could not turn back, she knew that instinctively.

Sarek? she thought.

Amanda had a vague impression that she was moving faster. For a fleeting moment, it occurred to her to wonder just where she was going, but that did not seem important, either. Only one thing still linked her to her Self, the essence of Amanda Grayson ... and that was Sarek. He had to be here, somewhere ...

Sarek?

Something was near her. What? She had no fear of it, whatever it was. It loomed closer, closer ... Suddenly, as she sped along, another presence was with

her, enveloping her with its essence. Joyfully, Amanda recognized it.

Sarek!

He was with her, beside her, around her, within her ... he surrounded and pervaded her with the sense of his presence. Sarek ... she thought, happy that they were together. My husband ...

But she was still moving ... Sarek was not the destination.

He could accompany her only partway, for a short while. With a faint pang of regret, Amanda felt him drop behind her. She was moving too fast for him ...

Moving ... rushing, now. Hurling. Where did not matter.

There was no fear, no pain, no weariness. There was ... peace. Peace and movement ...

Peace ... and nothingness ...

The last spark of individual identity that had been Amanda Grayson Sarek surrendered to the peace, losing herself, expanding beyond Self, beyond ... everything ...

"Sarek?"

Spock's eyes snapped open in amazement at his mother's whisper. She sounded suddenly younger, almost girlish. As he watched, her cracked lips parted in a loving smile, as though she saw something he could not. "My husband ..." The words were barely discernible ... a final, soft exhalation.

Amanda gasped sharply ... then her chest did not rise again.

I failed, Spock thought desolately, as his eyes automatically went to the monitors; there he read what he already knew.

It was difficult to believe that his mother was dead. He let his fingers slide down her temples to her throat ... nothing.

No pulse.

Spock stood there for a long moment, trying to assimilate what had

happened. It seemed inconceivable that Amanda would never open her eyes again, never smile, or speak.

Never ... the word had an awful sound. Something struggled inside him to break loose, to achieve expression, but he repressed it sternly. He was a Vulcan.

Gently, Spock placed her limp hands on her breast atop the coverlet. His mother's eyes were half-open, and, automatically, he reached out and closed them. His hand lingered for a moment on Amanda's cheek; then, resolutely, he stood up. Healer T'Mal, he thought, would be here any moment, having seen Amanda's readings from the monitoring station in the med center.

The Vulcan debated whether he should draw the sheet up over his mother's face, but decided not to ... she appeared very peaceful the way she was. Her face even bore traces of that last, faint smile.

Spock turned and walked to the door, hesitated, glanced back. There seemed no reason to stay any longer, but he could not decide what he should do. Healers, aides, and patients passed him in the corridor, and it seemed incredible and somehow unconscionable that everyone and everything should go on so normally, when there had been such a loss ...

Spock realized with one part of his mind that he was not reacting logically, but, for once, that did not seem important.

T'Mal came toward him, halted. She was a small, graying Vulcan, who wore a blue-green medical tunic and trousers.

"Captain Spock," she said, in the most ancient and formal of Vulcan dialects, "I grieve with thee on the death of thy mother."

Spock nodded, wondering whether his expression betrayed any of his inner turmoil, but apparently it did not, for T'Mal's face did not alter as she gazed at him. The Vulcan nodded, then said, matching her formality, "We grieve together, Healer T'Mal. I thank thee for thy care of my mother these many days."

T'Mal gazed up at him, and some of her formality vanished. "Go home, Captain Spock. Rest. We will place her in stasis, until your father returns, so he may see her if he wishes. Tomorrow will be soon enough to arrange for the memorial service."

Spock nodded. "Thank you, T'Mal. I will contact you ... later." Turning away, he headed for the med center's transporter unit.

Alone in the small room on Deneb IV, Sarek of Vulcan struggled, sending his mind out, striving to reach his wife, never knowing whether he had succeeded. And then ... he felt Amanda die.

One moment her presence was there, a warm spark in the back of his mind, a tenuous link stretching between them--and then the link snapped ... the warmth was gone, leaving an aching void.

Sarek leaned his head in his hands, feeling grief engulf him past any ability of his to control it. Amanda ... Amanda ... he thought, as though her name were some kind of litany or spell that could call her back. But no ... she was gone, truly gone, and he would be forever poorer for her loss. Amanda ...

Alone, in the dark, Sarek of Vulcan silently mourned. His world seemed to have tilted out of alignment, losing its focus and color. Amanda, dead? For the first time, the Vulcan realized how much of his strength, his legendary calm and wisdom had come from his wife's presence in his mind. And now ... gone ...

Forever.

The word was too large, too all-encompassing for even a Vulcan mind to grasp. Sarek rejected the idea. Logic might dictate that his time with Amanda was ended, but ... one's logic was uncertain at times, when family was concerned.

Someday, somehow, he would touch the essence of his wife again. Sarek knew it.

But ... what was he to do until then?

The answer to his question returned him swiftly. He would do his job ... his duty. He would gain freedom for the people of Kadura. He would complete these negotiations.

And then, he would do what he must about the Freelan threat. He would do his duty, as he had always done.

Amanda would expect that of him, as he expected it of himself.

Rising from the table, the ambassador straightened his formal robes, and his shoulders. Then, his expression calm, remote, he walked slowly back to join the others around the conference table.

Spock materialized inside the mountain villa. He could have gone to the house in Shikahr, which was within walking distance of the med center, but there he would have had to take calls, talk to people, accept expressions of condolence and inquiries about the time of the memorial service. Here, his solitude, should he wish it, could be complete.

Spock wandered through the empty house, noting that someone had made his parents' bed. The Healer's aide, probably. The Vulcan's fingers trailed across one of Amanda's woven hangings, and he pictured her weaving it, as he'd seen her at her loom as a child.

Remembering something, he took out his communicator.

"Spock to Enterprise sickbay," he said.

"Sickbay," replied Leonard McCoy's voice. "McCoy here."

"Doctor ... she is gone," the Vulcan said steadily.

"Spock, I'm sorry," McCoy's voice came back.

"Please inform the captain of my mother's ..." He searched for a human euphemism. "... passing, and tell him that I will speak with him soon. There will be a brief memorial service when ... when my father returns. I will inform you as soon as a time is determined."

McCoy hesitated, then said, "I understand, Spock. Do you want me or Jim to beam down?"

"No, Doctor. At the moment, I would prefer to be alone."

"I understand," McCoy said. "Spock ... I grieve with thee."

McCoy's High Vulcan was very weak, but Spock appreciated the gesture. "Thank you, Doctor," the Vulcan replied.

"Spock out."

Some random impulse drove him out of the house. It was the middle of the night here, on this side of the planet, and Amanda's garden was quiet and serene. Spock sat on the

bench, facing The Watcher, gazing around him at the beauty Amanda had created. The well-ordered paths, the graceful desert trees and shrubs from a dozen worlds, all complemented the natural stone formations that had been there when the villa had first been built. She had done this, much of it with her own hands ...

Spock remembered working in this garden with her as a small child, carrying colored rocks that she would arrange in swirling designs, remembered helping her rake sand into graceful patterns ...

Something inside the Vulcan loosened, relaxed, and this time he allowed it to surface for a brief moment. Spock leaned forward on the bench, arms crossed over his belly, as the pain of her passing filled him, engulfed him. Hot tears welled in his eyes as he sat there, but only one broke free ... and fell, to splash the soil in his mother's garden.

Journal in hand, Sarek seated himself at the desk in his cabin aboard the transport vessel. The negotiations had been completed yesterday; Kadura was, at last, free, and he was headed home for Vulcan.

Alone in his cabin, he placed the journal on the desk and, opening it, located the place where he had left off the night before. His wife's handwriting, symmetrical, flowing, and refined--a schoolteacher's elegant cursive--traveled over the white pages, bringing back memories, almost as though she were here, speaking directly to him. Yesterday he'd read her account of their first meeting and their courtship, up until the point where they had left Earth together. Now, seeing the date at the top of the next page, the ambassador braced himself for another onslaught of bittersweet memory.

September 16,2229

Within the hour we will be in orbit around Vulcan--my new home. It hardly seems possible that so much has happened in such a short time!

I am alone in my cabin, as I have been throughout the trip ... even though I am a married woman, by every law on Earth. But my husband follows traditional Vulcan ways, and insists that we wait until after the

Vulcan ceremony before consummating our marriage.

In the four months since that first walk on the beach, the first time he kissed me, Sarek has allowed me to see deeper into his mind and heart than I could ever have imagined. Not that he has been exactly ... forthcoming.

But I have learned to read even the tiniest change of expression on his face, learned to recognize every faint alteration of tone and inflection ... learned to interpret meaning from what he doesn't say as much as from what he actually says.

And today, in anticipation of the Vulcan ceremony this evening, there was the Bonding.

How can mere human words describe what no one on my homeworld has ever experienced? Physically, it was simple, undramatic. Sarek gravely invited me into his cabin (for the first time in our week-long journey), and solemnly poured a glass of some dark, heady-smelling brew into a cup carved from a single crimson stone veined with dull gold. He added several pinches of herbs, then gestured me to a seat, all without speaking a single word ... Sarek watched his betrothed sit down on the low couch in his cabin, arranging her long, pale turquoise skirts carefully.

When they had taken ship for Vulcan, Amanda had adopted the traditional garb of his homeworld for the first time, commenting that they would take some getting used to after the short skirts and trousers she was accustomed to.

With a grave, formal gesture, the diplomat passed her the cup. "Here, Amanda. Drink."

Gazing up at him over the ornate rim, she took a hesitant sip. "Oh ..."
she breathed, staring mystified at the contents.

"That feels like liquid fire ... but it's not liquor, is it?"

"No, it is not ethanol," Sarek said. "The drink does have a relaxing effect, but not an intoxicating one." He paused, watching her sip again, then continued. "Amanda, you know that, on my world, husbands and wives are bound by more than law and custom."

"Yes, Sarek," she replied. "They are linked telepathically."

"We call it 'bonding,'" Sarek said. "No marriage would be complete without it. This evening my world, my people, will witness the ceremony that will make us, as your people express it, 'one flesh.'" By tonight we shall be married, under the laws and customs of both our worlds. But first ... first there must come the bonding. That is something done in private, between the betrothed pair--either when they are children, or before the marriage ceremony."

Amanda hesitated in her turn, then said, "Is it difficult?"

Can we do it now?"

Sarek gazed at her, intent, profoundly serious. "It is not difficult for Vulcans," he said finally. "But it has never been attempted with a human."

"I am not telepathic," she reminded him. "You know that."

"I know. But I do not believe that is necessary. Our bond will not be the same as that shared by a Vulcan couple, but I believe it will be as lasting, as deep, in its own way." The Vulcan raised his hand slowly, ceremoniously. "Will you let me try, my wife-to-be?"

"Yes," Amanda said, evenly, though he could see her pulse jump in her throat. She took a deep, final draft of the cup, then set it aside.

Sarek gave her the faint smile that he reserved for her alone, pleased by her courage. "It will seem strange to you," he warned. "My mind will merge with yours, in a very deep meld. It may feel ... invasive. But I would never harm you, Amanda, remember that."

"I will," she said, her voice still calm--but she licked her lips, as though her mouth had gone dry.

Holding out two fingers, Sarek extended his hand toward his wife-to-be. Slowly, steadily, she raised her hand to meet his.

Sarek sent his consciousness questing outward, and felt his mind brush Amanda's. He shared her awareness of him, of the first stages of the meld; the heat of his touch against her hand ... the seeking tendrils of his mind touching the outer fringes of her thoughts.

He went deeper, cautiously, carefully, anxious lest he cause her pain. Her love and trust surrounded him. She opened to him, like some alien flower spreading its petals to the sun. Slowly ... very slowly ... he eased deeper, strengthening the meld.

Raising his other hand, he spread it against the contact points on her face, feeling her cool flesh against the warmth of his. Deeper ... deeper ...

Amanda was now aware of him stirring in her mind, coming to life, the fibers of his being joining to hers, linking, bonding, melding her mind was becoming sealed to his in a joining so profound that it could only be broken by a High Master--or death.

Sarek could feel her instinctive need to pull back, away--and could feel her fighting it, forcing calmness and acceptance.

He sent a wordless reassurance that she would not lose her individuality by this bonding, then felt her relax. He felt a wave of pride; she was brave, this woman he had chosen. Such a deep meld was enough to make even a Vulcan resist ... but she strove for wholehearted joining.

Surrounded now by her mind, Sarek experienced Amanda's goodness, her intelligence--and her heartfelt love for him. The awareness moved him as nothing ever had. The bond he had shared with T'Rea had been a pale shadow compared to this, a travesty of intimacy.

Now he was completely within her, and the sharing they experienced was more intimate than anything either of them had ever known. He felt the last of her fear melt away, experienced her joy in their union. Amanda had longed to be one with him--and now, after so many months, she was.

Her happiness suffused him, bathing him in unaccustomed emotion--but Sarek did not retreat from that emotion, here in the privacy of their joined minds. It was appropriate for a bonded couple to share such closeness ...

Their mental sharing was so complete, so total, that by the time Sarek withdrew his mind, his fingers encountered

moisture. Tears streaked Amanda's face, and she grasped his hand tightly when he moved it away. "Oh, Sarek ..." she whispered. "That was ... wonderful. Will it be this way from now on?"

He nodded. "It will," he promised. "We will always be conscious of one

another. We will be together as long as we both live."

Raising his hand to her lips, she kissed him gently.

"Thank you," she said, softly. "I wanted to be part of you ... and now I am ..."

She shook her head, put her hands up to her temples. "So many images," she murmured. "Things I never saw before are now in my mind. Those are your merv, ories, aren't they?"

"Yes. The infusion may be ... chaotic ... at first, but it will sort itself out, given time."

"Faces ... conversations.. so much to absorb ..." she whispered softly; then her expression tightened. "Wait a minute." She sat up straight. "There's an image ... Sarek, who is she?" she demanded, in a tone that brooked no opposition.

The Vulcan had an uncomfortable notion that he knew what she was talking about, but he said only, "To whom are you referring, Amanda?"

"This woman. The one in your mind. Lovely, delicate features, masses of black hair. You ... desired ... her. It's in your mind. You ... you ..." She groped for a word.

"You were intimate with her." Amanda's eyes flashed cobalt.

Sarek sighed. "T'Rea," he said. "My first wife."

"You were married? And you didn't tell me?" She sat bolt upright, furious. "How could you?"

Sarek regretted his lapse. Amanda's temper was not one to be trifled with. "Yes, I was married to T'Rea. Briefly. But she divorced me."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because, to explain how she became my wife, I would have to reveal something so private to Vulcans that it is never spoken of to outworlders. But you are my wife-to-be,

so I must tell you. I had intended to wait until after the marriage ceremony, however "He spread his hands upward.

"Explain, then," Amanda said, waiting. launched into a fairly composed, concise explanation of the Vulcan mating drive, and how a Vulcan couple in the throes of pon fart could mate, and yet have little interaction in each other's lives. He concluded, hesitantly, "Amanda, there is one final thing you must know. I never ... shared ... with her, what I experience with you. Understand that.

My marriage to T'Rea was not a marriage in terms of what you and I will experience as a married couple. We have agreed to share our lives together, which is far different than the brief encounter I experienced with T'Rea when my Time came."

"I see," she said, finally, thoughtfully. "And will you experience this ... pon farr again? When?"

"I cannot tell," Sarek said, honestly. "But I believe that I will, and that it will be soon. My Time with T'Rea was almost seven years ago, now."

"What a honeymoon," she murmured, shaking her head. "Oh, Sarek, I wish you had told me all this before!"

"I explained--I could not speak of it to anyone except my wife. No outworlder must know."

"I understand," she said, finally.

Just then, the ship's intercom chimed, informing them that they were about to enter Vulcan orbit. Amanda jumped up from the couch, clearly flustered. "Oh, dear. I have barely an hour to make myself presentable for the wedding!"

"You should assume the traditional garb," Sarek said. "But your appearance is ... everything that could be desired, Amanda."

Meeting his eyes, she flushed. "What a lovely compliment," she said. "Now I know why you're such a successful diplomat. But my hair ..." She peered at the mirror in his cabin. "I must run," she said. "I will see you in an hour."

"In an hour," he promised ...

Remembering his wedding, Sarek turned the page to see what Amanda had written about it.

September 16, LATER I am so tired, and yet before I allow myself to close my eyes, I must note down my thoughts, my feelings, lest they slip away by morning's light.

I am sitting here at a small table in the corner of the bedchamber. Vulcan beds are hard, barely yielding, but I suppose I will become accustomed to that with time. I am writing by the light of my pen, clad only in my lightest nightgown--because, despite Sarek's having air-conditioning installed specially for me, it is hot. By midnight, Sarek assures me, the temperature will have dropped, as it does in desert climates.

My husband is asleep. I can hear him breathing, lightly, slowly. I wonder if any Vulcans snore? Thank all the gods that ever were, Sarek does not/

The ceremony went well, all things considered. It was held in a stone-pillared and rock-walled sort of natural amphitheater that Sarek told me was the traditional marriage site for his people for many, many generations.

It reminded me of Stonehenge. 40 Eridani hovered just above the horizon as we spoke our vows, staining the red stone even redder. I managed to follow Sarek's cues without any horrible gaffes, and though the few words of Vulcan I managed to speak probably sounded like nothing ever heard before on the planet, no one reacted.

The marriage rite was presided over by two Vulcan women--T'Kar, the oldest female in the family, a wizened old creature who seemed to be half-asleep during the entire ceremony, and the person who actually officiated, named T'Pau.

I don't quite understand T'Pau's exact relationship to Sarek--Vulcan kinships are complicated, and somewhat differently structured than human families--she is something on the order of his eldest great-aunt, I believe.

T'Pau is some kind of matriarch, either by right of

blood, or natural authority. Her word is, apparently, law. I suspect she's not exactly thrilled at having a human join her family ... but she could teach Emily Post a thing or two about tradition and cutting-edge etiquette!

Fortunately, the ceremony only took about fifteen minutes--if it had been any longer, I'd have dropped from the heat, I'm sure. We then boarded ground transport and returned to the ancient family enclave, where the reception was held.

I gather that many receptions are held outside, in the gardens, but this one, in deference to my human constitution, was held in the central hall. The temperature controls had been adjusted downward a few degrees. All the Vulcans were wearing jackets and shawls, while I could hardly wait to shed my outer robe, light and gauzy as it was/)

Earth's ambassador, Eleanor Jordan, was the only other human present. She offered a typical human toast to the wedded pair, which all the Vulcans courteously drank.

As soon as was decently possible, Sarek touched my arm, and we slipped out. He led me through stone corridors opening onto chambers filled with ancient furnishings, down a winding staircase to a transporter pad installed in the basement of the building--it looked so anachronistic

set into that millennia-old red stone floor!

Sarek's house is located in Shikahr, and is quite nice.

Sparsely but impeccably furnished. It was long past sunset when we beamed here, so I received only a hazy impression of the outside. Sarek says there are gardens, which pleases me immensely. I brought some desert plant seedlings with me, in the hopes I can coax them to grow and thus have some touches of Earth here on my new home.

Even while he is asleep, I can sense Sarek mind brushing mine.

Today, before the ceremony, Sarek enlightened me

about Vulcan sexual drives. Very different from a human's libido! It seems that Vulcans undergo something he called pon farr ... much like the heat cycles experienced by some Terran creatures. Vulcans are capable of mating and conceiving at other times, but, during pon farr they must mate--if they don't, they can die. Sarek, my husband ... I can scarcely believe it, even after tonight. It seems too wonderful to be true, that we can now share the same bed, and that I will wake up next to him tomorrow, and tomorrow, and for all the tomorrows we will have together ...

Sarek closed the journal with a sigh, unable to read any more. Resting his head in his hands, he strove to mealirate, but images of Amanda intruded, filling his mind. Amanda, he thought, feeling grief fill him anew. Amanda ... that was the happiest night of my life, too.

Valdyr watched Karg salute her uncle, then exit, leaving them alone on the cloaked warbird's small bridge. The last thing Karg did before the doors slid shut behind him was give her a long, promising leer.

I can wait for our wedding night, his expression said, for my wait will not be long.

Valdyr glowered at him, touching the hilt of her dagger, and her gesture was just as suggestive. His very presence sent her blood boiling with passion--but not the passion he wanted. You will wait, Karg, she thought with murderous hatred, until Qo'nos's polar caps melt. Unfortunately, with the destruction of Praxis and the subsequent environmental problems the Klingon homeworld was facing, that might not be very long indeed.

If she could only talk her uncle out of this disastrous plan of his! She turned to face the ambassador, who was absorbed, watching the surveillance screens.

"Uncle," she said with a firmness she did not feel, "we must talk."

He glanced at her, then went back to watching the image on the screen. A lone human male lay curled in an embryonic position on the narrow,

shelflike bunk. "Niece, come see your charge."

Valdyr moved closer to him, staring at the silent, unmoving human. She could detect no movement, not even breathing. Was the prisoner still alive?

"He will be your responsibility," Kamarag reminded her.

"The warbird's crew tells me that young Kirk has eaten nothing in the five days since his capture. He only uses his food to ask questions, and spell out his name, rank, and some meaningless number. Worse than that, he has drunk only a small amount of water. For the last day, they said, he has not moved at all."

How grotesque, Valdyr thought, to just curl up and surrender.

This is what her uncle thought was an honorable prisoner?

"Typical," Kamarag remarked, studying the prisoner and shaking his head. "Most humans, it has been my experience, are a weak, spineless lot. I regret that this one will probably not afford you much amusement, niece."

In Klingon society, guarding prisoners of war was traditionally women's work. And, for the most hated prisoners and humans certainly qualified for that category), the female jailers took delight in administering the be /oy '--the ritualized "torture-by-women."

In a world controlled by Klingon warriors, a woman could release much of the frustration engendered by the male-dominated society on a strong, healthy prisoner.

"It is critically important that this man live and be healthy, do you understand, my ' ?"

intruded on her thoughts. niece. Kamarag's order Valdyr scowled. She would have to nurse this feeble weakling? Klingon prisoners were not usually coddled. A touch of hope glimmered in her breast. Was her uncle finally realizing the magnitude of his actions? Was this his way of softening the offense? Yes, that had to be it. He would strengthen the dying human so as to have a healthy hostage to return in exchange for Captain Kirk. It could, perhaps, salvage some honor in the end.

"He must be strong, so that when Kirk comes to claim

him," Kamarag explained in his most rational, ambassadorial voice, "this sniveling weakling can endure a good, lengthy bejoy'--while his uncle is forced to watch!"

aldyffs color deepened and her eyes widened against her will. Where was the honor in that? There was no craft in this plan, no politics, just

duplicity and cruelty. The shame of it made her glower at the deckplates.

"Don't worry, my dear niece," Kamarag said comforting ly, giving her a congenial hug, "that task will be yours as well. A reward for the distasteful work ahead of you--guarding this stinking alien, this blood kin of va Kirk! His torture will be my wedding gift to you--something to whet your appetites and insure a passionate night with your new husband?"

Valdyr had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from erupting into gales of hysterical laughter. Had all she learned at her father's side of honor, battle, and glory been lies? Was this really the way Klingons conducted themselves by betraying their leaders, lying, cheating, and abusing the helpless? Her father would have killed this man for what he was about to do.

"Now, what is it you wished to speak to me about?" The young woman blinked, having nearly forgotten. She swallowed, knowing already how futile this would be.

"I ... I wish to speak once more ... of my plans. The plans I made for my life, while my father was still alive."

Kamarag drew away from her, his face taking on his more "official" look.

"My father, as you must know, encouraged my learning," she reminded him. "He trained me himself, along with my four brothers, in all the warriors' arts."

Kamarag nodded. "You were your father's favorite, of that, I'm well aware. Training you was his way of proving your worth, since he made the healers work so hard to save you in infancy."

She nodded, lowering her eyes. In many families, a weak, small, sickly baby as she had been would have been allowed to die. But her father would not permit it and demanded the

healers save her. Perhaps it was because she was his only daughter. Her mother liked to tell her that he'd bellowed at the doctors that Valdyr's will to live was proof that she carried a man's share of noble warrior's blood. And he'd trained her as stringently as her stronger brothers. She'd loved him for that.

"My father," she reminded Kamarag, "felt my mind was as strong as my skills, as strong as my will to live. He wanted me to continue my schooling. He knew I was not strong enough to serve as a warrior ... but hoped I might have other skills almost as valuable to offer the Empire. He hoped--and I shared his dream--that I might follow you, Uncle, into diplomacy."

Kamarag raised his head in surprise. It was a compliment, and she could see he was taking it as such.

She continued quickly, before he could stop her. "At the time, it was a dream, a fantasy, but now ... with Azetbur holding such an important political role, it would not be thought so unusual if I ..."

The ambassador glowered. "Azetbur! The role she has usurped is a travesty! If she were a decent female she would have married again! Then, she could hand her seat over to her husband, as it should be!"

Valdyr yearned to remind her uncle that Azetbur's husband had been killed in the same attack that had killed the chancellor's father--but that it had been Azetbur herself that Gorkon had wanted to succeed him.

"And it is this depraved female you would model yourself after?"

"Oh, no, Uncle, it is you I would ..."

"Do not flatter me, niece! I have been a politician since long before you were born!" He was furious now, and Valdyr had no idea how to placate him.

"But ... my father--"

"Your father is dead. t" he reminded her brutally. "I am the head of this family, and you will follow the life I prepare for you! You will marry Karg, and be a faithful wife, and bear him as many male children as your body can grow. Your

glory will be in the success of your husband and male children. You will not live a life of perversion and depravity as that damnable Azetbur has. Do you understand me?" Valdyr was stunned by her uncle's reaction. Stunned and heartsick. But she showed not a trace of it on her face. She would not shame her father's memory by displaying weakness.

"Yes, my uncle. I understand clearly."

"Then, let us be family," he said quietly, "and never speak of this again." He turned back to regard the surveillance screens. Valdyr struggled to control her disappointment. She'd hoped that her uncle would listen to reason ... but he would not.

While she and her uncle had had their brief discussion, she'd been peripherally aware of the screens that displayed Karg's progress through the warbird. His lieutenant, Treegor, accompanied him. The two officers had picked up Peter Kirk from a rendezvous point on the edge of explored space, from the tramp freighter/contraband runner that had smuggled him off Earth.

Now, after landing on Qo'nos, at Tengchah Jay, the spaceport closest to

Du'hurgh, Kamarag's huge estate, it was time, at last, to remove the prisoner from his cell. As Karg stalked through the corridom, he carried in his gaunt-leted hand an electronic key that was the only means of opening the door to the security cell.

Through all of this, the figure on the bunk had never stirred, never twitched. Yes, Karg, Valdyr thought bitterly, bring my uncle his dead prize.

Finally, Karg and his lieutenant reached the prisoner's cabin. Karg inserted the key and left it in, so that the doors would remain open. Both men were relaxed, talking and laughing with each other, confident that the human, even in health, could be no match for them.

Karg leaned over the prisoner and shook the man's shoulder. There was no response; the captive's arm swung limply, then hung, flaccid.

"He ... cannot be dead?" her uncle muttered, as if contemplating that possibility for the first time. "If he is dead ..." You have nothing, Valdyr thought, nothing but shame. "No, he lives!" Kamarag muttered as Karg and his assistant lifted the limp form by the arms, slapping him lightly. The man seemed almost boneless, his head lolling back and forth, his eyes shut, his mouth sagging open.

He had to be alive, or his body would have stiffened with the death rictus. Karg slapped the human's face again, harder, but there was no response.

Suddenly, the prisoner groaned piteously and sagged even more. Karg and his lieutenant bowed over his form to prevent him from collapsing to the deck, and for a moment the human was lost to view, blocked by the warriors' broad backs.

Then, in the next instant, the two Klingons lurched toward each other, their heads meeting with a resounding crack. They fell backward, staggering. The human had suddenly awakened, grabbed the warriors and forced them together.

The human was upright now, his entire demeanor changed dramatically. Spinning on one foot, he lashed out with his other, catching Treegor on the chin. The warrior crashed to the deck, unconscious. Karg was up now, and in a murderous rage, blood trickling from a head-plate cut. With a roar, he charged the human, who moved low and struck the warrior with his fists hard, once, twice, three times just below the breastplate, in a warrior's most vulnerable place.

The air rushed out of Karg's lungs, and all he could do was swing wildly. He managed to strike the human on the shoulder, but the man took the blow well, and punched Karg twice, in his right eye.

This human knows us, aldyr realized. He'd wasted no energy attacking the

places where warriors would feel little pain. Her gaze sharpened with interest. She had not realized that humans could fight so well--or be so clever!

Karg lunged after the human, meaning to snatch him up and throw him into the nearest wall, but the smaller male held his place until the last second, then dodged the attack.

Grabbing Karg by his armor, he shoved the big warrior hard, and Karg's forward momentum ran him right into the bulkhead. His head struck with stunning force, and he slid down the wall, dazed.

Without a wasted moment, young Kirk raced out of his cell, grabbing the electronic key on his way out. Karg struggled to his feet to pursue his escaping quarry, but the doors slid shut in front of him, locking him inside. Valdyr stifled her laughter as she took in Karg's stupefied expression.

"Hu'tegh!" Kamarag cursed, slapping his palm on the alarm button. The raucous sound of the blaring klaxon instantly filled the air.

They watched the human on the surveillance screens as he raced down the corridors. Kamarag's hands flew over the control panel, and on another screen the two warriors Karg had gotten the key from suddenly appeared. They were in the mess hall, eating. They looked up in response to the alarm.

"Hurry!" Kamarag yelled through the intercom. "The human is loose in the ship!" As the warriors abandoned their meals and ran out, the ambassador secured all airlocks.

Valdyr headed for the bridge doors.

"And where are you going?" Kamarag demanded as the doors slid open before her.

"I'm going to recapture my prisoner," she informed him matter-of-factly. He seemed about to protest, but Karg's shouting as he hammered against his prison door quickly distracted him. She was in the hall before he had another second to think about it.

The human will head for the bridge, she decided. It would be the only way he could effect a genuine escape. Leaving the ship would merely strand him on a planet where he would be the only one of his kind, and entirely too easy to find. No, he'd need to get to the bridge, commandeer it. No doubt he'd figure out where it was in a matter of minutes. He was clever, this human.

Those of us that are not as strong must develop our minds

all the more, she thought, grinning with the excitement of the pursuit.

She was eager to go against this man. This warrior, she thought, shocking herself. And what else should he be called? Starved, dehydrated, and inactive for days, this human had managed to have both the strength and the cunning to overcome two of Kamarag's best warriors.

Valdyr raced down the corridor, heading toward the prisoner's cabin. She realized then that she had no weapon but her knife, and her fighting skills. She could not stun the man; she would have to fight him barehanded. She frowned.

Would he fight her? Or would he give her that look, that patronizing expression warriors always gave her? It would be shameful for a warrior to fight a woman, she was always told.

And she always responded, No, it is only shameful to fight her ... and lose. Gritting her teeth, she slid to a halt behind a juncture of corridors. This was the path to the bridge. To reach it, he would have to come through her.

Valdyr heard the thudding of feet on deckplates, then a Klingon warrior's guttural shout. She peered around the corner, her body hidden by the angled wall. The human, who'd been headed her way, spun around to face a Klingon racing toward him from the rear. Young Kirk waited until the warrior was nearly on top of him, then with an earsplitting yell of his own, leaped high in the air, smashing both feet into the warrior's face. The Klingon hit the deckplates so hard they shuddered. Kirk landed badly himself, pulling himself up with an effort. Panting for breath, he moved steadily toward her.

The Klingon woman stepped into his path from behind the curve and he stopped short. Chest heaving, he gulped for air. It had cost him, this fight, and she could see he was near the end of his strength.

"It is over," she said clearly in English. "You have fought well. Be proud. Now yield, and come with me." Kirk was clearly surprised to hear her use his language.

His shoulders sagged, as if in defeat, but she didn't trust him and went into a defensive stance. His gaze moved over her, taking in her posture, and his expression hardened with determination. "In a pig's eye!" Kirk answered.

She blinked, unable to translate the idiom. "You will yield!" she ordered, and launched herself at him.

Valdyr felt ashamed of her advantage. She doubted he would use the same force on her as he'd been willing to use on the Klingon males. His unwillingness to do that would allow her to conquer him, but she wouldn't enjoy it. She was still thinking that when his fist hit her cheek with stunning force.

Her head snapped back harshly, and she growled as blood poured from the corner of her lip. Drawing back, she landed a powerful right to his jaw, and he staggered. She moved to follow it through with a left, but he blocked the blow. Kirk brought his hand down in a hard chop at her neck, but she dodged and it landed ineffectively on her leather shoulder pad. Bringing the heel of her hand up under his chin, she snapped his head back with the force of the blow. Kirk grunted and went down.

Before he'd even finished landing, however, he'd scissored his legs between hers and knocked her to the deck. He landed on her roughly, struggling to get a grip on her hair and slam her head against the deckplates. Swinging her legs up, she flipped both of them end over end, then straddled him. "Yield, human!" she bellowed, and struck him hard in the face. His head cracked against the floor, he gave a sigh, and his eyes rolled up.

Valdyr eased off her prisoner carefully, fully aware that he might be feigning unconsciousness. Klingon boots thundered down the hall, and when she looked up, Karg, Treegor, the two crewmen, and her uncle were there, their eyes moving between the unconscious human on the floor and her. She was panting and sweating over him, the blood from her lip dripping puce droplets onto her armor.

Raging, Karg snarled, "Let me kill this Ha'dlbah now!" and lunged for the helpless body.

"You will not!" Valdyr heard herself shout as she thrust herself between them, shoving the warrior back roughly.

He moved on her, but by then her dagger was out of its sheath and in front of his face. He paused. Valdyr's warrior blood was coursing through her now. "Is this how a Kiingon

warrior kills his enemy?" she taunted her betrothed. "Waits until he's helpless and kills him in his sleep? Is that your path to honor, Karg?"

No one in the corridor moved. Karg's face flamed with shame. Valdyr was surprised when her uncle said nothing, merely stared at her reflectively.

Treegot grumbled at her, "This human is not worthy to be our enemy. He is a parasite, brought down by a woman. He deserves no honorable consideration."

"Be careful, Treegor," she warned. "This human brought you down with one blow, and outfought and outwitted the rest of you. He did that after a long fast and in a weakened state. He has earned the respect due a warrior."

Without another word, she sheathed her dagger. Then, reaching down, she grabbed the unconscious human by the wrists, hauled him up, and slung

him over her shoulder.

Valdyr struggled not to stagger; Kirk was heavier than he looked, but she could not afford to show weakness in front of this group now.

"Valdyr," said Kamarag quietly, "where are you taking him?"

"To the prison cell you have prepared for him," she said, managing to speak clearly in spite of her burden. "I will take him in the aircar we brought. He is my prisoner, is he not?"

He needs medical attention, and possibly force-feeding.

Your orders on the matter of his care were very clear."

"Do ... you not wish help?" Kamarag asked.

"Do you think I need it?" she challenged, meeting his eyes.

He raised his head as if insulted, but when Karg attempted to speak, he held up his hand to silence the warrior.

Karg looked outraged. "No," Kamarag said quietly. "I do not think you need help." And with a gesture that was almost a salute, he permitted her to leave.

As Valdyr stumped toward the airlock with her heavy burden, she heard Karg say angrily to her uncle, "I will not tolerate such insolence when we are wed.* I will beat that smugness out of her the first night!"

To her pleasure she heard Kamarag reply, "I do not

believe a warrior's heart is so easily conquered, Karg. You may have to rethink your approach."

See, Peter told himself, you were right the first time. You should've never woken up! He lay perfectly still on the unyielding surface where he'd been tossed. The truth was, he was afraid to move. Every single part of him hurt--not just a little, but with a bone-jarring, muscle-deep, migraine-type pain the likes of which he'd never known.

Well, what did you expect, mister? You took on the whole damned Klingon army.

Klingons! He'd been kidnapped by Klingons. Well, everything he'd ever read about them was true. They could fight like mountain gorillas, and they seemed about as strong. His aching body testified to that.

But why would Klingons want to kidnap him in the first place? Ever since Jim Kirk and his crew had saved Chancellor Azetbur, his uncle had become a favored person among the Klingon populace.

But not every Klingon, he knew, supported Azetbur's rule.

He tried to recall the two soldiers who'd come for him.

Their garb had been military--black and dark gray leather studded with metal, spiked boots and gloves--but the official insignia of the Klingon Empire was not pinned on their left sleeves. Instead, there'd been another insignia stitched on the leather, intertwined with what must have been the sigil of a high-ranking house.

He tried to gauge the gravity of this place by the weight of his body as it lay still. It was hard to say without moving. He was heavier than he was on Earth, just a fraction, perhaps, but there was a difference. Of course, some of that could be due to swollen muscle tissue! He wondered if he was on one of the Klingon worlds, or on Qo'nos itself. And he wondered if he'd ever find a way out of this mess. Despair washed over him like a bucket of ice water.

Klingons rarely kept prisoners, but when they did ... there was plenty of speculation about what happened to those unfortunates. Would they kill him? Torture him?

Tales of the infamous Klingon mind-sifter ran through his memory. Determinedly, Peter took deep breaths, in through his nose, out through his mouth, until he felt calmer.

"I know you are awake, human," a highly accented feminine voice growled at him.

He knew that voice. He'd heard it at least once before.

Yes. Before its owner whipped the tar out of him. He allowed one eyelid to creep open.

There she was, all right, the woman of his nightmares. She loomed over him, but carefully remained out of reach. As if he had enough energy even to lift his head, never mind take her on again. What a punch she had!

"You are dehydrated, human," she told him. "You need water and food. I am prepared to force-feed you if you will not cooperate with me. The choice is yours."

Her English was amazingly good, if oddly accented, Peter realized. He opened the other eye.

She was small, barely tall enough to reach Peter's shoulder, and slenderly built. Her long dark hair, braided into a rope as thick as Peter's wrist, hung over her shoulder and fell to her thighs. The Klingon woman's skin was the color of warm honey, her features delicate

and feminine. Even the ridges on her forehead were elegant--sharply defined, but not as massive as those of the male Klingons. The effect was almost charming. Like the lovely head of the cobra, Peter thought wryly.

She wore the same military-like garb that the males had, with the same insignia on it. As Peter's eyes met hers, she lifted her chin and stared back at him levelly.

"You will sit up, or I will pull you into a sitting position," she ordered him.

The last thing he wanted was for this Amazon to handle him again. He rolled onto his side and struggled to sit up without groaning. Easing his legs over the ledge of whatever he was lying on, he settled into the ordered position, only to sag back against a wall.

"I know you now, human," the female Klingon informed him, "so do not attempt to deceive me. I defeated you once and will happily do so again."

Holding up his hands, Peter tried futilely to moisten his mouth and speak. He craved water as he'd never craved anything before; he didn't even care if it was drugged. In fact, he wished it was. It might alleviate some of this pain.

"Here, drink this," she ordered him, holding a squeeze bottle out to him.

He clutched at it, his hands covering hers, as the fluid streamed into his mouth. It was clear, clean, pure water, and tasted more wonderful than anything he'd ever consumed.

Cruelly, she pulled the bottle away before he'd had more than a few swallows.

"Slowly!" she snapped. "You have been weakened by your battle. Too much fluid too soon will only make you ill. Here, swallow these, and you may have more water to wash them down."

He stared uncomprehendingly at some tiny pills in her palm.

"They are human medication. They are for pain. Take them ... or no more water."

He took them willingly and again clutched her hands as she allowed him more water from the squeeze bottle. Her skin was so warm.

This time, when she took the bottle away, her face seemed to soften a little. He released his grip on her reluctantly, wondering when she'd offer the water again.

"There is warm broth in this bottle," she told him, showing it to him. "It is Klingon, but it is specially made for injured warriors. It is food and medicine all in one. I have consulted with the information we have on human physiology and I assure you it will bring you no harm. You will drink it ... or I will feed it to you like an infant."

Peter nodded at her. He'd drink it ... the water had awakened an echo of hunger. He moistened his Flps again and asked, "Why do you care?" His voice was little more than a croak.

She frowned, confused.

"Why should you care if I eat or not? Whether I drink too much water and get sick? Why do you care?"

"My uncle has assigned me to see to your welfare," she explained, her tone curt, but no longer fierce. She handed him the bottle of broth. "I am to restore your health."

He nodded. Her job. That explained everything, and nothing. He sipped the warm brew gingerly, no longer interested in the politics of hunger-striking. Surprisingly, the liquid was savory and satisfying. As its warmth traveled through him, he found his spirits improving. Peter wondered how long it would be before the pills took effect. He was tired of pain following every faint movement.

Taking another sip of the broth, he looked around his new environment. All his great battle had done was earn him more scars and a new cell. This one was not much larger than his prison aboard the ship, but he knew very well that he was no longer in space.

The windowless walls were closely fitted blocks of stone that had been cemented over, not altogether successfully, because patches of the ancient brownish gray stonework showed through. He was perched on a sleeping platform consisting of a slab of stone with some kind of woven blanket thrown atop it.

On his left was a hole in the ground, what he now recognized as the Klingon version of a no-frills head. This one didn't appear to have been used within the last century.

The door was ancient wood reinforced with metal, but the locks holding it closed were modern--incongruous against the old wood. Beside the door was a clear observation panel with a speaker set beneath it. A four-legged stool was placed near it.

The walls around him seemed as tough as neutronium. He thought of a book his uncle had brought him once--The Count of Monte Cristo.

Sure, he thought. Give me a spoon, and I'll be out of here in a mere

fourteen years ...

This was definitely not the Klingon Hilton.

Peter took a deep breath, trying to take stock of his situation. What would Jim Kirk do? he wondered; then,

glancing at the young Klingon woman's slender but attractive figure, he repressed a grim smile. Yeah, right. I know just what Uncle Jim would do! Even with a Klingon, if she was as nicely built as this one ... too bad I don't have his luck.

Taking a few more healthy swallows of the broth, he savored the taste. It was spicy, burning his tongue, but he'd always won the chili cook-offs in school. He loved hot food.

He looked at the bottle, surprised to be feeling some of his aches easing up already. "This is very good broth." She cocked her head at him suspiciously. "I had always heard that humans were too weak to tolerate our food." He shrugged cautiously. "I'll make you chili some day and we can discuss it. I like this well enough. And I'm feeling better. Thank you." She seemed wary, then uncomfortable, but finally said,

"I, too, thank you." He stared at her, at a loss. "What for?"

"For fighting me. For treating me as an honorable opponent.

It was a good battle! I believe ... that if you were well ... you might have won!" Peter sat up straighter, forcing his brain into alertness.

Klingons put a lot of store in honor and was everything to them. But women didn't get much benefit from the heavily patriarchal system. He started to introduce himself. "My She cut him off abruptly. "I know who you are." He raised an eyebrow. Of course she knew who he was.

She'd helped kidnap him, hadn't she? "And ... my honorable opponent is ... ?" he prodded. The ploy was deliberate.

It would become harder to think of him as her victim if he started becoming a person to her.

She hesitated, and he wondered if she knew that. Finally, she said quietly, "I am Valdyr." He nodded. Interesting name. He wondered if it meant anything. Yeah. She- who - mops - the -floor- with - Starfleet -cadetst "Valdyr, have I earned the right to know why I'm here.*" He was pushing it, he knew, but what could she do, besides refuse? And beat the hell out of you again?

She seemed suddenly troubled, and glanced around the cell. He didn't speak, just took a few more sips of broth and waited patiently. Finally,

she spoke. "My uncle has declared a blood feud against your uncle. The government no longer wants vengeance against James Kirk, since he saved the life of Chancellor Azetbur. So, to regain his honor, my uncle must act on his own. James Kirk will be sent a message to come alone to a certain place in space. There my uncle's guards will take him, and bring him here. Once he is here," she paused, staring at him for a long moment, then finally continued, "you will be released." Sheg lying, Peter thought, but decided not to pursue it.

He didn't have the strength to face his possible future as a Klingon prisoner. "What will happen to my uncle once Kamarag has him?" Peter asked, even though he already knew.

Valdyr refused to meet his eyes. "My uncle has a debt of honor to settle with him. If you know what that is, you know what will happen." Torture and, eventually, execution, Peter thought grimly.

"Why the blood feud, Valdyr? I know my uncle has fought your people throughout his career, but our peoples are working toward peace, now."

"Your uncle left a Klingon to perish on an exploding world," Valdyr said quietly. "That warrior was my uncle's closest friend and prot6g."

"Kruge? I mean, Captain Kruge?" Peter was nonplussed.

"But ... that was over three years ago!"

"Revenge, like a targ, rouses hungry after a sleep," she said, obviously quoting an old proverb.

"Wait a minute. Captain Kruge ordered my cousin David's death," Peter argued. "Kruge's men murdered him in cold blood. If anyone has an old score to settle, it's us, not you." Valdyr frowned. "What is this, 'cold blood'?"

"Uhhh ... that means that Kruge thought about David's murder, then ordered it and was obeyed. He didn't kill him during a fight, or kill him by striking out blindly during an argument."

"That is not true!" Valdyr defended hotly. "David Mar cus was a prisoner of war, who was executed while attacking a guard."

Peter glared at her. "That's not the way I heard it."

"My uncle told me," she said, matching his intensity.

They glowered at each other for a moment; then Peter relaxed. This was crazy, he decided. They were acting like the Hatfields and the McCoys. "Neither one of us was there, so we'll never know for sure. It's been my experience that the truth usually lies somewhere in the middle."

Valdyr gave him a surprised glance, then nodded slowly.

"That has been my experience, too, Peter Kirk." The way she said his name made it sound like "Pityr."

She moved toward the heavy wooden door, but never turned her back. She wasn't going to be as easy to outwit as the goons they'd sent into his last cell, he realized. "I have brought you clean clothes." She nodded, indicating a pile of fabric that sat perched on the end of the stone bunk. "There are cloths in there ... you would say for washing, for drying. There is soap. I will be bringing a basin for washing when you are no longer so thirsty and are ready to bathe.

Your odor is too strong! If you do not willingly bathe, I will be forced to wash you myself!"

He couldn't help it. The mental image of this lovely but alien woman forcibly stripping him and lathering his naked body forced a smile onto Peter's bruised mouth. He winced even as he did it.

Her face darkened, and she advanced on him threatening-ly.

"What is funny?"

He held up his hands placatingly. "Come on, Valdyr!

Think about it. Don't Klingons have a sense of humor?

Have you ever given a grown man a forced bath out of a basin before? What a ... fascinating ... image that idea presents!"

She scowled, but slowly her expression thawed, as if against her will. "Do not imagine that having me strip you and bathe you would be a pleasurable experience, Kirk, just because I am female!"

Peter widened his eyes innocently. "Why, Valdyr, such a

thought never crossed my mind. But apparently ... it crossed yours."

Her eyes narrowed as she digested this, then her skin visibly darkened. She g blushing!

"Of course ... it is a potentially appealing scenario!" he continued, giving her a sidelong glance. "I don't believe humans and Klingons have ever had such ... an intimate interaction. Truly an interstellar first!"

Valdyr's mouth dropped open, just slightly; then she whirled, opened the door, and slammed it shut almost before he realized what she was doing. Peter heard the locks on the other side activating in rhythmic succession. His jailer appeared on the other side of the observation

port, glaring at him balefully.

Keep pushing your luck, mister. With a little more provocation, she just might beat you to death! He leaned forward and said quietly, "No disrespect intended to my most honorable opponent." He prayed his voice would carry through the port.

She seemed to relax at that, and her fierce expression lightened. Then, suddenly, a male Klingon appeared at her side, surprising both of them.

Oh, no, Peter thought, stunned as the man came into view.

This was her uncle? Could it really be? He recognized Kamarag instantly--the Klingon who had declared so publicly that there would be no peace while James T. Kirk lived.

Peter swallowed. Things were becoming entirely too clear.

Kamarag was big, his long dark hair and thick beard shot with gray, with heavy, jowly features that appeared never to have smiled. He glared at the young Kirk, and Peter could feel his hatred, as palpable as a clenched fist. The ambassador was not in uniform, but wore a longish oyster-white tunic over dark gray trousers, with a dark cape slung over one shoulder. An intricately carved leather strap held it in place. The strap bore the same insignia as the other Klingons wore--the insignia, no doubt, of the house of Kamarag.

The cadet stared at the ambassador. Ambassador? he

thought. What a joke. Sarek was an ambassador, a diplomat, a man of peace ... this jerk was nothing but a warmonger, a kidnapper, a pompous ass, a ... Peter ran out of silent epithets. His rage was suddenly too all-encompassing to be vented with mere insults. He had been drugged, kidnapped, beaten and it was this man's fault. Trembling with fury, he glared at Kamarag, feeling a tirade on the verge of erupting.

Slowly, the impulse faded. What good would cursing and insulting Kamarag do? He needed to keep his wits about him, Peter realized. Jim Kirk might lose his temper at an enemy, but Sarek never would. And right now, he, Peter Kirk, needed to be diplomatic.

"Ambassador Karostag," he said, and nodded politely to the older male.

But the Klingon ignored his greeting as he leaned forward and stared at the human. Slowly, his thick lips parted, and a terrible smile transformed his features. Peter felt every hair on his body rise. Then the Klingon turned to his niece. In Klingonese, he said, clearly, "He ate and drank?"

She nodded.

"Good," he continued, still in his native tongue. "I am depending on you, niece. Do not fail me. Make your prisoner strong and healthy. Treat him well." He patted the woman fondly on the shoulder. "He must be able to withstand your ..."

Peter couldn't translate the last word, and searched his mind for its meaning, but came up blank. He'd caught the word for women, or female, in there, but as for the rest ... he'd be willing to bet it wasn't a trip to the local equivalent of an amusement park that Kamarag was referring to. Ordeal? Trial? He had no way of knowing.

Kamarag was still conferring with Valdyr, smiling solicitously.

When the older man turned back to stare at his prisoner once more, Peter found that the look the ambassador gave him chilled his blood. Then the elder Klingon stalked away. Peter turned back to Valdyr to ask her about what that term, *be9oy*; meant, and found, to his surprise,

that her rich amber color had paled into a sickly yellow. Her eyes were wide as she watched her uncle stride away.

"Valdyr?" Peter asked softly, trying to get her attention.

"What does *be.Toy'* mean? I couldn't translate it. Hey, Valdyr!"

Her head snapped around and she stared at him wild-eyed.

"Do not speak to me, human!" she commanded.

"Remember your place. You are my enemy. My prisoner.

And I am a Klingon!"

He was stunned to see her eyes filled with frustration and genuine grief; then she turned and stormed away, leaving him alone in his stone cell.

Sarek materialized on the windswept plateau high in the steppes above Shikahr only minutes before sunset. Before him lay the steps leading to the top of Mount Seleya, where the ancient temple and amphitheater were located. The ambassador's robes flowed around him as he strode forward and began climbing. The stairs were steep and long; the Vulcan's heart was pounding by the time he reached the top, but he did not pause to catch his breath. Instead he detoured around the ancient, cylinder-shaped temple, heading for the small amphitheater.

The Vulcan was surprised by the number of people on the steps and ranged around the old temple. Glancing ahead, he could see that the amphitheater, reached by a narrow stone walkway that hung precariously over a thousand-meter gulf, was even more crowded.

Many people, it seemed, wished to pay last respects to the memory of his wife.

The ambassador had arrived on his homeworld only thirty minutes ago. First he had gone to the reed center, where, after spending a few minutes with the physical shell that had housed his wife's spirit, Sarek authorized the cremation.

Now he was at the temple, barely in time for the memorial service. The ceremony would be brief ... his son had asked T'Lar, the High Master of Gol, to preside, and she had agreed.

As Sarek moved toward the small, shallow amphitheater, the crowd parted before him. The ambassador's gaze touched many familiar faces from his homeworld ... diplomatic personnel and their families, as well as high-ranking government officials whom Sarek and Amanda had entertained during official functions. Members of his family whom he had not seen in years were there, heads respectfully bowed as they murmured the traditional words, "I grieve with thee." Amanda would be gratified that so many of those who initially disapproved of our marriage have come to honor her memory, the ambassador thought, as he moved through the crowd.

As he crossed the narrow bridge, he saw that the highest-ranking officials and closest family members were awaiting him in the amphitheater--and there was his son, wearing a formal dark robe with ancient symbols embroidered in silver on the breast. Spock was standing with his crewmates from the Enterprise. As Sarek walked toward him, Spock glanced up, recognized his father, then, deliberately, looked away.

Sarek had not spoken to his son except for the brief, stilted words they had exchanged when Spock had called to inform his father of Amanda's passing. By the time Spock called him, the ambassador had known for nearly six hours that his wife was dead. When Sarek had attempted to speak about her, Spock had cut him off, then curtly informed his father that the final repairs to his ship would be completed within forty-eight Standard hours, and that he would be leaving Vulcan with his vessel.

As Sarek walked to the forefront of the gathering, Spock, still avoiding his father's gaze, silently took his place beside the ambassador. Together, they walked up to stand before the two huge, smooth pillars on the raised platform. From the side of one of the pillars, there was movement; then T'Lar, accompanied by two Acolytes, stepped forth. The High Master wore a dark brown robe with a pale gold overtunic.

As Sarek and Spock stood there, T'Lar began to speak "Today we honor the memory of Amanda Grayson Sarek," she began, speaking Standard English in deference to the humans present. "She was a human who honored us with her presence on our world.

"From Amanda Grayson Sarek, we learned that our people and humans could

live together in peace ... that they could be allies, friends, and bondmates. Amanda Grayson Sarek possessed great strength, fortitude, and courage the strength to survive a world that poses great hardships for outworlders; the fortitude to endure the suspicion and distrust in which humans were frequently held; and the courage to forever alter the way Vulcans view the people of Terra. She changed us, not through strident protest, but by quietly prevailing, becoming over the years a living testament.

"Today we honor her ... we honor the wife, we honor the mother, we honor the teacher, we honor the person of Amanda Grayson Sarek. Her life is one to be held in highest regard and esteem." T'Lar delivered her words in measured tones, raising her voice only to be heard above the wind, for the large crowd stood in complete, respectful silence.

After the High Master had finished, by tradition the spouse was supposed to speak. Sarek hesitated for a long moment after the last echo of T'Lar's voice had faded into silence, then said "As a diplomat, I use words as a builder would use tools. But words will not serve me today. Grieve with me, for, with Amanda's passing, we have all lost someone very ... rare. I can say no more." Spock glanced at his father in surprise; then his expression hardened and he deliberately looked the other way.

Sarek waited a moment to see whether his son wished to say anything, then he raised a hand in salute to the waiting crowd. "My family, my friends ... I wish you peace and long life."

"Live long and prosper," T'Lar said aloud, speaking for the crowd. Many of the watchers held up their hands in the Vulcan salute, heads respectfully bowed.

The ceremony was over.

Unlike human funerals, etiquette following a Vulcan memorial service demanded that the family of the deceased be left in private. Sarek watched as James Kirk came up to his son and said something quietly to him; then the group of Starfleet officers silently took their leave.

"What did Kirk say?" Sarek asked, when he and Spock were alone, standing amid the stark peaks surrounding Mount Seleya.

"He asked if we could both meet with him tomorrow at nine hundred hours aboard the Enterprise to discuss the Freelan situation. I gave the captain a brief overview while you were gone." Spock still did not look at his father as he spoke. Instead his eyes remained fastened on the mountain peaks, scarlet from the reflection of Nevasa's sunset.

"Good," Sarek said. "I was going to request such a meeting with Kirk upon my return. I have new information to add to what I have already told you." The Vulcan hesitated. "Spock," he said finally, "about your

mother ... I would have returned home if it had been

possible. I--"

"She called for you," Spock interrupted, staring straight ahead. His features seemed carved from the same rock that surrounded them.

"Whenever she was conscious, she called for you. Her decline was rapid, after you left."

"The situation with Kadura was grave," Sarek said.

"Lives were in jeopardy Amanda told me that she understood."

"She understood very well." Spock's voice held a bitter edge.

"But the fact that she understood and forgave you does not make your actions correct. Any competent diplomat could have negotiated a settlement for Kadura's freedom.

But only you could have eased my mother's passing."

took a deep breath. "The entire time I sat there beside her ... two days.. there was only one thing in the world that she wanted--you. And you were not there. Without your presence, there was no solace for her ... no tranquility.

She called for you, and would not be comforted."

"Her ending was not ... peaceful?" the ambassador

asked, his voice a hollow whisper. Pain that was nearly physical in its intensity struck him like a blow.

hesitated. "Even her sleep was restless," he said finally.

A muscle twitched in his jawline. "She was not aware of my presence at all." closed his eyes, struggling for control. He experienced a brief impulse to tell Spock how he had attempted to reach Amanda, but that was a private thing ... not to be spoken of. Grief washed over him anew. So ... I did not reach her, there at the end. I thought I might have ... I thought perhaps she could detect my presence ... but it was not so, evidently ... "You were not there to ease her passing," Spock went on, inexorably.

"Despite my presence, she died alone."

the elder Vulcan drew himself up, gazing impassively at Spock, his face a cold mask. "These highly emotional recriminations are both illogical and distasteful, Spock.

Your logic has failed you, my son ... which is regrettable, but

understandable, under the circumstances. You are, after all, Amanda's child as well as mine. You are half-human ... and it is your human half I am facing, now."

Spock turned his head and met his father's eyes. Their gazes locked. The younger Vulcan's mouth tightened ... his gaze was as scorching as the desert that lay around them.

But his voice, when he finally spoke, was icy. "In that case, I will take my distasteful human half and depart ... sir. I bid you farewell." Spock swung around and walked away, his pace light, even. His control was perfect; his movements betrayed nothing of the anger Sarek had sensed. The elder Vulcan hesitated, wanting to call him back, but he had been perfectly logical--and right. One did not apologize for being logical or correct ... As the ambassador watched, his son crossed the narrow bridge, then strode away into the gathering darkness, leaving his father alone.

James T. Kirk sat in his conference room at 0855 hours, awaiting Sarek and his first officer. Spock had returned to his cabin aboard the Enterprise to spend the night, instead of remaining with his father. In Kirk's estimation, that did not bode well ... he'd seen his friend's reaction when he spoke of Sarek's leaving when Amanda was dying. Kirk had known Spock for many years, but had never seen him like this. If he had to label it, he would call it anger.

Spock's brief revelation three days ago concerning Romulan moles masquerading as Frellansma whole damned planet of them, apparently, was extremely wordsome.

James T. Kirk had had many run-ins with both Romulans and Klingons in his career, and, while it could not be denied that Klingons were fierce warriors and made awesome enemies, Kirk had decided long ago that he would rather confront Klingons in a knock-down, drag-out rather than Romulans.

There was something about Romulans ... a subtlety, a canniness ... It was the idea of Vulcan intellect without Vulcan ethics that Kirk found frightening.

And now ... the Romulans were planning something big, if Sarek was right. That did not bode well for the Federation.

Kirk recalled the moments after he had saved President Ra-ghoratrei at Camp Khitomer. The delegates and envoys had milled around, congratulating the Starfleet officers, everyone exclaiming over the fact that the supposed Klingon assassin had actually proved to be Colonel West, a human.

While Kirk was standing there, being congratulated and thanked by President Ra-ghoratrei and Chancellor Azetbur, he'd noticed the Frellan

envoy, shrouded in his or her muffling robes, facing Ambassador Nanclus, the Romulan who had plotted with General Chang and Admiral Cartwright to bring about war between the Federation and the Klingon Empire. Beside the Freelan had stood a young Vulcan woman, lovely and serene, her short black hair cropped to reveal her elegant ears.

Kirk shook his head, slowly, his mind churning with questions and speculations. If someone had ripped the Freelan's robes away, what would they all have seen? If Sarek was correct in his reasoning ... and Vulcans were, after all, noted for their reasoning abilities ... then they would have all seen a Romulan face beneath that muffling cowl and mask.

If that was true, then what did the Romulans want out of all this? Was Sarek correct in his deductions? Was the Freelan goal to cause war between the Federation and the Klingon Empire?

The door slid open and Ambassador Sarek entered. He was wearing his formal robes of state, but even their bejeweled elegance could not disguise the Vulcan's fatigue, the deeply shadowed eyes, the hair that had turned nearly white. Sarek's expression was positively grim as he nodded to Kirk. "Captain."

Kirk, who had stood respectfully when the senior diplomat entered, nodded back. "Ambassador ... thank you for coming. And ..." He struggled to form the Vulcan words this ship's computer had told him were proper. "I grieve with thee ..." He took a deep breath, returned to Standard English. "Mrs. Sarek was a wonderful woman, sir. We all respected and admired her deeply."

"Thank you, Captain," Sarek said, and for a moment the grimness relaxed fractionally, allowing just a bare glimpse of sadness to slip through.

The door slid open again, and Spock, back in uniform, entered, followed by Dr. McCoy. The Vulcan ignored his father as he nodded a quick greeting to Kirk.

Uh-oh, the captain thought. Will they be able to work together at all?

McCoy and Sarek exchanged greetings and the doctor expressed his condolences to the ambassador. When the formalities were finished, Kirk waved them all to seats.

"Ambassador Sarek," he began, "Spock has given us a brief summary of your concerns about the Freelans. But I would like to hear the whole story from your own lips, if you don't mind. And I'd like to see the data you've compiled."

"I have already transferred it to the ship's computer, Captain," Spock said, keying in a code word on the comm link. A fde menu appeared on the screen.

Sarek began to speak, his beautifully modulated tones and measured, precise delivery lending credence to what would otherwise have sounded like wild nonsense and rampant speculation, coming from anyone but a Vulcan of his reputation. Kirk listened intently, interrupting every so often to ask a question or request that the ambassador amplify a point.

Grimly, he and McCoy studied the charts and data the ambassador had accumulated over years of study and research, and with every moment that passed, Kirk's certainty that Sarek was correct in his reasoning grew. The very idea of Freelan being a Romulan world had been outrageous at first ... now, the more Kirk thought about it, the more the whole scheme seemed like very typical Romulan reasoning ... clever, devious, audacious ... and, unfortunately, it seemed that it might actually work.

When Sarek finally finished his account, the captain of the Enterprise shook his head grimly. "This stuff about the KEHL ... you're right about how it's growing. Two days ago I got a priority message from my nephew, Peter, telling me that he managed to gain access to the KEHL's computer systems, but that Starfleet Security hadn't paid any attention to the data he managed to get. He was asking my help in getting a full investigation of the group started."

"What kind of data did Peter have?" Spock asked.

"Membership rolls, propaganda films ... things like that.

I also gather that the KEHL has breached security at the consulate, Ambassador, and copied Vulcan data that they claimed would prove their case that your world has a master plan to take over Earth."

"Take over Earth? The Vulcans?" Leonard McCoy looked thunderstruck, and then he laughed out loud. "What a load of ... uh.. 2' He glanced at Sarek, and altered what he'd been about to say to "That's absurd!"

"Something happened during my negotiations with Commander Keraz that lends more credence to my theory," Sarek said.

"What was that, Ambassador?" Kirk asked.

"One of Keraz's aides, Wurrl, attempted to assassinate me. Both he and Keraz, I discovered, had been subjected to telepathic influence."

Hearing that his father had been attacked, Spock stole a quick look at the elder Vulcan, as if checking him for injury.

"Maybe what we ought to do is just grab some Freelan at a conference and rip his ass off, McCoy suggested. "Serve them right."

"In the first place, such tactics abrogate diplomatic munity as well as

civil law," Sarek pointed out evenly. "And if we engaged in such ... peremptory ... behavior, we would lose the goodwill of many delegates, no matter how exemplary our motives for doing so."

"Yeah, well," McCoy grumbled, "who knows what damage they've been causing, poking around in other people's minds? I'll bet the Freelans had a hand in Chang's conspiracy, too."

"I suspect you would win that wager, Doctor," Sarek said, steeping his hands before him on the table. So that where Spock learned that ... Jim thought. "During the recent crisis, President Ra-ghoratrei summoned me, Ambassador Kamarag, and Ambassador Nanclus to discuss the Klingon demand for your extradition after the assassination of Chancellor Gorkon. Just after Kamarag left, Admiral Smillie, Admiral Cartwright, and Colonel West entered the office. The Starfleet officers had prepared a military plan of action designed to rescue you and Dr. McCoy."

"I never knew that, Jim? the doctor exclaimed, eyes widening with surprise. "I thought Starfleet just decided to throw us to the wolves."

"Admiral Smillie told me about it at Khitomer," Kirk admitted. "But he said Ra-ghoratrei wouldn't go along with it."

"That is true," Sarek affirmed. "But what is significant to us now is that, during this discussion, Ambassador Nanclus

pointed out to the president that the Klingons were vulnerable.. and that there would never be a better time to begin a full-scale military action against them. He was quite ... emphatic."

"Nanclus was openly advocating war between the Federation and the Klingon Empire?" Even in the light of subsequent events, Kirk was surprised that the Romulan would be so overt.

"I heard him myself," Sarek said simply.

"But Nanclus was working with General Chang and Admiral Cartwright to start a war. He wasn't giving the official Romulan position "Kirk's voice faded out. waited a beat, then lifted one elegant eyebrow. "Wasn't he?" he asked softly. "How do you know? Subsequent events made it seem that Nanclus was working in concert with Chang and Cartwright ... but who really started the plot?" The captain drew a deep breath. "During his court-martial, Cartwright claimed under oath that Nanclus came to him, and that both of them then presented the idea to Chang--who was only too happy to take over. But if the whole thing was really Nanclus's idea ..."

"Precisely," Sarek said.

"Was the Klingon assassin's attack on you a result of telepathic influence, Ambassador?" Spock asked, his tone cool and formal. Kirk

realized it was the first time he'd addressed the elder Vulcan.

"Yes, I believe so.

I only gained a brief impression of Wurril's mind during the struggle," Sarek replied. "The Klingon suffered a fractured skull during the fight, and lapsed into a coma.

I have no idea whether he is still alive. Starfleet took him into custody." Sarek was looking at Spock, but, Kirk noticed, the Vulcan's return gaze was remote.

"And Commander Keraz also been subjected to undue mental influence?" Spock pursued the topic, still in that cool, toneless fashion.

"In what way?"

"When I asked the Klingon commander why he had chosen to take such an action in seizing a Federation colony, he informed me

really did not know why he had done it. It was strictly an impulsive decision, one that puzzled him in its aftermath.

When I told him what I had discovered about Wurril, he asked me to determine whether he, too, had been affected.

I touched him ... and knew that he had."

"Oho," McCoy said.

"You think some Freelan and his trained Vulcan pup compelled Wurril to try and murder you, and Keraz to turn renegade and invade Kadura?"

"I would say that 'compelled' is too strong a term," Sarek said.

"'Influenced' is more apt, I believe. But as to the Freelans being involved ... of that, I have no doubt."

"Ambassador," Kirk said, as an idea occurred to him, "is it possible that Kadura was a setup to lure you off Vulcan, so that you could be gotten out of the way? Is there any possibility that the Freelans know that you suspect them?" Sarek blinked. Obviously, Kirk's idea was a new one to him. "Possible, I suppose," he murmured. "Taryn did seem suspicious the last time I visited their station."

"Is there any possibility that your valit program did not completely cover your entrance into the Romulan data banks?" Spock asked. "Could they have discovered some evidence after you left Freelan orbit?" The elder Vulcan raised an eyebrow. "My valit was well designed," he said, with a touch of surprise that Spock would question his expertise with computers. "In the event any tampering was detected--which I consider unlikely--there would have been no way to trace the intrusion back to

me."

"But circumstantial evidence might enough to arouse Taryn to take action against you," Spock said. "Possible," Sarek conceded.

"I think we should go to the president immediately with all of this," Kirk said.

"And to Starfleet Security, Vice-Admiral Burton." The captain looked at Sarek, was surprised to see the Vulcan shake his head in negation.

"No, Kirk," he said. "Not yet. Not until I have incontrovertible proof."

"Just the fact that you're suspicious will be enough!"

McCoy burst out. "A man of your reputation, Ambassador of course the president will pay attention."

"I must speak to the president about this only in person," Sarek said. "Otherwise, I cannot be certain that his mind has not been influenced. The same applies to your Vice-Admiral Burton. Also, we must guard against any of these speculations becoming public knowledge. The consequences, should that happen, would be grave."

"What consequences?" McCoy asked, taken aback.

"The fragile peace with the Klingon Empire, for one," Spock said, before the ambassador could reply. "It might appear to Azetbur that the Federation is attempting to stir up trouble between the Romulans and the Klingon Empire ... by accusing the Romulans of influencing the Klingons to turn renegade. Also, do not forget the KEHL.

Most of the followers are undoubtedly hapless dupes ... innocent of everything except being easily led. Charges that they are Romulan pawns could lead to witch-hunts."

"What kind of proof do you propose to get, Ambassador Sarek? If the Romulans suspect that you know, they will undoubtedly recall all their Freelan personnel, and escalate their efforts to cause war between the Federation and the Klingon Empire."

"Indeed. We must be cautious, and not move until we are ready," Sarek agreed. "I would still like to access the Freelan data banks and copy their contents. If it is done properly, we could gain proof, without alerting the Romulans that we know of their plans."

"Can you do it again? And get away with copies, this time?"

"I believe that I can," Sarek said, glancing at his son. "If Spock will assist me."

Spock sat in silence for a moment, then nodded. "I will do my best," he said. "I will need to study the valits you used before, to attempt to refine them so they will work more smoothly."

For a moment Kirk sensed a flash of indignation from the ambassador, even though the Vulcan's calm expression

never varied. "Very well," he said. "I will provide them to you."

Kirk looked from father to son, thinking that if anyone could break past Romulan security, it would be these two.

Still, he was hesitant about not going straight to Starfleet Security with news of this plot. But if delaying a few days would provide proof positive ...

"How close would you have to be to Ereelan to tap into the data banks?" Kirk asked.

"Given the resources of a starship's computer system, anywhere within the boundaries of the system should suffice," Sarek said. "I was dependent, remember, on a small tricorder. Kirk, how long would it take to reach Freelan aboard this vessel?"

"Two days, at warp six."

"Excellent," Sarek said. "That should be sufficient time for me to acquaint Spock with my plan for accessing the Freelan system." The ambassador nodded approvingly at Kirk. "I thank you for your cooperation, Captain."

"It's my duty to investigate a threat to Federation security," Kirk said simply. "When can you be ready to leave Vulcan?"

"I anticipated that I would be leaving with your ship, Kirk. I came prepared to do so."

"Scotty said the final paint job would be completed--" Kirk, who was already reaching for the intercom, broke off as it beeped. Impatiently, he opened the channel. "Kirk here. I thought I gave orders that I was not to be dis--"

"Captain," Commander Uhura's voice interrupted, "I have a Priority One personal message for you, sir, from the commandant of Starfleet Academy."

"The commandant?" Kirk was nonplussed. What could Commandant Anderson be wanting with him? "Relay it, Commander."

"Yes, sir ... "She paused for a moment. "Captain ... Commandant Anderson reports that your nephew Peter has disappeared. Their

investigation leads them to believe he did not leave of his own free will. Sir ... the commandant reports that he suspects foul play."

Kirk swallowed. Peter was the only close relative he had.

If anything had happened to him ... "Commander," he said tightly, "inform the bridge crew to begin preparations to depart drydock on my command." He clicked to a different channel. "Set course for Sector 53.16 ... the Freelan system. Mr. Scott?"

"Scott here, sir," replied the familiar burr promptly.

"How soon can we cast off moorings and get out of here?"

"We'll be ready in another twenty minutes, Captain."

"You've got ten," Kirk snapped.

"Aye, sir," came the engineer's casual reply. "We'll be ready."

"Good, Scotty. Ten minutes. Kirk out."

Snapping off the intercom, the captain looked at the others grimly. "It never rains but it pours," he said.

"Murphy's Law."

The ambassador raised an eyebrow. "Murphy's Law?"

"A human aphorism that states, 'Whatever can go wrong, will,'" Spock explained.

"Yeah, and at the worst possible time," McCoy added.

"Jim ... what could have happened to Peter?"

"I don't know, Bones," Kirk said. "The temptation is to think that, because he was investigating the KEHL, they're responsible for this. But that might not be true." Opening a channel to the bridge, he said, "Commander Uhura, please contact Commandant Anderson for me."

"Yes, Captain. I'll put through a call immediately, sir." Kirk hesitated, thinking furiously. Should he turn command of the Enterprise over to Spock, and take a transport for Earth? He couldn't abandon Peter! And yet ... duty came before personal concerns. "Ambassador," he said,

"assuming you have your proof in a few days, what are you going to suggest that the Federation do about this situation with the Romulans?"

"Some elements in Starfleet would advise a preemptive strike," Spock

said. "I can visualize Admiral Smillie approving such a tactic, given sufficient provocation."

"War? All-out war?" McCoy was aghast. "There must be

some way to prevent that!" He glanced at Kirk. "Isn't there, Jim?"

"I don't know," Kirk said, forcing himself to put Peter out of his mind and concentrate on the subject at hand. "It could be that the Romulans would back off if they knew they'd lost the element of surprise, and that they couldn't push the Federation and the Klingons into hostilities."

"It is possible," Sarek pointed out, "that they might evacuate the Freelan colony and deny everything. Taryn, I believe, is ruthless enough for such an action."

"In that event, what would happen to the second-generation Vulcans?" Spock wondered. "Technically, they are hostages. We are under a moral imperative to free them."

"If these Vulcan kids have grown up brainwashed by the Romulans, they may think of themselves as Romulans, rather than as Vulcans," McCoy pointed out. "They may not want to be rescued." He turned to Sarek. "Do you have any idea how many there are?"

The Vulcan shook his head. "From the numbers of Vulcans who were abducted, I can speculate that there may be as many as one hundred ... perhaps two hundred. No fewer than fifty, certainly."

Kirk's hazel eyes were bleak as he held the Vulcans' gazes.

"Knowing the Romulans, they're perfectly capable of simply eradicating the hostages, rather than taking any chances of them being used as an excuse for a military rescue by Federation forces."

Father and son nodded silently, grimly.

"I think we should--" Kirk began, only to be interrupted by the intercom. "Kirk here," he said.

"Sir," Uhura said, "Commandant Anderson is standing by."

"Put him through," Jim ordered.

A moment later, Kyle Anderson's features coalesced on the small screen. He was a distinguished looking black man, balding, with a heavy, iron-gray beard. "Captain Kirk," he said. "You received my message?"

"Just a few minutes ago," Kirk said. "What's happened to Peter?"

"He's vanished without a trace, Captain. Our security people have determined that he disappeared shortly after midnight on Wednesday evening of last week. But we're having finals here, so nobody realized he was missing until the day before yesterday. It took us a day to track down your ship ... I'm sorry for the delay."

Kirk drew a deep breath. "But.. he's been gone for days! And you still don't know where he went?"

"No. He's disappeared so thoroughly that we now suspect he was taken off-world. We're in the process of tracing all ships that departed from Earth or Earth orbit that night," Anderson said. "But, as you can imagine, that's a tall order."

Kirk nodded wordless agreement. "What makes you suspect foul play?" he asked.

"We managed to retrieve the last message that came in for him at his apartment. It had been automatically scrambled after playing.. but they unscrambled it just this morning." He pressed a button. "Here it is."

Kirk watched with growing horror as his own features replaced Anderson's on-screen. He listened to himself demanding that Peter come over immediately. Then the screen flickered, and Anderson's dark features were back. "I never sent that message," Kirk said bleakly. "But it's no wonder he fell for it ... he was expecting to hear from "We know that, Captain. We have a record of Peter encoding a Priority One message for you. May we have your permission to decode it? It might give us a clue to his whereabouts."

Kirk hesitated. They'd agreed to keep their suspicions of the KEHL being linked with the Romulans secret. "We'll investigate on our end," he said, finally. "I'll let you see the message as soon as I clear it with Starfleet Security. Can you please transmit everything you've got on that message to my communications chief, Commander Uhura? There's nobody better at tracing transmissions."

"Certainly, Captain," Anderson said. "We'll do that."

"I'll get back to you as soon as I get that clearance," Kirk said, crossing his fingers underneath the table.

"My people suspect they were waiting for him on the street," Anderson said. "And that they grabbed him there."

"So you're thinking kidnapping, rather than ..." Kirk swallowed. "... murder?"

"We just don't know, Captain. But if somebody simply wanted your nephew dead, why the elaborate hoax with the faked message?"

"Logical," murmured Spock and Sarek at the same moment.

"Abduction ... possibly kidnapping?" Kirk's mind was racing. "Has there been any kind of message? Any demands for ransom?"

"Not so far."

"If any message comes through," Kirk said, "I'll let you know. Maybe we can trace its source, and learn something from that."

"Good idea. If I hear anything, I'll contact you immediately, Captain," Anderson promised in his turn.

"Thank you, Commandant."

"Rest assured, we're doing everything we can," the man said, before cutting the connection.

Kirk turned to the others sitting around the table. "If Scotty is as good as his word, we should be casting off moorings by now. Ambassador ... you and Spock should begin working on those valves you mentioned. I'll have Uhura get to work on tracing that message. I've got a hunch this is all going to wind up connected, somehow."

Minutes later, Kirk was on the bridge, ensconced in his command seat. With a glint in his eye, he surveyed the cavernous interior of the Vulcan drydock through the viewscreen. "Status, s'bysh?" he asked his helmsman.

"All moorings cleared, Captain. Docking bay doors will open in two minutes, thirty-five point six seconds," she reported, crisply.

"Lay in a course for Freelan, Lieutenant." Kirk settled back in his seat, his eyes level, jaw set. He watched s'bysh's

green fingers fly. "Ready, Lieutenant?" he asked, scarcely more than a minute later. "Course laid in?"

"Aye, sir." Counting seconds down in his head, Kirk reached thirty-four.

"Ahead one-half impulse power, Lieutenant," he ordered, and thought he heard Chekov mutter, "Not again?"

"One-half impulse, aye, sir." Enterprise sprang forward like a cheetah sighting prey.

The ship closed on the parting bay doors with a terrifying rush of speed, blasted through them with only a few hundred meters to spare on either side, and then they were out, into free space. Chekov's sigh of relief was audible all over the bridge, and Commander Uhura chuckled softly when she heard it.

"Ahead warp six," Kirk ordered grimly.

"Warp six, aye, Captain." Kirk settled back in his seat. No matter what speed Mr. Scott managed to coax out of the warp engines, it was going to be a long trip ...

After a long day spent refining valid programs, Sarek was weary, but sleep eluded him. Remembering his promise, he extracted Amanda's journal, and opened it, noting the date at the top of the page.

November 12, 2231 It is the middle of the night, and quiet. I am tired ... but I am also too excited to sleep. I cannot neglect my journal tonight of all nights!

I have a son.

Sarek and I have a son. He was born in the early hours of this morning. Never having been through labor before, I worried that it might prove too much for me to bear (no pun intended) without shaming myself before the Healers, but I believe I did well ... And our son is perfect. Even though the Healers reassured me that all their tests showed that the baby was normal, still I worried. After all, I had to be treated before I could conceive, then monitored carefully throughout the pregnancy to allow me to carry to term--nearly a full month more than the human norm!

Carrying a child for almost ten Earth months is not fun, and that is the understatement of the century. I was so big yesterday that I felt as though my sides would split open. I spent hours staring in wonderment at my belly, unable to believe the size of it. I could barely waddle to the bathroom unassisted! When I felt that dull ache in my back sharpen into an actual contraction, I could have jumped for joy. What a relief it is to return to something like my normal size!

For a while the Healers were afraid I would not be able to deliver normally ... my son is very large for a human infant, though not particularly so for a Vulcan baby. If it had not been for the Healer-midwife coaching, I might have given up in despair. But she was amazingly supportive for someone who must have been wincing inwardly every time I betrayed what I was feeling.

My labor was intense, and seemed to take forever. I was surprised that I was able to handle the pain as well as I did. It hurt, yes ... by all the gods that ever were, it felt as though some diabolical presence were trying to hammer a spike into the base of my spine, while simultaneously squeezing my belly in a vise. But, unlike hangnails, stubbed toes, barked shins, and sprained ankles, this was pain with a purpose. As long as I could focus on that purpose, the pain did not ... could not overwhelm me. I vaguely remember the midwife encouraging me, reminding that my suffering was for a purpose, and that helped me to focus on the results, not the pain.

Sarek was there for most of the time, holding my hand and thus sharing what I felt. In a way, that seemed to lessen the agony. Perhaps he used a meld to mind-block some of the worst of the pangs ... or perhaps it was simply the quiet strength he projects that gave me courage.

I wish I could have my child with me tonight, but they have taken him to the science academy, to run tests and keep him under close observation. As I held him in my arms after his first feeding, I beheld a tiny face that was so Vulcan that I wondered if there was anything of me in him. But just as I thought there was nothing human in him at all, my son opened his mouth and began to wail resoundingly just like a human baby. I saw something could it have been disappointment?--flicker across my husband's face as he heard those infant squalls.

Vulcan babies cry only for a reason--hunger or discomfort. And our son was dry and fed ... and thus had little or no reason to wail.

Which proves that he is partly mine, after all.

Was Sarek disappointed? I suppose I will never know.

I love our son too much to ask--and risk "yes" for an answer ... The newborn infant squirmed in his tiny, heated cocoon as his father watched every movement, enthralled by the new life that he had helped create. My son ... he thought, noting the tiny veins that pulsed greenish blue just beneath the thin, delicate skin. My son ... what will we name you?

Your Name Day will not arrive for nearly a month, so we have some time to choose a suitable appellation. Your mother will not even be able to pronounce your "first" name ... Vulcan first names were always a combination of syllables in Old Vulcan that denoted lineage and birth order. But Sarek's son would be called by his last name, even as his father was. Traditionally, in honor of Surak, the name would begin with an S. The infant moved restlessly again, then opened his mouth, uttering a faint squeak. His eyes opened, moved aimlessly for a moment, then fastened on his father's face.

The birthing puffiness had lessened; the child's eyes were now far less slitted, and Sarek could easily discern their color. Dark, like his own, not blue, as his mother's were. Not surprising. All the Healers' tests during Amanda's pregnancy had indicated that Vulcan genes would prove dominant in a human/Vulcan pairing.

The nursery attendant, noting that the child had roused from the readings on her monitors, approached Sarek and his son. "He is awake," he announced unnecessarily.

"He is," she agreed. "Soon he will be hungry. I will give him his supplement now. Do you wish to take him to your wife for his feeding, Ambassador?" Sarek hesitated. His son was very small ... his own hands

could nearly span that tiny body lengthwise. He had never held an infant before ... "If you would prefer," the nurse said, "I will do it." Sarek watched as she quickly, efficiently, lifted the baby and administered the oral supplement that would provide him with the nutrients that Amanda's human milk did not contain. But before she could turn away, he held out his arms. "I will take him," he said, firmly.

Obediently, the nurse placed the small, warm bundle into his arms. The Vulcan stood rigid, his arms stiff, as she settled the baby into place, making sure his head was properly supported.

The ambassador was faintly, illogically surprised to discover that his newborn son, who appeared so fragile, so helpless, actually had substance. The baby occupied space, and had mass ... he was a warm, squirming, living, breathing entity. Sarek stared down at him, fascinated. Dark eyes regarded him, locked with his own in an unblinking regard.

As he stared into the child's eyes, all at once the infant became real to Sarek, in a way he never had before. For all these months he had watched his wife's belly grow, touched her delicately to feel the movement beneath her skin, observed the child's heartbeat on the monitors ... but part of him had never truly comprehended that an actual child was forming within Amanda, and that that child was half his.

Reality had not begun to manifest itself until he had grasped Amanda's hand during labor, had directly experienced the agonizing pain that his wife was enduring. He had been amazed that a human could endure such pain without

blacking out--Amanda's fierce concentration, her comparative silence except during the worst of the birthing contractions had impressed him. His wife had always seemed frail to him, delicate, with her human constitution. His own strength had always been so much greater--and yet, today, he'd found himself admiring her stoicism as she'd endured such intense pain. Amanda was stronger than he'd ever realized. Even the Healer had expressed approval of her fortitude during labor and birthing.

Now the ambassador gazed down at the tiny face with its fuzz of black hair, noting the faint traces of the slanted eyebrows, the delicately pointed ears, the slightly squashed nose.

Looking at his son, Sarek of Vulcan experienced a moment of insight so intense it was nearly painful. Past and future, then and now and tomorrow seemed to swirl around him, blending and coming together in the small body so warm and breathing in his arms. This child was a link to the long-ago, and he would be the future. Someday he would stand up and walk the sands of his homeland, would gaze at The Watcher with wonder, would go to school and learn the logic of his forebears. He would grow

to adulthood, tall and strong and handsome, and someday he might hold a son of his own in his arms ...

"Our preliminary tests are complete," the nurse said, breaking into Sarek's reverie. "They indicate that his intelligence potential is above average, Ambassador. Considerably above average."

Sarek was not surprised, having gazed into the infant's eyes for these long seconds, but he felt a surge of pride that he did not trouble to repress.

The rigidity had somehow gone out of his arms. He held the child against his chest, instinctively cradling him close.

"I will take him to his mother now," he said.

The nurse nodded, and Sarek, moving carefully so as not to jostle his son, walked away ...

Closing the journal, the Vulcan sighed as he recalled his encounter with his son yesterday at Amanda's memorial

service. If his wife knew the things they had said to each other, she would have been terribly distressed. Remembering how she'd begged him to try and understand his son, instead of being judgmental and always finding fault, the ambassador shook his head.

And yet ... what could he have done differently? He had only done his duty. Amanda had understood .. why couldn't his son? ' James T. Kirk sat in the captain's chair, waiting.

"Captain," Uhura said, an odd note in her voice, "I'm picking up a subspace transmission, sir. It's on the frequency reserved for personal communique and mail ... "

Kirk glanced over at her, sitting up straight. "A message?"

"Yes, sir." She looked over at him, her dark eyes compassionate. She knew, of course, that Peter was missing.

"What does it say?"

"It says, "To Captain Kirk. Visit Sector 53.16, at coordinates 39 mark 122, before thirteen hundred hours stardate 9544.6. A certain redhead is waiting, will die if you don't show. Come alone. Tell no one."

Kirk drew a deep breath. "Uhura, trace that message back to its point of origin. I don't care how many substations they routed it through, follow it back all the way. Understood?"

"Aye, Captain," she said, her lovely features set in lines of

determination that matched his own.

"And message Commandant Anderson that we've just received the ransom note."

Wing Commander Taryn was dreaming ...

He did not dream often, but when he did, it was always the same dream ... or, at least, if he dreamed other dreams, he did not remember them. The Dream (as he had come to think of it) was the only thing in the universe that he consciously feared. Each time he awakened from it, he hoped that it would be the last ... but, though months and years of peaceful slumber passed, somehow, when he was least expecting it, the dream would come back ...

In The Dream he was small ... too short to reach the viewport in normal gravity without being lifted up. He was running, running down a neutral-colored corridor, a corridor that seemed to loom inward on him as he scuttled along.

His short legs pumped harder, trying to hurl him forward faster, but he was afraid--afraid! he should not be afraid, he should be calm ... he should be brave, he should not run away ... but he was afraid, he was!--and his feet kept slipping out from under him. Try as he might, he could not reach the end of the corridor ... it seemed to expand before him almost infinitely.

He would never reach it ... never, he would always be here, trapped, knowing that horror and absolute devastation lay behind him. And he, Taryn, deserved no better. He was a coward, a fearful, sobbing, cringing coward ...

Gasping, he stretched out both hands, making his short legs churn faster as he ran ... ran ... toward a goal that would never grow any closer ...

And then, with the suddenness of dreams, he was there, at the end of the corridor, standing on tiptoe, yanking frantically at the emergency release on the airlock door. The life-support pod lay in an alcove beyond that door. He knew how to open it, how to activate it, and the button to push that would launch it. Taryn knew all this, just as he knew that it was time to abandon ship, just as he'd learned in the drills.

He punched in the code, slowly, not wanting to make a mistake, his ears straining for noises from behind him.

Would they come after him? What would he do if they did?

He gnawed at his lower lip, waiting, until the airlock door indicated acceptance of his code. Finally it was time to grasp the opening bar in

both hands and pull it downward.

Even as he touched it, it began to move in his hands.

Horrified, he leaped back, and then the door began to slide open.

Choking in terror, he fled back down the corridor, running from this new, greater fear. He reached the end of the corridor, and there was the door from whence he had come, bolting in terror and anguish, knowing himself to be a coward. The control-room door. Placing a hand on it, Taryn began to pull it open.

No! No, don't! His elder self screamed silently at his younger self, for all the good it did. Taryn pushed the door open, slowly, slowly, and saw--

nothing except darkness as he jerked upright in bed, gasping. Slowly, reality began to trickle in. He was back on Freelan, in his own home. His wife Jolana was not here beside him, because she had gone to Romulus to visit their two grown children.

Taryn shivered, feeling cold despite the sweat on his bare chest and arms. That had been a bad one. He couldn't remember much about the dream ... which wasn't unusual.

He had a vague impression that in it, he was a frightened

child, but the details were always lost. Frankly, he didn't want to remember that dream ... ever.

Stress, he thought. I've been working too hard again. But the mission is so close ... nothing must go wrong! The Praetor made it clear that he has complete confidence in me.

He has given me more authority than I have ever had ... and I must be worthy. Nothing must go wrong ... we must be victorious.

Taryn forced himself to take deep, relaxing breaths. He glanced out the window, seeing the stars, as hard and cold and sharp in the blackness as spearpoints. He knew better than to look for Vulcan's sun from here ... it was too distant.

Vulcan's primary sun, Nevasa--or 40 Eridani, as the Federation charts recorded it. Taryn wondered, not for the first time, what it would be like to walk across the deserts of Vulcan--a world that was as hot, by all reputation, as Freelan was cold. A world where logic was revered, even over power. Sarek's world ...

Taryn had known for days that Wurril had failed to kill the ambassador--the Klingon hadn't been fast enough, it seemed. He'd been disappointed to learn about the Klingon's failure--but also, in a way,

the officer was pleased that that particular plan had failed. It would be so much more satisfying to overcome Sarek personally; after all the times the ambassador had defeated him at chess, victory at long last would be sweet indeed.

The wing commander sighed as he slumped back against the hard bolster. How much does Sarek know? he wondered, for the hundredth time. Sarek, he was sure, was the only one who could alert the Federation to their plans, the only one who suspected the true nature of Freelan and its inhabitants.

He suspects, but he has no proof, he reassured himself.

And things were moving so fast now, that within a few weeks--perhaps sooner, if the fleet was ready ahead of schedule, as the praetor had promised yesterday it would be--the war would begin. At that point, keeping the identity of the Freelans secret would no longer be necessary.

Taryn's mouth curved upward slightly as he thought of

what it would be like to be present when Sarek realized his defeat. The Vulcan had beaten him again during their last chess game. He usually won because he baited Taryn into recklessness ... but soon, Sarek's days of winning would be over. Soon ...

Pleasant anticipation relaxed him; the officer lay down again, reminding himself that the dream had never come twice in one night. But it was still a long, long time before he slept ...

Sarek also was dreaming. Full-blooded Vulcans did not dream often, but it did happen from time to time.

The Vulcan dreamed that he was on the surface of Freelan. All around him were glaciers, jagged buttresses of ice, sharp-fanged and glittering in the sunlight. He was walking toward a house ... Taryn's house, he knew--though the Freelan had never described anything about his home, of course. Still, this house fit in with what little was known about Freelan architectural styles. It was a black, dome-shaped dwelling, everything about it designed to maximize the capture and retention of heat, as well as keeping snowfall from crushing the building.

Sarek walked, experiencing the icy wind off the glaciers, yet not chilled by it.

Beneath his feet the snow crunched and he continued his journey.

As he neared the front of the house, the door opened and a Freelan stepped out, his muffling robes stirring in the icy breeze. "Sarek," the Freelan said, and the Vulcan recognized Taryn's voice. "Why are you here?"

"I was searching for you, Taryn," Sarek said. "My wife is dead."

"What is that to me?" the Freelan asked haughtily.

"If it were not for you, I could have been at her deathbed," Sarek said, knowing he spoke truth. "My son would not now despise me."

"What is any of this to me?" Taryn was almost sneering.

"Your domestic problems are your own concern, Vulcan."

"And your deceitful world is mine!" Sarek raised his

voice, and, darting forward, he savagely ripped the concealing mask from the Freelan's head and stared in shock as he Amanda's face beneath the muffling cowl and mask.

"Amanda!" Sarek said, stepping forward to touch her, to embrace her, but even as he did so, his treacherous, logical mind insisted, Amanda is dead ... And he awoke.

He was lying in his bunk in the VIP cabin aboard the Enterprise ... Freelan's icy surface and Amanda's face had been a dream, he realized. Sarek experienced once again the desolation of knowing his wife was dead. Her absence in his mind was an aching void, one that he could not imagine ever being filled.

Knowing he would not be able to sleep again, he arose from the bed, then padded barefoot across the sleeping compartment to the small lounge, a slim red-covered volume in his hand. Seating himself on the low divan, the ambassador opened the book and began to read ...

December 7,2237--the Twentieth Day of Tasmeen I have paced until I am exhausted my legs are trembling so that I must sit ... but I cannot rest. I see that this entry is nearly illegible, and that is because my hands are also shaking.

Spock is missing. He apparently left soon after sunset, and we have no idea where he has gone. He is only seven years old!

Sarek is in his office. I glanced at him as I went past, and he appears to be working! How can he? If I were to ask him how he can work while our son is missing, he would gaze at me with infuriating Vulcan calm and say, "Amanda, I have reported Spock's disappearance to the authorities. They are far more fitted than I to search for him. Pacing back and forth and indulging in emotional outbursts will accomplish nothing.

Simply because I am working does not mean I am not concerned about our son." I must try to calm myself. Getting furious at my husband will not help bring my son back, and I suppose that he is right--but it is

maddening when he remains so calm when I am upset.

Spock is missing--my child is out there in the desert, with all its dangers. And my husband is working!

If only he had been more understanding of Spock, made some effort to see things from a child's viewpoint but no, the son of Sarek must be perfect, must be better than all the other children--I overheard him tell Spock that himself today. He told him that if he does not pass his kahs-wan ordeal next month, the first time he attempts it, that he, Sarek, will be disgraced. He didn't use that exact word, but the implication was clear.

This admonishment followed on the heels of Spock's fight with those schoolboys, the ones who torment him every day with taunts of "Earther!" and "Halfblood!" and "Emotional Terran--can't control himself. I?" There have been times that I've had to dig my nails into my palms to stop myself from rushing out there and giving them all a slap. But of course that would only make things worse. This has been going on ever since Spock started school at age four ... It is torture to watch him try and fit in with the others.

My son, so tall, so slender, with his black hair and this thin, somber little face ... it breaks my heart to see him so abused. I've begged Sarek to talk to their parents, but he refuses. He pointed out (logically and correctly, I'm afraid) that such intervention on his part would only make the other boys torment our son more ... I cry when I see him trying to endure it, knowing how such teasing hurts. Why can't Vulcan children be as civilized as their parents?

The boys tormented him once again today, and his father was totally unsupportive, let alone sympathetic.

So he has run away. Where?

After several minutes' reflection, I think I know. I believe he has set off into the wilderness in order to deliberately expose himself to danger. Spock is setting himself up for his own private survival ordeal, because

he would rather die out there in the desert than disgrace his father next month.

If our son dies out there it will blame Sarek. I know it is not just, but I also know that I will do it anyway. I will blame my husband, and I will be unable to bear the sight of him.

At least I-Chaya appears to have gone with his young master. The old sehlat wouldn't be much use as defense, I suppose, but at least the big furry creature will keep Spock warm. Nights in the desert are chilly, even by human standards.

Someone else may also have accompanied Spock, but I am less sanguine about Sarek young cousin, SeleK.

Although the young man was perfectly poised and polite, I gained an impression of duplicity from him. His eyes never quite met mine when he introduced himself and explained who he was. And later ... I caught him gazing at me when he didn't realize that I saw him doing so. There is something about Cousin SeleK ... something false. I am certain that he was lying about the purpose of his impromptu visit here. Perhaps he was lying about being related to my husband.

No, that cannot be it. There was a definite family resemblance between them. But still, there was something ... something I cannot put my finger on ...

I have never heard of any Vulcan adult abusing a child. Surely SeleK only went after Spock because he saw the child running away and realized Spock could be in danger. Surely SeleK intends my son no harm ...

He seemed like a very nice young man, despite everything. There was a warmth in his eyes when he gazed at me that I found touching, despite my reservations when I realized he was not being fully truthful with me long to take the aircar myself and go looking for Spock. Writing in my journal usually helps to calm me when I'm upset, but not this time. I cannot sit still an instant longer--perhaps Sarek and I should take the

aircar and go looking for Spock ourselves in the Llangon Mountains. It will soon be dawn ...

Sarek glanced up from the pages of the journal and sighed, remembering ...

"I cannot stand this for one more instant," Amanda burst out, pausing in her jerky pacing to glare at him. Sarek, reluctantly, had abandoned his work to join her in the living room of their residence in Shikahr. "I don't care what you think--I'm taking the aircar and going to the Llangon Mountains to look for him myself." Turning on her heel, she headed for the door. Her husband stepped in front of her, barring her way.

"Amanda, there is no reason to--"

"Don't you dare use that infuriating calm voice on me!" she cried. At the moment, Amanda Grayson was a portrait in fury. "This is your fault, Sarek!" she flared, cheeks red, blue eyes blazing. "If you had tried to understand Spock, rather than demand perfection from him, just because he's your son, then this never would have happened! Now either come with me, or stay here! I don't care which!"

"Amanda." Sarek heard the steel underlying the calm tones of his own

voice, did not trouble to repress it. "I will not allow you to take the aircar into the Llangon Mountains.

The air currents there are treacherous, especially just after sunrise, and you are too upset to concentrate on piloting. We will wait here for the report from the authorities."

Her small hands curled into fists, and for an instant Sarek wondered if she would strike him, but she whirled and strode away. The doorway he barred was the only exit from the room, so, after a few paces she halted with a jerk, then stood stiffly, her back to him. After a moment, Sarek said, in a milder tone, "I have trained Spock in anticipation of his kahs-wan. He is familiar with the Vulcan plant life and the survival methods of our ancestors. Logic dictates that he will come back to us relatively unharmed, Amanda."

She stared at him wildly, then laughed, a harsh, bitter

sound that had nothing of humor about it. "And I'm supposed to be comforted by that, Sarek? By logic?"

"Logic is not meant to comfort, Amanda. It simply exists.

It is a way of viewing the universe that offers reason and order, instead of chaos."

"Human chaos, you mean," she snapped. "Why not just say it?" Her mouth tightened. "But you do say it ... only not in words. But it's there, in your face, whenever Spock smiles or forgets himself in the slightest degree! Disapproval radiates from you--I see it, and so does Spock. The poor child will never be good enough for you, and he knows it--no wonder he's willing to risk dying out there!" Sarek was taken aback by the accusation. Surely his wife was wrong, was simply giving vent to her illogical human emotions ... "Oh, I know you won't believe me," she said, more calmly. "You excel at not seeing what's right in front of your nose, Sarek. But I see it. It's obvious. Spock is trying to please you, but you've set him an impossible task--perfection!

Even Vulcans aren't perfect--as you ought to know!" Her husband stared at her, wordlessly. Amanda's eyes filled with angry tears. "I won't let you ruin his life, Sarek--even if it means going home to Earth and taking him with me. Maybe he'd be better off there, among people who have some compassion, some tolerance!"

"Leave?" Sarek's breath caught in his throat. "Surely you cannot be serious, Amanda. The situation has upset you, understandably--however, there is no need to consider such drastic action." She faced him, her hot anger dying away to something cold and, the ambassador sensed, far more formidable.

"Don't underestimate me, Sarek. I love you, nothing can ever change

that, but you are an adult, perfectly capable of defending and caring for yourself. Spock is my child, and I will care for and protect him in the face of every threat to his being--even if that threat is his own father." Facing her, the Vulcan felt as though he were confronting some eternal archetypal force--the personification of maternal protectiveness. A le-matya with cubs could not have been more deadly in defense of her young, he realized, experiencing a mixture of shock and unwilling admiration.

"I see," he said, after a moment, "I do not want you to leave, Amanda," he said, slowly and carefully.

She took a deep breath, but her expression remained hard and closed. Yet her voice betrayed just the faintest quaver.

"I do not wish to leave either, my husband," she replied formally. "Yet I will do so, if I decide that action is the best thing for our son."

"I will--" Sarek turned suddenly as his Vulcan hearing picked up a familiar sound. "An aircar," he said, starting for the door.

"Spock?" she cried, catching up with him in a long stride, then bursting through the front door ahead of him. An aircar was just settling down onto the landing pad in the large courtyard.

The aircar's side door opened, and two figures emerged, one large, one small. "Spock? Amanda called, holding out both hands.

It was indeed their son, followed by Cousin Selek. Both turned and raised a hand in grave salute as the aircar took off, swooping back toward the center of Shikahr.

"Spock ..." Sarek said. He stood in the courtyard and basked in the realization that his son was safely home ...

On that day, Sarek recalled, his son had informed his father gravely that he had chosen Vulcan. Amanda had never again threatened to leave him ... though the strife between them during their son's childhood had been far from over.

Following the successful completion of Spock's kahs-wan ordeal, Sarek had turned to the next major milestone in a seven-year-old's life--that of his bonding. Amanda had protested the whole notion--and especially Sarek's choice for his son's betrothed.

Sarek recalled his conversation with Spock. How had his wife known that T'Pring was dishonest and faithless? There was no logical way to explain her knowledge Sarek

recalled the conversation they'd had when he'd announced his choice of Spock's bondmate to be his wife ...

"T'Pring? You've chosen her? Sarek ... no!" They were sitting in her garden in Shikahr, watching Nevasa set, when he'd mentioned that he'd chosen Spock's bondmate.

Amanda leaped to her feet and regarded him with dismay.

The ambassador stared at his wife in mild surprise.

"Amanda, why such disapproval? The girl's lineage is impeccable. Her family is as highly placed in Vulcan society as my own. She will have property of her own, to match what our son will inherit. Why do you not approve?"

"Because," Amanda said, flatly, fixing him with a level stare, "I don't like her. That child is ... I don't know. She's too polite, too ... calculating. There's something ... cold ... about her. I don't approve of this whole business of betrothing children--it's barbaric."

"Amanda, you are not being logical. T'Pring will prove an excellent consort for our son. She is intelligent and she will have all the advantages that a well-placed family can give her ... she will--"

"Make Spock's life miserable, Sarek," Amanda broke in, her eyes darkening with emotion. "I can tell that she's not the right girl for Spock. T'Pring reminds me of one of those beautiful little snakes we have back on Earth--the ones with the lovely, jewel-like colors, that are so delicate, so beautiful ... and so deadly that if they bite you, you live for less than a minute."

"Such prejudice on your part is specious, Amanda," Sarek said, experiencing a moment of impatience with his wife. "You have no reason for any of these allegations." She paused for nearly a minute before replying. "I know," she said, finally. "I know that what I'm saying isn't fair. But all my instincts tell me that T'Pring is totally wrong for Spock. Sarek ..." She swung back to face her husband. "I want you to cancel the bonding. Or at least postpone it, until they're ... out of school, say." Sarek shook his head. "No, Amanda. This is my world, and we agreed long ago that Spock would be brought up according to Vulcan custom and tradition. You heard him choose Vulcan himself, after that time when he ran away to the Llangon Mountains. I have made my choice, and T'Pring is the consort I choose." Amanda drew a deep breath, and shook her head sadly, in turn. "You're making a mistake," she said. "But you're right. I did agree, and you are following Vulcan tradition." The slender shoulders beneath her soft green gown sagged, suddenly, and she sighed deeply. The ambassador knew that she was giving in, but his victory did not please him. "Very well, my husband," she said, tonelessly. "But I am not sanguine about this decision."

"Logic dictates that the two will be well suited to one another, Amanda." She flashed him a contemptuous glance. "Logic? You can't use

logic to predict marital harmony, Sarek. I'm sure your father was being eminently logical when he betrothed you to T'Rea ... but we both know how well that worked out. Don't we?" Before Sarek could arrive at a rejoinder, she turned and walked away, back into the house.

Peter Kirk laid the ornate Klingon cards down with a disgusted air. "I fold. You beat me again!" Sitting on a stool outside the observation panel, Valdyr looked smug as she made a notation on a pad with a stylus.

"You now owe me ... five thousand, six hundred and seventy-three kilos of prime-grade dilithium crystals," she said in Klingonese.

In the two days since Peter had come to Qo'nos, Valdyr's twice-daily visits had become the high points of his days.

She had treated him respectfully, and even, at times, with a rough kindness. She'd located several old Klingon books for him to read—including The Complete Works of William Shakespeare in, as Valdyr put it, "the original Klingon" and had struggled to teach him an arcane Klingon card game that he was having some difficulty mastering. He insisted they speak Klingonese, so that he could become even more articulate in the difficult language.

He'd discovered that Klingons did possess a sense of humor ... even if Valdyr's was somewhat restrained. Just getting her to relax enough to almost smile was a challenge.

He didn't try to kid himself—Stockholm Syndrome was setting in badly, at least on his side. He wasn't sure about Valdyr.

Between the Klingon books and his conversations with Valdyr, he ended up not needing her help in translating the odd term he'd heard her uncle speak. He'd found it easily enough in Shakespeare. The Merchant of Venice. Shylock used it. Joy' meant torture, and, as Peter already knew, Be' meant woman, or female. Torture by females was the rough translation.

Bejoy' referred to a specific, ritualistic torture performed on prisoners of war ... by Klingon women.

Another subject they might never be able to discuss. So, tell me, Valdyr, when you perform the bejoy', what do you think you'll use first? The hot irons, the electronic stunner, or will you begin by flaying roylflesh? Anyone taking any bets on how long I'll last? And to think he'd once been worried about the Kobayashi Maru. He folded his hand in defeat and slipped it through the food slot. "Are you sure you've taught me all the rules of this game?" Peter grinned ruefully as her serious expression assured him that anything less would be dishonorable.

"Well, in that case, you'll have to send me to Rura Penthe to dig those crystals."

Valdyr's dark eyes sparkled indignantly. "Never! That is a place where only the worst criminals go."

"Like my Uncle Jim and Dr. McCoy?" he asked dryly.

"They're really desperate characters, both of them." He was sorry the minute he'd said it. They had a truce going, and now he'd thrown out a volley.

The Klingon woman's eyes dropped. "I know they were innocent of assassinating Chancellor Gorkon," she said, carefully shuffling the deck, then dealing cards through the food slot beneath the observation panel. "But that does not mean that your uncle never murdered a Klingon."

"He killed Kruge, yes, but he didn't murder him," the cadet insisted. "Krugé beamed down to kill Kirk because he wanted revenge for his lost crew. They were fighting on the edge of a precipice, as the Genesis planet was breaking up beneath their feet. A big chunk of rock gave way beneath Kruge, and he went over the cliff. Jim caught his hand to save him, but Kruge tried to yank him over, too. My uncle got mad and let him drop."

"Let him?" Valdyr said, skeptically.

Peter grimaced. "It was self-defense! Kruge would have killed both of them, otherwise!"

"Kamarag says that Kirk lured Kruge down to that world just as it was breaking up, then abandoned him to die," Valdyr said.

Young Kirk shook his head. "James T. Kirk doesn't operate that way. If you knew him, you'd believe me." They continued the game in silence for a few moments before Peter spoke again. "There's one thing I still don't understand, Valdyr."

"What is that?"

"It's been three years since Kruge died. Why did your uncle wait so long? Why decide to take revenge now?"

The young woman stared at her cards, but Peter knew well enough that she'd already planned out her moves. Finally, she said, "At first he thought the government would support him in his quest for vengeance. But when Praxis exploded, moderate voices in the councils realized that we would need the help of the Federation to survive." Valdyr examined her hand. "After that, he did not speak of Kirk for a long time.

My uncle ... has always been loyal to his government. But suddenly, a few weeks ago ..." She sighed and moved a card. "... he changed. One

day, revenge was all Kamarag could think of, speak of ... plan for. Vengeance, and Kirk's death. He said that if the government would not support him, he would act on his own."

"Which is why I'm here," Peter said, and she nodded.

"What caused him to change so suddenly?" he wondered aloud.

"I do not know," Valdyr said. "I only know that he is my uncle, the head of my family, and I must be loyal to him." She looked up at him. "Are you going to place a bet, Pityr?"

They placed their bets, then upped the ante several times.

Peter studied Valdyr, then finally said, "Your loyalty to your uncle includes torturing me, doesn't it?" That was more than a volley, he realized. He'd just dropped a matter/ antimatter bomb into their conversation.

Her eyes met his unflinchingly. "If the choice were mine ... none of this would be happening. I am sorry, Pityr."

They said nothing for a few minutes, then continued the game, but his heart wasn't in it. He was not surprised when she beat him again. "I quit!" the human groused, struggling to keep the bitterness out of his voice. He tossed his cards back into the slot. "Life isn't fair. I've been kidnapped, held prisoner, and now my jailer turns out to be a beautiful woman who's a card shark to boot." He'd used the current English idiom, as he knew of no Klingon one that was appropriate.

Valdyr glanced up at him, obviously startled. "You called me ... what did you call me?"

"Beautiful and a card shark," Peter said levelly. "Which term didn't you understand?"

"What is this ... card shark?"

"A shark is an Earth animal, a huge fish ... you know, fish?" He racked his brain for the Klingon word. "An animal that swims in the sea, a dangerous predator, you know?"

"Oh!" she cried. "You mean, norgh?"

"Yeah, norgh. You're like that when you play cards.

Understand?"

She thought it over, then gave a soft snort of derisive laughter. "What you mean is that, since I am a woman and I beat you always, I must be ruthless. I thought Earth males treated their females equally!"

"We do," Peter protested. Valdyr just looked at him, her expression clearly distrustful. "Really, we do," he insisted, holding up his hand as if under oath. "Aren't Klingon

women treated equally?" He felt guilty for asking, since he already knew the truth.

"No," Valdyr admitted. "The men have always held the ... outward power. If women want power, they must find a man to work through, advise him, push him, make him the ... the ..." She groped, at a loss for a suitable term.

"A figurehead?" suggested Peter in English.

Valdyr quickly accessed the English word on her portable comm link, then nodded. "Exactly," she said.

"Well, what about Chancellor Azetbur? She's a woman." Valdyr's eyes sparkled. "She is special. Her father made the other members of the High Council promise to uphold her as his successor, and they have done so. The people support her ... but the warriors' code is difficult to change."

Peter fixed her with an intent stare. "What about you,

Valdyr? What would you like to do with your life?" She dropped her eyes. "I ... have dreams."

"Of what?"

"When I was small," she said, "I wanted to be a warrior.

It is hard for women to do ... but possible. But I was sickly.

When I realized I had attained my full size, I ... knew I could never be strong enough to be a warrior, no matter how I studied."

"Even so, you learned to fight."

She nodded. "And I am good with a knife," she said, with a touch of pride. "But, I am too small to truly defend myself against another Klingon with nothing more than my hands."

She'd said that offhandedly, so he wouldn't feel insulted.

"So you can't be a warrior. What's next?"

She glanced around, as if suddenly concerned that they might be overheard. "I hoped to become a diplomat, like my uncle."

"Are woman allowed to be diplomats?"

"There is no law against it."

Peter got up off hi stool, paced the cell a few times. He

still ached, but he was feeling much better. "That's funny that you should say that," he admitted. "I thought about shifting to a career in the Federation diplomatic corps myself"

She cocked her head, her long braid swinging. He found himself suddenly wondering what that massive mane might look like all undone. "You did?" she asked.

He nodded. "That's why I studied Klingonese and Romulan even before the Academy."

"Then why did you change?"

"I'm not sure anymore," he said, halting and staring at her, his brow furrowed. "I guess Command was what everyone expected me to do."

"Everyone expects me to marry Karg and spend my time running a household," Valdyr said dryly.

Peter made a face at that, and Valdyr almost smiled. "I think," she said, "we should try very hard to do what it is we want to do, not what we are expected to do!"

"I agree!" Peter said, flashing her a smile. Then, remembering who he was, and where, and what would soon be happening to him, he sobered abruptly. They did not speak of the coming torture, but it sat there between them.

Valdyr chewed on her lower lip, her sharp, slightly crooked teeth scoring the soft flesh. "Pityr," she said softly,

"please believe me. This is not something I wish to do.

I ... have no more control over this than you have."

Peter sank back onto his stool, his shoulders slumping.

"Your uncle is using me to capture and kill my uncle, Valdyr. What kind of honor can Kamarag gain out of this?"

She drew a quavering breath, shaking her head. In the smallest voice she admitted, "There is nothing about honor in any of this. There will be nothing for our family when it is over but shame."

Peter came over to the observation panel, reached through the slot as

far as he could, and just managed to brush the flesh of her arm with the tip of his forefinger. She leapt back, her knife instantly in her hand.

"What--?"

"I'm alive, Valdyr, just like you," Peter said. "Remember when you first gave me water? You saved my life with that

water. Why did you do that, when you knew what was facing me? When you knew what you would soon be doing to me?"

She tightened her jaw and remained silent, staring at his fingers as though they were some bizarre life-form.

"You gave me water ... and I held your hands. Remember?"

They were so warm, your hands, so much warmer than mine. I was pretty shocky, all my blood going to my injuries ... but I'm warm now, Valdyr, just like you. I'm alive. Feel. Feel how warm I am. Go on ... "

Hesitantly, she approached the panel as if mesmerized, then put out her hand, brushed his fingertips with hers. His skin tingled where she touched him. Her body temperature was slightly higher than his, although nowhere near as high

"m 7"

as a Vulcan's. ee. Peter said, softly. "Warm. Alive. Just like you. And I want to stay alive!"

She was staring down at his hand, wide-eyed, as though she'd never seen it before.

"Can you really do it, Valdyr?" he whispered, as he closed his fingers around her long, elegant ones. "Can you do this thing that has no honor in it, just because your uncle wants you to? Can you really do this ... to me?"

She shuddered and closed her eyes. With a surprising surge of strength she clasped his hand so powerfully, her nails scored his palm, drawing blood. Then she murmured,

"Yes."

What an idiot you are, mister. t he thought bitterly.

Valdyr's face was flushed, her eyes bright with ... regret?

Was it really?

Yes, Peter decided. It really is ...

"I don't want to die," he said, gazing at her through the panel.
"Valdyr, I especially don't want to die at your hands." He gripped her just as tightly as she gripped him. "I don't want my uncle to die either. And more than that ... I don't want the peace our people are only now working out to crumble ... You know that's what will happen when all this comes to light."

She nodded grimly, raising her eyes to his.

"And I don't want to see you give up your dreams. Don't lose all the honor you've worked so hard to gain. I couldn't

bear to know that my death would take that from you." He prayed she would not think his speech that of a self-serving coward willing to say anything to save his life. He was saying nothing but the plain truth.

"Valdyr," he whispered, "I've come to really care about you. As a person of honor ... of dignity ... and of great strength." She looked down, staring at their joined hands, saw their commingled blood dripping onto the slot. With a choked, inarticulate sound, she yanked her hand away, then turned abruptly and bolted down the corridor, racing as though a demon was on her heels.

Peter reined in his own emotions as he pulled his abandoned hand back inside his cell. He stared at the crescent-shaped wounds on his palm, still oozing blood. He must've cut her as well, as puce-colored liquid mingled with red in his palm. He made a fist, holding their blood inside, and fought back the demons of his own fear.

As Wing Commander Taryn studied the chessboard before him, one slanting eyebrow went up in pleased surprise.

"You are improving," he remarked, considering his options and finding they were limited.

His opponent was a slender young woman with delicate, almost elfin features that were emphasized by her cropped black hair and elegantly pointed ears. Her name was Savel, and she was twenty-two Standard years old. Her Vulcan parents had been killed while trying to escape when Savel was a baby; she did not remember them at all. The young woman had lived in a government-operated creche until Taryn had taken her into his household at the age of five.

The commander regarded her as an adopted daughter, and had raised her with the same advantages that he had bestowed upon his two sons.

"A very interesting gambit," Taryn conceded. "Not one I ever taught you. Where did you learn it?" Savel's black eyes sparkled with pleasure. "While I was with you at Khitomer, Ambassador Sarek's aide challenged me to a game. Soran won, using this very tactic."

Taryn stiffened in his chair. "You played chess with Ambassador Sarek's aide?" Now it was Savel's turn to tense. "Yes," she admitted.

"You did not forbid that, Vadi. "The word meant "uncle" in Romulan, which Savel spoke as fluently as she did Vulcan.

"What harm could that do?"

"A great deal," Taryn said, sternly. The commander leaned forward in his seat, his dark eyes holding hers. "What if I had been forced to come searching for you, and encountered Sarek? I told you, he suspects us. If we had met face-to-face ... there is no telling what he might have done.

He has already unmasked one of us, and for that reason I was at great pains during Khitomer to stay out of the ambassador's way. You knew that, Sayel." The young woman hung her head. "Yes, I knew. But Soran was ... very pleasant to me. I found our conversation enjoyable. I do not often get the chance to speak with someone near my own age, Vadi." Taryn sighed. "I know," he said. "But, Savel ... you took an unnecessary risk. We are close to the completion of our plan, within grasp of our goal ... " Now it was the woman's turn to whisper, "I know." She gazed at him with a touch of remorse plain to read in her dark eyes. As she had been raised by Romulans, her control was not as great as a native-born Vulcan's. "Forgive me, Vadi."

"Very well. As long as you will promise not to take such a chance again."

"I promise," Savel said. "Vadi ... it is still your move."

"So it is." Taryn studied the chessboard, then made one of the two moves possible to him. Savel's mouth twitched as she moved a piece of her own, so quickly that Taryn knew he had fallen into her trap ... for a trap it was. The commander sighed, frowning, but inwardly he felt a wash of pleasure at her growing skill as he said, "I see it now ... mate in two." With a near-bow of respect, he ceremoniously knocked over his king as a sign of defeat. Though losing to Sarek always rankled him, losing to Savel, whom he had taught himself, was almost pleasurable.

Taryn sat back in the overstuffed armchair in his comfortable study, with its shelves of data spindles, its ancient has-reliefs and weapons hanging on the walls, and the glow from the fire-box chasing the last vestige of chill from the air. It was winter on Freelan, and even here, in the northern equatorial region, frost and snow were common during these long, dark months.

Taryn thought with longing of times he had lived on Romulus, in a small house on an ancient, winding street.

The wind there was warm, even during the brief rainy season ... a far

contrast to the bitter gales that raged at night around his dome-shaped house on Freelan.

"Have you heard any news of Kamarag?" Savel asked.

"Will we need to encounter him again?"

"I do not know," Taryn said. "The reports I have received tell me that he has had Captain Kirk's nephew kidnapped, and that he has demanded that Kirk exchange himself for the young man. Kamarag has good reason to hate Kirk, and he has sworn a blood oath to avenge his young protégé, Kruge. So it is possible that he will require no further prodding."

Savel nodded. "There was a strong core of hate in him before I ever touched his mind," she said. "Who is monitoring him now?"

"No one, at the moment," Taryn replied. "Darns was, for a time, but he has now been detailed to Earth. There is a major trade conference there, and he and Staviv were needed to attend."

She nodded. "It is possible we may have to visit Kamarag again. The ambassador may balk at actually executing Kirk, knowing that if he does that, he will surely be declared a traitor, once his actions are known to Azetbur and her councillors."

"Getting close to him may be too risky, now," Taryn said.

"Even if the ambassador merely captures Kirk, that will probably be enough to touch off hostilities--especially since the raids along the Neutral Zone are increasing."

"Who is working there, Vadi?" Savel asked, cocking her head at him.

Taryn smiled thinly. "That is the beauty of it ... no one."

We prodded Keraz, we prodded Chang, we prodded Kruge and Wurril and Makesh and Kardis. Now insubordination and mutiny are creeping through the Klingon forces like a spy in the night. Every week there are new reports of terrorism ... and we are responsible for only half of them!

Azetbur is holding on by her elegant fingernails--but soon, her grip on her people will be lost. And then ..." He nodded.

"War," Savel said, with an expression Taryn could not read. It seemed to be compounded of equal parts eagerness and revulsion.

"Vadia-lya," he said, referring to her as his "little niece" for the first time in years, "what troubles you?"

"Nothing," she mumbled, gazing down at the thick woven carpet beneath their feet. "It is only that--"

"Yes?"

"At Khitomer ..." She bit her lip, her control visibly slipping now.

"Yes?"

"When the Federation president spoke, he sounded so ... earnest." She looked up, met Taryn's gaze, and flushed visibly, but continued, "When he spoke of peace between the worlds, I could almost ... visualize a galaxy where peace reigns. And that vision was attractive to me."

"Ah, but Savel, there will be peace," Taryn reminded her.

"Soon, the purpose to which I have dedicated my life will be achieved. Soon, there will be peace. Of course a little strife must precede it, that is unavoidable. The war between the Federation and the Klingons will not last long, and the conflict between what remains of the Federation and our forces will be even briefer. But soon ... within a year or two, we will have a lasting peace ... and survival as well as victory for the Romulan Empire. Otherwise, what will happen to us?"

"The Federation will try to destroy us," she replied without much conviction.

Taryn gazed at her thoughtfully, but finally nodded.

"Another game?" he asked, waving at the chessboard.

Savel's grave features brightened, though her control was back in place, and she did not smile. "Oh, yes, Vadi," she said, eagerly, and moved to set up the pieces.

Stepping off the turbolift, Sarek walked down the narrow corridor, halting outside Kirk's quarters. He signaled the door. "Come," the captain's voice responded.

Kirk was just fastening the belt of his uniform jacket. He halted abruptly as he saw who his early-"morning" visitor was. "Ambassador!" he exclaimed, "Good morning."

The Vulcan did not waste time on pleasantries. "Kirk, we must speak for a moment," he said. "I have been giving a great deal of thought to your nephew's abduction, and logic indicates that it is connected to our problem with the Freelans."

"I was wondering the same thing myself," Kirk said. "I called it instinct instead of logic, but it sounds like we've reached the same conclusion. What's your reasoning?"

"While I was negotiating on Kidta, Commander Keraz told me that

Ambassador Kamarag called a meeting of Klingon officers, and attempted to induce them to turn against Azetbur and her government. If Keraz and Wurl were influenced by Freelan telepaths, why not the ambassador?

With the history of events between you, Kamarag would prove an excellent candidate for mental influence."

"You think Kamarag kidnapped Peter?"

"Not personally, no. But that he was behind it ... yes, I do."

Kirk looked thoughtful. "That's an interesting idea," he said. "I know he hates me ... I've been told many times how he's denounced me publicly at every opportunity ... but is his hatred strong enough to lead him to betray his government?"

"Perhaps not on his own, but with sufficient telepathic prodding ..."
Sarek countered. "Logic seems to favor Kamarag as a likely suspect in Peter's abduction."

"But how does that connect with Peter investigating the KEHL?"

"If the same person or persons are influencing both groups ... it would be simple to induce the KEHL to turn Peter over to someone who would then take him to Kamarag."

"You think there's a third party involved?"

"I would suspect so. That way, the KEHL would not have to deal with an alien ship."

"Makes sense. Uhura is trying to track down the ships that departed Earth during the time in question. But that's a tall order. She's been working on it since yesterday, so maybe she'll have something soon."

"Have you heard any reports about the KEHL and its activities?" Sarek asked. "I have not yet scanned today's communications."

"The leader, Induna, was finally released on bail," Kirk said. "Last I heard, he was calling for--" The captain broke off as the intercom signaled. He activated it. "Kirk here."

"Captain?" It was Commander Uhura's voice. "Sir, I've managed to locate the points of origin of both the message sent to Peter in his apartment, and the subspace one that reached us."

"Good work. What did you find out?"

"The first transmission, the one patched together with clips from old transmissions of yours, was sent from a vessel in Earth orbit ... the Bobino."

"What kind of ship? What registry?"

"Bobino is a freighter, registered to an Otto Whitten, who owns her but is not her pilot."

"Did you check him out?"

"Yes, Captain. This Whitten is a man with a past. A con artist ... but clever. Arrested many times, but the charges were always dropped. The vessel is registered as a 'freighter,' but 'smuggler' is probably a more accurate description."

Kirk glanced at Sarek. "Sounds about right," he said.

"Who is the pilot?"

"Bobino's pilot is a woman named Erika Caymor. Same thing as Whitten. She's been arrested a number of times, but she always gets off. Extortion, credit fraud, theft,

smuggling ... the list of charges against her goes on. But the authorities could never make anything stick. They're a nasty--but clever--pair."

"They sound like scum," Kirk said, bitterly. "Smugglers who had smuggled not contraband, but Peter Kirk, off-world."

"What about the other transmission? The subspace one?"

"That message originated on Qo'nos, Captain. I can't pin it down any further than that."

"Damn!" Kirk muttered, looking over at Sarek and nodding ruefully. "Good work. Thank you, Commander."

"I was glad to be of help, sir," she said. "I put in a call to Vice-Admiral Burton's office, asking them for any information they have on Bobino's registered course. I'll let you know when I hear from them."

Kirk clicked off the intercom and turned back to the Vulcan. "Looks like logic and instinct are both paying off," he said.

"What will you do now, Kirk?" Sarek asked. "Will you stay on course for Freelan? What about the ransom demand that you exchange yourself for your nephew?"

"At the moment, our course is taking us toward both destinations," Kirk said. "I plan to get to the closest possible approach to the stated coordinates, then hand over the Enterprise to Spock and order him to take you to Freelan. I can hire a small ship at the nearest starbase and

make that rendezvous myself."

"Why not use the Enterprise?"

Kirk shook his head. "I can't justify using the starship for a personal mission like this."

"But ... Kirk. Going to keep that rendezvous alone will be extremely ... hazardous," Sarek said, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, I don't plan to just waltz in with my eyes shut, Ambassador. The Enterprise's speed has given me nearly a two-day lead that the kidnapers don't expect. If they keep that rendezvous, I plan to be there well ahead of time, so I can find out where they come from."

"Logic suggests that they will come across the Neutral

Zone from Qo'nos," Sarek said. "Kamarag told me once that his ancestral estate is located there."

The captain programmed the food dispenser in his cabin for a cup of coffee, then, when it arrived, took a grateful sip.

"It's frightening," he said, "to think that the Romulans could plan something like this for so long. Planting a colony on Freelan, disguising their appearance, all that security for decades ... and the gradual acquisition of Vulcan children to raise so they could control their telepathic abilities. All of this beginning in the days before we even knew what the Romulans looked like! By my calculation, they've been working on this plan for seventy-five years!"

"Possibly longer," Sarek said, sitting down on the edge of the bunk. "We have no idea when Fredan was first colonized."

However, do not forget, Captain, that, like Vulcans, Romulans have a considerably greater life span than humans."

The ambassador spoke without thinking, but, suddenly hearing his own words, he experienced a vivid memory of Amanda. They had been sitting together in her garden, watching T'Rukh, when she'd said, suddenly, "Sarek ... I want you to know that I expect you to remarry after I am gone."

Her husband had regarded her with mild surprise.

"Amanda ... is this statement a result of your having turned forty yesterday? I understand that this particular anniversary of birth is frequently stressful for humans ... "

She'd smiled at him. "No, my husband. My remark was entirely logical. We've never spoken of it before, but it's obvious that, barring some

kind of accident, you will outlive me by at least sixty years. You should not deprive yourself of companionship, out of some misguided sense of loyalty. To do so would not be logical."

"But--"

She'd smiled again and stopped his words with a shake of her head. "I know this is premature. But someday you'll remember this conversation. Someday you'll be relieved to know that you have my blessing in choosing another consort."

Let's leave it at that."

And they had.

He looked up, to find Kirk regarding him intently from across the small room. "My apologies, Captain," the ambassador said. "My thoughts turned ... elsewhere. You were saying?"

The human shook his head slightly, his hazel eyes softening.

"I want you to know, Ambassador, that I admire you and Spock for continuing with this mission ... despite everything that's happened."

"Work is an anodyne to grief, Kirk," Sarek said. "Or, at least ... it presents a distraction."

"Yes, I know," the captain replied simply.

"Ambassador ..." He hesitated.

"Yes?" Sarek said, raising an eyebrow.

"I may be overstepping, here, but I just wanted you to know that ... that Spock ..." Kirk was struggling to find words. Sarek nodded encouragingly. The captain tried again. "He's taking his mother's death very hard," he said in a rush. "With some people, it's a relief to transmute grief into anger. If you don't mind a word of advice ... be patient. Let him work through this on his own."

He'll ... come around."

The Vulcan regarded the human steadily. "I will keep your words in mind, Kirk," he said quietly. "Patience is a virtue on Earth ... on Vulcan, we are taught that it is an essential component of life."

Kirk sipped his coffee in silence for several moments.

"Kamarag," he said, finally. "Ambassador, if he does have Peter, I'll have to go to Qo'nos ... and stage a rescue."

Sarek shook his head. "Captain ... alone? That would be ... most illogical."

"Rescuing Peter isn't an official mission," Kirk pointed out. "But ... maybe I don't have to go to Qo'nos alone."

Chancellor Azetbur was rather grateful that I saved her life ... possibly she'd be interested in knowing about what's going on."

"I would not tell her directly, Kirk," Sarek cautioned.

"Why not?"

"There is no way for us to know who may be under the

Freelan influence now," Sarek reminded him. "Azetbur herself might even be suborned."

"They'd never get close enough to her," Kirk said, but the captain was clearly taken aback at the idea.

"Possibly you are correct. But what about her aides? If they discover what you know, and that you have shared your knowledge with the chancellor, that would make her, in turn, a prime candidate for assassination."

"You're right ... "Kirk set his coffee cup down so hard it sloshed into the saucer. "Damn! This entire situation breeds paranoia. You can't trust anyone!"

"I will speak with Azetbur. I may be able to discern from her expressions and speech patterns whether she has been influenced. I will attempt to warn her ... subtly, as well as discover whether she knows anything about Peter."

"Thank you, Ambassador. I'd appreciate that." Minutes later, Sarek sat before the comm link in his cabin, waiting patiently as the screen flickered. Finally it cleared, and familiar features coalesced before him. Sarek inclined his head respectfully. "Madame Chancellor."

Azetbur inclined her head in turn. "Ambassador Sarek. I trust you are well?"

"I am, Madame. And you?"

"Entirely," she said. "Allow me to offer condolences on your recent bereavement."

"Thank you, Madame Chancellor."

The Klingon woman gazed at him, and, for the first time since he'd known

her, seemed at a loss. "I heard about the attempt on your life, Ambassador. It was a relief to know that Wurril had failed. I take oath on my father's honor, Ambassador, that neither Keraz nor Wurril was acting under my direction."

"I know that, Madame Chancellor," Sarek assured her. "I sensed Wurril's mind telepathically during the struggle. He was definitely not allied with your government."

The chancellor visibly relaxed. "What is the purpose of your call, Ambassador?"

Sarek hesitated for a second, carefully phrasing his inquiry in the most subtle and least revealing terms he

could manage. "Madame Chancellor ... there was an illegality, a violent act, perpetrated against a Federation citizen on Earth eight Terran Standard days ago. I am ... disquieted ... to inform you that this ... incident, at least on the surface, appears linked to Qo'nos. Evidence indicates that this ... link may be highly placed in your government."

Azetbur blinked, and Sarek was quick to note the faint flicker of surprise cross her face. She was learning fast ... her expression barely altered before her features were, once more, an impassive mask. But the ambassador knew that, whoever had been responsible for young Peter Kirk's abduction, it had not been done with the chancellor's knowledge or sanction. "Qo'nos?" she repeated. "I assure you, Ambassador, I have no knowledge of any such crime.

Unless, of course, you are referring to the renegades who captured Kadura?"

"No, Madame Chancellor, this concerns a different matter altogether," Sarek said. "Incidentally, may I inquire as to whether Commander Keraz has been captured?"

"Not to my knowledge," Azetbur said. "He is still at large." She gave the Vulcan an impatient glance. "Ambassador, if there has been violence done on Earth by Klingons--especially by any who are government officials, then I must demand that you be more specific."

"Madame Chancellor, your zeal does you credit--but you have misunderstood. I am neither accusing nor identifying any Klingon official as having committed crimes."

"Then what are you saying, Ambassador?" she snapped.

"I do not care for verbal swordplay; I am a Klingon."

Sarek nodded. "I assure you that I would be more specific if I could, Madame Chancellor, but I regret that I am not at liberty to explain at

this time."

"When you are free to explain, will you, Ambassador? I must confess that my ... curiosity ... is aroused." Her dark eyes sparkled dangerously.

"You have my word," Sarek promised. "Madame Chancellor ... I am not at liberty to do more than make a suggestion, for I have no way to substantiate my suspicions,

but ..." He paused while she listened intently. "If ... individuals within your government appear to behave in a manner that is suspicious, or uncharacteristic ..." He hesitated again, choosing his words with infinite care. "It is possible that ... an external agency is exerting undue influence upon them. I believe that these external agencies were responsible for Commander Keraz's actions at Kadura."

Now it was Azetbur's turn to raise an eyebrow. "Really, Ambassador? What an extraordinary statement."

"I make it only as one living being to another, Madame ... not in any official or diplomatic capacity.

Guard yourself, Madame Chancellor. I have reason to believe the intent is to subvert the peace process your government and the Federation have recently embarked upon."

"What kind of undue influence?" she demanded. "Bribery?"

Torture of family members? Drugs, or other chemical forms of coercion?"

Sarek shook his head. "No, Madame. None of those methods. I regret that I cannot be more specific; however, I have overstepped my authority in divulging even this much to you."

She gave him a long, thoughtful look, but forbore to ask, evidently realizing he could not be persuaded to say any more. Sarek took a deep breath. One final test, now.

"Incidentally, Madame Chancellor ..."

"Yes?"

"Captain Kirk requested that I express his wishes for your continuing good health and success in your administration."

The Klingon woman's expression brightened ... for a moment she nearly smiled. "Please express my thanks to Kirk, and tell him I wish him success, too. We were ... gratified ... to learn that he and the Enterprise will continue to serve the Federation."

Sarek nodded. "I have enjoyed our talk, Madame Chancellor; however, I

know your schedule is a busy one. I shall say farewell."

"Thank you for your ... warning, Ambassador. Be assured I shall be watchful."

Sarek nodded, then held up his hand in the formal salute.

"Peace and long life, Madame Chancellor."

Again the faintest of smiles touched the Klingon woman's mouth. "Qapla'.t, Ambassador Sarek," she said, wishing him

SUCCESS.

"Captain?" Uhura turned to regard her superior officer.

"I have an incoming call for you. It's Vice-Admiral Burton, sir."

"I'll take it in my quarters, Commander," Kirk said, and then he added, in an undertone too soft for anyone but her to catch, "Put this on a shielded frequency, Uhura." She nodded as he left the bridge.

In his quarters, Kirk turned on his screen and Vice-Admiral Burton, Starfleet's chief of security, appeared.

After the captain had outlined the problem of Peter's disappearance, concluding with Uhura's finding that the ransom message had originated on Qo'nos, the admiral, a beefy man with a shock of thick white hair, frowned. "More terrorism," he concluded. "This is obviously not your ordinary kidnapping for profit."

"I agree," Kirk said. "How do you want me to handle this, sir?"

"Investigate your nephew's disappearance without any public fanfare," Burton said. "And if there's any possibility that this is reprisal against you personally, by the Klingons, you'd better abandon this notion of going in alone. I'm officially authorizing you to use the Enterprise for this mission. If the Klingons are involved, then it becomes a matter of Federation security--and that makes it official.

But ... Kirk. I meant it about keeping this quiet. The KEHL is gaining converts every day. Something like this would add fuel to the fire."

"I understand, Admiral. Did your office come up with any information on that smuggler's destination?" the captain asked.

"We've got a copy of Bobino's official flight plan, Captain.

They were scheduled to take a load of gourmet foodstuffs to Alpha Centauri A ... but they're overdue. Way overdue."

"Any idea where they went instead?"

Burton nodded grimly. "They picked up a cargo of high-grade dilithium ore in Sector 51.34 two days ago."

Sector 51,34 was only a parsec or so from the Klingon Neutral Zone. Kirk nodded, unsurprised.

"Captain, this clinches it. I want you to get to the bottom of this ... and soon."

"I will, sir," Kirk replied.

"Mr. President," Sarek said, to the image on his comm link. "Greetings." Gravely, he saluted the chief executive.

"Ambassador Sarek," Ra-ghoratrei said. "Allow me to offer my most sincere condolences on your bereavement. I very much ... regret ... having called you to duty at such a time."

"I discussed my mission to Kidta before leaving, Mr. President," Sarek said, uncomfortable at having to speak of this now. "My wife understood its importance. But I did not call you to discuss Kidta, Mr. President."

"What is it, Ambassador?"

"Sir ... I believe that I have discovered a threat to Federation security. I have discovered evidence--evidence that I will soon be able to share with you that the Keep Earth Human League may be funded and supported by off-world interests."

Ra-ghoratrei's pale eyes widened. "What? The KEHL?"

But they are ..." He hesitated. "They are more than they seem, apparently ... "

"Yes, Mr. President. I suggest that you authorize a full-scale investigation into the group. I believe that such an investigation may turn up surprising information."

"Can you be more specific, Ambassador?"

"No, Mr. President," he said, "I cannot, at this time. But I will be contacting you within a few days with, I hope, conclusive proof. In the meantime, I ask that you authorize a full investigation--although I do not believe that it should be a public inquiry. I will explain my reasoning later."

"Ambassador," Ra-ghoratrei said thoughtfully, "your service to the Federation is legendary. I will do as you ask but I do insist upon the explanation you promised."

"You will receive one, Mr. President. Two days--three at the most--should prove sufficient."

"Very well," the president said. "Until we speak again, then, Ambassador Sarek."

"Live long and prosper, Mr. President." Sarek raised his hand in salute.

After cutting the connection, the Vulcan sat for several minutes composing a detailed message to Ra-ghomtrei, with additional copies to the head of Starfleet Security, Vice-Admiral Burton, and the chairman of the Security Council, Thoris of Andor. The message gave a complete summary of his suspicions and findings, plus the data he had collected so far.

Then the Vulcan placed each message under a time lock.

If the Enterprise did not return from this mission, Ra-ghoratrei would receive the message in five days, with the others receiving theirs in six.

When he finally got off duty that evening, Kirk was weary to the bone. They were now enroute for the Klingon Neutral Zone. A few hours ago, he'd received official orders from Starfleet affirming Vice-Admiral Burton's verbal orders. He was to attempt to locate and rescue Peter Kirk; then he was directed to place himself and his vessel at the disposal of Ambassador Sarek, who was currently on a special factfinding mission for the Federation president.

Unsealing his maroon uniform jacket, Kirk slumped into a chair. The captain had a hunch that the entire mess was only beginning--that it was only going to get worse before it got better. Assuming it does get better, which is a big assumption, he reminded himself.

And besides, he thought, you've got it easy, compared to Peter. What might the Klingons be doing to the young man, while he sat here, safe aboard his orbiting fortress?

Thoughts of Klingon torture, mind-sifters and beatings, raced through his mind, and the captain shuddered.

It least Qo'nos isn't Rura Penthe, he thought, trying to find comfort in the fact--but he was tormented by images of Peter being brutalized by Klingons like Old One-Eye.

Klingon jailers weren't noted for their kindness and compassion, to put it mildly.

He and Peter had grown close, over the years; Kirk knew his nephew better than the cadet suspected. He was aware of Peter's feeling that he

had to live up to his illustrious uncle's example, and regretted inadvertently placing his nephew under that kind of pressure. But Peter was a Kirk, and he was bound to pressure himself to achieve, no matter what anyone said to him.

An image of the young man's features drifted before his eyes, and Kirk shook his head wearily. Would he ever see him again ... alive? Where was Peter? Was he even now being tortured?

With a muffled groan, Jim Kirk leaned his head in his hands. Hang on, Peter, he thought. Just hang on a little longer ...

Savel stared at herself in the mirror as she brushed her thick, shining hair. Today she was wearing a long blue dress instead of her usual silvery padded tunic and snug trousers, and she felt more feminine than she had in a long time.

For a moment, she indulged herself by imagining what Soran might think if he could see her in this garb. He had been so courteous, so quietly attentive ... i*. had been very flattering. Savel knew that most Vulcans were bonded by the time they were adults ... was Ambassador Sarek's young aide betrothed?

Surely not; if he'd been promised to another, he wouldn't have stared at her quite so intensely. His eyes had been very dark, very earnest ...

Savel suddenly wondered what would happen to Soran if her adopted uncle's most cherished dream was realized, and war erupted between the Federation and the Klingons--followed swiftly by a full-scale Romulan invasion. Everyone knew that Vulcans were pacifists ... but that word was not at all synonymous with "cowards." If pushed to defend their homeworld, Savel was quite sure that the Vulcans would fight, and fight well.

And what if Soran was hurt ... even killed?

Savel's throat tightened, and she told herself she was

being ridiculous. She'd only met the young Vulcan for a few hours; thinking about him now was senseless ... illogical!

She stared at her reflection, wondering where Soran was, what he was doing at the moment. Would she ever see him again? Would she ever find someone on Freelan that she found as attractive? The odds against that happening were great--and not simply because she was so drawn to Soran.

The young Vulcans residing on Freelan were technically free to intermarry with the Romulans ... but few did.

To put it bluntly, the majority of the transplanted Vulcans on Freelan were regarded with suspicion and disapproval ... though there were

exceptions. Savel knew of several Vulcans-by-blood who had risen to high-ranking positions in the Romulan military--some had intermarried.

One or two had even received vital political appointments.

But generally the transplanted Vulcans tended to seek each other's society, rather than looking to the Roraulans for mates or companionship. Was this because they had all grown up with the knowledge that they were a captive people? Or did their telepathic abilities set them apart?

Some Romulans were willing to accept and welcome the new additions into their society ... but many more were like Taryn's wife Jolana. Why? Was Jolana cold and withdrawn because she suspected Savel's loyalty? Since many Vulcans-by-blood served in the military, and served well, that attitude was illogical. Or was their distrust and aversion due to jealousy or fear of the Vulcan telepathic abilities?

There was no way to be sure without a deep mind-meld, and Savel had no desire for such intimacy with her adopted "aunt" ... so she would never know.

With a sigh, she smoothed down the skirt of the blue dress, and headed for the door of her room. Tonight she and Taryn would be leaving aboard his ship. The commander would take command of the invasionary force that was being assembled and supplied near Remus. Savel held no military rank, but her telepathic skills made her invaluable in espionage efforts.

As she stepped through the door, Savel thought for a moment more about Soran, but she forced the image of the handsome young aide's face from her mind. She would never see him again ... thinking about him was illogical.

Squaring her slender shoulders, head high, Savel resolutely went to find her uncle, so they could plan what their strategy would be during the upcoming war.

Peter Kirk paced restlessly, turning again and again to stare through the observation port at the front of his cell. It had been three days since Valdyr had fled from him. Three days.

He was still fed regularly, his meals brought now by different Klingon guards, but she had not returned. The guards had come and gone as quickly as possible, sparing him barely a glance.

The cadet discovered that, for the first time since this whole thing had started, he was afraid--gut-wrenchingly, genuinely afraid--but not for himself.

Could Kamarag have observed Valdyr's behavior toward her prisoner and

considered it disloyal or treacherous?

Could she have been punished for their conversations, for ... touching him? He ran his thumb over the healing wounds on his palms, as if trying to reassure himself that that passionate handclasp had actually happened, that he hadn't imagined the entire thing. No, it had happened. He glanced at his hand. Oh yes, it had happened.

But where was Valdyr? What if she never returned?

At the thought of never seeing the young Klingon woman again, Peter swallowed painfully. Valdyr ...

Peter opened his fist and stared down at the marks of her nails. What had happened between them?

Or, at least ... what had happened to him? He scowled, fighting the reality, struggling against the truth ... Peter groaned inwardly and struck the wall of his cell with his fist so hard that he winced from the pain. But even that couldn't distract him. The truth was still there, immutable, unmistakable ... How long was he going to go on lying to himself?

All right, dammir! Peter finally admitted. I love her. I'm a fool!

It was inconceivable that he should love her--a Klingon!

When had it happened? How could it have happened? Were Klingons and humans even biologically compatible? Who even knew? And yet ... trying to deny how he felt would be like denying that he had two hands, or two eyes ... or one heart.

Very little was known about the complexities of Klingon society, though there was plenty of speculation. Some of the things he'd heard about the sexual capacity of Klingon women would've made an Orion slaver blush. It was probably nothing but sleazy speculation, he knew--the same kinds of things had been said about other groups at other times. Peter had paid such gossip little mind ... until now.

But now thinking of those things brought images to his mind ... images ... Did Klingons love like humans? Were they even capable of similar emotions? More importantly, was there any hope at all that Valdyr might ever have the same feelings for him, or would she just find the whole thing one more dishonorable complication in a situation that was causing her considerable soul-searching and anguish?

There had been women in Peter's life, and some of them he'd loved--or, at least, he'd thought so at the time. Yet the most intimate moments with them had not moved him the way that touching Valdyr's hand had. Peter tried telling himself this was just a greater manifestation of Stockholm Syndrome, but neither his emotions nor his hormones were

listening.

Love? Yeah, let's get really kinky, here, Peter. You'll probably never see her again until they haul you out to that platform, where she'll be waiting to perform the be'joy' on you, with Uncle Jim as a witness. You'll really enjoy that, won't you? You'll love that, right?

Suppose ... suppose ... she'd refused to perform the bejoy'. Maybe that was why she hadn't returned. Suppose one of the guards who'd been delivering his meals got the job because she'd refused and her uncle was furious. What if

he died without ever seeing her again, at the hands of a stranger?

The cadet sank onto his bunk, cradling his head in his hands, feeling despair ready to overwhelm him.

Something made him glance back at the observation portal, and suddenly, as if his desire had conjured her up, Valdyr stood there, staring at him expressionlessly. She said nothing, standing at attention like the good Klingon warrior she yearned to be.

Slowly, he got up and walked toward the portal, trying to frame words. Valdyr's eyes widened almost imperceptibly and he stopped dead in his tracks, suddenly wary. Something was wrong ...

She wasn't alone. Without warning, Kamarag stepped into view. With him was another soldier, one Peter dimly remembered seeing before. Hadn't this guy been one of the goons who had come to get him out of his cell aboard the transport vessel?

Valdyr no longer met his eyes. Was it time for the bejoy?

Peter swallowed, but stood tall, head high. He would not shame himself ... "Ah, the young Kirk," the ambassador murmured approvingly, addressing Valdyr in Klingonese. "He looks fine, niece. Strong. Healthy. You have done well." Kamarag eyed Peter through the portal as if sizing up a side of beef. "Cadet Kirk!" he said in English. "Do you know what day it is?"

"No, Ambassador," Peter replied, in the same tongue, "I do not."

"It is the day I will have my revenge!" Kamarag informed him. For a Klingon, his demeanor was positively jovial.

"Even now your uncle speeds to our rendezvous, where I will take him prisoner. As soon as I have him, Karg here will bring you and Valdyr to join us." He indicated the other male. Peter stared at the warrior. So this was Karg ... no wonder Valdyr hated him.

"Aboard my flagship, Hohwi; we shall all enjoy an old Klingon ritual.

Tell me ... do you find my niece attractive, young Kirk?"

Peter refused to show fear. "Any male would," he said, honestly.

"Good, good! I like your spirit ... it will add immeasurably to the be/oy!" No doubt you have longed in the past days to find yourself ... close ... to her, hungered for her touch? Even human males are not immune to a lovely female's charms, that is obvious. Well ... I am happy to tell you that you will soon have your wish granted. Soon, you will be very close to Valdyr indeed--while she separates your skin into its many fragile layers inch by bloody inch! By the time she is finished with you, she will know you ... intimately. Outside ... and inside."

Kamarag guffawed, and Karg did, too. Good grief, Peter thought, refusing to feel the fear that wanted to claw its way out of him with a shriek. Where did this guy learn English?

Reading Edgar Rice Burroughs? He sounds like he comes from Barsoom ... Kamarag was still grinning. "No doubt your uncle will enjoy the spectacle; he will, after all, be the next to succumb to it!"

Peter said nothing. He would not let himself be baited ... besides, Kamarag was, finally, saying something of real interest.

"And as soon as the bejoy' is finished, my fleet will speed into Federation territory--and all the riches that await us there."

Peter was stunned. He had thought that Kamarag's only interest lay in torturing him and his uncle. He'd had no idea the ambassador had a "fleet" of his own and was planning to start a war!

"Your fleet?" he dared to ask, hoping Kamarag would keep talking, keep boasting. He must mean the renegades who were causing so much trouble ...

"Yes indeed. I have a sizable force accumulated of captains who are ready to take back their honor as Klingon warriors! Together, we will reduce your Starfleet to scrap metal."

Dream on, Peter thought. The ambassador had lost his

mind if he seriously thought he and his "fleet" could conquer the Federation. Starfleet would wipe them out, there was no doubt. But--Peter repressed a shiver--he also had no doubt that Kamarag and his cohorts would wreak terrible destruction on the worlds closest to the Neutral Zone before they were stopped.

The ambassador turned so that his niece would be sure to hear him. "By the time Chancellor Azetbur learns of our action, it will be too late. At last, we will all regain our honor!" He faced Peter again, noted how the young man was eyeing the walls of his cell. "It is a terrible thing

to be held prisoner while events of such magnitude unfold around you, is it not, young Kirk?"

Peter refused to give him the satisfaction of a reply.

Valdyr's face never changed expression, yet she seemed to be struggling with emotion. "My uncle," she said softly, pitching her words for Kamarag's hearing alone, turning her back on Karg, "I ask that you reconsider what you are about to do. Attacking the Starfleet is Hoh'egh."

Of course Valdyr realizes it's suicide, Peter thought, his spirits rising slightly. Kamarag may be crazy, but she's not ...

The ambassador stared down at her. "You are worried for me, niece?"

Valdyr nodded. "Not only for you, Uncle. For all of our people. Our world is dying, my uncle," she insisted, still speaking softly, but passion now tinged her voice. "We have neither the technology nor the means to save our people.

By working with the Federation, Chancellor Azetbur hopes ..."

"Enough of this!" Kamarag growled, losing his patience.

"I will not hear another word about that depraved female and how she will save the Klingon Empire! Mention that name again, aldyr, and you will have more to fear from Karg than your wedding mgnt.

Valdyr flushed deeply, and she set her jaw. She drew herself up as tall as she could, and this time she addressed both males. "Is this how you would control me, Uncle, by threatening me with a husband? Is this how a Klingon male

earns his female's loyalty--through fear? Where is your honor? You--"

Karg's fist shot out faster than Peter's eyes could follow, smashing brutally into her jaw. She hit the ground hard, but never uttered a sound.

Valdyr's face was swelling, and her lip was split and bleeding, but he knew from personal experience she could handle that. Her hand went for her dagger automatically, but Karg anticipated it and grabbed her wrist, twisting it painfully. She endured it without flinching, as the powerful warrior leaned down close to her face.

"Your disrespect to your uncle is disturbing, Valdyr," he warned her. "Do not think I will tolerate such attitudes from my wife. Where are your loyalties? To your family, or to that perverted female who has usurped the rightful role of a male?"

"I am a Klingon!" Valdyr snarled. "My respect and my loyalties are to my family, Karg--of which you are not a part!"

"That will be rectified soon enough," Karg reminded her.

"We will be wed as soon as James T. Kirk dies beneath your knife. Then you will be mine! And you will learn respect ... "Hauling her up by the front of her armor, he backhanded her hard enough to snap her head back. She blinked, dazed.

Peter slammed against the viewing port before he even realized he'd moved forward. He pounded his fists against the glass. "Karg, you coward!" he heard himself shouting, barely remembering to speak English. "You want someone to fight, come in here and take me on. I'll flatten you, you bastard, just like I did the last time."

His taunts had the effect he intended. Karg's face suffused with rage and he released Valdyr and moved toward the viewing port. Kamarag stopped him with a gesture.

"Enough of this," Kamarag said to Karg. "I must fetch James T. Kirk. Wait for my call, then bring Cadet Kirk to me at the head of my fleet. Once this business is done, you can enjoy your wedding night in Federation space, as we head for the nearest colony!"

Karg gave Valdyr a last, sneering glance; then the two males left.

Peter pressed against the port, straining to see down the hallway, trying to determine if Karg and Kamarag were out of earshot. He turned back to Valdyr, and was surprised to find her intense black eyes focused on his face, as if she were trying to look through him. "Valdyr!" he whispered. "Are you all right? Valdyr?"

She glanced down the hallway, then finally climbed to her feet and came over to face him. "You meant what you said to Karg, didn't you?"

"What?" He shook his head, unsure he'd fully understood her.

"Do you understand what you said to him, how he interpreted it?" she asked again.

Peter just stared. "What was not to understand? If I could've gotten my hands on him, I'd've mopped the floors up with him, I'd've ..."

She shook her head. "You challenged him as an equal.

Warrior to warrior. You refused to let him view you as a helpless human prisoner. You challenged him--over his woman."

Peter felt his barely suppressed rage bubble over. Clenching his fists, he pounded one hand hard against the viewing port. "You're not his

woman!"

"My uncle has arranged the mating. It will be done."

"Like hell it will!" Peter raged, feeling jealousy overwhelm him. The thought of Karg "claiming" aldyr on the much-referenced wedding night made him crazy. "He'll touch you over my dead body! He can't have you!" Hearing himself beginning to sputter incoherently, he wound down.

"I will ask you the same question you asked me so many days ago, Pityr," Valdyr said softly, in a tone he had never heard her use. "Why do you care? What does it matter to you who touches me?"

He ground his teeth. Better to say nothing than to have her laugh in his face, or give her something to taunt him with when he had to endure her knife. But something in her eyes compelled truth. "It matters to me. It matters a

lot. The man ... who touches you ... should do so with respect ... "

She never took her eyes from his. "That will never happen, Pityr. My uncle is about to betray his government, a course of events that will eventually bring about either the destruction of our world, or, at the very least, of our family. And the man ... who would touch me with ... respect ... will soon be dead ... by my hand ... "

What ... what does she mean by that? Peter stood plastered against the window, as close to her as he could get, afraid to interpret her words too freely ... afraid to hope.

"Pityr ..." Her voice was hoarser than usual. "I cannot stay long. I--"

"Where were you?" he demanded. "You've been gone for three days!"

"I was here," she said tonelessly, not looking at him. "I came down once, while you were asleep, to look at you. But I could not talk to you until I ..." She trailed off.

"Until you what?" he asked softly.

"Until I knew my own mind," she admitted.

"What does that mean?"

"After the other day ... I sent a message to my uncle, asking him to release me from this duty. But he ... he refused."

"Why did you ask to be released?" Peter asked, wishing she'd look up at him.

But she kept her eyes downcast. "Qo'nos ... is not a good place to

live, since Praxis exploded. Half of the moon was blown into a very long elliptical orbit that in fifty years will finally intersect with this world ... which will mean the end for life on this planet. So many meteors will impact that it will destroy our atmosphere, crush our homes and land.

Even now, Qo'nos is encircled by a ring of debris that reminds us night and day that our time is limited.

"Meteor showers are now common. One of your human months ago, my mother was at home in Hatlhburgh with my oldest brother. A shower fell, and our home was destroyed, my mother and brother killed. My father had

died three years ago, when your uncle destroyed his own vessel to trap Kruge's crew. So my three living brothers and I had no one. Kamarag took us all in. He is now the head of my family, Pityr!" Her voice was tight and brittle, and she shook her head so hard her thick braid slid across her breastplate. "Honor demands that I serve him, and do as he wishes!"

"Well, you are doing that," Peter said, feeling his throat tighten as he glimpsed her expression.

"But to serve him, I have to be prepared to betray the leader of the Empire, Chancellor Azetbur. I have to share the responsibility for the death of our homeworld. Without the Federation to help us, everyone on Qo'nos will eventually die! And ... worst of all ... I must personally bring about your death!" She moved closer to the window, until she was pressed against the glass, even as he was.

"Pityr ... Pityr-oy ..." She closed her eyes, but the anguish in her voice was unmistakable.

The cadet froze as he took in what she had just said, feeling a surge of incredulous joy. The suffix "oy" was used as an endearment. "Valdyr ..." he whispered. "Valdyr, look at me ..."

Finally, she looked up. Carefully, Peter stuck his hand through the slot, until his fingertips brushed hers. He stroked the tips of her fingers, his heart pounding.

"Valdyr-oy ..." he whispered, his blue eyes holding her dark ones.

She gazed at him incredulously; then he felt her fingertips slide over his, and suddenly she was touching his palm gently, rubbing her fingertips against the crescent wounds there. He in turn felt the small scabs from his own nails that were sheltered in her palm. "How can this be?" she whispered, her voice a mixture of anguish and joy. "It is not possible. We are not the same people. We are alien to one another. Enemies by blood ..."

"Not anymore," he protested softly, "not enemies. Not by blood. We have

shared blood. We are part of each other."

"Impossible," she repeated, as if trying to convince

herself. "Humans are weak and cowardly. They have no heart, no endurance. They cannot fight, they have no will to do it. They stink of fear. Human males have no stamina, no passion. All they can do in bed is talk. A Klingon woman would kill any human male foolish enough to bed her."

"Is that what they say?" Peter murmured, losing himself in her dark eyes. "Well, on my world they say things, too."

Klingons never bathe, so they smell. They are stupid, ignorant savages who live on base emotions, allowing their passions to rule their lives. They rut like animals. Klingons cannot weep ... because they cannot love."

She looked shocked to hear that Terrans had prejudices that equaled those on her own world. "Do they say that?" she murmured, and he nodded, silently. "But Pityr ... I am learning that what they say is not true. I have seen you fight like the finest warrior, against odds so great, there was no way to win. You fought ... and almost won. I had never seen such heart, such will to win ... such stamina ..."

He clasped her hand in his tightly. "I am learning, too."

You're always clean, and your fragrance reminds me of apricots. You're so smart, you're the only one here who has the sense to see what the future holds. And I've heard anguish in your voice ... a sorrow too noble for tears. I know you don't want to hurt me. I understand you are just doing what you must."

She shook her head. "You believe it is true, then?"

It was his turn to be confused.

"That, because we cannot weep," she explained, "we cannot love."

"No, I don't believe that."

"But you believe that I could still bring about your death?"

Even now?"

"I thought ... when you explained about your uncle ..."

"The days I stayed away ... I did so ... because no matter how I felt about my family loyalty, I realized ... that I could not live with the betrayal of Azetbur, and the destruction of my planet ... and more than that ... I could not live with your death."

"What are you going to do, then?"

She released his hand, glanced up and down the hallway.

"I do not know yet. You will have to trust me."

He shrugged, smiling. "My fate has been in your hands since I first arrived here, Valdyr."

A look of pleasure washed across her face, and then she was gone, leaving him with nothing but the memory of her touch.

Commander Taryn sat in his quarters aboard the Romulan bird-of-prey Shardarr, reviewing intelligence communiqués from Romulus. Savel, who sat opposite him, watched alertly as the commander's expression darkened.

"What is it?" she asked, when he finally looked up.

"Matters may be moving more precipitously than we anticipated," he replied, the lines in his craggy, raptor-beaked countenance deepening. "Kamarag has gathered a squadron of renegade captains around him by offering them Federation plunder and amnesty from the new government he claims he will head. He is clearly planning some kind of coup to coincide with his raid into Federation space. His squadron is currently assembling in space, not far from Qo'nos."

Savel digested this news in silence. It was really going to happen, she thought. The war ... the war that Taryn had planned for his whole life. And she had been the one to bring it about. Vividly, she remembered touching Kamarag's mind, inflaming his hatred for Kirk. It hadn't been difficult ... the Klingon's hatred had already been like magma beneath a planet's crust ... "But this is what you wanted, what we planned for," she said, finally.

"But the speed with which this is happening is a problem for us." Taryn rose from his antique carved desk and paced restlessly across the small office, stopping for a moment to regard the extensive collection of ancient weapons hanging on the wall. Some of them were so old that they predated the Romulan exodus from Vulcan, following the Surak reformation.

The commander stood for a moment, ostensibly

studying a training lirpa--one with a hollow bludgeon and a dulled blade.

Savel had a good knowledge of the tactical situation they now faced. But she had no idea of what information Taryn had gained from those communiqués. "What problem?" she asked.

Taryn handed her the communiqués, inviting her to scan them for herself. "Kamarag is doing far more than we expected. He plans to topple Azetbur's government--not simply to lead a renegade raid. We did not anticipate this."

Savel scanned the messages quickly, then nodded agreement.

"He has gone too far to simply go home after his raid.

There is no way that Kamarag can keep his actions secret, now ... not with this many people involved. The ambassador has evidently decided that the time has come to make his break with Chancellor Azetbur's government. How do you think he will proceed, Vadi?"

"I believe that, once Kirk is dead, the ambassador will initiate hostilities by leading his squadron across the Neutral Zone in an all-out attack on the nearest Federation world. He will use the publicity from that to declare himself a war leader, and thus sway the public to his side. Staging a military coup will then be easy."

Savel raised an eyebrow as that notion sank in. "If Kamarag does that ... such an action would indeed precipitate all-out war between the Federation and the Klingon Empire." Silently, the young Vulcan woman considered, as she had been considering for the past several days, the ramifications of interstellar war.

Memories surfaced in her mind, from the days before she'd come to live with Taryn and his family. There had been eleven Vulcan children in the creche, many of them orphans whose parents had suicided rather than be forced to engender more children to live on Romulus, Remus, or Freelan. And in the very early days ... there had been an old one, an ancient Vulcan who had been brought in to teach them their native language. Sakorn had been his name, and he was blind.

Savel vividly remembered the afternoons she and the other children had spent with Sakorn during those language lessons. The ancient Vulcan had also, whenever he could avoid the watchful eye of the other teachers, attempted to imbue his charges with Vulcan ethics and values.

"War is an unconscionable waste of resources, and the most illogical of tactics," she remembered him saying quietly, one summer afternoon, as they'd all sat in the school courtyard together. "There are no winners in war ... only losers. The innocent pay, and the guilty grow ever richer and ever greedier. Violence breeds violence, and the cycle of avarice and corruption is nearly impossible to break. There is no excuse for a civilized being to resort to war ... there are always alternatives to bloodshed."

Savel didn't know whether she completely agreed with Sakorn's pronouncements but her memories of the old one were still vivid enough

to make her breath catch in her throat as she imagined what he'd say if he knew what she'd done.

"War ..." she repeated, hearing the doubt in her own voice. "What you have been working to achieve for all these many years ...

"Indeed," the commander replied, taking down an ancient Vulcan senapa and examining the scythelike obsidian blade, careful to touch only the handle, for the cutting edge was dipped in the traditional poison. He frowned down at the weapon, seemingly studying the flowing streaks of red amid the black stone. "This development will, in all likelihood, benefit us in the end. The more fragmented the Klingon Empire is, the easier it will be to conquer.

But Kamarag is moving so much faster than I had anticipated ... he is proceeding too swiftly. Our forces are days away from being able to take full tactical advantage.

And if Kamarag kills Kirk tomorrow, and then proceeds full-scale into Federation space ... the Federation and the Klingons could be engaged in all-out war within a handful of days. The praetor has ordered full mobilization of all forces, under my direct command ... but I do not know whether we can be ready to invade in time."

Savel glanced at the small viewscreen that showed the vista of stars as seen from Shardarr's bridge. Events, like the stars, seemed to be moving toward them too fast. "Is there anything we can do to slow the ambassador?"

"I cannot think of anything" Taryn said.

At the sound of the intercom, both turned toward the comm link. "Taryn here," the commander snapped as he activated it.

"Commander, I have that tactical analysis prepared that you requested," came the voice of Taryn's second-in-command.

"Excellent," Taryn said. "Call a meeting of all senior officers in my conference chamber. We will be there directly."

Motioning to Savel to join him, the commander strode out of his office and down the narrow, utilitarian corridor.

Once they reached the sparsely furnished conference chamber, with its huge comm link that dominated the bulkhead, the young Vulcan woman sat in her accustomed place on the commander's left. One by one, his senior officers filed into the room. They were all young, hand-picked by Taryn to serve aboard his ship and intensely loyal to him.

Taryn began the meeting by having his second-in-command, Poldar, give a briefing on the current tactical situation. Savel watched as he

pinpointed the location of Kamarag's renegade squadron, then pointed out the locations of their own vessels. Several would reach the area within two days, but others would not arrive for another five or six.

The fleet was massing ... the largest fleet ever assembled in Romulan history. And Shardarr would spearhead the attack, if all went according to plan.

"What about Federation vessels?" Taryn asked.

"There are a number in Sector 53.16," Poldar said, "but none close enough to trouble us until we are well across the Neutral Zone. With the exception of one vessel, Commander."

Taryn raised one slanting eyebrow, inviting the centurion

silently to continue. "Commander, I speak of the Enterprise.

Kirk's ship lies directly in the course Kamarag's squadron will take across the Neutral Zone."

"Enterprise lies in the path of Kamarag's invasionary force?" Taryn repeated slowly, plainly taken aback.

"Yes, Commander," Poldar said. "We received a new batch of intelligence reports just as I was leaving the bridge for this meeting. We have a positive identification on the ship ... it is definitely Kirk's?"

"That is not good," Tonik, the senior helm officer, said flatly. "If Kamarag's squadron encounters the Enterprise, they may be decimated."

"Not even Enterprise can defeat half a score Of ships," Taryn pointed out, the faintest touch of scorn in his voice.

"And Kirk ... Kirk is not with the ship. He is keeping a rendezvous elsewhere." Despite the commander's confident air, Savel noted the lines of strain deepen between his brows.

"Even if Kirk is not there, he will have left one of his senior officers in command of his vessel," Tonik pointed out, mildly. "And even if Kirk is not with his vessel, that by no means makes Enterprise easy prey."

"Yes," one of the junior officers chimed in, "and with only five or six Klingon ships remaining, Kamarag's force might not be threatening enough to bring out the Federation fleet in force. And the fewer Starfleet ships assembling to defend the Neutral Zone, the fewer captains we can induce to cross into Klingon space ... should that tactic prove necessary to gain our ends."

"I regret to say that I have more news that may not please you, Commander," Poldar said, pausing to glance at another communique.

"Intelligence has confirmed the presence of Ambassador Sarek aboard the Enterprise."

Taryn straightened abruptly, and now he was frowning.

"Sarek ..." he repeated, and his officers watched him silently.

After a moment's contemplation of their newest piece of news, Taryn rose from his seat and brusquely dismissed his officers. Savel stayed, knowing that the order did not apply to her. When the chamber had emptied, she stepped closer

to her adopted uncle, touched his sleeve. Taryn, who had been gazing straight ahead, eyes hooded, his expression unreadable, startled slightly and looked around.

"What is it, Vadi?" she asked, softly.

"Why is Sarek aboard that ship?" Taryn asked, his jaw muscles tight with tension. "What is he planning? Sarek never does anything without a reason ... "

"I do not know, Vadi," Savel said. "The one time I was in his presence, at Camp Khitomer, I tried to 'read' him--and could not. His shielding is surprisingly good."

"How much does he know?" demanded Taryn, thinking aloud. "He tried to break into our data banks ... I am certain he was somehow responsible for the malfunction that nearly shut the entire system down that night he was aboard our station."

"How do you know that?" Savel was taken aback to hear about the data banks.

Taryn made an impatient gesture. "I cannot prove it. He left no betraying trace. But I am certain that malfunction masked some espionage attempt on his part. Did he gain access? Copy data? Is it possible that he actually obtained proof of our plans?"

Grinding one fist into his palm, he strode restlessly around the conference chamber, frowning. "No," he said, after a moment, answering his own question. "He has no proof. He would have contacted Ra-ghoratrei if he did ... and our contact in the president's office would have informed us."

"But he did speak to Ra-ghoratrei yesterday," Savel pointed out. "The report said so."

"Yes, but only to warn him against the KEHL. No ... he has no proof. I am sure of that. But now ... to make sure he does not gain proof ... I must lure him to me ... and kill him." Taryn said the last slowly, as

though he almost regretted the necessity.

"Are you sure that he did not somehow warn Ra-ghoratrei, Vadi?"

He turned to regard her as though he'd forgotten her presence. "No ... I know Sarek. He is too proud, too

stubborn to go to Ra-ghoratrei with a tangle of speculations for which he has no concrete proof. He is aboard the Enterprise at this moment because he has come in search of that proof. Now we have a few days before the fleet assembles. During that time ..." A muscle tightened in Taryn's jaw. "Sarek must die."

"But if he is aboard the Enterprise ... As Tonik said, she will not be an easy ship to destroy."

"No ... but if I can lure Sarek to Freelan, I could order one of the squadrons on Freelan to waylay Enterprise and destroy her enroute."

"And if Sarek refuses to come to Freelan?"

"Then we will have to lure Enterprise away from her present position, possibly across our Neutral Zone."

"Why? What purpose would that serve?"

"Two things would be accomplished." Taryn's expression lightened into almost one of pleasure. "First," he held up one finger, "Enterprise would be out of the way of Kamarag's squadron, allowing the Klingon to enter Federation space in full force. And, two"--he held up a second finger--"the delay involved while I allowed Enterprise to search for Shardarr--"

"Without finding her until you choose, I presume."

"Correct ... that time delay will allow at least one or two of our other ships to join us. Facing three, even four cruisers or birds-of-prey, the starship will be outgunned. During the time they waste while hunting us, we will jam their communications to keep Sarek from sending a message to Ra-ghoratrei."

Then, when we are certain of victory, Shardarr and the other ships will decloak ... and we will finish them."

"A good plan, Vadi," Savel said hollowly. "Suppose Sarek had brought Soran with him? He would be killed, too."

"But ... is there no other way? Sarek ... I have heard you speak of him so many times as almost a ... friend. Is there no way to spare him?"

"It is regrettable," Taryn said bleakly, the expression in his dark eyes revealing his' own turmoil. "However, I can

think of no other way to insure that the ambassador does not warn Ra-ghoratrei of what he may have learned about us and our plans."

"He may have already told the president. Killing Sarek may not prevent the Federation from discovering what is happening."

"He has not told him. I am certain he has not. I know Sarek ... I have studied his mind during our chess games.

He is stubborn, and proud. He would insist on having incontrovertible proof ... not mere suspicions." Taryn sighed as he stared at the battle plan still frozen on the wall screen. "I do regret the necessity. I could have wished to keep Sarek alive, so he could be of use as a negotiator."

Unable to sleep, Sarek rolled out of the narrow bunk and paced restlessly around the cramped cabin. Then, driven by an impulse he did not stop to analyze, he slipped on his robe and soft boots and, picking up Amanda's journal, headed for the observation deck.

It was the middle of the shipboard "night," so the ambassador encountered only a few crew members in the corridors or the turbolift. Halting before the door to the observation deck, Sarek touched the entry panel, then stepped into the starlit dimness.

While Enterprise was in warp, the stars appeared different than in subspace ... each bore a trail of light caused by the effect of the spacewarp that allowed the vessel to exceed the speed of light. The closer the star, the more distinct the trail appeared to an observer. On the bridge, the ship's viewscreens automatically filtered out the trails, in order to clarify the image, but here they showed distinctly.

Moving as silently as a shadow, Sarek walked to one of the chairs scattered about, and seated himself. He gazed outward, attempting to clear his mind, preparatory to finding his center. It had been so long since he had gained the tranquility found only in meditation.

Down ... seek the center ... concentrate effortlessly.

Allow all external stimuli and surroundings to slip away ...

Sarek felt his mind and body responding, as he sought out and touched his own center--

The sound of a step intruded into his consciousness.

Sarek's eyes opened as he sensed a familiar presence, and he turned to see Spock hesitating just inside the door of the observation lounge.

"I regret the intrusion," Spock said, coolly, formally, as he turned to go.

Sarek hesitated, wanting to call him back, not wishing to have this enmity between them. But he could not quite force himself to speak.

Suddenly the ambassador was struck by an overpowering sense of what humans called *d6jh vu*--this had happened before ... nearly forty-five Standard years before. Sarek blinked, and the memory surged up, as fresh and real as though it were actually happening ...

The three of them were gathered around the table for the evening meal, and Amanda had prepared many of their favorite dishes herself, not trusting the selectors to season and spice every dish perfectly. Always sensitive to his wife's moods, because of their bond, Sarek soon realized that Amanda was both preoccupied and nervous.. though he could not think of any reason for her to be uneasy.

Eighteen-year-old Spock sat on his right, and the youth's appetite, customarily healthy, was noticeably lacking.

Today Sarek had met with the head of the Vulcan Science Academy to discuss possible curricula for Spock's education, which would begin next term. Sekla, the ambassador recalled (experiencing a flash of pride he did not trouble to suppress), had openly expressed his eagerness to guide and foster young Spock's intellectual and logical development.

His sows intelligence profiles and school records were, in Sekla's word, "impressive." For a Vulcan, that was quite a compliment.

Sekla, Sarek had noted, had been careful not to say,

"Impressive for one of half blood." No mention had been made of his sows shared heritage.

Now Sarek glanced inquiringly from his wife to his son.

"My wife, this meal is exemplary. I thank you. Yet I note that neither of you appears to be hungry. Is something wrong?"

Amanda started, then obviously forced herself to relax as she turned to face her husband. Her brown hair had recently begun to show a few streaks of silver, but her soft features were relatively unlined, and her blue eyes were as sapphire-intense as ever. "Nothing is wrong, Sarek," she said, but he could tell through their bond that she was equivocating ... not actually telling an untruth, but coming perilously close to it. "However, I have determined to finish that translation of T'Lyra's ancient poetry cycle tonight. My editor messaged me today to inquire about when it would be completed, and I have only two poems left. So I will take my leave of you. Spock"--she turned her gaze on her

son, and there was an intensity in her eyes that hadn't been there when she'd spoken to her husband--"will you help your father clear the table? That will give you a chance to talk."

"But, Mother--" Spock began, half-protesting, but Amanda merely gave him a too-bright smile as she collected her own dishes and headed for the autocleaner in the kitchen. Her son avoided his father's gaze as he snatched up his dishes and followed his mother into the kitchen.

Sarek hastily rose, gathered his own dishes, and followed him. What is transpiring here? he wondered, disquieted.

The elder Vulcan was just in time to hear Amanda insist,

"You have to tell him, Spock. You know that." Sarek hesitated, half-shielded by the doorway, and saw his wife give his son an encouraging smile. Spock gave her a wan half-smile in return. Sarek tensed as he saw it. His sows control was virtually perfect in front of him, but, in the company of humans, it slipped occasionally. Once, on Earth, the ambassador had actually seen him grin when he'd thought he was alone, as the youth observed the antics of a pair of his grandparents' kittens.

I will insist that Spock reside at the Science Academy during his course of study, Sarek thought. There are no humans there, and that hould enable him to perfect his control.

Then Amanda left the kitchen, and Sarek stepped in.

Silently, father and son tidied the kitchen and dining area.

When they were finished, the elder Vulcan caught and held his son's eyes. "What is it that you must tell me, Spock?" he asked bluntly.

His son took a deep breath. "Perhaps we might walk outside, Father? The Watcher should be just past full phase."

"Certainly," Sarek agreed.

Together, t he two left the villa and walked into Amanda's garden. As father and son walked slowly, Sarek glanced at his son's face, saw that Spock's mouth was drawn tight, making him appear older than his eighteen years. "Tell me what concerns you, Spock," Sarek said, finally, seeing that the youth was not disposed to break the silence.

Spock drew a deep breath and halted, turning to face his father. His eyes were level, but for a moment a muscle jumped in the corner of his jaw ... twitched once, twice, then was forcibly repressed. "Father, I decided some time ago that I did not wish to attend the Vulcan Science Academy," he said, carefully enunciating each word. "I applied instead to Starfleet Academy. I learned today that I have been accepted as a

cadet."

Sarek heard the words, but it took a second for them to register. Ever since Spock's early childhood, Sarek had watched his eager fascination with the universe, observed and fostered the development of his logical, scientific mind.

For years science had been Spock's consuming interest in life. And now he was talking about giving that up in order to wear a uniform?

The ambassador gazed at his son, searching for words, knowing that he must make the youth recognize the gravity of this error in judgment.

"Spock," he began, careful to keep his voice low, "it is obvious that this constitutes an unconsidered decision on your part. That is understandable ... you are young, after all. But I cannot allow you to ... waste your years of study.

Your thinking processes and logical abilities are eminently suited for a scientific career."

"I do not intend to give up science, Father," Spock said, a spark of eagerness animating his features slightly when he realized that his father was willing to discuss his decision rationally. "Starfleet ... serving aboard a starship ... will provide an unparalleled opportunity for scientific exploration, observation, and study. As a science officer, I will be able to study the universe as I never could if/ remained here on Vulcan."

Spock's control was slipping; his father could hear the passion tingeing his voice. Sarek stared at the youth stonily.

"Spock ... your control," he chided.

The other's eyes fell ... all animation drained from his features. "I ask forgiveness," he said, and Sarek caught just a hint of sullenness in his tone. "At any rate, Father, I have made my decision."

"Spock, what happened just now is an excellent example of why I demand that you reconsider this decision," Sarek pointed out. "In Starfleet, you will be among mostly humans.

Your control is precarious enough. In the company of humans, it may be irrevocably damaged. You could disgrace your people ... your entire lineage if you do this."

"I will endeavor to perfect my control--" Spock began.

Sarek shook his head and continued, adamantly, "Spock, every time your control falters, you reflect poorly upon all of Vulcan."

Spock's features hardened. "My control is my own affair," he said, coldly. "I wonder how my mother would react if she knew you were warning me against being 'contaminated' by her species."

"Your mother has no part in this," Sarek said curtly, feeling his anger at his son's stubbornness threatening his own control. "She is not Vulcan, and this does not concern her."

"Mother is in favor of my decision," Spock said evenly.

"She believes it will be beneficial for me to interact with many different kinds of beings. And I should point out that gaining acceptance into Starfleet Academy is far from easy,

Father. Starfleet chooses only the top five percent of applicants." The youth gave him a sideways glance. "Mother is proud that I have been accepted." Sarek heard the implied rebuke, but did not acknowledge it. "Assuming you graduate," he said, "are you aware that you will be required to take an oath stating that you will do whatever is necessary to carry out your orders? Including kill? Starfleet vessels carry formidable weapons, Spock! You would have to be trained in the use of them, as well as hand weapons. It is eminently possible that you would be called upon to kill another, in the performance of your duty." Spock's expression did not alter. "There is talk of commissioning an all-Vulcan science vessel," he pointed out.

"Perhaps I will be assigned to that ship ..."

"And perhaps you will not," Sarek snapped. His own control was slipping, but, at the moment, he did not care. He paced up and down the garden path, his strides quick and jerky. "You will be a puppet, a toy for Starfleet to order about as they please. You will have no free will. Starfleet officers are respected by the masses, that is true. But no Vulcan has ever graduated from the Academy, my son! Our people are not suited for a life in the service!"

"That is something that remains to be seen, Father," Spock said, with maddening calm. "I have decided that this is a step I wish to take. Do not think you can dissuade me.

My mind is made up."

"Your future is bright," Sarek said, changing tactics. "I have little doubt that you will distinguish yourself as a scientist if you attend the Vulcan Science Academy. If you pursue this other path, however, you will have disgraced your family.. your lineage. What would T'Pol say, if she could hear you planning to bring ruin upon yourself?."

"I have determined that this path is mine, Spock stud. "I cannot allow family opinion to dissuade me."

"If you do this," Sarek said, holding his son's eyes with his own, putting every bit of intensity he was experiencing into his formal words, "you will not be welcome in my lands, your name will not be known to me. If you persist in disgracing yourself and your lineage, I will not be able to excuse you, either publicly or privately. You will be vrekasht to me, Spock, do you understand?" Vrekasht ... the ancient word meant "exile," or "outcast." Sarek regretted having to say it, but it was obvious that strong measures were required to make his son see reason in this.

Spock's features hardened, and his mouth was a grim slash. "Vrekasht?" he repeated. "Is that not rather ... overstating the gravity of the situation, Father? I have only chosen my life's path ... not murdered or mind-violated another."

"If you persist in joining Starfleet, then I have no doubt that you will be called upon to do both, in the course of time," Sarek said, inexorably. "I insist that you reconsider this disastrous course." Spock gazed at him for a long moment; then his shoulders straightened, and he raised his chin slightly. "No," he said, coldly. "My decision stands. If you wish to name me vrekasht, then so be it. Farewell, Father." Without another word, the youth turned and strode away, up the garden path, toward the villa. Sarek watched him go, fighting with himself. Spock was correct to name his son vrekasht was extreme ... and unjustified. Sarek wished he had not done it. The word "Wait!" surged through him, wanting to burst from his lips ... but the ambassador clenched his teeth and the word died in his mouth, unspoken.

Spock's tall figure was at the garden perimeter now ... was still moving ... it was not yet too late ... it was--too late. Over. There was a last flicker of a Vulcan robe, and then his son vanished into the villa.

Go after him, one part of Sarek's mind insisted, but he could not. He was correct, and he would not grovel, would not recant. Logic dictated that he wait for Spock to consider his words. Surely his son would come to his senses.

Sarek stared blindly at T'Rukh, waiting for Spock to reappear. An hour passed ... two. Three, and the ambassador still waited, barely stirring.

Finally he heard a step beside him, and turned, only to find that it was Amanda who stood there. Traces of weeping still showed around her eyes, but her features were composed.

"Where is Spock?" Sarek demanded.

"He beamed out an hour ago," she replied, her expression as cold as the snows of her homeworld. "Our son is gone, Sarek." The Vulcan heard her words, unable to believe that Spock had not reconsidered, had accepted the sentence his father had imposed on him, and had left to pursue this

illogical, distasteful career choice. "Spock.. is gone?" he asked, finally.

"That is what I said." Amanda's voice was flat. "He told me that you declared him vrekasht, my husband. How could you?"

"I was trying to make him come to his senses," Sarek muttered, still stunned by her pronouncement.

"That was a terrible, unjust thing to do, Sarek," Amanda said. "You have done the unforgivable. Spock is my son, and I will not support you in this." She took a deep breath. "I cannot stay with someone who could do what you have done today. I am leaving you, Sarek."

"You are ... leaving? Amanda," he said, carefully, "I do not wish you to leave."

"You have no choice, Sarek. I cannot stay with you anymore.. after this." For the first time, Amanda's voice faltered slightly.

Sarek, noting that?aid, "But you will be back, Amanda.

You will return ... She shook her head. "I don't know, Sarek. Perhaps. Or perhaps not. I only know that I can't bear the sight of you at the moment. Farewell." Without giving him a chance to say anything more, she turned and walked away, just as her son had. Sarek stood in his wife's garden, bathed in T-Rukh's harsh light, alone.

Alone ... Sarek watched as the door to the observation deck slid shut behind his son. His fingers tightened on Amanda's journal. Today he would read of her days without him. She had been gone for nearly a year, and they had never spoken of that time after she'd returned. What had she done in all those days?

Today he would find out.

Those days without her had been the worst of his life ... in some ways, worse even than now.

Why had she come back? Sarek still wasn't sure. His fat her, Solkar, had died, and she had appeared without warning at the memorial service. At its conclusion, Amanda had simply walked over to him, taken his arm, and gone home with him as though she had never been away.

They had never discussed the separation.

Sarek took a deep breath and opened the slim red volume ...

Spock walked along the corridor leading from the observation deck, almost wishing he had not left. His father had appeared so ... alone. For a moment, Sarek had appeared actually ... vulnerable.

But then memories of Amanda's last hours surfaced, and the Vulcan's lips tightened. Vulnerable? His father?

Reaching Kirk's cabin, the Vulcan identified himself and was admitted. Kirk was still in uniform, though the captain had been off duty for over an hour.

"We will reach the rendezvous coordinates in one hour point thirty-two minutes," Spock said, without preamble.

"What are you planning to do, Captain?"

"We're almost a full two days ahead of the deadline, Spock," Kirk said. "Your father and I discussed this yesterday."

He thinks, and I agree with him, that Kamarag is behind this. I believe he's holding Peter on Qo'nos."

"And?" Spock prompted, when the officer paused.

"And I'm going in to rescue him," Kirk said. "With luck, I can take a shuttlecraft in, locate him by sensor, grab him, and get back to the Enterprise before Kamarag even reaches the rendezvous site." Spock nodded; he'd been expecting something like this. "I will go with you, Captain," he said. "You cannot go alone."

"I was planning to," Kirk said. "Invading the Klingon homeworld single-handed is pretty foolhardy ... even for me." He shook his head, as if wondering at himself. "I can't expect anyone to join me on such a harebrained mission."

"You can expect your friends, Jim," said a new voice, and Spock turned to see Leonard McCoy framed in the doorway behind him. "You know better than to think Spock and I would let you go off to tackle a whole planet of Klingons by yourself"

Kirk grinned ruefully. "I guess I do," he said finally, gazing at his friends and shaking his head. "After all, three stand a much better chance than just one, against a whole planet ... right?"

"You got it," McCoy said. "Right, Spock?"

"Right, Doctor," the Vulcan said, firmly.

Kirk spread his hands in a gesture of defeat. "All right, then ... next stop, Qo'nos. I'll meet you on the shuttlecraft deck in an hour."

"Approaching Qo'nos, Captain," Spock reported. "ETA to orbit, twelve point two minutes."

Kirk, who was piloting the shuttlecraft Kepler, nodded in acknowledgment of the Vulcan's words. "Anything within sensor range?"

"I detect no military craft, just freighters."

The captain checked his screens, wishing he had some idea of where on Qo'nos Kamarag's ancestral home lay.

Northern or southern hemisphere? Eastern or western continent?

"Spock," he said, "what are our chances of tapping into the Klingon data banks and accessing some information?"

"I may be able to do so, Captain," the Vulcan said, turning away from his sensor array. Like Kirk and McCoy, Spock wore a black jumpsuit designed for night raids.

"What information do you wish me to access?"

"Kamarag's home address," Kirk said, dryly.

"I will attempt to access its location, Captain," Spock said, turning back to his instruments.

"Y'know, Jim, this will be the first time we've actually seen Qo'nos," McCoy pointed out. The doctor was sitting in the passenger seat behind the captain. "Last time we were there, we were shut up like mice in a shoebox, and shuttled around in closed vehicles."

Kirk nodded. "We didn't even see the planet from orbit." Spock regarded his console intently. "I have Qo'nos on-screen." Intently, Kirk watched as the tiny dot grew until, with magnification on maximum, they could see their destination.

"Look at that," Kirk whispered, after a moment. "I didn't realize it had a ring!"

"That ring is much of what remains of Praxis," Spock said. "There are several large chunks of the moon still orbiting Qo'nos, and corresponding gaps in the ring. This ring is ..." He consulted his sensors. "... approximately two thousand kilometers across, and it orbits Qo'nos's equator at a mean distance of eleven thousand, five hundred seventy-one kilometers." Kirk glanced at his own sensors. "There's also a lot of asteroidal material in the system," he said.

"Correct. A large number of asteroids will impact the planet in approximately fifty years." Kirk stared at the planet that was growing in their viewscreens. "Now all we have to do is avoid detection by the Klingons while we locate Peter." He gave McCoy a lopsided grin. "Sure you don't want to change your mind about coming, Bones?"

"Too late for that, Jim," he pointed out, smiling back at his friend.

Spock cleared his throat. "Piloting the shuttlecraft across the plane of that ring will be difficult, Captain. The Kepler's shielding is limited."

"Why go near the ring at all?" McCoy asked. "You can surely plot a course that will keep us away from it." Kirk glanced at the ringed world, watching it grow steadily in their viewscreen. "If we go in directly, bold as brass, the Klingon sensors will be bound to pick us up, and we'll have unwelcome surface-to-air company in no time," he explained. "I think what Spock is planning"--he slanted an inquiring look at the Vulcan--"is to use the ring as a ver."

"Precisely," said Spock. "As I mentioned before, sensors indicate that the ring has several gaps, caused by large chunks of Praxis acting as ring shepherds. Their gravitational force clears a small gap around them. I recommend that we traverse the ring plane through one of the larger gaps.

Matching orbit with the ring, we can use it as a shield while we locate Peter."

"How are you going to find him?" McCoy asked, staring mesmerized at the ringed planet. "It's a big world."

"I did manage to locate Kamarag's aneostrol compound in the Klingon data banks," Spock said. "Thus we have an approximate idea of where to search. Mr. Scott and I modified the sensors to detect any human life readings. If Peter is the only human in that compound, we should be able to trace him."

"It's a good plan," Kirk said, "but crossing the plane of the ring, even through the longest gap, will require some tricky piloting."

"It is fortunate for us that the presence of the ring, and all the attendant meteor showers since the demise of Praxis, has evidently forced the Klingons to abandon whatever early-warning defense system their planet boasted," Spock said, studying his instrument readouts.

"They probably still have a lot of meteor showers," Kirk said, eyeing the ring. They were now close enough to it that, under the highest magnification, the ring was revealed to be made of millions of chunks of rock, ranging from pieces no bigger than a marble to huge boulders larger than the Kepler.

Minutes later, the shuttlecraft was approaching the gap in the ring. Kirk sent the little vessel skimming along its edge, matching its speed; then he boosted the Kepler's velocity slightly, aiming for the break, which was now clearly visible.

Qo'nos was an awesome sight below them the planet turned, brown and greenish blue, its continents separated by shallow azure seas speckled with atolls. The three largest landmasses were edged by volcanic mountain chains, and it was evidently a far more seismically active planet than Earth.

From this distance, signs of civilization, at least on the

daylight side, appeared minimal. Only a few angular blotches on the western side of the continent below them betrayed the presence of large cities.

But even the world turning below him could not hold the captain's attention for long. As they sped along, Qo'nos's ring dominated their view, spreading out before them like a golden plain studded with nuggets of all sizes. The ring was nearly two thousand kilometers wide at this point--and yet, it was far from solid. Glimpses of the surface beyond it came and went, depending on its density. Kirk's eyes widened as he studied the vista.

"Shields at maximum, Captain," Spock said. "Ready for crossover."

"It's a good thing we'll be crossing over on the dayside of the planet," Kirk said. "Otherwise, dust vaporizing against our shields would spotlight us from the surface, if we tried this on the nightside."

"Will the shields hold?" McCoy asked tensely.

"Long enough to get us through," Kirk said, hoping he wasn't being overly optimistic. He kept his eyes glued to the last-minute course corrections flashing up at him. "Barring any major collisions, of course," he added.

"Even though the gap is relatively free of large rocks, it still contains quantities of dust and small particles. The shuttlecraft's shields were not designed for continuous bombardment, Captain," Spock warned. "They may burn out." Moments later, the ring gap lay directly below them.

Kirk's fingers skipped nimbly across the controls as he delicately jockeyed the shuttlecraft into position. With a short blast of the maneuvering thrusters, the captain began the crossover.

Even here, in this relatively "clear" portion of the ring, they were buffeted by debris. The little craft bucked as the shields absorbed the impacts of direct hits from gravel-sized rocks--one, two, three ... a dozen--Kirk lost count. All the while his hands moved, keeping them on course, heading them down and through the sparsest portion of the gap.

He was aware, peripherally, of Spock backing him from the copilot's seat, making tiny adjustments that helped stabilize the Kepler.

"Shields are weakening," the Vulcan reported matter-of-factly.

And then, a second later, he added, with a touch of excitement, "Captain, I am picking up Peter's readings ... " Where? Kirk said. "Can you plot a course to bring us down near him?"

"Affirmative," Spock replied, and, only a few seconds later, the heading the Vulcan had computed appeared on Kirk's screen. Quickly, the captain laid it in.

"Shields are down by eighty percent," Spock cautioned.

"We're almost out of it," Kirk said tightly, fighting the controls of the bucketing Kepler. "Ten more seconds, and we're home free!"

"Shields are weakening ... weakening ..." Spock said.

Then the Vulcan added, matter-of-factly, "Shields are burned out, Captain."

"We're okay," Kirk said, his throat raw with tension.

"We're out of it. Now all we have to do There was a sharp crack of sound as something struck the Kepler, rocking the shuttle violently; then Kirk heard the high, thin shriek of escaping air pressure. "Bones, check the air pressure! Spock, take over!" he ordered, moving to locate the impact and exit points of the tiny rock that had struck them. Moments later, the captain saw with satisfaction that Kepler's automatic sealant system was working as it was designed to, covering the tiny holes. The whine of escaping air lessened, then stopped. Jim returned to his board.

Moments later, he knew they were in trouble. The shuttlecraft's directional controls now responded sluggishly to his exploratory commands. "Damn it," Kirk said, feeling the Kepler yaw. "Piloting this thing down through atmosphere won't be easy."

"You going' to be able to land this crate, Jim?" McCoy asked, his voice carefully casual.

"We're sure going to try," Kirk said. Grimly, he fought the controls, struggling to keep the shuttlecraft on course. It wouldn't help them to land safely in one of Qo'nos's oceans,

and he certainly didn't want to find himself setting down thousands of kilometers from Peter.

It was a bumpy ride, nursing the crippled shuttle down through Qo'nos's turbulent upper atmosphere, fighting to keep the little craft stable and on course.

Finally, they were approaching their destination. Red sunlight from Qo'nos's setting sun splashed them as they headed down. Kirk wished for Sulu as he struggled to keep the Kepler's landing skids parallel to the ground. It had been a long time since he'd landed anything in these conditions.

Glancing at his course readouts, he realized that they were about six kilometers from his intended destination, and thought, Close enough. I don't mind walking ...

Glimpsing a gap in the tree cover below, the captain sent the craft down into it, and suddenly they were engulfed by huge trees with strange, feathery leaves and giant red seedpods.

"Come on," he whispered to the little ship. "You can make it ... almost there ..." He made a last-minute adjustment, saw the ground rushing up toward them. Too fast!

"Brace for crash landing!" Kirk managed to shout, even as Kepler's nose plunged downward.

The shuttlecraft hit, bounced wildly, struck again, bounced again, then, finally, stopped. Kirk pushed himself upright in his seat, looking around dazedly as he unsnapped his safety harness. "We made it," he said, disbelievingly. He turned to regard his companions, who were both sitting up, their expressions somewhat dazed.

"Captain," Spock said, "we should leave the vicinity quickly. Our erratic approach may have been sighted."

"We obviously can't escape in the Kepler," Kirk said, gazing ruefully at the damaged shuttle as they prepared to abandon ship. "Can you tell if there are any spaceports nearby?"

Spock held up his triorder, nodded. "Fifteen and a half kilometers due west," he said, "lies the port called Tengchah Jav." He slung the instrument over his shoulder.

Working quickly, the Vulcan opened the weapons locker, extracted three small phasers, checked their settings and power packs, then distributed one to each of them.

"I'm going to set the shuttle to self-destruct," Kirk said, his fingers moving over the controls.

"Be sure you give us time to get out of range, Jim," McCoy admonished, scrambling hastily out of the craft.

After setting up the self-destruct sequence, Kirk, with Spock and McCoy behind him, walked away from the doomed Kepler. Jim gave the little craft a valedictory pat as he left, wishing there were some way to

salvage the ship.

The three set off, walking quickly into the forest, picking their way over rocks and fallen logs, as the night gathered around them.

Once you step upon this path, Valdyr warned herself, your life as a Klingon will be over. There would be no place for her anywhere in Klingon society, not on Qo'nos, not on her colonies, not anywhere. She would be outcast, scorned and marked for death. She closed her eyes, struggling not to let the magnitude of her plan stay her hand. This is the path before you, she reminded herself. For you, it is the road of honor, whether any other Klingon anywhere in the universe ever realizes that.

For the final time, she checked her weapons. Under her sleeve, against her forearm sat her small, wicked, three-pronged dagger, where a sudden jerk of her wrist would release it. At her right hip hung the small, silent crossbow that had been her favorite weapon since childhood. While it was best used in close conditions, it did not have the hum and whine of modern weapons, and would not reveal a concealed shooter. Under her breastplate sat two hand disrupters, their battery packs fully charged. She touched the weapons one final time. Then she took the key to Peter's cell. He was still her prisoner.

Straightening her armor and tunic, she left her room and headed for her uncle's private quarters. Du'hurgh, Kama-rag's ancient family estate, was a massive, old fortress, with dozens of rooms and numerous passageways and staircases.

Taking an obscure route, she came to her uncle's quarters stealthily, concerned that Karg might have guards posted, but there were none. And why should there be? After all, who would dare enter Kamarag's private quarters in the ambassador's own home? His simpleminded, weak niece?

And even if she did, what could she do there?

Moving silently, Valdyr slipped into her uncle's favorite study. Once inside, she stood perfectly still, waiting, listening, but there was no one, not even a serving woman.

Valdyr was nearly overcome by memories once she stood inside the cavernous chamber. Every kind of ancient armament hung from its walls, as well as paintings and tapestries of the finest warriors of their family's lines. Her father had brought his children here every summer, and the compound and this place, in particular, called up vivid memories of him. Valdyr stared at the images of long-dead heroes and remembered her father's thrilling tales of their exploits.

How she'd longed to be like them! Her gaze fixed on the portrait of a woman, her many times great-grandmother who had fought at her husband's side in so many decisive battles hundreds of years ago. That image had

always been her favorite. She gazed upon it now, knowing she would never see it once she left here.

Then, so be it.

Moving to the computer that appeared so out of place in this ancient hall, she paused for one last moment before using the private code of her dead father to activate this link with the outside world. Then she sent a carefully composed message to Brigadier Kerla, consort to Chancellor Azetbur.

Her father had served under Kerla many years ago, before he was promoted and sent to serve with Kruge. Her father and Kerla had been good friends, trusted allies.

Valdyr knew Azetbur trusted Kerla as well. She would have to take a chance with him. The message, at first, would seem like a normal piece of correspondence. She had to make sure that it would be sent through the relays, that no one would pay it any mind and stop it on its journey. The relays would slow it down, she knew, but she could think of

no other way to insure that Brigadier Kerla would receive it.

She was, after all, only the daughter of a dead hero, only the niece of an ambassador. Perhaps her father's name would take her message to Kerla's hands. If it did not, than Peter, his uncle, and Valdyr herself were all doomed.

Peter lay on the stone bench, reading and trying to keep his eyes from staring at the vacant glass portal. The waiting was becoming unbearable. Would Uncle Jim really just give himself up to Kamarag? He couldn't! He would know kidnapers never live up to their promises, especially a kidnapper as crazed as Kamarag. Peter sighed, trying not to 'wear himself out worrying over a situation he could do nothing about.

He heard the slightest click, and his gaze snapped to the portal, but no one was there. Another click followed, and Peter was on his feet instantly. It was happening. They were coming to take him ... to Valdyr. Uncle Jim had actually done it, given himself up. His mind raced wildly.

His door swung open, and Valdyr entered, pointing a wicked-looking Klingon hand disrupter at him. So, she'd had to come for him herself. Boy, these people did nothing to make things easier, did they?

"Are you ready?" she demanded.

He stood up straight "Yes. I'm ready."

With a quick flip of her wrist she tossed the disrupter at him. He snatched it clumsily, then stared at the weapon in his hand. He realized

she was holding a small crossbow by her side. "What's going on?" he whispered.

"Shhhh," she warned him, then stuck her head out the door, looking both ways. "Be prepared to use that. We have a long, dangerous journey ahead of us. You must stay close to me, Pityr."

He grinned. "Try and stop me."

They moved quickly through endless, ancient stone corridors in stealthy silence, and the whole time he hadn't a clue as to their destination.

After a good fifteen minutes of climbing dark, winding

staircases, and tiptoeing down long unused hallways, Valdyr finally halted. Turning to her, she pressed her mouth against his ear and whispered, "Now it becomes difficult." Now? he thought, and stared at her.

"To leave the dungeons is easy if you take the back passageways," she explained quietly. "They are no longer used. But to enter the secret tunnels, you must go through the heart of the compound. We will have to be even more cautious. And we must be ready to fight."

"I'm ready," he assured her. "Lead the way." She opened the antique door cautiously, indicating that he should wait behind in the stairwell. He watched her through a crack in the wood as she stepped into a spacious, well-lighted hallway. She had just begun to signal him to follow her when two burly Klingons rounded a corner. She froze, as he did.

"Valdyr!" one of them said to her congenially. "Karg has been looking for you. He wishes you to join him at the midday meal. You'd better hurry." She stiffened and frowned. "And because Karg wishes it, Malak, I am to obey? I am no trained targ, and I take no backhand summons from my uncle's pet." Her tone dripped contempt.

Peter rolled his eyes, unable to believe that she was going to get into a row with these two apes now. But the guard merely laughed, apparently enjoying her display of spirit.

"I told him you would not listen to me, Valdyr," Malak agreed, "but I, too, must do as I am bid by my commander." Suddenly the soldier with him sniffed. "Do you smell something?" Malak tested the air and looked thoughtful.

Damn it! Peter swore silently. He hadn't had a real bath in over a week, and his sponge baths, no matter how thorough, were a poor substitute. Besides, you're a human. You smell as different to them as they do to you.

Before Malak could answer, Valdyr sneered, "Who could smell anything

while Karg walks these halls?" Malak laughed again. "Oh, Valdyr, you were always a terror. I miss serving with your brother. If Karg were wise, he'd seek another wife. Make things easy for yourself and hurry along. You might still get a choice cut of meat. Come, Darj, we have work to do." The laughing soldiers moved on, but Peter could see Darj looking about the hall, as if trying to find the source of the odor he'd detected. Valdyr watched them for a few minutes, then yanked open the door.

"Hurry, there is no time! Karg will come looking for me if I do not answer his summons shortly. Clutching his sleeve, she towed him through the hallway. Finally, she stood before a huge piece of furniture. She peered around behind it, then glanced at Peter, as if assessing his size. "The passageway is behind this closet. I think you are thin enough ... "

"I knew I smelled something foul?" an angry voice said behind them.

They spun, and Peter found himself facing Darj. He was alone, holding a weapon on both of them. He glanced at Valdyr, who was still half behind the closet, half exposed.

There was no way they could pretend she was just "moving the prisoner." Their attempt to escape was plain.

"Malak thinks little of his commander," Darj said, moving carefully around them. "Fortunately for Karg, I am loyal! Malak will be demoted, but if he's fortunate, he'll be allowed to live. You two, however, will not have that privilege. Valdyr, move away from that closet, now."

"Certainly, Darj," she said demurely, surrendering. She stepped away from the massive wooden piece, revealing the crossbow held firmly in her right hand. She fired at the same instant, and the quarrel buried itself deep in the soldier's throat.

Darj collapsed heavily, gurgling, then lay still. Before Peter could react, Valdyr snatched up the soldier's weapon and pocketed it, then rifled through his uniform. She shoved several small items into the pouch she wore on her belt; then she began tugging the heavy body toward the closet. "Help me!" she gasped, and Peter, who'd been standing there, stunned--he'd never seen anyone killed before--jumped to obey.

"Into the closet," she ordered, and the two of them wrestled the heavy body inside the massive wooden structure.

"This way? she snapped, and he followed her as she squeezed behind the heavy furniture.

In back of the old wooden object was a small door that opened inward. Valdyr pulled out an ornate iron key, and unlocked the secret door. It slid open easily. And then they were inside, the door shut securely

behind them. Peter stood stock-still, in total darkness. If she abandoned him here.

A light flared and he winced at the sudden brightness.

Valdyr was in front of him, holding a tiny but powerful lantern. "We will be safe for a while now. The only one who knows these passages is my uncle, and he is not here. Karg knows nothing of them. the fool can search the entire compound and never find us. And even if they find Darj's body and discover this passageway, by that time we will be deeply into the hidden chambers."

She started moving along the narrow tunnel, and Peter followed her. "But how long can we stay here?" he wondered.

"We only need to stay until dark," she explained. "Then, we can follow the tunnels, and leave the compound."

"You mean these passageways will actually take us outside this fortress?"

"That's correct. They were built hundreds of years ago, and have been used by entire armies during local conflicts and feuds. There are dozens of warrens and chambers, enough to hide an entire squadron of soldiers. We will be safe ... until we leave. Once outside the compound we must try to reach the spaceport--but by then Darj will surely be missed, and your escape discovered. They will be searching for us."

They moved swiftly through the tunnels, saying little, as Valdyr guided them to safety. Finally, she ushered him into a small, cozy chamber, then set about lighting battery-powered lamps that hung on the wall. "This place had always been special to my oldest brother and myself. We used to play war in these tunnels, and hide from our nurses down here." She moved over to a narrow bed, her only furniture in the room, and sat down. "We spent hours down here, making up stories, planning our futures ... "

Peter remembered her speaking of her brother's death.

"You must miss him."

She nodded. "He was a lot like my father. He treated me more like a little brother than a sister." She looked about the dimly lit chamber. "It as almost as if I can feel his spirit here ... "

Peter watched as her eyes moved around the room. She had just killed one of her countrymen. She was giving up everything in her life to do this for him. He didn't know what to say to her. "I ... wish I could've known your brother. I would like to think ... we could've found a common ground ... "

She turned to him. "My brother and father would approve of what I'm doing. They would know I'm fighting for Qo'nos, for the future of all Klingon people."

Peter nodded. "I'm sure they would. You've chosen a very difficult path, Valdymm much more difficult than armed combat. You bring honor to their memory."

They sat in awkward silence for a few minutes. Finally, she said, "I have sent a message to Azetbur. Once she receives it ..."

"When did you send it?" he asked, interested. "What did it say?."

She explained about sending the message to her father's old friend, Brigadier Kerla, and how she had addressed and phrased it cautiously, so it would go through the channels without being intercepted. "However, I know that will slow it down. I cannot say how long it will take before Azetbur will even see it."

Peter thought she was being optimistic. Realistically, it could be hours before the thing even got into the hands of this Kerla, assuming some well-meaning staff member didn't misinterpret it and delay it even further. "When the chancellor finds out what you've done, she will surely reward you."

Valdyr looked away, her expression grim. "I have betrayed my family. She may personally be grateful, but ... family

honor is very important to our people. There will be no rewards for what I've done. I expect to be outcast ... you would say, homeless, shunned ... when this is over. But I will have my own personal honor. No one can take that from me. Not Karg. Not Kamarag. No one."

He admired her obstinate courage. "Valdyr ... I want to thank you for helping me. And as long as I live, you will always have a place in my family ... for whatever that's worth."

She looked at him, her expression shocked. "You would accept me in your family? And how would your people feel about that, a Klingon woman coming to them? What of your uncle--he hates us. How will he feel about this?"

"My uncle is fair," Peter insisted. "The tragedy of Gorkon's death changed the way he regards your people. He is as close to me as you were to your father. I assure you, my uncle would welcome any warrior as brave as you into our family."

"Then I hope we all live long enough to meet, Pityr. I have heard much of this James Kirk. It would be interesting to face him and see if the man and legend are the same."

Peter started to smile when a mark on her neck caught his eye. He squinted. It was a terrible-looking bruise. He touched it gently. "What happened, Valdyr? How did you get this?"

She flinched and moved away, so he pulled his hand back, fearing he'd been too familiar. She looked away, and he thought he could see her color darkening in the chamber's muted light. "It is just ..." she began hesitantly. "It is nothing ... "

Then he realized. "Karg did this to you." His voice was low as he tried to suppress the outrage he felt. "That's what happened, isn't it? This is from Karg."

She turned, met his gaze defiantly. "It is Karg's mark. He marked me so everyone would know to whom I belonged. I fought him, but he's ... too strong for me ... "

Peter's fury flared. "I'd love to have about ten minutes alone with that guy in a locked room," he grumbled.

She watched him curiously. "This bothers you, Pityr, this mark from Karg?"

"Of course it bothers me," he blurted. "He touched you against your will. No one should be allowed to do that."

She actually laughed then, and the lightness of that sound startled him. "Oh, Pityr, you humans are unusually funny!"

If I were strong enough, I could keep Karg in his place--it might be a good marriage then--but because I am small, he has all the advantage."

"It shouldn't have anything to do with strength, Valdyr," he argued. "You should only be touched when you choose to be, and by whom you choose to be."

"I see. And because Karg forced his touch on me, you are angry with me about this?" she asked.

"Of course I'm not angry with you/I'm furious at Karg."

"Furious enough ... to fight for me?" She asked the question so quietly, Peter instantly understood that the question meant more to her than its simplicity indicated.

He stared into her deep, dark eyes, realizing that this was the first interaction they'd been able to enjoy without having the viewing port between them since she'd first dumped him into his cell. They were together, here in this small room, with no one around, just the two of them. He swallowed, wanting to make sure he said just the right thing. "My people believe that fighting is the last resort, that there are

always alternatives to violent confrontation ... but ... I must confess ... that guy ... Yes, Valdyr. If I had the chance, I would fight Karg for you."

Her eyes widened as if she could not believe he'd actually said that. She looked as if she might say something, than hesitated, and finally murmured, "Pityr. What are apricots? ...

He blinked, momentarily confused. Then he remembered telling her that was how she smelled to him. He smiled.

"They're a delicious fruit from Earth. They're only available a short time each year, so they're highly prized. They have a wonderful perfume, and a bowl of them in the warm summer air will scent a whole room. My grandmother grew

them and we couldn't wait every year until they were ready to be eaten."

"And ... I have this same scent?"

"Yes ... "He leaned closer and deliberately inhaled her odor. Moving slowly, for fear of shattering the mood between them, he touched her face, turning it to him, as he allowed his lips to graze her cheek lightly.

"What.. are you doing?" she whispered, holding per-fee-fly still.

"Kissing you," he explained, pressing his mouth to the edge of her jaw, then the corner of her mouth. "Do Klingons kiss?"

"Yes," she murmured.

He met her gaze unflinchingly. "What do you want? Do you want me to touch you?"

"I want only one male on Qo'nos to touch me," she admitted. He started to pull back slightly, afraid he'd misinterpreted her interest. "I want Pityr Kirk ... a human.t ... and a warrior. to touch mew She said it as if it amazed her.

Then, as if her confession suddenly granted Peter total freedom, he took the woman in his arms, armor and all, and pressed his mouth against hers.

The kiss began tenderly, but almost immediately it ignited all the stored-up emotion of his long days of captivity.

Peter pulled Valdyr fiercely against him, and was aware of her arms coming up to encircle him with a strength he found exhilarating. "Hlja.t" she whispered, between kisses.

"Mevqo', Pityr ..."

There was no way in hell he could stop.

Finally, when they pulled away, she laughed and bit his chin hard. He yelped and bit her back. And in the next instant they fell upon the bunk, wrestling, yanking at each other's clothing, rolling over and over in strenuous love-play that sent them crashing to the floor, laughing, biting, tussling. Finally, he landed on his back, Valdyr straddling him, pinning his shoulders to the ground.

"I like this way of kissing. You will teach me this human

kissing, Pityr Kirk!" she demanded before dissolving in laughter again.

He heaved her up and tossed her off him, rolling over to pin her down this time. "I will teach you this human kissing, Valdyr-oy. And you will teach me ... ?" He had no idea what to ask for.

She touched his cheek, her eyes glimmering. "Everything, Pityr-oy. I will teach you everything."

He leaned down and began their lessons ... "Ambassador Sarek?" Commander Uhura's voice was as cool and professional as usual, but there was an underlying note of tension in it that made the Vulcan raise an eyebrow as he activated the intercom in his cabin.

"Samk here, Commander," he replied.

"I have a message coming in for you, Ambassador," she said. "The codes accompanying it identify it as being from Freelan." The way she trailed off alerted the ambassador.

"Is it originating there?"

"All the codes are correct, and the directional frequency is right ... but I don't believe it's actually coming from them.

My guess is that the transmission is being relayed via Freelan from some other location." nodded. "That does not surprise me, Commander Uhura. Please patch the message through to me here ... and, if you can do so without arousing suspicion, trace the actual origination coordinates of the message."

"Understood, Ambassador," she replied. Almost immediately the comm screen in Samk's cabin flickered, and, a moment later, he found himself facing a Freeinn. Despite the fact that Freeinns appeared virtually identical in their shrouding robes, the Vulcan was certain that his caller was Taryn. "Greetings," Sarek said, cautiously. "This is Ambassador Samk."

Whom do I have the honor of addressing, please?"

"This Liaison Taryn," the image's mechanical tones responded, without preamble. "Ambassador ... I must ask you to meet with me on a matter of some urgency."

"Where would you like to meet?" Sarek said. "As you have already discovered, I am not on Vulcan."

Taryn's shrouded figure moved slightly, and the Vulcan thought he detected tension in the dark form. "Why ... I had hoped you could come here, as is our custom," the Freelan liaison said.

"When would you prefer to meet?"

"As soon as possible."

Sarek shook his head. "I fear that will be difficult, Liaison.

The ship that is my transport has been diverted to patrol the Neutral Zone. I will be unable to meet with you until the Enterprise has completed its current mission. Why do you need to meet with me, Liaison?"

Taryn did not reply for a long moment. "That trade agreement we negotiated last month concerning kivas shipments," he said, finally. "My government has overridden some of the provisions I agreed to. I have no choice but to ask you to reconvene the negotiations."

Sarek raised an eyebrow in feigned surprise. "Overridden?" he asked. "Liaison, when we met, I trusted that I was dealing with someone with sufficient authority to negotiate in good faith. I am ... disappointed ... to discover that you no longer have the backing of your government."

When the liaison replied, the Vulcan could hear the anger lacing his voice, even through the mechanical tones. "I assure you, Ambassador, that this is simply a temporary setback. I have not lost the backing of my government. I do have the power to negotiate in good faith for my world."

For the first time, Sarek permitted a touch of sarcasm to tinge his own voice. "Your world? Which world is that?"

"What do you mean?" Taryn demanded angrily.

"My apologies," Sarek said, smoothly. "My mind must be ... confused. Age catches up with all of us, as the human aphorism would have it. For just a moment I thought I was speaking with someone else ... a diplomat from another world altogether, by the name of ... Nanclus. You never met him, of course. He was executed for treason last month."

"When can you meet with me?" Taryn asked, and the mechanical tones could not disguise the cold fury in his voice.

"I do not know," Sarek said, honestly. "I will have to consult with the ship's officers to discover that. I will speak with you again by the end of today, Liaison."

"I may be away ... at a government conference," Taryn said. "My aide will take your message, Ambassador."

"Very well." Sarek inclined his head and raised his hand in the Vulcan salute. "I wish you peace.. and long life, Taryn." ' Without replying, the Freelan broke the connection.

Sarek sat staring at the screen for a moment, until Uhura's face flickered into view. "Ambassador Sarek ... I was correct, sir. That call was patched through Freelan channels, but its actual point of origin was in a sector of the Romulan Neutral Zone. The exact coordinates are a few hours' journey from our present location."

Sarek inclined his head graciously. "I thank you for your diligence, Commander," he said. "I find that information unsurprising ... but ..." His mouth curved slightly as he thought about his son's reaction. " ... fascinating."

In his office aboard Shardarr, Commander Taryn pulled off his muffling Freelan cowl and inhaled a deep breath of "fresh" air before turning to face Savel, who was sitting across the desk from him. "He knows." The commander's deep voice was grim. "He knows everything. Now he mocks me with his knowledge. There is no question anymore.

Ambassador Sarek must die ... and as quickly as possible."

Quickly, the commander contacted Poldar over the intercom and ordered him to plot a course that would take them within subspace jamming range of the Enterprise.

"Our foremost ships are still half a day's journey away from our present location, Commander," the centurion reported, when asked.

"What will you do now?" Save/inquired softly.

The commander gave her an enigmatic glance. "Delay, Savel. Make Enterprise notice me, then hunt me, then chase me ... until it is my pleasure to turn the tables, and hunt her."

Sayel gazed at him, her eyes wide and haunted, full of silent apprehension and sadness. Where is Soran? If he dies.. I will be the cause of it ... of all of this ...

"Pityr," Valdyr whispered against the cadet's car, "we have to leave now."

Peter Kirk groaned, not certain whether he'd actually slept, or simply lain, half-drugged with exhaustion and satisfaction. The room appeared the same as it had when they'd entered it, the lantern still illuminating the dimness, and he had no sense of time.

"Pityr," she whispered, "it is time. We must go."

"Not yet," he argued. "Just a few more minutes ."

She sighed, then relaxed against him. "One more minute," she said. "Perhaps two. But no more, 7woy ..."

The human stroked her back, feeling the contours of flesh over bone that weren't quite human. He realized that he ached. I must be covered with bruises, he thought, remembering what had passed between them and marveling at it.

Not to mention toothmarks. A faint taste lingered in his mouth, sweet and somewhat smoky. Peter ran his tongue over his raw, bruised lips. The faint saltiness of his own blood now mingled with the alien taste of hers.

He tightened his arms around her, then kissed her again.

He didn't want to leave now. He didn't even want to move, though the floor they were lying on was so cold and hard that he was shivering.

Finally he raised his head, resisting the urge to kiss her again, to savor the taste and texture and feel of her strange mouth again ... and again. "What time is it?"

"It is the middle of our night," she explained, as she picked up her small lantern. "The few soldiers my uncle left here with Karg should be weary from searching for us since the midday meal. Karg would've come looking for me

shortly after I failed to heed his summons. I don't know how long it would be before they missed Darj. Eventually, someone would've thought to check your cell." He was surprised to see her grin.

She stood, and began pulling her clothing into place, then redonned her armor. "They will search the road to Tengchah Jav--the closest spaceport. Even if Karg were bright enough to figure out that we hid on the premises--which he's not--he will have to search very discreetly.

Kamarag gave orders that nothing should arouse suspicion from any official agency of the Klingon government."

"So, what's our plan?" he asked, as he slipped on his boots.

"We will take the tunnels to the farthest exit, and come out in the woods near the south road. We can stay in the forest and follow the road to the spaceport. It will be perhaps nine of your kilometers to the port."

"Can't they scan for me while we're under here?" he asked. "After all, I am the only human in the nearby vicinity."

She patted a wall. "There is so much scionite in these walls that scanning rays cannot penetrate. That is why they cannot follow us here--to the scanners, this does not exist."

"And once we're out of the tunnels?"

"I have a small tracer for you. It will give off a false registration--make the scanners think you are another Klingon. Soldiers carry them so they can be found where they fall in battle, so they might receive their warrior's ritual. It will mask your readings."

"Suppose we're seen?" Peter asked. He tapped his forehead.

"Don't you think someone might notice?"

"I have a hooded cloak for you," she said. "I cached one here yesterday." She opened a recessed drawer under the stone sleeping shelf and pulled it out.

"You've thought of everything," Peter said, "I think.

What happens when we get to the spaceport?"

"We will have to get past the security gates, and keep a close eye out for Karg's troops. Then, I will help you find a

ship." She hesitated, glancing at him sideways. "You will escape Qo'nos ... "

"You mean we will. Right?" he demanded, taking her by the shoulders.

"You're coming with me, back to Earth.

Aren't you?"

Valdyr gazed up at him, smiling sadly. "That is what I thought too, at first. But ... I've reconsidered. Pityr ... be realistic. A Klingon, on Earth? How could I live? I would be an exile, an outcast, living among a species that hates my people--even as my people hate yours ...

"We don't have to stay on Earth," Peter insisted. "There are colonies where even we wouldn't be noticed."

"And your career in Starfleet?"

"Listen, all that time alone in that cell made me think, too, and one of the things I've realized is that I'm not James T. Kirk and I never will be. I want to be myself I'm not cut out to be a legend, Valdyr. I'm just not cut out for command." He regarded her worriedly. "Valdyr-oy ... think what will happen if you stay behind! Your uncle ... when he catches up with you ...

Her exotic alien beauty almost glowed as she responded assuredly, "Do not worry, Pityr-oy. He will not catch me. I will die by the Heghba', with my honor intact."

It took the human a second to realize that she meant ritual suicide, and when he did, his hands tightened convulsively on her shoulders. "No!" he cried. "Don't even think it?"

"I have betrayed my family by helping you," she pointed out reasonably. "There is no other path left to regain my honor."

"Don't talk like that," he said fiercely, his heart pounding with fear for her. "You're not doing that! I won't let you!"

"You'll have to fight me, Valdyr ... !" He stopped, realizing how frantic he sounded.

Her face was very close to his in the confines of the dusty, stone-walled chamber. Peter felt her breath touch his face as she said, softly, "The last time I fought you, I won. But you were exhausted, at the end of your stamina. I do not think it will be so easy for me the next time."

He pressed his cheek against hers and held her to him. If that was the best she could do for capitulation, he'd take it.

But at least she knew if she attempted to stay behind at the spaceport, he wouldn't give in without a struggle.

"Now, we must go," she whispered and, taking his hand, led him out of the room.

She led Peter along dark, dusty corridors that twisted and turned without rhyme or reason. They traveled a surprisingly long time, saying nothing, with no light but Valdyr's small hand-held lantern.

Finally, the corridor they were in ended in a tunnel that ran straight up, with an ancient-looking, battered wooden ladder traveling up into the darkness. Without a word, Valdyr began climbing, and Peter followed without hesitation.

Finally, she halted, and Peter could see an opening in the stone before her.

"Good," Valdyr whispered. "They have not discovered this exit. Quickly, now!" She was out of the opening in seconds, and Peter clambered out after her. And then for the first time he stood on Qo'nos's soil, conscious and aware.

Despite Valdyr's urgency, he paused to glance around.

In the darkness, the forest looked like any forest at night--heavy tree trunks crowding in on one another, with tangled, shapeless underbrush at their roots. In the daylight, the colors and textures that would make this forest unique alien--would be revealed, but for now, all that was lost.

Then Peter glanced skyward--and stood transfixed.

Overhead, washed in gold by the reflected light of the sun on the planet's other side, Qo'nos's ring arched like a bridge--a broken bridge. The shadow of Qo'nos bisected the middle of the ring, leaving it in darkness.

Valdyr threw the cloak over his shoulders and fastened the tracers. "Pull your hood up," she commanded him. "We must hurry."

James T. Kirk picked his way cautiously down a narrow animal trail, squinting in the darkness. From the look of Qo'nos's ring, it was nearly midnight. His night vision was

excellent, almost as good as Spock's. (Unfortunately, the same could not be said for his regular eyesight--and he'd now gone through so many pairs of spectacles for reading that Bones McCoy claimed to have exhausted the supply in all the antique shops in San Francisco.) The rescue party had had to detour around several large, private estates, which had nearly doubled their hike through the dark forest. Now, finally, the trees were thinning ahead of them. "How far are we from Kmarag's compound?" Jim whispered ahead to Spock. "My sense of direction has been off ever since we made that last detour."

"We are almost--" The Vulcan broke off, and halted.

"Correction. We are here." Kirk pushed his way through the last screen of undergrowth, McCoy following him. Together, the little party looked down from a high ridge, seeing the huge, fortresslike house down in the hollow, surrounded by both high stone walls and modern security fields.

"There seems to be a lot of activity going on," Kirk said, noting the brilliant security lights and the presence of many armed figures racing to and fro.

Spock regarded his tricorder intently. "Peter is no longer within the compound," Spock said.

"Not there? Then where is he? Did they take him off-world?" Kirk demanded, startled. Had Kamarag decided not to meet at the rendezvous? Had the Klingon ambassador somehow discovered that Kirk had no intention of obeying his instructions, and had returned to execute his nephew in revenge?

"Peter has vanished," Spock said. "He is not in the compound at the present moment. However," the Vulcan added, fiddling with his tricorder, taking readings, "that does not necessarily mean that he is now off-world. The rock formations in this area contain traces of selonite ... the same material that forms the basis for the cloaking device. It makes readings impossible. If some of that scionite-impregnated rock is between us and Peter, that would make it impossible to scan him." Kirk groaned aloud. "Just what we need!"

"I believe I should continue scanning," Spock said. "I may be able to pick him up again ... if he is in the area." Leonard McCoy plopped himself down on the ground with a groan. "Haven't hiked this much since Yellowstone," he grumbled, digging into his belt pouch and taking out a small flask and container of ration pellets.

The three officers silently shared the skimpy provisions as Spock continued to study the screen of his tricorder. "Fascinating," the Vulcan murmured, after a few minutes. "I am picking up something ... confusing. For a moment I thought I had detected Peter, but now the human readings are blending and merging ... becoming intermixed with Klingon readings."

"Where? What location?" Kirk demanded, jumping up.

"Due north," Spock said, pointing. "On the other side of the compound."

"Is it possible that it might be Peter, somehow masking his readings?" McCoy asked, peering at the tricorder's tiny screen.

"I believe it may be," Spock muttered.

"Well, it's the best lead we've got," Kirk said.

"Captain ... these readings are moving toward the spaceport," Spock said. "Slowly ... at a walking pace." Spock glanced up at his friend. "I believe, Jim, that your nephew has not waited for rescue. He has, instead, effected his own escape." Kirk felt a slow grin spread across his features. "Well, that was damned inconsiderate of him, wasn't it?"

"Now what?" McCoy wondered aloud.

"Guess our next stop will be the spaceport, too," Kirk said, glancing at

his wrist chrono. "See that ground vehicle that just pulled up there, outside the security gate?" He pointed down into the hollow.

"Yes, Captain," Spock replied.

"Think you could hot-wire that thing?"

"I believe I can, Captain," Spock said.

"Good. Let's make our way down there ... slowly. Keep

low. Take no chances. We've got plenty of time; we're going to hijack that car in just about ... forty-five minutes." The three officers cautiously made their way down the little ridge, crawling commando-style where there was no ground cover. Finally, they huddled crouched in a thicket about thirty meters from the guard station. The driver and the guard were standing outside, talking desultorily. The fugitive trio waited in silence, until, finally, Kirk glanced at his chrono again.

"Ready, Spock?"

"Ready, Captain." Kirk counted seconds in his head, and then, right on schedule, came the moment he'd been waiting for. A dull boom erupted from the forest they'd left behind, and a gout of distant yellow and red flame brightened the night. Half a second later, the ground beneath their feet shuddered.

"That's it!" Kirk said, grabbing McCoy and propelling him out of their hiding place. "Go!" Spock was already racing forward. The guard was still outside his security station, his gaze fixed on the fire in the foothills. He never saw the Vulcan's dark figure, never realized that anyone was there--until a hand clamped onto the juncture of neck and shoulder, and he sagged, limp.

The driver turned toward his fallen comrade, then launched himself at Spock's dimly seen shape with a loud war cry. Kirk darted up behind him, chopped him hard on the neck, then kicked his feet out from under him. When the Klingon, dazed but still game, tried to get up, the captain stunned him with his phaser.

The captain caught his breath, then turned toward the car.

"Want me to drive?" he asked, heading for the open door.

"With all due respect ... no," Spock said, firmly, heading him off. "I have analyzed the controls with my tricorder, and I would prefer to drive. Your efforts at chauffeuring during our sojourn on Iotia are still vivid in my memory." Kirk chuckled as the three would-be rescuers piled into the ground vehicle. It was a matter of moments to activate the engine and turn the car. Kirk crouched beside Spock and felt adrenaline course through his body. He glanced back at McCoy, who was gripping the edge of the backseat with both hands, holding on as Spock

sent their stolen transportation barreling down the road.

"Jim, how the hell did you know that would happen?" the doctor demanded, pointing in the direction of the explosion.

"That was the Kepler," Kirk said. "You told me to give us plenty of time to get away ... and it came in handy as a diversion." With a sharp cry, the doctor grabbed the seat again and held on for dear life as the car slewed around a sharp curve.

"Dammit, Spock, watch it! You're a Starfleet officer, not a chauffeur!"

"Spock, how long till we reach the spaceport?"

"ETA is ... fifteen point seven minutes, Captain," Spock said, intent on driving. He sent the vehicle skidding into another tight turn, frowning slightly in the lights of the controls. "This road, unfortunately, winds about rather than going directly through the woods. I apologize for the ... instability ... of the ride." Kirk grinned, feeling the car surge forward. "Just as long as it gets us there before Peter gets off-world, Spock. That way we'll only have to steal one ship."

"I shall endeavor to avoid that eventuality," Spock promised gravely, and increased speed until the groundcar seemed ready to take flight.

Peter and Valdyr had alternately walked and jogged for over an hour before they reached the edge of the forest, which ran almost up against the spaceport. The two paused for a moment, staring down at Tengchah Jav's perimeter security gate--the first of several hurdles they had to surmount in their quest to get off Qo'nos.

Valdyr glanced over her shoulder, then fished in her pocket, as they approached the gate. "This gate is programmed to admit any valid identification," she told him.

He gazed at the security device that would scan the number of people approaching and only admit those with the proper ID. "That's great," Peter remarked, watching her take out a small ID disk. "I don't have one."

"Yes, you do," she said. "I took Darj's." Handing him a disk, she fed hers into the scanner. "Before I killed him, I'd wondered how I would get you past this point."

Peter followed suit, and the gate swung open. Quickly, the two headed for the nonmilitary side of the port. If they were in luck, they would find a small, private vessel that was unsupervised while its crew was on shore leave. "Maybe we can find a trader or a smuggler's ship," Peter told Valdyr,

"with a Federation registry. Federation vessels have standardized controls. I know I can pilot one of those. What other checkpoints do we have to cross?" he asked in a low voice, as they hurried along, watching keenly for any sign of Karg or his troops.

"There is an inside gate that leads to the civilian landing fields, but it is not always guarded," she whispered. "If there is a guard ..." She patted her crossbow.

Peter swallowed hard. "Valdyr, there's got to be another way. If there's a guard ... distract him somehow--act helpless, or something."

She spun, glaring at him.

"Just for a second!" he argued. "While he's helping you, I'll come up behind him and knock him cold."

"Are you sure you can?" she asked pointedly. "You'll only get one chance. Perhaps you should act helpless!"

"Let's not argue technique, okay?"

She nodded, if reluctantly. "Once we're inside that gate, we'll have to choose a ship. Of course, they are all locked ... "

"I should be able to break the codes," Peter assured her.

"I learned the basics for breaking computer codes back when I was in my teens, and most freighters--especially the older models--don't have the most up-to-date security systems."

"That would be great," Valdyr began; then she glanced back over her shoulder again, only to halt in her tracks. "Lights! A ground vehicle!" she whispered, shoving the human toward a stack of vacuum-proof packing crates. "Hide!"

Peter leaped for cover and Valdyr joined him. They crouched, rigidly still, scarcely daring to breathe. After a

moment, he peered around the nearest container, making sure he was in shadow. He watched the vehicle as it skidded to a stop. "Someone's in a big hurry," he whispered, with a sinking feeling in his midsection.

"It is one of Kamarag's vehicles," Valdyr said, with despair in her voice. "They have tracked us, somehow."

Without discussing it, the two fugitives both took out their disrupters and prepared for battle. They watched anxiously as the vehicle's doors opened, and three black-clad shapes emerged. Two were tall and lean, the other shorter and stocky. They moved furtively, and one kept glancing at some device in his hand--probably a scanner or tricorder. Peter groaned

inwardly. Valdyr took his hand, gripping it so hard she made the bones grind.

Then his eyes narrowed as he stared at the three shapes.

The stockier man was obviously in charge ... both of the others turned to report to him as they searched. There was something about the way that one moved. Something familiar ... They wore no traditional Klingon garb that he had ever seen. And none of these figures looked big enough to be any of Karg's men. The shapes of their heads in the shadows seemed ...

"We must kill them with the first shot," Valdyr murmured softly in his ear, "or we will never escape."

He nodded distractedly, even as the three searching figures drew closer to their hiding place. "Wait," he whispered,

"let them get closer first. We can't afford to miss."

She aimed her weapon, even as he did. But then he lowered the disrupter. He was too busy staring at the tallest of the three figures. There were too many things all wrong about this. The tall searcher suddenly moved through a beam of light, and his face was illuminated. Peter saw a flash of a familiar arching eyebrow, and the unmistakable curve of a pointed ear.

Valdyr took deadly aim at the stocky male who was now almost on top of them. Peter lurched, grabbed her firing hand, and called, "Valdyr, no!"

She turned to him, her face twisted in confusion. The three stealthy figures turned in unison toward the sound.

Peter surged to his feet, distantly hearing the Klingon woman's shocked growl. She clutched at him, attempting to pull him down, but he yanked free and bolted away, trying to get clear of the crates. "Uncle Jim!" he called softly. "It's me! Peter!"

"Peter?" Kirk halted on the pavement, staring wildly around until he spotted his nephew. "Peter?"

The young Kirk launched himself at his relative, and Jim seized his nephew in a bear hug, nearly lifting the taller man off the ground. They pounded each other's backs until they wheezed, grinning wildly.

"Gentlemen, I hate to intrude." Spock's cool tones cut across their emotional give-and-take. "However, if we are to effect our escape, we must not lose any time."

"I'm with Spock on that, Jim," Leonard McCoy agreed, glancing furtively around. "We can't afford to get caught now."

"Right," Kirk said, stepping back and regarding Peter fondly. Then the cadet watched his uncle's expression change to surprise, then alarm.

Peter turned to see Valdyr cautiously emerging from behind the stacks of crates. She was still clutching the disrupter. All three men wheeled in her direction, even as Jim Kirk's hand dropped to his phaser.

"No, Jim! Wait! She's with me! That is ..." He paused, collected his wits as all three men glanced between him and the Klingon woman. He walked over to the crates and took Valdyr by the arm. He murmured to her, "Time to holster the weapon." Then, leading her somewhat reluctantly to the small group, he introduced her. "Captain James T. Kirk, Dr. Leonard McCoy, Captain Spock ... this is Valdyr. I wouldn't be here without her. She helped me escape.

She's ... on our side." Peter trailed off, his face growing hot. The captain stared at his nephew, as if wanting to be sure he meant what he said.

"So," Valdyr said, eyeing the senior Kirk up and down,

"this is the famous legend?"

The captain looked slightly abashed. "Well ... I am out of uniform ..."

"I presume she provided you with the Klingon robe," Spock asked, reaching over to pull an object from it, "and the tracer?"

Peter nodded.

The Vulcan examined the device. "Yes. Here is the cause of those confusing tricorder readings. It very nearly kept us from locating you."

"It kept Kamarag's men from finding us, as well," Peter explained while Valdyr glowered.

"I can well imagine," Spock agreed dryly. "It is fortunate that Federation technology is more advanced than ..."

McCoy elbowed Spock, and the Vulcan abruptly fell silent. The doctor stepped smoothly into the breach, all his Southern courtliness in evidence. "Well, if you've been helpin' Peter out, miss, we're all mighty grateful. Aren't we, Jim?"

Kirk paused for a second, then finally said quietly, "Of course we are. Thank you for helping Peter. For ..." He glanced quizzically at his nephew. "... everything ..."

"Not to belabor Spock's point," McCoy added, "but it's time we got

ourselves out of here."

Peter gave him a sharp glance. "Valdyr's coming with us.

Where's your ship?"

Before Jim could say anything, Spock cleared his throat.

"We ... are currently without one."

Peter rolled his eyes. "So we still have to steal a ship?

That's where we were at before you showed up!"

"Miss. ... Valdyr," McCoy said, still exuding polite charm, "do you know the layout of this spaceport?"

"The commercial freighters and off-world vessels are on that side," she said, pointing southwest, "and the military vessels are in a shielded underground hangar--to protect them from meteor showers--over there." She pointed in the opposite direction.

"I was hoping to find a freighter," Peter said.

"Forget that," Kirk told him. "We're going to need something with a cloaking device if we hope to get out of here in one piece. A bird-of-prey should do the job nicely."

Peter's mouth dropped open. Is he crazy? But Valdyr

nodded in agreement. "My uncle's men will not expect us to go for a ship that would be impossible for two people to pilot."

"Your uncle ... ?" Jim Kirk said.

Peter sighed and nodded. "Her uncle is Kamarag." None of the three Federation officers said anything for another long moment while Valdyr drew herself up stiffly.

Peter wondered if any human male in history ever had such an uncomfortable family introduction.

The entire group climbed back into the crowded vehicle and turned toward the manned gate half a kilometer away that was the entrance to the military side of the spaceport.

They drove toward a cluster of outbuildings until Valdyr directed them into a convenient alley. They were able to position the vehicle so that the gate was within sight, while keeping the groundcar in darkness. The group huddled inside began to confer.

"There are two guards," Valdyr told them.

"We can handle that," Kirk said, touching his pocket.

"We're armed. Phasers on stun." Spock, McCoy, and Kirk drew their weapons. "Spock and I will move along the fence line ... "

"Jim," McCoy interrupted, "you'll be out in the open.

Don't you think they'll see you?"

Kirk gazed out of the vehicle, mulling over options.

"The chances of our approaching the guards without being seen," Spock informed him, "are approximately ..."

"Spare me," McCoy groaned.

The Vulcan raised a surprised eyebrow.

"There is a simpler way," Valdyr said suddenly, with a sigh. "If your weapon can stun, then give one to me. I can approach the guards as if I were--how do you say it?--a helpless woman." She glowered at Peter, who only smiled back at her. "They will not be expecting trouble from one as small as myself. When I am close to them they will be easy to stun, and there will be no chance of them sounding an

Kirk nodded and Spock handed his weapon over to the

Klingon female. When she was out of the vehicle, Kirk regarded his nephew. "You do trust her, Peter?"

Peter nodded. "Valdyr has not only given up everything--including her heritage--to save my life, but, I ... I'm in love with her!" He took a deep breath.

The sudden silence in the car was shocking. McCoy's eyebrows had climbed to his hairline, while Spock began an intense examination of the vehicle's interior. Kirk gaped at his nephew. Peter swallowed. He had wanted to find the perfect moment to discuss this with Jim; he hadn't meant to just blurt it out in front of everyone.

"Does she know that?" the captain finally asked quietly.

Peter shook his head. "She knows ... I care for her. I know she cares for me. We really haven't had the time or opportunity to have the kind of meaningful discussions people like to have in a developing relationship."

There was another uncomfortable pause, and then Spock interrupted "She is at the gate."

The four men watched the Klingon woman as she sauntered up to the two guards, twitching portions of her compact form provocatively. One of them started grinning as soon as he saw her. Peter found himself wondering how one acted sexy while wearing armor ... but, in a flash of insight, he realized that the armor itself was exciting for Klingon males! Whatever Valdyr was saying to the two guards made both of them focus on her, and lose all interest in their post. This small spaceport must not see many problems, he imagined. No doubt these two men spent most of their time bored and restless.

Suddenly, Valdyr arched her back, stared up at the closest guard, and bared her teeth. He grabbed her by the hair and tried to yank her over to him, even as the other one grabbed her, pressed himself against her, and bent his head to her neck. Peter's temper flared and his hand had grabbed the handle of the car door when Spock's reasonable voice intruded. "Wait," the Vulcan cautioned. "One moment ..."

No sooner did he say that than the two Klingon guards suddenly looked amazed, then crumpled to the ground.

Valdyr grimaced, spat on the one who had clutched her, and then matter-of-factly grabbed the closest by the heels and began struggling to wrestle him into the guard station.

"That's our cue!" Jim announced, and opened the vehicle's doors.

At the gate, Spock lifted one of the unconscious Klingons effortlessly and arranged him at his station inside the small building, while the captain and McCoy struggled with the other one.

Peter grabbed Valdyr by the shoulders. "Are you all right?"

"Uuughh? she grunted. "I had to let those veq-nuj handle me. I'm sorry now I didn't just kill them!"

"Valdyr ..." Peter said warningly. She gave him a knowing look, then handed Spock back his phaser.

Suddenly, a mechanical whine intruded, and the entire party turned to look out the windows at the source of the sound. Feeling a rumble beneath his feet, Peter glanced over at a portion of the pavement that was rising into the air, like a huge trapdoor. Distant figures surrounded a small vessel that was on the platform rising up level with the landing field.

"Looks like a miniature bird-of-prey," Kirk said.

"That is essentially what it is," Valdyr confirmed. "A small, armed shuttle, very fast and maneuverable, it usually has a crew of three to

six."

"I'd say that's exactly what the doctor ordered," McCoy said, "if only we could get to it."

Peter shook his head. "Forget it. I can see at least three crew members out there, as well as four maintenance staff."

"We wouldn't have a prayer of swiping that ship."

Kirk sighed. "Probably not," he admitted. But the expression on his uncle's face said otherwise.

"A helpless woman will not get you that ship," Valdyr warned.

"No," Jim agreed. "And if we try to take out the crew and the maintenance staff, even with three hand phasers and two disrupters against all of them, we'd be spread awfully thin. It

would be hard to get close enough to stun them. These little jobs don't have much range."

Valdyr lifted her head proudly as the captain casually included her.

Jim continued to eye the ship speculatively. "It'll be tough enough just taking off, much less avoiding pursuit and setting a course that will bypass that ring ... "

"What he's sayin', miss," McCoy translated for the Klingon woman, "is that we're going' for it, soon as he finishes tellin' us how impossible it is!"

Suddenly, an alarm began to whoop. The crew near the ship looked up, and automatically the fugitives ducked so that they wouldn't be seen through the guardhouse windows.

Valdyr pointed excitedly through the front windows, toward the automatic gate she and Peter had entered with their coded disks.

Several vehicles had just arrived, and armed Klingons, small in the distance, were aiming heavy disrupter rifles at the gate with its blaring alarm. Suddenly, the gate blew apart, its metal structure screaming, its beams and support hardware twisting and shattering. The Klingons poured through the perimeter, over the blasted chunks of debris that had been the entrance.

"Karg's men!" the Klingon woman said. "They have finally traced us."

"Karg must've decided that they couldn't capture us undetected, so they're staging an all-out assault!" Peter agreed.

The warriors surrounding the small bird-of-prey had noticed the invasion, too, and were pointing at the running figures.

"Stay down!" Valdyr ordered everyone. "Don't let them see you!" Tossing her disrupter at Peter, she leapt out of the guardhouse, brandishing her dagger. In Klingonese, she shouted at the men guarding the small bird-of-prey. "Enemies have come to steal your vessel] Defend yourselves' Waving her weapon at the ship, she beckoned the crew. With a roar, the ship's crew members drew their own weapons and charged forward to confront the invaders. With a

mighty yell, Valdyr raced toward Karg's troops, and the soldiers from the ship followed her blindly.

"Valdyr, no!" Peter yelled, and lurched after her, but Jim grabbed him roughly by the arm.

"She's bought us the time we need!" Jim told him. "We can't go up against that firepower with three phasers! Now come on, we've got to get that ship!"

"She'll be killed!" Peter argued. "I'm not leaving her!"

"Spock," the captain ordered.

"Peter, please," the Vulcan said quietly, taking the cadet's arm in a formidable grip, "I would regret being forced to carry you to safety."

McCoy was peering out the doorway at the ensuing melee of soldiers firing at each other. Disrupters whined and crackled. "Time, gentlemen!"

The captain stuck his head out the door to confirm McCoy's diagnosis. "You've got Peter, Spock?"

"Yes, Captain."

Peter stared at the Vulcan, calculating his chances at pulling away from the taciturn science officer without leaving his arm behind. Uncle Jim, McCoy, and Spock left the guardhouse at a dead run, and Peter had to either move his feet or be dragged. Pulling back as much as possible against the Vulcan's immovable strength, he turned his head, straining to see Valdyr, but it was impossible to pick her small frame out from the mass of huge, fighting men. If he left her this way, he knew he'd never see her again. He'd never be able to live with himself, either.

"Spock!" he implored. "They'll kill her!"

The Vulcan's expression softened just slightly, but he didn't slow down. "Once we're aboard the ship we may be able to effect her rescue."

Peter told himself that Vulcans never lie, and prayed that the old

saying was true.

He heard the disrupter fire cease, and looked back at the mob of Klingons. He was shocked to see a number of bodies sprawled on the ground, dead, and realized that the remaining soldiers, as a group, had turned and were staring, and pointing, at them.

Spock saw it, too. "That is, if we get to the ship ..."

A loud voice Peter recognized as Karg's suddenly shouted, "HALT, HUMANS!"

"We can make it!" Kirk insisted, as they drew closer to the ship.

"Halt, now!" shouted Karg again. "Or, we will kill this female maghwl?" A jolt of disrupter fire charged the air, blasting the ground a few meters in front of Peter and Spock.

The next blast nearly took off McCoy's leg.

Spock stopped running, and, even so, they nearly piled into McCoy, who had skidded to an abrupt halt. "Jim!" the doctor bellowed. "Stop, dammit! They've got our range!" The captain halted, and turned, his face grim and set.

The combined group of soldiers closed the gap between them. As they did, Peter shook his arm where Spock still gripped him. "Spock! Let me go!"

Spock stared at the cadet. "If I do, you will do nothing foolish?"

Peter hesitated.

Spock's eyebrow went up; then he sighed, loudly. "Never mind. It was a poor choice of words. You are, after all, a Kirk." He released the human's arm.

"They killed the ship's crew, her maintenance staff," McCoy murmured in a shocked tone.

Peter's heart sank. And now Karg had them all, Valdyr, himself ... his Uncle Jim. The cadet decided he must be some kind of bad-luck hex. After all, Uncle Jim had gotten out of a million scrapes worse than this before. As Karg drew near them, he could see he was towing Valdyr by the hair.

She was unarmed. There was magenta blood splashed on her arm, and some smeared on her face, but he didn't think any of it was hers.

"Won't Kamarag be pleased!" Karg gloated as the soldiers drew abreast of them. "No doubt he's having some trouble finding his quarry in the immensity of space. When he returns, won't he be impressed when we

present him with not only James T. Kirk and his wretched kin, but also the gutless Vulcan computer and the butcher who calls himself a physician! You will all pay for your crimes against Qo'nos!"

Peter heard McCoy murmur a bitter, "Oh, brother ... not again!"

"I have committed no crimes against Qo'nos," the captain said, coolly. "I only came here to rescue my brothefts son, who is also innocent of any crime. Besides," he added,

"Chancellor Azetbur invited me to visit her world anytime after I saved her life at Khitomer."

The watching troops stirred when they heard their chancellor mentioned, though Karg was undismayed by Kirk's reference. The captain glanced around at the circle of armed Klingons. "Chancellor Azetbur knows nothing of your betrayal ... yet," the officer reminded them boldly. "If you abandon this scheme of Kamarag's now, you can still save ."

"Chancellor Azetbur is our enemy/" Karg bellowed furiously.

However, Peter noted that several of the soldiers shifted uneasily, glancing at each other surreptitiously. Others glanced around, uncomprehending, not understanding the captain because they didn't speak English.

Peter studied them, an idea growing in the back of his mind. Perhaps not all of these men were totally committed to betraying their government. There came a time when even good soldiers had to question bad orders ...

The cadet recognized one of them, Malak, and saw that he, particularly, seemed uncomfortable. In the harsh glow of the spotlighted landing field, he saw two gleaming weapons on Malak's belt. One of the daggers was small ... delicate.

He had Valdyr's blade Karg was still ranting. "That slut! Azetbur is a pretender/ She is ..."

"Appointed by her father," Peter said loudly in Klingonese, raising his voice to be heard over Karg's baritone, "and ratified by the Klingon High Command. She is no pretender, but the legal head of your Empire. A rightfully appointed head of state, who is working toward saving your planet!"

All eyes turned to him as, dramatically, he swung his hand overhead, pointing to the ring, the debris of Praxis that encircled Qo'nos. "It's still there, isn't it? It hasn't gone away, has it? The symbol of your world's inevitable demise.

You all know that, without the help of the Federation, Qo'nos is doomed. Your military vessels are housed in underground shelters to keep them

safe from meteors that gouge your world. How many of you have lost loved ones to the meteors? Is that the way warriors want to die? Being struck by veq from the sky?"

Peter realized that his uncle, the doctor, and Spock were staring at him. Even the captain and McCoy, who were probably hearing him over the Universal Translators they carried, seemed impressed. Several of the soldiers looked uncomfortable, glancing at Karg guiltily as if wondering what they were all doing there in the first place.

"Azetbur is working with the Federation to guarantee you a future," Peter reminded the Klingons. "She's not dwelling on the past, like this qoh"--he pointed at Kargm"who thinks that he can make the past into the future, when anyone who raises his eyes can see that is impossible!

Azetbur, like yourselves, looks up at the sky and reads what is written there--change. Change and continued life for Klingons and Qo'nos! Your chancellor wants to make sure there is a future for all Klingonsmnot just the wealthy ones who can hide in the fortresses, and not worry about what falls from the sky. Your chancellor is loyal to the people of Qo'nos--and she needs your loyalty in return. Do not betray her!"

It wasn't a bad speech, Peter realized. He suspected that he had more than one convert in the crowd.

"Listen to him!" aldyr implored. "You heard from Treegor how he can fight! He defeated two Klingon warriors at once! Peter Kirk is a warrior, like yourselves. He speaks from his heart."

"Silence, you lain be7" Karg snarled, and swung a vicious blow at her face.

Before Peter could react, Valdyr blocked the blow and slammed an elbow into Karg's midsection, under his breastplate.

Then she punched him hard in the face with the back of her own fist, making his nose spout blood.

Karg never released the grip on her hair. Enraged, he swore violently and, in a blur, yanked his dagger out of his belt and stabbed the woman viciously in the gut, twisting the knife and drawing it up as hard as he could before yanking it out.

Valdyffs eyes widened, but she didn't cry out. Instead, she spat directly in Karg's face. Blinded, he released her, and stepped back. Valdyr's eyes rolled up and she crumpled to the ground, her hands folded over the wound. Blood gushed through her fingers.

The Klingon soldiers seemed stunned by Karg's action, as though they could not believe that their commander could be so foolish as to kill Kamarag's own niece.

Peter screamed "NOW" and bolted to Valdyr's side, barely realizing that McCoy moved with him, some medical diagnostic tool already in his hand. "Valdyr! Valdyr!" the cadet shouted as McCoy swung the tool around, recalibrated it, swung it again, muttering wildly to himself.

She can't be dead. t he thought frantically.

The Klingon woman's eyes fluttered feebly, finally opened. The dark light in her eyes was dim, barely focused.

"Pityr ..."

"Valdyr! Hold on! Fight like the warrior you are! Don't give in!"

"Pityr ... ? You must flee ... "

"Valdyr, listen. You'll be okay, just listen. Oh God, Doctor, do something! Valdyr ... you've got to live. You've got to! I love you, Valdyr. Do you hear me? I love you!"

A smile flickered across her face, revealing crooked teeth as McCoy fumbled in his medical kit. He found a hypo, adjusted it, then pressed it against her neck. "You love me?" she gasped. "This is true?"

"It's true, I swear it before all Qo'nos. I love you."

She nodded. "We cannot weep. But we can love, Pityr.

You are my mate. With you I would take the vow. I love you, too." Then her eyes closed again, and her head rolled to the side. McCoy cursed vehemently and gave her something else.

"Bonest' the captain asked softly.

McCoy shook his head, but continued working feverishly.

Peter felt every emotion he'd suffered through and repressed well up in him and explode in a blinding rage. He touched the blood still seeping through her locked fingers, then enclosed it in his fist. Clenching his teeth in fury and bitter sorrow, he slowly rose ... and turned toward Karg.

"Son, wait," his uncle warned quietly, but Peter ignored him.

Taking a step toward the Klingon, he thrust out his fist, still dripping with Valdyr's blood, and growled, in Klingonese, "One of you who still possesses a warrior's honor, give me a dagger, so I may deal with this traitor who has no pretense to honor left him--to attack an unarmed female.t"

"You would challenge me?" Karg asked him incredulously, shifting the dagger that still gleamed with Valdyr's blood.

"It is his right," Malak said, stepping forward. "Valdyr has named him her mate." The soldier removed the woman's dagger from his belt and tossed it to Peter, who caught it by the hilt.

"It is a good day to die," Peter announced, smiling wolfishly as he advanced on the officer.

"Peter! No!" Jim shouted, lurching forward.

But Spock caught his captain by the arm before he could interfere, saying quietly, "Jim. This is a cultural issue."

"Dammit, Spock," Kirk growled.

"It is Peter's choice," Spock reminded him.

Karg charged the young man, his dagger extended. Peter deflected it, and punched the Klingon hard in the eye with the fist that held Valdyr's knife. With a second swipe, he opened a shallow cut on the Klingon's corrugated forehead.

It bled freely. Karg howled, and his eye began to swell and close, even as the blood dripped down, further blinding him.

Peter spun around the warrior, the small blade licking out, caressing him as delicately as a lover, nicking his ear.

Flick ... and Valdyr's dagger scored the back of Karg's gauntleted hand. Flick ... now his cheek was laid open.

The small cuts humiliated the warrior, enraging him past all caution. Karg lurched forward, stabbing blindly, as Peter

danced out of the way, leaving a razor-thin line of blood along the Klingon's neck.

The officer recovered himself slightly, holding back, and when Peter came in again, he sliced the cadet's arm. The human ignored the wound, though it burned like fire, and, flick--this time the little dagger cut the small leather strap that held the right side of Karg's armor close to his body.

The armor flapped annoyingly now, distracting the warrior.

Roaring with rage, he charged the rapidly moving human, but Peter stepped aside like a matador, and, as he did so, he chopped his fist down on the Klingon's bull-like neck, deadening the nerves in his arm, nearly causing Karg to drop his dagger. He aimed a powerful kick at the

soldier's midsection, but Karg was ready, and blocked, numbing his foot and halfway up his leg.

Limping, Peter staggered out of range, then came back in, and landed a ringing blow to Karg's chin, making his head snap back. The Klingon's teeth clacked shut, and blood suddenly poured from his mouth. Before he could recover, Peter grabbed the healthy mass of hair that was a Klingon warrior's pride.

"We humans call this 'death by humiliation,'" he whispered in his enemy's ear. "Think of it as return payment for the way you abused Valdyr." With a swift flash of her wicked blade, he severed most of the long hair from Karg's head.

Behind them, he could hear the other Klingons laugh uproariously.

Karg went wild, bellowing and swearing as he charged the human. Peter sidestepped him, and clubbed him hard where his neck and back joined. Karg's eyes rolled up, and he fell heavily, face forward, onto the pavement, then lay unmoving, unconscious. Peter, his rage still unspent, hovered over the body, sweating, heaving for air. He wanted Karg to get up, again and again, so that he could beat him to a bloody pulp--then slice him like a holiday roast.

"Kill him, young Kirk!" Malak urged. "It is your right. He will have no honor left to him, if you let him live."

No one moved as Peter shifted Valdyr's blade and stared at the back of the unconscious soldier.

Then a weak, tremulous voice cut the air. "Pityr ..." He blinked, looked around, saw Valdyr lying on the pavement, with McCoy still working on her. Her eyes were half-open, her bloody hand raised slightly, beckoning him.

"Dammit, man!" McCoy snapped at him. "Will you get yourself over here before she burns up the little reserves she has left tryin' to get your attention!"

Peter glanced up at Malak. "Karg doesn't deserve any honor. He's a traitor, a man who brutalizes those who are weaker than he is. Let him live with the shame of his defeat." He left the unconscious Klingon and moved to Valdyr's side.

He took her hand as she whispered in a thin voice, "You fought for me?"

"And won," he said slipping her dagger back in its place.

"With your knife."

"My warrior ..." she whispered, and lost consciousness again.

As the Klingon woman slipped back into unconsciousness, McCoy continued to work on the hideous wound in her abdomen. He worked swiftly with the tiny electronic microcautery, but she had lost so much blood already!

Jim and Spock drew near the fallen woman. "Bones, will she make it?"

The doctor never looked up, never lost his focus. But before he could answer, a harsh, accented Klingon voice called out, "This is the man who killed Chancellor Gorkon?" McCoy glanced up, saw one of the soldiers pointing at him.

"Now he will kill Kamarag's niece!"

"Not bloody likely," McCoy swore. "I'm not going' to let her die."

The shame of that failure still burned within him. The fact that the chancellor's death had caused him--and his best friend--to be sent to that hellhole Rura Penthe was bad enough ... but really, it was the death of Gorkon himself that upset McCoy. He had never before lost a patient because of his own lack of knowledge. Working on the chancellor for those few, futile moments had been the

blackest point in his entire career. To struggle to save a dying man ... and know so little about his most rudimentary needs ... First, do no harm, the law of healers said, the law that ruled McCoy's life. After Rura Penthe, he'd sworn that would never happen to him again. Not ever. Ignoring the soldier's insult, he focused on his patient.

"In the time since the chancellor's death," Spock suddenly said, addressing the crowd, "Dr. McCoy has studied Klingon physiology extensively. He is completely qualified to assist this woman."

The warriors did not seem mollified. Then Malak stepped forward. "It is well known that Vulcans do not lie."

Does everyone still believe that load of horse-puckey?

McCoy wondered, sealing the wound, and packing it with a sterile, inflatable foam from a small container in his kit.

The doctor noticed Spock's expression change, as if he suddenly realized what an opening he'd just been given.

"Warriors, know this," the Vulcan intoned. "You serve Kamarag loyally, yet even Kamarag does not know that the plans he has made have been influenced by the mind of an alien. Kamarag's thoughts and plans are not his own--he is little more than a puppet."

The Klingons all looked at one another, then at Malak, who seemed stunned.

"Why else would Kamarag," Spock continued, pressing his advantage, "after three years of silence, suddenly concoct this plan to kidnap Peter Kirk and lure James Kirk to his death, when James Kirk himself was responsible for saving Azetbur's life? Did none of you question Kamarag's motives? Did none of you question his plans to commit treason? Did none of you question the lack of honor in his scheme?"

Malak answered for the group. "We did have questions, the same questions Valdyr had from the beginning. But we are loyal to Kamarag's house, as our families have been for generations. Now I look at what it has brought us, and I have no answers. We have lost some of our brothers, and have been forced to kill warriors we had no feud with." He

gestured back at the dead soldiers that had been protecting their ship.

"If we can get off Qo'nos, and meet with Kamarag," Spock explained, "we hope to prove to him how he has been influenced, and sway him from his course."

Malak nodded. "Vulcans do not lie, so I believe you." He looked down at McCoy. "Do you believe you can save Valdyr?"

McCoy wiped the sweat beading on his brow. "I've got her stabilized ... barely. If I could get her to the Enterprise, to our sickbay ..."

"Take her," Malak said, startling the doctor. These fierce-looking warriors were actually going to let them go? Malak looked at Captain Kirk and Spock. "Take the bird-of-prey."

If you can outrun those who will surely come after you, do so. Save Valdyr. And, if you can, save Kamarag. Then I will have done my duty to my lord." He turned to his men, as if waiting for a challenge, but none came.

"Can we move her?" Peter asked McCoy. The boy's face was nearly white with worry.

"Carefully," McCoy warned, worried that any sharp motion would reopen some of those bleeders.

Spock leaned down and asked, "Shall I?" Gratefully, McCoy nodded, watching protectively as the Vulcan gently lifted the unconscious woman and stood up with her cradled in his arms.

McCoy trotted alongside Spock as they all headed for the small warbird.

"Spock," Peter said, "I can override the lock, but I'll need your tricorder." At the Vulcan's nod, Peter unfastened the device from around Spock's waist, then made himself busy with the lock that would extrude the gangplank. His fingers flashed over the controls of his tricorder as

he searched for the proper sequence. Suddenly there was a soft thunk; then, with a hiss of pressurized air, the ramp extended out and down. Kirk was in the lead, already heading for the ship's bridge.

"Put her here, Spock," McCoy directed the Vulcan, and

the science officer lowered Valdyr onto a padded seat set back away from the tiny bridge, then went forward. McCoy crouched beside the woman, checking her wound and reading his diagnostic tool. Everything had held. The wound was secure. McCoy glanced around the tiny cabin.

Wouldn't this ship have its own medikit, with Klingon-specific drugs and equipment?

"How bad is it?" Peter asked, his eyes searching the older man's face.

McCoy hesitated. Finally, he admitted, "There's a lot of internal damage, but, Peter, with her spirit ... if anyone can make it with this much damage, I'd say she can." Peter nodded, and tried to smile wanly. McCoy looked up to see Jim hovering over his nephew's shoulder.

"We're going to need you up front, Peter," the captain ordered.

"Aye, sir," the cadet responded and, with a final glance back at Valdyr and McCoy, moved up to the bridge.

Good, thought the doctor, get him out of my hair so I can get some real work done.

Peter watched his uncle Jim swing himself into the pilot's seat and begin powering up the ship. Spock, to Peter's surprise, elected to take the gunner's seat, leaving the navigation console to the cadet.

Moments later, the tiny shuttle lifted off and swooped upward. Peter could see the change come over his uncle as Kirk gloried in the small ship's skyward rush. The cadet called off a course, and Kirk fed it into the ship's computer.

Suddenly, a harsh Klingon voice came over the intercom, demanding to know the ship's flight plan, its registration number, and a half a dozen other required things ships had to have before leaving the spaceport. Peter found it ironic that even Klingons had bureaucracy.

"Any way we can bluff our way out of this?" the captain asked his crew.

"I can speak enough Klingon, Uncle Jim," Peter told him,

"but I just don't have the answers to their questions."

"Nor do I, Captain," Spock told him.

"Fine," the captain said casually, and slapped the inter-corn into silence, cutting the speaker off in mid-tirade.

"That's enough of that."

"Company coming," Peter reported tersely, as he watched his instruments. "Two cruisers."

"Where's the damned cloaking device?" Kirk grumbled, peering at controls covered by Klingon symbols. "On the Bounty, Scotty labeled everything in English!" Peter craned his neck to see around his uncle. "It's on your left, that third switch, with the red telltale beside it."

"It is possible, Captain," Spock warned, "that other Klingon vessels may well have technology to identify this ship's energy signature, and thus allow them to track us, even if we activate it."

"Well, it won't hurt to try," Kirk said. He quickly flipped the appropriate switch. "There it is, Spock ... " Peter felt a subtle hum course through the shuttle, and the viewscreen changed abruptly, revealing a view of the planet below that was wavy and distorted, as though seen through a haze.

The shuttle was almost out of the atmosphere, almost into space, when one of the ships nearly caught them. "Cruiser at oh-four-three mark six," Peter announced. "They've powered up their weapons and they're tracking us!" Spock was setting up the gunner's targeting screen, all his attention fixed on their opponent. The other ship fired, and the shuttle shuddered violently.

"Direct hit!" Peter shouted. "Our amidships shield is down by eighty percent. Another hit there, and we won't have to worry about confronting Kamarag,"

"What the hell's going on up there?" McCoy shouted.

Quickly, he examined Valdyr. Puce swirls colored the white packing foam in her wound. Oh no, she sprung a bleeder. He had no time to check the Klingon kit, and grabbed his microcautery. The ship suddenly veered sharply before he could engage the instrument. If that had happened while he was working in the wound, he could have caused irreparable damage! He had to have a steady working field.

"Another jolt like that and I may as well throw this patient out the airlock for all the good I'm doin' her!" he yelled.

He saw Peter turn to look at Valdyr, then heard Jim's "captain" voice order sharply, "Focus on your job, mister!"

Let the doctor handle his patient." The cadet's face flamed as he turned back around.

Let the doctor handle his patient[McCoy mentally mocked Kirk's order. The ship lurched again, then zagged hard right. Bones had to grab Valdyr's unconscious form to keep her secure in the chair. Handle, indeed[he fumed. I'm a doctor, not a damned juggler

"Spock?" Jim Kirk asked, not turning his head to see his officer. "I'm coaxing every bit of speed out of this ship that I can--"

"Understood, Captain," the Vulcan said, his voice preternaturally calm. "Targeting locking on ... and firing." The little bird-of-prey shivered with the force of the blast. Spock spared a glance for the viewscreen, in time to see the disrupter blast score a direct hit on their opponent.

"That's got them!" the captain said exultantly. "Nice shooting, Spock! No loss of life, but they'll have to break off pursuit and make a manual landing. Peter, let's up the stakes on this pursuit. Locate one of the ring shepherds and plot us a course past it. Find us a way through that ring." Peter worked at his controls feverishly. "Course computed and laid in, sir," he reported, moments later, his voice professionally confident.

"Looks good," Jim responded, standing by to make minute course corrections. Then the ship shot toward the ring field at maximum speed.

"Cruiser approaching, dead astern! Six-four-three mark nine!" the captain heard his nephew shout. "They're going to follow us--weapons targeting!"

"Spock," Kirk said, "remember what happened to the Kepler?"

"I do indeed, Captain," the Vulcan said, targeting his weapons.

The shuttle hurtled into the gap. On their right side, close enough almost to touch, loomed the huge granite ring shepherd. They were beside it--they were past it! "Now, Spock!"

"Firing aft weapons," Spock announced, and the little warbird trembled with the force of the blasts.

The powerful beams shot into the ring shepherd, blowing it apart in a shower of debris, spreading directly into the path of the oncoming cruiser.

Shards and chunks of rocks spun wildly, in eerie silence; then Peter's voice reached Kirk, suddenly exultant. "Captain, the debris has overloaded their shielding! They're breaking off?" The Vulcan nodded. "Even Klingons can understand diminishing returns. Pursuing us at the cost of their own vessel was not worth the effort. Eminently logical."

"Have you all finished turnin' this blasted shoebox upside down?" McCoy

bellowed from the rear.

The three men glanced at one another in exasperation.

"Yes, Doctor," Jim assured him. Then Kirk turned to look at his nephew. "Go on back if you want to, Peter. Spock and I can handle this now." Peter nodded his gratitude and slipped out of the seat to join McCoy. "How is she?" He still found it hard to believe they'd survived that flight through the ring gap!

"A little the worse for wear, I'm afraid," McCoy admitted grumpily. He had an odd-looking kit opened up beside him.

"Fortunately, I found this ship's medical kit. But I'm havin' a little trouble with the diagnostic tool--language barrier, you know? Maybe you can help." Peter smiled wanly. He desperately wanted to do something for Valdyr, anything ... McCoy waved the device over the pale, comatose woman. Peter translated what he could, giving McCoy the terms phonetically, since none of them meant much to him, but the doctor kept nodding and saying, "Uh-huh," as if he at least understood it. McCoy dug around in the kit, found something and slapped it in his hypo. "This'll be a big help," he mumbled, as he pressed it to aldyr's neck. "Though, heaven knows she's got a damned pharmacy in there now."

Suddenly, the woman's eyes fluttered open. "Pityr ..." she gasped.

"He's right here, miss," McCoy told her. "Don't move now. Talk to her, son, before she starts thrashin'."

"Valdyr." The cadet took her hand, squeezed it gently.

Her returning grip was weak, and that shocked him more than even her appearance.

"My warrior," she whispered, "you cannot only fight ... you can speak ... so well ... like a diplomat ... as well as Azetbur ..."

Peter flushed with pride, knowing the high opinion aldyr had of the female chancellor.

"I'd say he's every bit as eloquent as his uncle, young miss," McCoy agreed, checking her signs, and examining her wound for fresh blood.

Valdyr frowned, blinking drowsily. "Pityr, what am I missing?"

The cadet shook his head, not following her.

"This McCoy, he keeps saying to me, 'miss,' 'miss'--what is this I am missing? I do not want to be missing anything!"

MCOY heard her, and raised his eyebrows. Peter nodded, trying to assure

the doctor it was all right. "It's okay, Valdyr.

You're not missing anything. "Miss' is an archaic title, what humans sometimes call young, unmated females. It's old-fashioned, but it's a sign of respect."

Her gaze drifted to McCoy. "Thank you for that respect, Doctor. I did not think that would be such an easy thing to get from humans."

"You earned that, miss," McCoy assured her. "Now, please, just lie still."

Suddenly, she turned back to the young Kirk, her eyes widening. "Pityr, do not forget to tell your uncle ... about Kamarag ... "

"He knows all about Kamarag, Valdyr," the cadet tried to reassure her.

"No," she insisted, "he does not! You must tell him about Kamarag's fleet. I do not know how many ships, but he had

many officers that he spoke to! Do not let Kirk fly right into his ambush ... "

"I'll tell him, Valdyr, I'll tell him. You've got to take it easy."

"Pityr, please, kiss me," she demanded, her voice hoarse and breathless. "If I am to die, I want to take the memory of your kiss with me, Pityr-oy."

"You're not going to die, Valdyr," Peter told her. "I'll fight death for you, just like I fought Karg. And I'll win." Gently, he touched her mouth with his.

She laughed lightly as he did. "Hija!" she whispered.

"Mevqo', Pityr "Then she slid back into unconsciousness.

glanced at McCoy, alarmed, but for once the doctor seemed unconcerned. "It's okay," the older man assured him.

"Her body's shutting down its less important functions, to preserve its energy. She's holding on."

cadet sighed, relieved. "Call me if she comes to," he asked, and McCoy nodded as Peter returned to his station.

uncle and Spock acknowledged his arrival as Peter relayed the message from Valdyr to Jim Kirk about Kamarag's forces.

"Don't worry, Peter. We can still beat him back to the point. We'll warn Enterprise in time."

"And then what?" Peter demanded, bleakly.

shrugged. "Maybe there will be another ship or two around.

"I'll contact Scotty, and have him call for help."

"The nearest starbase is two days' journey away," Peter pointed out darkly.

"Take it easy for the moment, Peter," Kirk tried to reassure him. "We'll find a way to handle Kamarag. And, by way, you were pretty damned eloquent, cadet."

"Thanks, Uncle Jim."

elder Kirk patted the helm and changed the subject. "This is one sweet little ship, isn't she?" he said to the other two men. "So ..." he patted the console again, "what'll we name her?"

"Actually, Klingon ships are called 'he,'" Peter said, tightly.

"And he has a name. It's painted on his bow. I

spotted it as we boarded him." His face was as expressionless as Spock's, belying the turmoil of emotions inside him.

"He's called the Taj."

Spock looked pensive. "Ironic ..." he muttered.

"What does it mean?" Jim asked.

"Dagger," Peter said, a shadow crossing his face.

No one said anything more as Taj flew on, swift and alone in the blackness.

Hours later, a weary James T. Kirk piloted the Taj into the Enterprise's docking bay. Waiting for him in the docking bay was a welcoming committee consisting of a medical team, a grim-faced Mr. Scott, Commander Uhura, and Ambassador Sarek.

Within moments a medical team spirited Valdyr away, with McCoy and Peter in tow. Kirk stood at the top of the gangplank and watched the two of them, his heart aching a little for his nephew. Peter in love with a Klingon? But it had happened, there was no denying it. It was obvious that this was no casual affair; Peter had fallen, and fallen hard. Was there any possibility of a future for the two of them together? Any hope of happiness? He didn't know ...

Ten minutes later, once more in uniform, the captain hurried down the corridor, fastening the flap of his maroon jacket.

When he reached the conference chamber, he found his officers, plus Sarek, already assembled. Spock, also, was back in uniform. In contrast to his own weary dishevelment, the Vulcan was, of course, impeccably groomed and seemed as fresh as if he hadn't played hide-and-seek on Qo'nos for the past fifteen hours.

Kirk lowered himself into a seat and addressed his chief engineer.
"Status, Mr. Scott?"

"Well, Captain ... I dinna know exactly what's going' on, but something worrisome is happening. Half an hour ago, we picked up a blip for about five seconds on our sensors--and then it was gone. Three minutes later, another ... not far away. Just ... blip, then gone. Over and over, sir. Never in the same space twice ... but stayin' just barely within the boundary of the Neutral Zone--th' Romulan Neutral "What do the sensors indicate?" Kirk asked. "Could it be Kamarag's fleet?"

"Noo, sir, it's not large enough for that. We canna get a full readin', Captain, because it comes and goes so quickly.

Just bits and pieces. It isna small, that's for sure. I'd say ship-sized."

"No possibility of it being a natural phenomenon?"

"Noo, Captain. My guess is that it's a ship. A cloaked ship. It decloaks just long enough to register on our sensors as a blip, then it recloaks and moves. But never very far away."

"A bird-of-prey," Kirk said, and Scott nodded. "Kling-on?"

"Possibly," Spock said, studying the limited sensor data Scott displayed for their benefit. "But I think not. The ion traces are different from those we detected from cloaked Klingon vessels."

"And, Captain," Uhura spoke up, "there's something else that's suspicious about it. The instant we first picked it up, something began jamming our long-range communications.

We can't send subspace messages, sir."

"HmMMM ..." Kirk sipped coffee, thinking hard.

"Show me the blips," he said, and Scott obediently called up a three-dimensional schematic on the conference table's screen. Kirk studied the pattern as he finished his coffee.

"What do you make of this, Spock?"

"I would like the opportunity to study it further," the Vulcan said, gazing intently at the screen. Sarek also stared at the screen, barely blinking. Kirk could almost hear the Vulcan wheels turning.

"What would happen," the ambassador said quietly, "if we were to move closer to it?"

"We can try," Kirk said. "Mr. Scott, Commander Uhura, please report to the bridge to oversee maneuvers. Scotty, see how much of an ion trail our visitor is leaving. Uhura, try and determine the range their jamming signal has."

"Yes, Captain."

"Aye, sir."

Minutes later, with the two senior officers standing by, Kirk instructed the helm to head for the last recorded blip at one-eighth impulse power.

"Look!" Uhura exclaimed over the intercom as another blip abruptly flashed on, then off. This one was deeper into the Neutral Zone by several hundred kilometers.

"It's like a game," Kirk said, staring hard at the screen.

"They want to lure us into the Neutral Zone."

"A game," Sarek repeated softly, an undercurrent of excitement in his voice. "Yes indeed ... a game! But not follow-the-leader ... watch closely ..." The Vulcan's long-fingered hands flashed swiftly over the computer controls.

As Kirk watched, the three-dimensional schematic was replaced by a three-level grid pattern--a familiar pattern.

He turned to Sarek incredulously. "A chessboard, Ambassador?"

"Yes," the Vulcan said, his dark eyes shining with pleasure from solving the puzzle. "And I recognize the game."

Taryn is in command of that vessel. And those moves, those coordinates--they are identical to the moves Taryn made in one of our recent games." He shook his head, adding, mostly to himself, "A Vulcan gambit ... of course he would employ one. A Vulcan gambit ... it makes perfect sense. I should have realized it before."

"But assuming that is Taryn, why would he come here?" Kirk said.

"Because he wants me. He knows that I have uncovered the Freelan plan. I spoke to him while you were gone, and I deliberately baited him, trying

to lure him into some reckless action ... as I have done many times during our

chess games. Now he is responding to my implicit challenge.

He is moving his ship in the pattern of the last game we played that he won. He employed T'Nedara's gambit, and there"--Sarek swiftly outlined a series of moves in red--"it is. The exact pattern of his moves in the game we played."

"How many moves did he make during the entire game?" Spock asked, obviously fascinated. As they had been speaking, several more blips had appeared on the schematic.

"It was a long, hard-fought game. Each of us made hundreds of moves."

"Are you sure, Ambassador?" Kirk asked, wonderingly.

"Do you have any other evidence that this is Taryn? When he contacted you, what did he want?"

"He demanded a meeting between us in the Freelan system. I told him I would be unable to attend. As I said, I baited him. I could tell that he was angry, though of course I could not see his features. Now he does this," he gestured at the screen, "as his next move."

"But if he was on Freelan only hours ago--"

Sarek shook his head. "No. He merely said he was on Freelan. Commander Uhura confirmed that the message from Taryn was only routed through Freelan communications systems. The actual transmission originated inside the Romulan Neutral Zone."

On Kirk's order, Enterprise moved again, and again the unseen vessel responded with a series of moves. "The pattern is exact," Sarek said. Catching Kirk's still-skeptical glance, he marked a new location on the screen in purple.

"The next move," he said.

As the Vulcan had predicted, when Enterprise moved again, the blip materialized for a second in those exact coordinates. Kirk shook his head. "Okay, let's assume you're right, for argument's sake. But why the game? What does he want?"

"The game grid for his ship's maneuvering coordinates is not the main point, Captain. Taryn would probably be surprised to realize that I have identified the pattern. He is simply amusing himself while he seeks to draw us closer to his ship ... and away from the rendezvous point."

Kirk turned to the monitor that showed Uhura and Scotty, who were

listening in from the bridge, as ordered.

"Commander, have you discovered the range of their jamming capability?"

"Yes, sir," she replied promptly. "It extends for nearly a light-year in all directions. We'll definitely have to move to get any kind of message out."

"Great ..." Kirk said, grimly. "Starbase Eight is two full days away, and that's the closest help we can expect. And now we can't even get a message out."

"Captain," Scotty put in, "what I dinna understand is why the devil the Romulans try to lure you away now, if they're the ones who forced you to come out here in the first place? It doesna make sense!"

"It does if the Romulans wish to begin a war," Sarek said,

"between the Federation and the Klingon Empire. If Taryn has gone to this trouble to initiate hostilities, he undoubtedly wishes Kamarag and his fleet to cross into Federation space unimpeded."

"Good point," Kirk said. "So, really, Peter's kidnapping was almost extraneous to the rest of this situation. The Romulans inflamed Kamarag--and this is the form his revenge took. In addition to attacking the Federation, he decided he had to get back at me, personally."

"That would seem the logical deduction, Captain," Spock said.

Sarek was staring at the growing schematic as if mesmerized.

"We cannot continue to allow them to jam Enterprise's subspace communications. We must be able to send a message to Starfleet Command ... and the president."

"Why?" Kirk demanded. "I mean ... to request reinforcements, yes, that I know. But why the president?"

"Taryn must realize now that I know about their plans.

He is trying to prevent me from revealing what I know to Ra-ghoratrei or your Starfleet Admiral Burton."

"It is fortunate," Spock observed quietly, "that you sent that time-locked message."

"At your suggestion," Sarek reminded the first officer.

"However, that message may not activate in time to prevent both a Romulan and a Klingon invasion."

"So ... what's next?" the captain asked, rubbing his forehead.

"What do you mean, Captain?" Sarek asked.

"I mean that you've convinced me that that's a Romulan ship, and that Taryn is commanding it. But as long as he doesn't cross the Neutral Zone, I have no authority to go after him. And I can't go far ... Kamarag is on his way, remember, with that fleet. So what do I do now?"

"Our original goal remains unchanged, Kirk. We must obtain indisputable proof of the true nature of Freelan, and of the Romulan plot to instigate war ... and to do that, I must transport over to Taryn's ship and speak with him personally."

Kirk regarded Sarek, his eyes narrowing. "Slow down, Ambassador. Why would you want to transport aboard that Romulan ship? Assuming I'd allow it ... which I won't.

Beaming aboard a cloaked vessel? Something we can't even get a reliable transporter lock on? That could be suicide.

And even if you survived the beaming, don't forget your destination."

"I am willing to take the risks, Captain," Sarek said gravely. "In fact, I insist upon it."

"What could you hope to gain from dropping in on Taryn?" Kirk heard the exasperation in his own voice.

"Two things, Kirk," Sarek said. "First, if I can catch Taryn without warning, he will not have time to assume his disguise. If I beamed over and recorded our interview on some type of scanning device, that would constitute the proof we seek. And, secondly, if Taryn knows that their plot is known to the Federation, he might be willing to negotiate for the lives of the Vulcans on Freelan ... allow us to rescue those who wish to leave that world."

"Why do you think he'd do that?" Kirk asked.

"Because of something I only now realized about the esteemed liaison ... something I should have deduced long ago. Taryn has a vested interest in saving those Vulcans."

Kirk gave Spock a "what the hell is going on?" look. The

captain sighed. "All right, I grant you your point about getting your proof. But why should the Romulans care whether the Federation knows about their plan? Won't they simply proceed with it anyway?"

Spock shook his head. "Unlikely, Captain. The entire Freelan plan was dependent on secrecy and surprise ... and on the Klingons attacking the

Federation, thus diverting troops and resources, forcing Starfleet to spread its defenses too thinly. If the fleet were warned, and war with the Klingons averted, the Romulans would stand no chance against the Federation."

"Precisely," Sarek said.

"Okay, I see what you're getting at ... but, Ambassador, I can't allow you to beam over to that vessel, proof or no proof, kidnapped Vulcans or no kidnapped Vulcans.

Starfleet would bust me down to yeoman duty for risking a person of your reputation on such a stunt."

"I am willing to take the risk, Kirk," Sarek replied. "Just as you have your duty, I have mine ... and it is to do everything in my power to prevent a war ... or the probable slaughter of transplanted Vulcan citizens."

Kirk's eyes met Sarek's and held for a long moment.

Slowly, Jim shook his head. "No," he said. "I'm sorry, Ambassador Sarek, but the answer is no. It's too risky. We can't pinpoint the location of the ship closely enough."

"Yes, we can," Spock said, suddenly. "If the ambassador can predict its next location, then I can program the transporter to lock on to the bridge before it even appears."

Kirk stared dubiously at the Vulcan officer. "Do you think he can accomplish anything over there, Spock?"

"I do not know," Spock said, quietly. "It depends upon his plan."

"Kirk," Sarek said, earnestly, "I have known Taryn for more than sixty years. I believe I can predict his actions and reactions accurately enough to be able to choose the best technique for approaching him."

"They'll shoot you on sight, Ambassador!" Kirk replied.

"Not if I am beamed onto the bridge, where Taryn can see me. He will not summarily execute me. He may decide at

some point that that is what he must do, but he will let me speak, first. And if I can speak with him ... I can negotiate.

If he will not listen, and chooses to kill me ... I am willing to take that chance."

"The ambassador does not have to go alone, Captain," Spock said, stiffly. "I am volunteering to accompany him."

You wouldn't even know they're father and son if you saw them like this, Kirk thought, inwardly shaking his head.

Vulcans!

"Captain," Spock said, "as soon as you beam us aboard, you must use the diversion to warp far enough away to be out of jamming range. Then you must transmit the data we will relay."

Kirk hesitated, wavering. Finally, hearing an invisible clock ticking in his head, knowing that Kamarag's fleet was on the way, he nodded curtly. "All right."

The next minutes flew by in a blur as Sarek and Spock prepared the transporter coordinates that would place them aboard the Romulan vessel. Beaming would indeed be tricky the transporter chief would have barely a second to fine-tune the location in order to make sure they arrived on the ship and not in an area of space beside her, or beneath her.

"This recording device will function automatically," Spock told his father in the transporter room, fastening a small instrument into place between two of the large cabochon gems on the ambassador's formal robe. "It will transmit, and the Enterprise will record what it sends. If Taryn is indeed aboard, and you can induce him to identify himself, while showing his true features, that should constitute the proof we need."

"All right. I pick up your transmission, warp out of here, and then message Starfleet and the president," Kirk said.

"Then what? I've got to come back here and intercept Kamarag. What do you want me to do about you two? Try to lock on and beam you back?"

"As soon as the message is sent, return to the rendezvous point," Sarek said. "If my talk with Taryn has been successfully concluded, I will contact you to arrange for us to

return. If not ... there is not much chance that we will be alive to be retrieved," he added, matter-of-factly.

Kirk sighed and nodded. I hope to hell this works ... Spock and Sarek stepped up onto the transporter pads.

The captain nodded at the transporter chief. "Energize."

Sarek heard the distinctive whine, felt the Enterprise's transporter chamber begin to dissolve around him ...

And then he was materializing again. He saw, with a moment of brief, intense relief that he was again surrounded by bulkheads. At his side,

Spock was re-forming. They had made it. He was aboard Taryn's ship.

As he had requested, Spock had programmed their coordinates to place them on the bridgema logical choice, since it was one of the largest, relatively open areas.

The ambassador heard gasps of shock, startled exclamations as the Romulans recognized both of them. Then, all around them, hands drew disrupters. In less than a second after they had finished beaming, Sarek found himself facing seven drawn weapons.

If I am wrong, the ambassador thought, and Taryn is not here--or is not the man I believe him to be--neither Spock nor I will live another minute.

But no blast of energy tore through him. Slowly, the ambassador pivoted, studying his surroundings. The bridge of a bird-of-prey was considerably more cramped than that of a Federation starship. All around him, uniformed Romulans sat before instrument consoles, their seats swiveled to face the intruders, the disrupters in their hands leveled unwaveringly.

Uniformed Romulans? The Ambassador stared around him in surprise. No ... not Romulans. At least ... not most of them.

Sarek was astonished to realize that the individuals surrounding him at the various command posts were not Romulans--they were Vulcans. He'd been expecting to find at least one Vulcan aboard Taryn's ship--but not nine of them!

But these officers were, indisputably, Vulcans.

He could tell by the faint mental vibrations they exuded.

On his own world, Sarek was used to that, and, like most of his species, had learned to ignore it, overlook it, tune it out.

But to encounter it here?

"What is this?" a voice barked harshly in Romulan.

Despite the millennia separating their peoples, the languages of Vulcans and Romulans still held some of the same cadence and flow, though their vocabularies and syntax had mutated greatly over the years. Swiftly, the voice changed to English. "What is going on? Who are you?"

Sarek turned to regard the speaker. "You know who I am, Commander."

The individual facing him, one of the two present who was not holding a drawn weapon, had to be Taryn. Sarek studied him unblinkingly. Yes, this was Taryn ... even without the insignia on his uniform, he would have

known him. Everything fit. The arrogance he'd come to know so well shone in this individual's eyes. Those eyes were dark and hooded amid his craggy, hawklike features. He wore the uniform of a high-ranking Romulan officer--a wing commander.

And from him, as from many of the other officers, Sarek sensed now unshielded mental activity. It also emanated from the young woman standing beside him, her eyes wide and startled. She, alone of the bridge crew, was unarmed.

Sarek nodded at both of them. "Commander Taryn," he said. "And Savel? My aide, Soran, has spoken of how much he enjoyed playing chess with you. Allow me to present my ... associate, Captain Spock."

The ambassador had seen something flare in the girl's eyes when he'd spoken of Soran. Recalling Soran's expressed interest in her, Sarek noted her reaction and silently filed that information away for further consideration. It could prove useful ...

"What are you two doing here?" Taryn demanded, his voice harsh and rasping with surprise and anger he did not trouble to conceal. "How dare you," he almost sputtered,

"invade my ship in this manner?"

"I recognized your game strategy, Taryn," Sarek said, attempting to make it clear that the commander was responding to that name. He only hoped that Kirk was picking up everything from the tiny recorder. "T'Nedara's gambit.

A Vulcan gambit. I took it for a tacit invitation to call upon you." The ambassador smiled faintly. "A Vulcan gambit, Taryn ... how appropriate, under the circumstances."

Taryn bolted up out of his seat, and for a moment Sarek knew that his life hung in the balance. The commander's hand dropped to the grip of the hand disrupter he wore.

Then he took a deep breath ... another. Forced a faint, wry smile. "Perhaps I was too clever, Sarek. I did not think you would recognize the coordinates as being the same pattern as the moves in our chess game."

"How could I not recognize them, Taryn?" Sarek asked simply. "That was one of the few that you won. Naturally, I would remember." Exultation surged inside him. Taryn had responded to Sarek's use of his name, and he'd made reference to their games on Freelan--which were chronicled in Sarek's diplomatic records of his negotiations with the Freelans. At last, he had the proof he had risked his life to achieve.

Leave, Kirk, the Vulcan urged, silently. Take your starship and transmit

the message ...

"Why have you come here, Sarek?" Taryn asked, almost pleasantly. "You know that I cannot permit either of you to return."

"I came to negotiate for the release of the Vulcans who reside on Freelan," the ambassador replied. "The Federation has been warned. The war you attempted to instigate will not come to pass. Starfleet will be standing ready, should your forces attempt to initiate hostilities. We both know that the Romulan Empire is not prepared to take on a battle-ready Federation ... a strong Federation that is still allied with the Vulcans." Sarek took a deep breath and glanced slowly around the bridge, at all the faces of the officers.

"And, finally," he concluded, "there will be no war with

the Klingons." He spoke decisively, not allowing any of his inner doubts to show. There could still be war, and he knew it--but Taryn and his officers must not.

"Why not?" Sayel blurted. Taryn glared at her, and she subsided immediately, but not before Sarek glimpsed relief in her eyes.

"Because Captain Kirk managed to safely rescue his nephew," Spock said, speaking for the first time since their beam-over. "And, even if Kamarag's fleet manages to destroy the Enterprise, Starfleet has been warned. The renegade ambassador will not get far into Federation space before he is stopped. Azetbur has proved she will not support the renegades ... your plan has failed."

"Enough of this!" the commander snapped, his temper obviously fraying. "Why are you here, Sarek? Surely you know your life is forfeit, should I give the word. What did you hope to gain?"

"The lives of the Vulcans on Freelan," Sarek said steadily.

"As I told you before. You are the wing commander for the Freelan operation. Only the praetor can countermand your orders. If you give the word, the Vulcans will be permitted to leave--those that choose to do so. The Enterprise will take them away from Freelan before bloodshed can occur."

"Bloodshed?" Savel glanced at the wing commander, and this time his quelling glance only made her stiffen her spine and repeat her question. "What do you mean, Ambassador?"

"Consider, Savel ..." Spock said. "What will the praetor do with Freelan once the Federation president and Security Council know the truth about your world?"

"If he follows precedent," Sarek pointed out, "he will, as the humans

put it, 'cut his losses." Possibly abandon the colony. And certainly destroy all evidence of the plot. And the most tangible evidence of what Romulus planned are the individuals such as yourself."

"In a way, miss," Spock added, "the Vulcans on Freelan can be considered prisoners of war. The fact that you were born and grew up on that world does not change the fact that you reside there due to acts of terrorism and piracy committed by the Romulan military. Have you studied history?" She nodded slowly.

"Then perhaps you can tell me ... how often are prisoners of war actually returned to their native soil after such a long passage of time?"

"I cannot think of a single instance," Sarek said, in answer to his son's rhetorical question. The Vulcan ambassador gazed around him at the closed, hard young faces of the bridge officers. "It is far safer--and politically sounder to kill them or allow them to die."

Savel turned to the wing commander, her dark eyes full of distress. "Would they do that, Vadi?" she demanded.

"Would you allow that?"

"If he does nothing, that is very likely what will happen," Spock said.

"Taryn," Sarek said, his voice deepening, "if we do not take your people off Freelan, the chances are excellent that they will be considered a failed experiment--or prisoners of war--and eliminated. Will you risk a pogrom, Taryn? Will you allow your own people to be slaughtered?"

"My own people ..." the commander repeated tonelessly.

His face was expressionless, but Sarek did not miss the tension in his jaw muscles. "I do not understand what you mean."

"Certainly you do," Sarek said, holding the commander's eyes with his own. "You are as Vulcan as I ... and as Vulcan as they are," he said, his eyes flicking from one to another of the bridge officers. He pointed to Savel. "As Vulcan as she is."

Silence fell on the bridge. Sarek glimpsed the surprise in Spock's eyes, quickly masked. One by one, the young bridge officers turned to regard their commander. Only Savel did not betray any amazement. She knew, Sarek thought.

Taryn shook his head, unable to summon words. The commander was pale beneath the weathering of his features.

"No," he said, forcing the word out. "No!"

"Come now," Sarek said, gently. "It is illogical to deny

the truth. Will you continue to deny your heritage, knowing that you risk death for the other Vulcans on Freelan?"

The young officers were recovering from the shock of Sarek's revelation. They stirred and murmured among themselves.

"Even if what you say is true, what could possibly induce me to relinquish the Vulcans on Freelan?" Taryn demanded, his expression darkening. "If I did that, I would be committing treason!"

"If you do not, you will be committing murder," Spock said quietly. "And, in a manner of speaking, genocide. Is that what you wish for them? Imprisonment and eventual death?" He indicated the officers.

"And for her?" Sarek nodded at Savel. The ambassador was impressed at how well Spock was handling his part in this--obviously, he had underestimated his sows abilities in the field of diplomacy.

"No!" Taryn cried, in what was almost a howl of pain. He smashed a fist down on the arm of his command seat, bending it visibly. "I will not betray my adopted people. I am Romulan, NOT Vulcan. I have dedicated my life to the service of the praetor! My Vulcan blood is nothing but an accident of birth--it means nothing to me!"

"Does Savel mean nothing to you?" Sarek asked, quietly.

He was thinking quickly, wondering what other inducement he could offer. There was one possibility Taryn, he knew, would not allow himself to lose face before his crew. "We have known each other for a long time," he said. "I know you, Taryn. I am willin to offer you what you want most, in exchange for the lives of the Vulcans."

"What--what do you mean?" Taryn demanded. Whatever the commander had expected, it obviously wasn't this.

"The chance to defeat me. Does that tempt you? You have wanted to win in a contest between us for decades, Taryn."

The ambassador knew he was treading a very delicate line. "One final contest, Taryn. One last chance to beat me." Sarek fixed the commander with an intent gaze. "I will wager with you for their lives. A ame, Taryn. If I win, you allow them to go free, you aree to help me in any way

necessary to free the Vulcan captives. If I lose ..." The ambassador drew a deep breath. "If I lose, you will get the battle you desire. I suspect your fleet is on the way. Time, at the moment, is my enemy ... but it is your friend. A game will take several hours. Will you gamble that your fleet will reach here before endgame?"

"A game?" Taryn actually laughed. "A game, Vulcan? Are you insane? We play for far higher stakes than simply a mere game! We play for lives here. Are you willing to play the game as it should be played?"

Sarek suddenly realized what Taryn was talking about, even as Spock did. His son gave him a warning glance. But the ambassador squared his shoulders. "I am willing to do whatever is necessary to gain the lives and the freedom of your captives, Taryn. I have the courage to do what I must." He paused for a long, significant second. "Do you?"

Taryn was clearly taken aback. The officer glanced around at the faces of his officers, seeing their waiting expressions.

"Old man, you surprise me," Taryn said, and then he smiled ... a predatory, dangerous smile. "No one has ever before dared to question my courage."

Slowly, the wing commander got to his feet. Standing, he was taller and heavier-built than Sarek--and probably at least thirty years younger. "Very well, then, Ambassador. I challenge you!" His voice rang out so loudly that Savel jumped.

"I challenge you by the ancient laws and rite of the Toriatal. T'kevoidors a sketitus dunt'ryala aikriian paselitan ... Toriatal," he intoned solemnly. Sarek recognized the language as Old High Vulcan. Taryn faced him, head high. "So ... you want their lives, Sarek--then fight for them! Win their lives, or your life--and that of your son's--are forfeit!"

Sarek recognized the words. This was a challenge so old that it was still common to both the Vulcan and Romulan cultures. The Toriatal dated back to the days before Surak had brought his message of logic and peace to their mutual homeworld.

In the ancient days of the Toriatal, two warring Vulcan

nations would, in a land already devastated by conflict, choose champions to represent them in battle, and agree to victory or defeat on the basis of that single-combat-to-the-death outcome. At least now the Enterprise would be safe from any Romulan ship in Taryn's fleet, Sarek thought.

Under the terms of the Toriatal, a truce remained in effect until the champions had completed their fight. No Romulan vessel would initiate hostilities once he agreed to the Toriatal--until the battle was concluded, and either he or Taryn lay dead.

"State the terms of the challenge," Sarek said, buying time while he thought. Was this the only way? In any kind of physical contest, Taryn would be the undisputed favorite.

He was a full-blooded Vulcan, younger, stronger than the ambassador--and a soldier, in fighting condition. The odds were not good.

"Very well. If you win, Ambassador, I agree that I will release any of the Vulcans residing on Fredan should they wish to go. I will help you in whatever way is necessary to allow you to offer them that choice. I will break off the planned attack, and not initiate hostilities with the Enterprise. Acceptable?" Sarek nodded. "I understand."

"And, if I win, Ambassador, you agree that your life--in the unlikely event you survive the challenge itself--and the life of your son are mine to do with as I please. The ship you call Enterprise and its crew will be fair game for my fleet, when it arrives." The ambassador turned to look at Spock. "I am willing to wager my own life in this challenge," he said. "But I cannot ethically stake the life of my son."

"What I am staking is far greater than what you are willing to wager, as it is, Ambassador," Taryn pointed out, truthfully. "A challenge is a challenge. Do you accept, or not?" The Romulan exuded confidence as he stood there.

Sarek drew a deep breath. The needs of the many ... he thought, but he could not do it. Not with the life of his son at stake. Slowly, he shook his head, and opened his mouth-- "Do it," Spock said in an undertone, without turning his head. "Accept his terms. If you do not, our lives are forfeit in any case." Sarek glanced at the first officer, then straightened his shoulders. "Very well, Commander. I accept your challenge.

I will fight you in the Toriatal."

"As challenger, the choice of type of combat is mine," Taryn said, a gleam of anticipation in his eyes.

"Yes." All around him he heard murmurs of anticipation from the young officers. Only Savel seemed distressed by what was happening. Out of the corner of his eye Sarek saw her shaking her head as she whispered, "No, Vadi!" Sarek wondered what kind of duel Taryn would choose.

He hoped Taryn's arrogance would lead him to choose unarmed combat. The ambassador was an expert at several Vulcan martial arts, including tal-shaya. In unarmed hand-to-hand, he might stand a chance. Although Sarek had trained with traditional Vulcan weapons in his youth, and had become proficient with them, he had not done any sparring with weapons for years.

Also ... if they fought without weapons, there was a good chance that neither of them would die. Sarek did not want to die--nor did he want to kill Taryn.

"I choose weapons, Ambassador," Taryn said, and paused for a beat. "Specifically, the senapa." The commander sat back with a faint, cold triumphant smile.

Sarek took a deep breath. The senapa ... the deadliest, most painful of weapons in the ancient Vulcan arsenal. A combatant could survive one cut, or perhaps two--if he was strong and received an immediate blood filtering and transfusion--but three was almost always a death sentence.

"I will prepare myself," the ambassador said.

"You will need a second," Spock said. "I offer myself, Ambassador." Sarek turned to look at his son, and, finally nodded. "I accept." Turning back to face Taryn, Sarek gave him the ancient, ceremonial salute. "As soon as you are ready, Commander."

Taryn nodded. "Fifteen minutes, Ambassador. Savel will guide you to the gymnasium."

In one corner of Shardarr's gymnasium, Spock quickly prepared Sarek for the coming combat. Swiftly, efficiently, he stripped off the heavy, formal robe and hung it on the wall, carefully arranging the folds so the jeweled borders faced the combat square Poldar and Tonik were marking off.

When his son leaned close to unfasten the ambassador's undertunic, Sarek whispered quietly, "How long will it take Kirk to send the message and return?"

"Approximately an hour, from the time we left," Spock reported, sotto voce. Then he added, "You are not in any condition to attempt this."

"I am well aware of my limitations," Sarek agreed, bleakly. "If I can hold out long enough, perhaps Kirk will return. If I am only wounded, the estimable Dr. McCoy might be able to save me?"

"The closest supply of senapa poison antidote is on Vulcan," Spock whispered grimly. "It is hardly standard provisioning for starships. I do not like this. A duel with senapas ... Taryn will have a definite advantage. He is younger, taller, and doubtless far quicker than you."

"Do not think that knowledge has escaped me," Sarek admitted, with a flare of mordant humor. "But, as the challenger, it was his right to choose the contest and the weapon to be used."

"When was the last time you trained?"

"It has been several months," Sarek admitted. "Since before ... before your mother's illness was diagnosed." Sarek heard his son's indrawn breath, sensed his apprehension.

It echoed his own. All the commander had to do was stay out of range, and use his greater reach and faster reflexes to cut Sarek several times ... and it would be all over. Even one cut, the ambassador reflected, would eventually slow him down ... and, as the minutes went by, and the poison permeated his system, Sarek would grow dizzy and drop his guard, thus becoming an easy target.

When he saw Taryn walking toward the improvised challenge square, Sarek quickly rose to his feet. As was traditional, both combatants were clad only in short, loose trousers, so that most of their bodies would be bare--and thus more vulnerable to the poisoned blades.

Accompanied by Spock, Sarek walked to meet his opponent.

The centurion Taryn had addressed as Poldar--another of the transplanted Vulcans--stood impassively awaiting them in the center of the combat square. In his arms rested a carved display case, and within it, in recessed niches, the two senapas. When he reached the middle of the square, Taryn, with a mocking salute, indicated that the ambassador should take the first choice of weapons.

Sarek studied the two senapas. They appeared identical; a curved, half-moon blade, wickedly sharp, with a handgrip and a padded rest for the knuckles, so they would not touch the blade. Sarek selected the weapon nearest him, grasped it, then stepped back, waiting while Taryn took the other. He hefted the senapa ... it had been a long time since he'd practiced with one. It was, of course, a slashing weapon rather than a stabbing one.

Poldar motioned the two seconds, Spock and Savel, to back away from the square. Sarek took a deep breath, trying to loosen his muscles. He rolled his weight onto the balls of his feet, and assumed a balanced stance, right foot slightly ahead of the left.

"Begin," said Poldar, and Sarek was surprised to hear the centurion say the word in Vulcan. He glanced at the young Vulcan--and that nearly proved his undoing, for Taryn, moving with the silent deadliness of a le-matya, sprang forward. Only his son's reflexive gasp made the Vulcan leap backward, and he avoided Taryn's blade by centimeters.

Backing away cautiously, keeping one eye out for the boundary lines of the combat square (for to step over one was to lose automatically and face execution), Sarek was careful to stay near the middle of the marked-off enclosure.

A square enclosure was far more dangerous than a circular one--a combatant could be trapped in a corner, and it was a rare fighter indeed who could fight his way out of that situation and remain unscathed.

The Vulcan tried a few experimental swipes with his senapa, getting the feel of the weapon. At one time, Sarek had been able to flip the senapa

in the air and catch it by the handle with either hand--but that was over a hundred years ago.

Taryn had evidently been sizing his opponent up, for he came in again, low and fast, feinting to the right, then slashing quickly left. Again Sarek managed to dodge and twist, avoiding the blade by a hairbreadth. But the effort left him short of breath ... and Taryn, seeing that, smiled.

The ambassador continued his slow circle in the center of the enclosure, watching for an opening. "Step over the line, old one," Taryn said, mockingly. "Make it easy on yourself."

"Did no one ever teach you that insulting your opponent is the mark of a coward and a bully?" Sarek asked, keeping his voice maddeningly calm.

Taryn's face twisted with anger, and he lunged again at Sarek. The ambassador sidestepped, his foot lashing out, tripping Taryn, even as he brought his unweaponed fist down on the back of his opponent's neck. With a grunt, Taryn fell forward, but he had been well trained--the commander turned the fall into a roll, and was back on his feet before Sarek could take advantage. Taryn eyed his opponent warily, and the smug, overconfident expression in his eyes had now altered to a look of respect.

Sarek began planning his next strategy--until he saw Taryn's eyes widen, and then gleam excitedly. At the same moment, he felt a faint, stinging burn along his left side, over his ribs. Looking down, he saw the thin line of green. A tiny slash--but, over time, it would be enough. The ambassador's breath hissed between his teeth. Deliberately he began circling again, hoping that Taryn would be content not to close with him for the moment.

Centering himself, the Vulcan reached inward with his sense of his physical self. Like all Vulcans, he'd been trained in biocontrol and biofeedback. The poison ... yes, it was spreading outward from the little wound. Just a tiny

amount, but it would make him sluggish, and, eventually, disable him. Concentrating fiercely, the ambassador managed to slow down his circulation, stemming the spread of the poison. It was all he could do ...

Tired of waiting for Sarek to succumb to the poison, Taryn attacked again, lashing out in a hard, flat arc that would have slashed the Vulcan's throat had he not ducked under it. Sarek came in close, his elbow up and out, and it struck the commander hard, not in the throat as he'd planned, but on the side of his jaw. Taryn grunted and staggered back, but when Sarek attempted to follow his advantage, the commander kicked him hard in the left patella.

Pain seared through Sarek's leg, and it nearly buckled beneath him. Somehow, the Vulcan managed to stay on his feet, but he was gasping painfully. Fire shot through his veins, and for a moment he couldn't decide whether it was from the poison, or lack of air. Blackness hovered at the edge of his vision, but several deep, gasping breaths forced it to retreat.

"You are better than I expected, Ambassador," Taryn said. Sarek was too winded to be gratified by the sweat that shone on the commander's face and chest. "But you are in no condition for this and you know it. Step out, and I guarantee you a quick, clean death with honor. Why prolong this?"

I must end this soon, Sarek thought. Then a possible strategy occurred to him, and he began shuffling toward the commander, feigning (he did not have to playact much, actually) weakness along his entire left side.

Right-handed as usual, Sarek aimed an awkward, underhand slash at Taryn's shoulder. The commander, as he'd planned, leaped to Sarek's left, closing in for the kill. Sarek pivoted away from the other's blade, and then with every ounce of control he could muster, the ambassador flipped the senapa into the air--

and caught it left-handed.

Taryn was still leaning into his swing, unaware that his

entire side was now a target. With a flick of his left wrist, Sarek slashed him lightly, along the ribs, once ... and then again.

Two slashes. Enough poison to disable even a strong opponent in a matter of minutes. Dimly, Sarek heard Savel's anguished gasp. Quickly, he disengaged, stepping back, still careful not to step into one of the corners.

Feeling the sting along his ribs, Taryn checked, then stared down at himself incredulously. Slowly, he looked back up at the weapon Sarek still held left-handed. The commander chuckled faintly, hollowly. "Better and ... better ... old one." He was beginning to gasp. "Very well, then ... finish me. Go ... ahead."

"I have no desire to kill an old friend," Sarek said. "Let us declare the challenge at an end. All I want are the Vulcan youths."

"You think ... I wish ... them harm?" Taryn's breath came hard, now, and it was painful to hear. "No ... I never ..."

"I did not think you wished them harm," Sarek was quick to say. "Let us stop this now, Taryn. With a doctor's help, it is possible we both can survive. I ask you ... as a friend ..."

"Please, Vadi!" Savel cried out, unable to restrain herself.

"No!" Taryn roared, and lunged forward, slashing wildly.

Sarek parried with his own senapa, and the brittle blades rang against each other--and shattered. Taryn gasped, his eyes rolled up in his head, and he fell.

Sarek stood staring at him, his eyes widening in distress as he saw the small streak of green crawl across the commander's knuckle. Three slashes ... fatal, in all likelihood.

"Where is your physician?" the ambassador demanded, dropping down beside the commander's still form. "Bring the physician immediately!"

"No ... forbid it ..." Taryn mumbled, his eyes closed.

"Poldar ... take command ... do whatever you must to honor the outcome ... of the challenge ..."

"I will, Commander," the young centurion promised, bending over his dying officer.

"He might be saved!" Sarek insisted, touching Taryn's forehead, feeling the life throbbing within his body and his mind--though it was ebbing fast. "Bring the doctor!"

Poldar steadfastly shook his head. Even when Savel added her voice to the ambassador's, the young centurion stood firm, obviously determined to honor Taryn's last orders.

In a final effort to save the commander, Sarek slid both hands around Taryn's head, instinctively finding the correct points. "Make them bring a doctor," he ordered Savel and Spock, who was crouched beside him, and then he sent his mind into the commander's, melding with him, lending him strength, keeping him alive--at the risk of his own life.

The meld deepened as Sarek poured more mental energy into the dying commander. He and Taryn shared each other's minds, each other's lives. In vivid flashes, the ambassador relived events from Taryn's past. The births of his children. His wedding. His promotions. Their chess games. Political allies, and deadly enemies ...

But all the while the other Vulcan's mind was growing weaker, weaker, forcing the ambassador to pour more and more of his own strength into this last, desperate effort.

Sarek deepened the meld, and felt himself going back, back in time, to Taryn's youth ... then his childhood. Back all the way to his earliest memory--one that, even in his dying, weakened condition, filled the commander's mind with horror and revulsion ... Taryn remembered ...

and Sarek shared that memory, for they were One.

Sarek was Taryn, only his name was different--Sarenw and he was four years old, aboard his parents' small trading vessel. All the Vulcans in that sector knew that ships were disappearing ... piracy and hijackings were assumed to be the cause. Orion slavers roamed the spaceways, and the tales of rape, pillage, murder, and enslavement were rampant--and horrifying.

So when their small freighter was suddenly seized in a tractor beam, and a huge, unknown ship loomed over them, seemingly materializing out of nowhere, Taryn's parents had made a decision that seemed right to them.

In whispers, his father and mother had decided that they would fight, to the death if necessary, rather than allow themselves to be taken captive and probably enslaved. If they were not killed in the fight, they resolved to link their minds, and use their training in biocontrol to stop each other's hearts. After long minutes of discussion, they decided that they must include Taryn in their link ... they did not want their son to suffer, and growing up as a slave seemed to them worse than not living to grow up at all.

"Saren ..." said Mother, holding out her hand to her child, who stood wide-eyed and trembling in the doorway to the tiny control room. "Come here. Give me your hand."

"Yes, Saren," echoed Father, reaching out for his son.

"Come here. Take our hands." Instinctively, Taryn knew that if he did as they bade, he would come to harm. Trembling, he shook his head wordlessly.

"Come now, Saren," said Father impatiently. "You are letting your emotions rule. We are Vulcans ... fear has no part in our lives. Do you wish to be a coward?"

"No ..." little Taryn whimpered, tears beginning to trickle down his face. He hadn't cried since he was a baby, and he was profoundly ashamed of himself. He was a Vulcan, and Vulcans didn't cry! Or let themselves be afraid.

But he couldn't help it.

"Saren, my son." Father's voice was stern. "Come here-- now!" The little ship shuddered as something clamped on to their airlock. Mother cried out that they must hurry--hurry!

Both Vulcans removed weapons from a locker.

Old-style stunners ... little defense against phasers or dis-rupters.

"Saren!" Father commanded, coming toward him. "Give me your hand!" The child's remaining control snapped, and he shrieked aloud, "No! I'm afraid!" Sobbing with terror, Taryn turned and bolted out of the control room. It was only after he'd reached the airlock door, and it had begun its ominous turn the moment he'd touched it, that the child's terror of the unknown had overcome his fear of his parents, and what they'd decided they must do.

As the invaders pushed their way into the ship, weapons drawn, Taryn had bolted back up the corridor. He'd flung himself inside, and was immediately struck by the stun beam. Helpless, he'd lain there, unmoving, forced to watch as the invaders in their uniforms had burned down the door, shot his father with a disrupter, vaporizing him immediately, and then turned their attentions to his mother. As they'd reached for her, she'd stiffened suddenly, her eyes glazing, then crumpled in their arms, dead.

Sarek understood so much now about the commander why he'd issued the challenge, why he could not abide the charge of cowardice or fear.

The ambassador knew that the commander had locked those memories away, repressed them until they haunted him only in dreams. You were only a child, he told the stricken commander. „I small child. You are not responsible for what happened. You could not have changed it. Know this, and let the pain go ... let it go ... Sarek sensed Taryn's understanding, sensed that the commander was finally released from the terror and guilt of that time--but his new understanding would do him little good, because, despite his best efforts, the Freelan was slipping away. Sarek clung to the meld with stubborn, dangerous persistence, clung even when he felt the change, the dissolving sensation seize his body.

Death? he wondered, dimly. Is this death?

But moments later, he recognized the sensation for what it was--he was caught in a transporter beam.

James T. Kirk stood in the transporter room, watching Dr. McCoy and his medical team struggle to stabilize the dying Romulan. "Tri-ox!" the doctor shouted, and a nurse slapped a hypo into his hand.

Sarek was crouched beside the Romulan, both hands

pressed to his head, clearly melding with him--but, even as Kirk watched, the ambassador, who was clad only in his undergarments, suddenly slumped over onto the pad.

"They are suffering from senapa poisoning, Doctor," Spock said, his voice incongruously calm in the organized melee of the medical team. "It may be possible to reproduce the antidote." Grabbing a stylus from a technician, he scribbled a chemical formula and diagram. "This is it."

McCoy quickly pushed the formula at a tech, and the man hurried out to get it replicated. "What else do you know about how to treat this?" he grunted, giving Sarek a tri-ox hypo also. "It sure as hell messes up the blood's ability to carry oxygen!"

"The ancient text mentioned treating it by blood filtration and transfusions."

"Okay," McCoy said. "Set up sickbay for filtration and transfusions. Check our supply of Vulcan Q-positive blood."

"That's a common type, we should have some on hand."

"But ... he's a Romulan," Kirk said. "Or do they have the same blood types?"

"I have no idea," McCoy said. "But this one's a Vulcan, Jim."

Spock looked over at the captain and nodded confirmation.

"All right, Spock, you're going to have to play donor for your father again," the doctor snapped. "Get ready."

"I am prepared, Doctor," the Vulcan said, removing his jacket and rolling up the sleeve of his shirt.

"Okay, I think they're stable enough to move! Get those antigrav stretchers over here, Nurse!" the doctor ordered.

The captain turned to McCoy. "Will he make it?"

"Don't know yet, Jim," McCoy grunted, his fingers flying as he injected the Romulan with a hypo. "Maybe. These Vulcans are tough ... as well as stubborn," he added, giving Spock a sidelong glance.

Kirk watched as they loaded both unconscious Vulcans onto the stretchers and followed them into the hall. He was halfway to sickbay when Uhura's page reached him. "Cap tain Kirk ... Captain Kirk, please report to the bridge immediately."

A quick slap on the nearest intercom panel brought him into contact. "This is the captain. What's going on, Commander?"

Chekov's voice responded, sounding breathless and a little scared. "Sir, I am picking up ships on our long-range sensors. Ten of them. Coming out of the Neutral Zone, and heading straight for us."

"On my way," Kirk said, and began running for the turbolift. It never rains but it pours, he thought grimly. What a time for Kamarag to show up ...

"Right on time," Kirk muttered to himself as he reached the bridge and glanced at the chrono. "I suppose punctuality is a must for a diplomat ... "

Chekov turned to regard him questioningly. "I beg your pardon, Captain?"

Kirk shook his head as he headed for his command seat.

"Nothing, Mr. Chekov. Status?"

"We have picked up ten ships coming out of the Klingon Neutral Zone."

"ETA, Commander?"

"Three point six minutes, sir."

"What type?"

"I am scanning four cruisers and six birds-of-prey, sir." Kirk's heart sank even further. Klingon cruisers were almost a match for the Enterprise, unlike the smaller war-birds.

The captain turned over plans in his mind ... run for it, try to stay ahead of them until reinforcements could arrive? No ... because as soon as they crossed the Neutral Zone, they'd probably split up, in order to do the most possible damage to the maximum number of planets.

"Commander Uhura, try to hail Kamarag's ship."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk was surprised when the Klingon's ship, the Hohwi;

accepted the contact. Moments later, the ambassador's heavy features coalesced on the screen. The moment his eyes fixed on the captain, he scowled, and his glare would have drilled neutronlure. "Kirk ..." he growled. "How dare you contact me? We have nothing to say to each other--unless you want to beg me for your life, and that of your crew. I would enjoy that sufficiently to allow you several minutes for that ... "At the thought, he smiled, but it was anything but a pleasant expression.

"Ambassador," the captain said, forcing himself to use his most reasonable voice, when the very sight of the Klingon made him furious, remembering how he'd agonized over Peter's disappearance, "we need to talk. There are some things I have to tell you. Break off your attack, because you're doing this as a result of alien mind influence.

Ambassador Sarek is aboard, and he has proof of what I'm telling you--proof I'd be happy to let you see for yourself.

I'm sure that, under the circumstances, if I explain everything to Chancellor Azetbur, she'll--"

Kamarag interrupted with a sound that was halfway between a growl and a snarl. "Kirk, you lying, cheating murderer! I know you have kidnapped my niece and are holding her prisoner. Your thrice-cursed nephew has attacked my finest officer, Kargl For this you will die in writhing agony. When I free my niece, she will perform the be/oy' on both Kirks, and I and my troops will wager as to which of you shrieks the loudest and longest!"

Turning his head, he addressed one of his officers. "This is an order. Target Kirk's ship to cripple only--do you understand?"

I want him alive! He is mine!"

Kirk, watching, would have found the ambassador's blustering amusing, under different circumstances. He sounds like one of the villains in a dime novel, he thought, sardonically.

"Ambassador Kamarag," he began, only to have the Klingon's image abruptly disappear.

"He broke contact, Captain," Uhura said, unnecessarily.

"Just as well," Kirk muttered.

"Veil," Chekov said, dourly, "I guess that is that. We are

the only ship between them and the Federation colonies so I guess've stay put."

"We'll give them a fight," Kirk said.

Then something occurred to the captain, and he turned to Uhura. "Commander, open a wide-beam frequency to all those ships. I'm going to see if some of those other commanders aren't a little more open to reason."

"Frequency open, Captain."

Kirk took a deep breath. "This is Captain James T. Kirk of the Federation starship Enterprise. I believe most of you know me as an opponent, in the past, and as a friend to your Empire in recent days. I swear to you on my honor as a Starfleet officer that you are following a man who is under the influence of alien mind control. Kamarag is no longer thinking independently. If you will break off the attack, and not intrude into Federation space, I will personally speak to Chancellor Azetbur on your behalf. Ambassador Sarek of Vulcan is aboard this vessel and he will speak for you. It is my belief, under the circumstances,

that the chancellor will agree to grant clemency for any commander who breaks off the attack. I ask you to consider what you are doing--betraying your own government, to follow a madman. Kirk out."

The ships were almost within firing range. Kirk waited tensely, but none of them broke formation--the warbirds clustered together in groups of threes, with the cruisers between them and to either side

"Well," he said, to no one in particular, "it was worth a try ... guess we go it alone ..."

"Captain," Uhura said, plainly startled by what she was hearing, "we're being hailed."

"By the Klingons?"

"No, sir ... by the Romulan vessel!"

"On-screen."

The bridge crew watched as the screen flickered; then the oncoming Klingon vessels were replaced by the features of an officer in Romulan uniform. "I am Centurion Poldar," he said.

"I am Captain Kirk."

"Yes, I know. Captain, my commander's orders were to honor his word to Ambassador Sarek. I hereby place my ship at your disposal. I am prepared to fight alongside you as long as necessary." Kirk glanced at the tactical schematic, and saw that Shardarr had drifted over until she was behind the Federation vessel, clearly preparing to defend her from the rear.

"I appreciate your assistance, Centurion," Kirk said.

"Too bad the odds aren't more even."

Poldar drew himself up. "I stand by my orders, Captain Kirk," the young officer said expressionlessly. "You will find Shardarr prepared for battle." He cut the connection.

"Well," Kirk muttered, "that's one for the history books ... "

"Stand by phasers and photon torpedoes," Kirk said.

"Target the Hohwiand fire on my order."

"Aye, Captain!"

As the Klingon vessels came closer, they slowed, and spread out until they encircled the Federation and the Romulan vessel. Hohwi' was still

the closest. There wasn't much Kirk could do about tactics; surrounded as he was, evasive action would be limited to only a few hundred thousand square kilometers of space.

His eyes fixed on the tactical screen, Kirk watched the blips, then snapped, "Fire, Mr. Chekov!"

Two deadly phaser blasts shot out, striking the Klingon vessel's shields.

"Slight damage to their forward shield, Captain," Chekov reported.

The flagship returned fire, and the Enterprise shuddered violently as she was struck amidships. "Port shield down twenty percent, Captain."

Oh hell, this is it, Kirk thought.

Just what I need, with a full sickbay, Leonard McCoy thought grumpily, another damned space battle. The Enterprise shuddered violently as she was hit. Beside

the doctor, on the couch where he was lying for the transfusion to his father, Spock struggled to sit up. The Vulcan had already given more blood than was good for him; he was pale and unsteady, but still determined to gain his feet.

"And where in hell do you think you're going, Spock?" McCoy snapped.

"The ship is obviously engaged in battle, Doctor." Spock was halfway up now, swaying like a ship in a gale. "I must report to the bridge." McCoy gave him an evil grin and reached in his pocket for a hypo he'd prepared specially and been saving, knowing he'd probably need it. "I told you twenty-six years ago that my patients don't walk out on me during medical procedures," he said, jamming the hypospray against the Vulcan's arm. Spock sagged back onto the couch, unconscious.

The ship shuddered again. Leonard McCoy ignored the motion. He was a doctor, and he had lots of work to do ... "Target Hohwi' with a photon torpedo and fire, Mr. Chekov!"

"Firing, Captain!" The Enterprise gave a different, more internal shudder as the weapon was launched. Kirk held his breath, then pounded his fist on the arm of his chair in disappointment.

At the last possible second, the Klingon vessel managed to evade the torpedo. Chekov was crestfallen. "A clean miss, Captain." Behind them, Shardarr fired, catching a warbird and shearing off half a wing. "Good going, Centurion!" Kirk whispered, just as Enterprise shuddered again. "Forward shield down to fifty percent, Captain!" Chekov reported.

Kirk groaned inwardly. We're going down this time.

There's no way around it. "Lieutenant, evasive--five-oh-six mark four!" Enterprise heeled over, but the disrupter blast caught her glancingly on the saucer. The entire bridge lurched violently.

"One of the birds-of-prey is preparing to fire, Captain!" Chekov exclaimed.

But, to everyone's utter astonishment, the Klingon vessel wheeled around like a nervous horse and loosed a blast at Kamarag's ship!

"What the hell?" Kirk demanded.

"Captain, we're being hailed!"

"Captain Kirk? Ambassador Sarek?" A strongly accented voice came over the ship-to-ship, audio only. "This is Commander Keraz aboard Bahwil'. I request that you and Ambassador Sarek speak for me and my crew ... should we by any chance survive this. I will fight with you and we will die as true warriors, with honor!"

"Glad you could join us," Kirk said, dryly.

With a graceful dip of her painted wings, the bird-of-prey moved out of formation and joined the other two ships in the middle of the circle.

"Commander Keraz, Commander Poldar, you stay behind us, and use our shields to augment your own," Kirk instructed. "See if you can't take out a couple of those ships for me." Both commanders signaled their assent to Kirk's plan.

Moments later, the captain was rewarded with a view of S hardarr and Bahwil' moving in a corkscrew evasive pattern, firing at the warbirds on the Enterprise's port and starboard sides. Bahwil' got lucky--or its gunner was extremely skillful. Keraz's disrupters penetrated the renegade's shields like a phaser slicing rock, and, for a moment, space lit up with a mini-nova as the bird-of-prey exploded violently.

Kirk shook his head. This is the craziest fight I have ever been in ... look at this! A Federation, a Klingon, and a Romulan ship, ready to duke it out with a whole squadron of Klingon renegades? I never thought I'd be fighting battles with Klingons and Romulans, instead of against them!

Enterprise bucked like a spurred horse under another blast from Hohwi'.

"Aft shield down sixty percent, Captain! We can't take another hit there!"

Kirk glanced at the schematic, saw that Hohwi' had drifted closer to Shardarr. "Ship to ship, Uhura! Tight beam to Shardarr.t"

"Aye, Captain?"

"Centurion Poldar--I want you to fire at Kamarag's ship in exactly thirty Federation Standard seconds," Kirk said, tersely. "Target coordinates seven-six-three mark nine. I know she isn't there now--but she will be! On my mark, and counting!" Without waiting for acknowledgment from the Romulan, he turned to Chekov. "Target the flagship on its port side and fire, Mr. Chekov. Targeting coordinates seven-six-six mark two."

"Aye, Captain! Targeting ... and firing!" As Kirk had hoped, Hohwi' evaded most of their blast, swinging to port--which brought the cruiser directly into the line of Shardarr's blast. Fire flared along the Klingon ship's side, and Chekov yelled, "Captain, she's lost all maneuvering power!"

"Target weapons array and fire, Mr. Chekov!" The phasers blasted the listing ship, wiping out her weapons with one shot. The bridge crew whooped in triumph.

Three down, seven to go, Kirk thought grimly, just as one of the warbirds fired on them.

Enterprise lurched so violently that Kirk was nearly flung from his seat. Quickly, he activated his restraint system.

"Captain, we've lost our aft shield," Chekov reported.

"Another hit there, and we're dead."

"Chekov, target that vessel, and fire on my order."

"Aye, Captain?"

James T. Kirk drew a deep breath, thinking that it might be his last. He opened his mouth, said, "Fi--" and stopped in midword.

Suddenly, the long-range scanners showed a huge fleet of ships pouring out of the Klingon Neutral Zone! Dozens of ships ... "Captain? We're being hailed!" Uhura's eyes were wide with amazement.

"On-screen, Commander." A gruff, familiar voice filled the air, even as the forward viewscreen filled with well-known features. "Kirk? This is General Korrd. The chancellor tells me our former ambassador is giving you some trouble." The general's fleshy, squint-eyed features were wreathed in a malicious smile.

Kirk noted the emphasis on the word "former."

"Well, yes, General ... just a little trouble." Korrd guffawed heartily at the captain's attempt at humor, which, to be frank, did not quite

come off. "Get that Vulcan of yours to man the guns, then!" the general advised, genially. "He's one Hu'tegh fine gunner!" Kirk glanced at the sensor array, saw that the renegade vessels were streaking off in all directions. He realized suddenly that his uniform was sticking to him, and that his face was covered with sweat.

"Kirk?" It was General Korrd again.

"Yes, General?"

"Looks like I'll have a good hunt for the next few days.

Wish me success, Kirk! Korrd out." The captain cut the connection with a grin, shaking his head.

The bridge crew looked as though they didn't know whether to laugh or cry, cheer or curse. Chekov seemed to be doing a little of everything, mostly in Russian.

"Well, I'll be damned," Kirk said, to no one in particular.

"That was ... close."

The first thing Sarek was conscious of upon waking was that the pain from the senapa wound was gone ... vanished. He did not have to exert biocontrol to repress it. The second thing the ambassador realized, as soon as he opened his eyes, was that he was in the Enterprise's sickbay.

The bed he was resting in was in a secluded alcove.

Glancing around, Sarek saw that his son occupied a bed across from him. Spock's eyes were closed ... he was breathing deeply. Asleep.

Events rushed back as the ambassador stretched cautiously.

The fight with Taryn ... beaming over to the Enterprise. McCoy's fight to save the wing commander. The last thing Sarek remembered was being hooked up to a blood-filtration device, at the same time as Spock was readied for a massive transfusion. Spock's blood now coursed through his veins ... Spock's blood had helped to preserve his life.

Just as it had all those years ago ... Slowly, the ambassador sat up, then reached for the intercom switch beside the bed. He summoned one of McCoy's nurses, and, when the man appeared, he made a request.

Minutes later, Sarek held in his hands one of the red volumes of his wife's journal. Swiftly, the Vulcan flipped through the pages, searching for a particular entry ... and found it ...

December 7, 2267 Sarek is safe ... Dr. McCoy operated on his heart, and he will be fine--mere words cannot convey my relief. I really thought

that I was going to lose him. Oh, Sarek ... if you weren't in my life anymore, I don't know how I would go on. I would NOT want to go on.

But, thankfully, I don't have to face such desolation.

Something ... the gods, fate, fortune ... if there is a governing force to the cosmos, today It was kind.

And today ... for the first time in eighteen long years ... today we were a family again. It was wonderful.

I had given up hope that those two stubborn Vulcans would ever reconcile--and, yet today they were both teasing me about logic, and the glint of humor in Spock's eyes matched the one in Sarek's. This evening McCoy agreed to let us all have dinner in sickbay, and we ate together as a family--with an honored guest, of course. Captain Kirk is such a charmer!

And he knows it, too ...) It has indeed been an eventful day. I am tired out, yet I don't want to sleep, yet. I want to savor the knowledge that we are a family again, and that my son and husband are on good terms.

Family ... what a lovely word. I don't think there is a better one in the entire language ... After so many years of enmity and anger ... family. I pray that their goodwill toward each other will continue.

They are both so stiffnecked, so stubborn./Neither is ever willing to admit that he was wrong ... especially Sarek.

But today the fates were kind, and we were spared a tragedy. I wonder if I would truly have hated my son for the rest of his life if he had allowed his father to die because he felt he could not give over command of his vessel? Or would I have forgiven him eventually?

Thank heavens I will never have to find out ...

The entry ended there. Slowly, thoughtfully, Sarek closed the journal, struck by his wife's words, written so long ago.

Amanda could almost have been describing the present situation between Spock and himself ... Amanda ... he thought, gazing across the room at his son's sleeping face. Amanda, what should I do now?

As it happened, Spock was fast asleep. He lay quietly, breathing deeply, relaxed, but he was fully aware that his father was reading one of his mother's journals. As he watched surreptitiously, he saw the elder Vulcan put the slim volume down with a sigh.

The first officer thought of the events of the previous day, recalling, with a chill, Sarek's duel with Taryn. Several times, as he'd watched

from the sidelines, Spock had been convinced that the ambassador was finished ... but always, Sarek had rallied and fought back with a skill that had surprised and impressed his offspring.

Spock had never realized that his father, the diplomat, had so mastered the ancient fighting techniques. And then, as Taryn had lain there, gasping his last, Sarek had melded with him, saving the wing commander's life. The first officer repressed a surge of envy. His father had never chosen to meld with him ... but he had not hesitated to join his mind with a stranger's ...

Glancing around the sickbay as McCoy bustled around in the next room, checking on several patients who had been injured during the Enterprise's battle with Kamarag's ship, Spock experienced a strong flash of *djh vu*.

The Vulcan remembered that day his mother had come to his quarters, begging him to go to his father and give Sarek the blood transfusion that would enable McCoy to operate, and thus save Sarek's life. Amanda had come to him, had begged with tears in her eyes ... and he, Spock, had refused to go.

Because of duty.

He had told his mother that he could not, would not go to Sarek, and the reason he had given her was that duty

demanded that he remain in command of the Enterprise ...

Remembering Amanda's response to his words, the Vulcan raised a hand to his cheek. For a moment he almost reexperienced the slap she had given him ... for a moment he could almost feel the sting. Spock recalled being surprised by the strength of the blow--he'd received many in fights that hadn't matched its impact.

Duty ... duty ... duty ... The word whispered through his mind, sounding vaguely obscene when it was repeated enough times to lose all meaning. Spock glanced over at his father, remembering the way he had condemned Sarek for doing exactly what he himself had done, twenty-six years before.

I am sorry, Mother, he thought, not quite sure what he was apologizing for ... the events of that day twenty-six years ago, or what he'd said to his father only days ago? He thought he'd grown more than his father. But had he really?

Perhaps not ... "Spock ..." Sarek's voice reached him. Instantly Spock sat up and regarded the ambassador.

"I am here ... sir," he said.

"Are you ... well?" the elder Vulcan asked, eyeing him measuringly.

"I am," Spock said. "And you?"

"Well," Sarek said, sounding slightly surprised. "Though thirsty. And rather weak."

Spock glanced around the sickbay, saw no attendants, and, rather than buzz for one, got up himself, poured a glass of water, and took it to his father. "Here," he said, prepared to help the elder Vulcan sit up if he needed it, but Sarek was able to do so unaided.

The ambassador sipped gratefully at the cool water. "And you, my son?" he asked, putting the glass down.

"I am well," Spock said.

"The Klingon fleet?" Sarek asked.

"The Enterprise engaged Kamarag's ship, backed by Poldar aboard Shardarr. "Spock raised an eyebrow. "And it

seems that your old acquaintance Keraz threw in his lot with the forces of law and order. The captain was in to visit me several hours ago, and told me that Azetbur has promised the commander a full pardon."

Sarek nodded. "What of Kamarag?"

"Enterprise managed to cripple his ship. I gather that Kamarag did not choose to live through his defeat."

The ambassador nodded. "Loss of life is always regrettable, but ... perhaps ... this is one time it is better so." The elder Vulcan glanced over at the other diagnostic couch.

"Commander Taryn's readings are almost normal, now," he observed.

"Yes, McCoy says he's sleeping normally. He'll be able to return to his ship within a day." Spock gazed at Sarek.

"From what little I heard of what he said to you and Poldar, his experience during the duel and the mind-meld evidently ... changed Taryn."

"He is grateful to me for saving his life," Sarek said. "But, even more, he feels that he has regained his Vulcan heritage, apparently through our mental link. I gather that his past had haunted him all his life. When he faced, with me, what he most feared ... it lost its power over him."

"What will happen now with the Vulcans on Freelan?"

"Taryn will escort us to Freelan and authorize any of them that choose to leave aboard the Enterprise as free to go," the ambassador replied.

"But after the Vulcans who wish to emigrate are released," Spock ventured, after a few minutes, "what will happen to Taryn? Do you think he will come to Vulcan with the others?"

Sarek shook his head. "No," he said, and there was more than a touch of sadness in his expression. "Taryn will go back to Romulus, to face his superiors and his praetor. He has not said so, but I know his mind, now."

"But ... if he does that, he will be executed for treason," Spock said.

"Yes," Sarek agreed, holding his son's eyes with his own.

"But he believes it is his duty ... and, after my recent

actions, who am I to tell anyone not to fulfill his duty, no matter what the cost?"

The two Vulcans shared a long, unblinking look; then Spock swallowed. His voice, when he spoke, had a rough edge, like a jagged tear in dark velvet. "Father ..." The word emerged with difficulty after all these days. "About what I said after mother's memorial service ..." He paused, searching for words.

Grief mixed with a touch of hope flared in the ambassador's eyes. "Yes, my son?" Before Spock could continue, he raised a hand. "I must tell you that I have thought a great deal on what you said, after the memorial service. I only hope that my actions did not hasten Amanda's end. You may have been right when you accused me of going because I lacked the courage to stay, Spock ... "

"And I may have been wrong, Father," Spock said, forcing the words out. "I know, now, that my mother's death was inevitable. Remember, Dr. McCoy told us that she had only days. And ... there is something else I must tell you "

"Yes?"

"When I told you that Mother could not find peace,

I ... may not have been entirely correct."

Sarek raised an eyebrow.

"I was angry," Spock said, not allowing himself to sound defensive at the admission, "and what I said, for the most part, was the truth ... but ... at the very end ..." He had to stop, take a deep breath, before

he could go on. "She relaxed. She even smiled. She appeared peaceful."

Sarek nodded silently, and it was a long time before the ambassador spoke. Finally he stirred. "Thank you, my son," he said softly. "Your words have meant a great deal to me."

Valdyr watched Dr. McCoy check the regenerated tissue on her wound. She had on a bizarre, blue, two-piece outfit one of the female nurses brought for her to wear until her own clothes could be cleaned and repaired. The garments were comfortable--too comfortable, she thought--but they were so flimsy she wasn't entirely convinced they would survive her normal activities. McCoy had discreetly lifted the top over her abdomen and was running his hand gently over the new tissue. She grimaced, peeking at it herself.

"That doesn't hurt, does it?" McCoy asked her, as he poked around.

"Of course not," Valdyr said sternly. As if any Klingon would have admitted if it did! McCoy looked at her and she could see the amusement etched on his face." He'd been so kind to her, she couldn't help but relax around him. "Well," she admitted reluctantly, "it did at first--just a little. Now, all it does is itch."

"That won't last, miss," he assured her. "Another day or so, and you won't even know anything ever happened there."

She made a face at him, and he grinned. "How can you say that when that place is all pale and soft."

"As your own cells replace it," McCoy said, "that'll be fixed, too. We wouldn't want you looking like a patched-up battleship!" The sickbay doors whooshed open, making both of them turn to see Peter enter the exam area. The cadet looked at them quizzically, as if wondering if he'd come at a bad time. McCoy waved him over as he covered the wound. "However, I should tell you, Valdyr, human males like a little softness in a woman." He raised an eyebrow at Peter, who gave them an embarrassed smile.

"Not that one," Valdyr said confidently--and her words made Peter's face turn crimson.

The cadet glowered at her disapprovingly. "I think you're feeling too well," he decided.

"She's doing great," confirmed McCoy, "thanks to her amazing constitution. I take it you're here to take my favorite patient away from me?"

"Yes, sir," Peter said. Turning to Valdyr, he told her,

"We've got your quarters all prepared. It's time you gave up that bed to

someone who really needs it." At that moment, the doors opened, and Jim Kirk entered.

"You've had half the ship locked away in here, Bones," the captain complained good-naturedly. Eyeing Valdyr, the captain smiled and nodded. "How are you feeling?"

She nodded back reservedly. He had come to her, himself, to tell her of her uncle's death following the Heghba'. It had been a sign of great respect, and she'd appreciated it. He had not flinched, either, when she'd voiced the ritual howl.

Valdyr was coming to think humans weren't nearly as weak as she'd been led to believe.

"We were just about to inspect Valdyr's quarters, Uncle Jim," Peter told him. "Dr. McCoy told me this morning she could be released."

Kirk nodded and turned back to Valdyr. "I'm here on official business." He looked at Valdyr meaningfully. "A little more pleasant business than the last time, thank goodness. Miss. Valdyr, Chancellor Azetbur has asked to speak with you."

"With me?" Valdyr said, incredulously. "The chancellor would speak with me?"

Kirk walked over to the wall viewscreen and tapped a sequence on the control panel. A Klingon face appeared.

"Tell the chancellor that Valdyr is here, ready to speak with her."

Valdyr's heart was hammering.

Suddenly, Chancellor Azetbur's image filled the screen.

She looked so stern, so powerful, so impossibly noble and honorable that Valdyr simply stared, transfixed. She reminded the young Klingon woman of the portrait in her uncle's home. "Chancellor ..." Valdyr finally managed to whisper.

Azetbur's face warmed into a gracious smile. "Valdyr! It is an honor to speak with you. And a pleasure."

Azetbur felt honored to meet her? Valdyr's gaped. "Oh, no, Chancellor. I have no honor ... I betrayed--"

"Nonsense!" the chancellor interrupted briskly. "None of our people has more honor. You risked everything to save Qo'nos and our people--and you succeeded. You received an honorable wound in battle. You helped to save the honor of your family, from Kamarag's attempt to destroy it.

Qo'nos will never forget your sacrifice. While you were recovering, I have spoken to the people who know you well.

They have told me of your dreams for the future."

Valdyr glanced over at Peter quickly; he was smiling as he winked at her.

"I want you to know that I, personally, wish to assure you that your future will be as bright as the one you granted your people through your courage." Azetbur leaned closer to the screen, her expression softening, becoming less formal, more earnest. "You were born to be a leader, Valdyr, and I shall make sure that is what you will become. You will be trained as diplomat, under my auspices and tutelage. Our Empire needs people like you to insure her welfare. Our people are facing a time when they can no longer solve problems the way they have in the past. We need warriors who will gain our ends with words, not weapons. You are our future, aldyr."

"MET" Valdyr stammered, but after a second, she managed to regain her composure enough to say, "Chancellor, you honor me too greatly. I do not know what to say."

"What is there to say? It is only what you deserve. Kirk has told me that his ship is currently on a vital mission to Freelan. As soon as his mission is fulfilled, when you are completely recovered, General Korrd will be sending a crew to fly the Taj home. He has instructions to bring you to me, so we may discuss your education, and your future, at greater length. Grow strong, Valdyr. I will see you soon." And then, abruptly, she signed off.

Valdyr just sat there, completely taken aback. She'd been resigned to giving up her life as a Klingon, to adjusting to this new life. Now ... She looked at the men standing around her. Azetbur must have spoken to them. She turned to Peter. "You told her ... about me?"

"I told her the truth," Peter explained. "I told her about your dreams of getting an education, about being a diplomat ... "He trailed off. "Isn't that what you wanted?"

That was what she'd wanted ... before. Did she still want it? "But ... if I go back to school ..." She turned and looked at Captain Kirk. Was this his way of pulling her and Peter apart? She didn't know what to think.

"Valdyr," the captain said softly. "You're being given a

wonderful opportunity. You're very young. This could shape your whole life. Think carefully before you decide."

McCoy suddenly stood in front of her. "Come on, Jim.

These kids need time to talk." Nodding farewell, the two older men left.

Peter pulled himself up to sit beside her on the bed. He had said little so far.

"If ... I do this, Pityr," she said quietly, "then ... we must part ... Is that what you want me to do? You want me to leave you?"

He didn't answer for a long moment; then finally he said,

"Remember that talk we had, where I told you that everyone expected me to be like my uncle Jim and take the Command track, and you said ..."

"That I was expected to marry and bear children and spend all my time scheming for their advancement. Yes, I remember."

"Well, you made that sound like a fate worse than death, Valdyr. If you pass this opportunity up ... that's all that will be left for you to do. If you married me, and had my children, and worked to improve our lives--someday you'd wake up and realize you ended up living the very same life everyone wanted you to have on Qo'nos. And then, I think, you'd be very unhappy."

The truth of his words hit her hard. But why did her future as a diplomat require her to leave him? "Why can't our futures somehow ... be closer together? Why must I be on Qo'nos and you on Earth? Why can't things be better than that?"

He slipped an arm around her and pulled her close to him.

"I'm not sure it can't be, Valdyr. We'll have to work at it, and we'll have to be willing to suffer separations ... Did

you know that Mr. Spock's parents are of mixed species?"

"No, I did not."

Peter nodded. "His mother was human." Then he chuckled.

"And his father is a diplomat. What I'm trying to say is, that Sarek and his wife had to spend a lot of time apart, because of their work. She was a teacher, and a mother, and that kept her at home."

"I understand about Mr. Spock's parents," Valdyr said,

"but what has that to do with ..."

"Us? Well, I just mention that because they enjoyed many years of marriage, even though they spent a lot of time apart.

It was a good marriage. I've been thinking about them because, well, Mr. Spock's mother just died ... while Sarek was on this last diplomatic mission."

Valdyr was startled by that. "That was a difficult thing to do, to serve with honor while one is grieving."

"Yes, but Sarek is a Vulcan. My point, Valdyr, is that other people maintain relationships even when they aren't always together. Even when they have to spend large amounts of time far apart."

"You are saying, if they can do it, that we could, too?" Peter shrugged. "I mean, if a mere Vulcan can maintain a relationship with a human over time and space ... what can a Klingon accomplish?"

She rested against him. "Now I know what it is I will be missing, Pityr. I will be missing you so terribly." She felt him swallow, and knew that was one of his ways of controlling the emotions he didn't want her to see.

"We'll find a way, Valdyr," he promised her, hugging her tight. "We'll find a way to be together. We'll just have to be patient."

Smiling, she let him help her off the bed, and lead her to her quarters.

During the next two days, the Enterprise warped toward Freelan, accompanied through space by Shardarr. When they reached the fringes of the Freelan stellar system, the ships dropped out of warp. Sarek accompanied Taryn to the transporter chamber so he could reclaim his ship from Poldar.

The wing commander, having a typically strong Vulcan constitution, was fully recovered from the effects of the senapa poison. He had resumed his uniform. For the first time, Sarek was able to study his features freely, without either a mask of fabric or anger to conceal them. The two Vulcans stood facing each other in the transporter chamber,

while the Enterprise's transporter chief discreetly busied herself with duties.

"What has been the reaction to your orders to allow the Vulcans to leave, should they choose to do so?" Sarek asked.

The officer drew himself up, his expression taking on a touch of the old arrogance. "I am still wing commander. I am being obeyed," he said. "As soon as I have beamed over, I will send Savel back ... and then any of my officers who wish to leave. The Vulcans on Freelan have been told to gather at a central point, so they may be beamed up efficiently. They will do so."

"Of course," Sarek said, with a touch humor. "They are Vulcans."

Efficiency is in their blood."

"You gave me yo. ur word that Savel will be under your personal guidance in establishing her new life," Taryn reminded the ambassador.

Sarek raised a hand formally. "I gave you my word. She will be given every opportunity and advantage it is possible for me to offer."

The wing commander relaxed slightly. "Very well, then. I must go. If you will wait for Savel, she will not be long."

"Taryn ..." Sarek began, and the officer, who had begun to turn away, turned back. "Come with us," the ambassador said, aware of a note of entreaty in his voice he did not entirely trouble to repress. "Your people will need leadership, you are correct in that. You could provide that leadership yourself. And ..." The ambassador's mouth quirked upward slightly. "And we could play chess ... "

A slight smile touched the wing commander's grim mouth. "And have you continue to beat me? I think not. It is my duty to take Shardarr back to Romulus, and to face the praetor with what I have done."

"But you know what will happen."

"Of course," Taryn said. "But this is what I must do, Sarek. I am a Romulan officer. I have lived as a Romulan ... and I will die as one."

Sarek sighed. "I was not expecting anything else," he said.

"But I had to ask ... "

Taryn nodded curtly, then stepped up on the transporter

pad. Again that faint smile touched his mouth, as he lifted his hand, and, with a slight grimace, spread his fingers into the Vulcan salute. "Peace and long life, Sarek," he said, quietly--

just as the transporter beam took him.

Minutes later, Savel and Taryn stood together in Shardarr's transporter room. The young Vulcan woman's features were composed, but her voice trembled uncontrollably.

"I do not want to leave you, Vadi! Let me go back with you to Romulus. Perhaps I can bear witness for you, and they will understand."

Commander Taryn smiled faintly. "Understand? The praetor? Why, Savel, I never knew you to make jokes before ... "

"But ..." She was trembling, thinking of what would happen to him back on Romulus. "Please, Vadi.t"

"Savel," he said, chidingly, "remember your control. You are a Vulcan, and under Ambassador Sarek's guidance. He has promised me that he will sponsor you, until you are ready to take your place on your rightful world. You must look to the future."

"You are a Vulcan, too," she said, an edge in her voice that betrayed her anguish at parting from him. "Come with He was already shaking his head. Taryn drew himself up proudly. "I am a Romulan," he corrected her. "And I must take Shardarr back to Romulus and make my final report."

A number of the young Vulcan bridge officers were already aboard the Enterprise, and were leaving with the Federation vessel ... but a surprising number of the senior officers--including Centurion Poldar--had announced their decision to accompany Taryn on their last voyage home.

"Besides," the commander added, "the ambassador will need help to gain the trust of the Vulcans who have chosen to go home to their native world. They will need a leader.

You have the strength to guide them, Savel."

"What will happen to the others?" she wondered. At least

fifty of the Vulcans, mostly those who had married into Romulan families, had chosen to stay.

"They will have to go underground, to live as Romulans for the rest of their lives." He sighed. "The Plan has failed. I would not be surprised if the praetor decides to evacuate Freelan entirely. The repercussions of the failure of the Plan will echo through the Empire for many years ... perhaps decades."

"What will the praetor do?" Savel asked.

"What we Romulans always do in the face of adversity ... pull back, regroup, wait. The Empire is patient, Savel. That is why it has endured so long. The Empire will wait, and plan ... until it is time to try again."

"If only there could be peace," she whispered.

He raised an ironic eyebrow. "If only there could be," he echoed. "But not today, I fear." He glanced up at the waiting transporter technician. "Come, it is time."

Savel straightened her shoulders and nodded, her features calm ... though her eyes were full of anguish. With her bag of personal belongings in hand, she slowly took her place on the transporter pad. Taryn gave her a Romulan salute.

"Farewell, vadia-lya."

Squaring her shoulders, Savel hesitantly lifted her hand, spreading her fingers apart as she had seen Sarek do. "Peace, Vadi ... peace and--" She broke off. To say "long life" under these circumstances was ridiculous. "Farewell," she said, instead.

Just as the beam of the transporter began to whine, Savel saw him smile at her fondly. "Give my regards to Soran," he said, just before she winked out of existence.

Wing Commander Taryn took a deep breath, squared his own shoulders, and left the transporter room without a backward glance.

Peter Kirk and Valdyr stood together in the Enterprise's docking bay, at the foot of Taj's gangplank, to say their farewells. They did not embrace, because there were three Klingon officers in the doorway, eyeing them interestedly.

Peter smiled unsteadily at the young Klingon woman.

"You'll get home days ahead of me," he reminded her.

"Uncle Jim finally introduced me to Ambassador Sarek and he said he would grant us access to the diplomatic core-net.

I expect to find a communique waiting when I get back to Earth. I want to hear all about your schooling, Valdyr. I want to know everything that happens to you, until we can see each other again. Promise me."

She nodded in turn. "On my honor, I will. You must do the same."

"On my honor, I will."

She gave him a faint smile. "Then ... I wish you safe voyage back to your world. I know you will pass your warrior's test with honor, Pityr. You have already faced far worse ... "

"Yes, but then I had you to help me be strong," he said, and for a moment felt his control slipping. "Farewell Valdyr-oy. Safe voyage. Until we meet again. May it be soon ... "

"Farewell, Pityr-oy. We will make it be soon," she replied fiercely, giving him a warrior's closed-fist salute.

As he watched, she turned and ran up the gangplank. The last glimpse he had of her was the gleam of her armor, and a final toss of her long braid.

Hearing over the intercom that the bay was about to depressurize, Peter

hastily left, without looking back ...

Sarek sat on the divan in the small VIP cabin aboard the Earth-bound Enterprise, Amanda's journal open in his lap.

The ambassador was rereading the entry his wife had made on the day that the news of her father-in-law's death had reached her.

April 5, 2249 I just received a communique from T'Pol, telling me that Solkar died yesterday. He was the last surviving member of Sarek's immediate blood-kin--except, of course, for Spock ... whom Sarek has declared *vre-kasht*.

I find myself thinking about how lonely Sarek must be. Of course, after what he did, he deserves to be alone ... but time, I am discovering, has a way of putting things in perspective.

This past year, as I look back on it, has, in a way, been a good one. It was a thrill to go back to teaching, and, because of my celebrity (notoriety?), I've been given the best and brightest that Earth had to offer. My students have been wonderful--watching them grow and expand their horizons has been so rewarding.

Also, living here in San Francisco while Spock attends

Starfleet Academy has been a good opportunity to renew closeness with my son.

It was also good to spend time with More and Dad ... Aunt Matilda passed away this year, and she was younger than Dad ... it made me realize, for the first time, that my parents will not go on forever. Neither will I, come to think of it.

Neither will Sarek.

It's funny how death puts things in perspective. I think ... I think it's time to go home to Vulcan. Spock will soon, as second-year cadet, be going off on training missions. He has made the admittedly difficult adjustment to living in close quarters with so many human students, and he is finally beginning to make a few friends.

He doesn't need me here anymore ... he needs the company of people his own age, cadets who are learning the things he is learning.

And, of course, there is the thought of Sarek, alone.

When I asked T'Pol, rather hesitantly, how Sarek was these days, she stared straight at me, her imperious expression unchanged--but her words, uttered in her slightly lisping, accented speech, surprised me. "Thee asks how Sarek is, Amanda? In all this year of exile from thy homeworld, thee hast never asked. Why now?"

'7 ask because I know how Sarek would grieve for his father, T'Pol," I said, regarding her steadily. "I am ... concerned about his welfare."

Her black eyes blinked at me, from out of her bony, once-beautiful features. "Thee is right, Amanda. Sarek grieves for Solkar ... but he grieves a hundredfold more for thee."

Her bluntness startled me. "Really?" I murmured, unable to think what to say, trying to repress the stab of anguish her words brought.

T'Pol paused, then stared straight at me. "Wilt thee attend Solkar's memorial service, Amanda? If thee tells me thee wishes to attend, I will delay the service until thee can come home."

Home. She said home in referring to Vulcan. T'Pol saw that, to me ... an outworlder. My breath caught in my throat as I remembered so much ... the beauty, the desolation, the heat ... Sarek's arms around me, the closeness of our bodies no more intimate than that of the bond we share ...

For the first time in a year, I allowed myself to sense Sarek's mind through the bond. It was always there, of course, in the back of my mind--I'd have known if anything had happened to him. But I've been too angry to let myself touch his mind. And, of course, I'm not a telepath, so my ability is limited ...

But I sensed him. And what I sensed made tears stream down my face.

She didn't even avert her eyes from the sight of so much rampant emotionalism when I wept. When I managed to regain my control, she said, only, "Wilt thee come home, Amanda?"

I nodded at her, and she gave me the date, location, and time of the service, then cut the connection.

So now ... I must pack, and board the transport. I have only a few hours to finish, so I can't spend any more time on this journal until I'm bound for Vulcan.

Sarek, I am coming back to you. I have learned a great deal this past year, and one of the things I have learned is that in punishing you, I was punishing myself just as much. It is no longer worth it.

If I know you--and I do--you won't ever bring up the subject of my self-imposed exile from you and Vulcan.

You'll simply want to go back to the way things were--except that our son will not be part of our family anymore, as far as you're concerned.

Can I live with that? Yes, I believe I can. You see, I can forgive

you, then I have to believe that you and Spock will, someday, forgive each other.

I must hurry ... time and that transport won't wait ...

Sarek closed the volume and sighed. It was painful to read those words ... to think of the time they had spent apart, and of how he would give up nearly everything he possessed to regain that lost year. Putting that volume aside, he picked up the next, then located the spot where he'd left off the night before. Noting the date on the next entry, the ambassador steeled himself to read what she had written.

March 14, 2285 No entry for three days ... I can scarcely see to write this ... I am so tired that I ache all over, but every time I lie down and close my eyes, the images I see are too awful to bear. So, after dozing for the first time in days, I am awake barely an hour later, writing ... because doing nothing is even worse.

Is there a God? If there is a Supreme Being, how could he, she, it, or they allow this to happen?

My son is dead. Spock is ... dead. Writing those words ... I am trembling, shaking, and my heart feels as though some giant is squeezing it in an inexorable fist. Spock, dead? It seems impossible. I keep thinking there has been some mistake, that Starfleet will call us and tell us it isn't true. How can it be true? Spock is--oh god, was--half-Vulcan. I expected him to outlive me for decades! Why did this have to happen, why? My child, dead? How could this happen?

Of course I know how it happened. Even in the midst of my own anguish I could find it in my heart to pity poor Jim Kirk ... he tried so hard to break it gently. Spock was his best friend, they were so close, serving together all these years. I could tell that the captain had been crying too ... Sarek did not cry, of course. I found myself, for a moment, hating him for that. As though his lack of human tears meant that he did not care for Spock ... when I know that he did care, that our son was the most important person in the galaxy to him ... except, possibly, for me. I stared at him, the tears welling up and coursing down my face, sobs racking me until it seemed that my body could not hold them--and I came so close to lashing out at him. For a horrible instant I wanted to slap him, scream at him, and demand that he weep for our son ... I am thankful that I did not. I would never have forgiven myself that would have made an intolerable situation even worse.

Sarek takes comfort in the fact that Spock died well, in the performance of his duty, sacrificing himself to save his shipmates. A hero, to use the human term ... a word which does not translate into modern Vulcan.

But there is no comfort for me. Last night I clutched myself, rocking back and forth, feeling as though I might explode with sorrow. Sarek came and sat beside me, trying to comfort me with his presence. He

rested his hand on mine, silently, and „hen herinally spoke, it was only to say the traditional words ... "My wife, I grieve with thee ... " I know he does. But I feel that a mother's love is stronger, and thus her grief is also greater. Illogical perhaps ... but true, I know it.

Spock, my son ... if only you had died on Vulcan!

Then you would not be lost to us forever. At least your living spirit, your katra, could have been saved, could have been placed in the Hall of Ancient Thought. If oly--

Abruptly, the precise, elegant handwriting broke off.

Sarek knew why. Vividly, he remembered the afternoon his wife had burst into his study, her reddened eyes wide and wild ...

"Sarek?" Amanda's normally cultured, lovely voice shattered like fine crystal in the stillness. "What about Spock's katra? It wouldn't have died with his body, if he found someone to entrust it to ... his living spirit could still be found!" Sarek turned from his computer terminal to see his wife standing in the doorway, clutching it with both hands, as

though she might fall without the support. She was wearing a dressing gown pulled carelessly over her nightdress, and her hair was mussed, in contrast to her usual impeccable grooming.

Amanda's eyes flashed with incredulous hope as she continued, breathlessly, "From what James Kirk told us, our son knew his actions would kill him--so he would certainly have established the mental link necessary to entrust his katra when he died! Spock was a good telepath--he could have done it very quickly."

"But Kirk did not mention--" Sarek began, reasonably.

"Kirk's human!" Amanda burst out. "He may not even know what he holds in his mind! Most humans wouldn't--oh, Sarek, if there's even a chance--" She gazed at her husband pleadingly. "--even a small chance, we can't afford to ignore it! We're talking about our son's living spirit--what humans would call a soul, I suppose. We can't let him be lost forever!" Sarek stared at her, his mind turning over what she had said. "Your deduction is most unlikely, Amanda," he said at last, his tones gentle. "From the scenario that Kirk described, the ship was in great peril, in imminent danger of destruction. Spock could hardly have found time to meld with Kirk before he went down to the engine room."

"It doesn't take a full meld, and you know it, Sarek," she insisted, her blue eyes flashing stubbornly. "Our son was a trained telepath, he'd melded with Kirk many times. He could have established the link that would make Kirk his Keeper in a bare instant!" Sarek experienced a flare of hope. Amanda was quick to notice the tiny change in his expression. "You must go to Earth and see Kirk, my husband," she said formally. "You

will be able to tell whether Kirk holds our son's essence in his mind. Go, Sarek. Spock would have found a way! I know it!" The ambassador stood up, crossed the room to stand beside his wife. Slowly, formally, he held out two fingers, and she returned the gesture. They stood together, their mutual grief flowing between them, both gaining strength from their closeness. Through their bond, Sarek shared some of Amanda's hope that their child was not totally lost, and it slowly, gradually, became his own hope.

Finally, Sarek nodded. "I will go to Earth, Amanda," he promised. "I will speak with Kirk in person. If necessary, I will touch his mind, and discover whether he is unconsciously Keeping our son's living spirit." Amanda smiled at him gratefully. "Thank you, Sarek," she said, softly. "Thank you, my husband. Spock would have found a way ... I know it. My son is not completely gone ... if he were, I think I would know. You must find him, Sarek ... "

"If he is to be found, I will do so," Sarek said, his tone as grave and earnest as if he took a solemn oath. "I will bring his living spirit back to Vulcan ... so he may be at peace."

Sarek looked up from the journal and sighed, remembering what had followed. His son was alive today because of Amanda's unwavering faith that he was not truly--not completely--lost to them.

I must give these journals to Spock, allow him to read them when I am finished, he thought. My son deserves to gain the insight into his mother's mind that they have given me ... Despite the bond we shared for so many years, there are things about Amanda that I never knew until now ... If only his wife were still alive. If only he could express aloud, for once, the emotions he had allowed only to surface in the silent privacy of their bond. It would have meant so much to her to have heard him say it out loud ... just once.

But she was dead. Amanda was dead.

Dead ... and nothing could change that. Amanda, unlike a Vulcan woman, had no future ... at least, no future that was perceivable or retrievable. As a human, she had not possessed a katra ... so nothing could be placed in the Hall of Ancient Thought, to linger until it was ready to go on to whatever lay next.

If Amanda had been Vulcan ... if Kadura had not been

taken hostage ... Sarek could have been the Keeper of her katra ... her living spirit could have resided within him until it was released into the energy nexus of the Hall of Ancient Thought.

If Amanda had been Vulcan, her husband and son could have gone to that ancient citadel, stood within its confines and gained a sense of her presence. By the time his wife's katra was ready to depart, Sarek would

have been prepared, would have had ample time to bid her farewell. Had his wife been Vulcan, her death would not have meant such an abrupt and shocking end, a complete and utter severing of their bond. Even if he had been on Kadura, Spock could have been her Keeper ... But Amanda had been human, and the ambassador had never, until a few weeks ago, wished it otherwise. But when he'd learned that she was ill, Sarek had been forcibly reminded of something he'd determinedly managed to forget ... that his wife was almost certain to predecease him by years ... probably decades.

The ambassador sighed aloud, thinking that if Amanda had been Vulcan her katra would probably now be residing within him--or within Spock. She would, in a sense, still be alive ... But if Amanda had been Vulcan, she would not have been Amanda ... Sarek sighed, and his eyes returned to the volume on his lap. He began reading again, finished that one, and, with a sense of deep regret, picked up the last of the red-bound books. Opening this one, he paged through it, saw that it was only a third filled. He took a deep, painful breath, and determinedly began to read.

The last brief series of entries made him sit up straighter, his eyes moving quickly over the page. When he finished them, he went back and read them again, slowly. He could almost hear her voice ...

September 17,2293 Frankly, I am worried about Sarek. The days since I have been diagnosed have been a great strain, far worse

for him than for me. After all, he bears the burden of not allowing me to glimpse his fear for me ... of not letting me sense his pain. The only comfort I can offer is to let him think that I remain unaware of his inner turmoil, so that is what I do ...

September 18,2293 Sarek left today to negotiate for the release of Kadura, a planet taken by Klingon renegades. The president asked him personally to handle the negotiations, and he had to accept. It is his job, his duty to use his skills for the benefit of others, and I understand that. He is the best in the galaxy at what he does, and I know that. I am proud of him.

Which doesn't mean that I don't miss him, and wish he had stayed here with me. I miss him more with each passing hour. You would think I would be used to his absences by now, but this time ... I am not a saint ... I am facing something that frightens me, and I wish he were here to help me face it. But I am strong. I can manage by myself ... I always have, whenever it was necessary.

Besides, there is still our bond. I miss his presence in the back of my mind, but there is still a small sense of him remaining. Since I am not telepathic, it is faint ... but, in a sense, he is always with me. Will I ever see him again?

I fear not.

Something about the way I feel ... Spock mentioned a sensation of "shutting down," when we spoke about dying. Is that what I am feeling?

Difficult to keep my thoughts organized enough to write. Hard to concentrate ... so tired.

Spock ... I am worried about him. His eyes are haunted, his mouth a knife-thin slash. Beyond his worry

for me, his constant concern and grief, I can sense his anger ...

Anger at death, perhaps. Anger at age, at the cruel fate that is turning his mother into a shriveled, feeble stranger. Normal emotions--except that my son is a Vulcan. But I have sensed more barely masked emotion from Spock since his father left today than I have since he was a small child. They say everyone has a weak point--and apparently I am Spock T

Spock's main anger ... is directed at his father.

How can I help him learn to understand, and accept and forgive--as I have learned to do over the past decades? How can I help Spock, when I will not be here much longer?

Tired now ... September 19, 2293

So glad that I made Sarek promise to read these journals. Comforting to know that he will understand, someday, what I was thinking, feeling, here at the end.

Will I be here tomorrow? I sit here in my bedroom and gaze around me at my beloved things ... and I am at peace, finally. If only Spock could share my acceptance.

If only I had the strength to explain Sarek to my son.

Spock cannot forgive his father/or leaving me, but it not that he doesn't love me, not that at all. Spock is half Vulcan, raised to be Vulcan ... why can't he understand?

What a reversal ... usually it is Spock who has to explain Vulcan behavior to me. Never forget that time in his quarters aboard Enterprise when Sarek was dying. I slapped him, slapped my son. The crack of that blow still rings in my ears. Only time I ever struck him in his life.

Oh, Spock ... you understood then/ Why can't you understand now?

Don't hate your father.

Love him, as I do. Understand him, as I do.

Sarek ... you are reading this, I know you are. Show

Spock this entry, even if you don't choose to let him see the others.
Show him. Perhaps it will help ...

So much still to do, to say. Wish I could visit my garden again. My
favorite place ...

Sarek, remember that, afterward. My garden. I want to be in my garden,
afterward.

More to write, but tired ... so tired.

Sarek ... I can still sense you ... in the back of my mind If only I
could touch you, see your face ... just once more ...

Peter Kirk stood before the closed bridge doors and found himself
clenching his fists. Relax, he ordered himself, but his body refused to
listen. What's the big deal? It's only your first command/He took a deep
breath, let it out slowly, and moved forward just far enough to activate
the doors. They opened with a familiar whoosh.

The minute he stepped onto the bridge, the crew came to attention, but
Peter barely noticed them as more than shadowy shapes, he was so keyed
up. This was it. The moment of truth. He walked forward, trying to
conceal his tension.

The bridge seemed dimmer than he was used to. "As you were," he ordered
the crew, trying to sound normal, even cavalier as he approached the
captain's chair. The captain's chair. Your chair Even now he was still
amazed that he was here. That he was finally in command of the
Enterprise.

He'd thought the commandant was joking when he'd told him. His first
command. The Enterprise. He eased himself in the command seat, and
touched the armrest console almost reverently.

"Present location, navigator?" he asked.

"Sector 3414, approaching the Loop Nebula, Captain," a familiar voice
replied.

Peter's head snapped up. For the first time, he really looked at the
crew. He'd known he'd be working with senior officers, of course, but
... "Commander Chekov," he said quietly. "I didn't expect to see you
here."

"Well, sir," Chekov replied with a saucy grin, "we're just in the
neighborhood ... " Peter blinked, and looked around him. Lieutenant
S'bysh sat at the helm, by Chekov's side. A glance to his left showed

Commander Uhura fussing with her communications board. She nodded at him when she noticed him watching her.

He stiffened in surprise when the seat before the Life Sciences and Support station revolved, revealing Dr. McCoy. The doctor's expression was one of sheer delight, as he reported, "Life-support operating at peak efficiency, sir, and sickbay's fully staffed and ready for action."

"Thank you, Doctor," Peter said blandly, in spite of the bead of sweat he suddenly felt tracking down his face. He didn't want to look over at the science station, but he had to.

"First Officer, anything to report?"

"Not at this time, sir," Spock's familiar, placid baritone replied.

So, it was old home week, huh? He shook his head. Either that or it was a dream he'd wake up from ... but that wasn't bloody likely.

Most of the cadets "fortunate" enough to make it to the Kobayashi Maru had to contend with a bridge crew of half cadets and half experienced officers. It wasn't unusual for a well-known visiting ship's crew to offer to man the simulator, but Peter had never heard of anyone taking the test with the entire bridge crew from a Constellation-class starship!

Usually, there were other cadets being tested, not just the command officer, but Peter was so late taking his test, there were no longer any cadets left to be part of his crew. The experienced bridge crew's job was to "push" the captain, see if he or she had the confidence to override their experience and advice. But to have this crew ... ?

Maybe he could lodge a protest with the exam board. Yeah. After I finish the test! There was no getting out of it.

He glanced around the bridge once more. Uncle Jim was nowhere to be found--at least he could be thankful for that.

He licked his lips.

Hell, it's just a test. It can't be half as bad as flying through the ring around Qo 'nos, or escaping from Kamarag's prison! Then why was he so nervous? He could feel Spock's unwavering gaze searing the back of his head.

Suddenly, Uhura sat up straight. "Incoming transmission, sir. It's ... garbled ... "

"Put it on speakers, Lieutenant," he ordered, swiveling his chair.

"Enterprise, can you hear me? This is the Kobayashi Maru," a heavily

accented Slavic voice reported. Peter strained to hear the woman, but the broadcast was dim and full of static.

"Can't you boost that, Commander?" he asked.

Uhura shook her head. "That is boosted, sir. That transmission is coming straight through the Loop Nebula, sir. It's a miracle we can hear it at all." She frowned, concentrating intensely, and manipulated her board.

"We have suffered a rupture in our matter-antimatter containment field," the woman on the Kobayashi Maru continued. "We have had severe damage to our life-support system. We've ejected our fuel to keep the ship intact, but we're down to batteries now."

"Kobayashi Maru, "Uhura shouted, "what are your coordinates?" The transmission grew even fainter, and Peter strained to hear it.

"Coordinates 3417, mark 6. We are five hundred thousand kilometers away from the Cygnus Loop Nebula, and drifting. Battery power can maintain life-support for one hour ... repeat ... one hour. If we don't get help soon, three hundred sixty-two lives will be lost. Enterprise, can you hear me? We have one hour or less ..." The voice broke up into garbled static.

"Mr. Chekov, can you bring up schematics on the location of Kobayashi Maru?" Peter asked.

"Aye, sir," Chekov replied, and within seconds a graphic image appeared on the big viewscreen.

The viewscreen before him showed Enterprise currently moving toward a huge nebula, a massive cloud of gas and

dust, in colors of hazy blue, white, and pink. On the other side of the nebula, if the coordinates they had given were correct, the dying freighter, Kobayashi Maru, was drifting.

Peter frowned. So far, the rumors had been correct. This was a new scenario. With the exception of the familiar, damaged vessel, most of what was happening had been changed. For example, he now had to rescue the people on the ship, not simply the ship itself. Once they were aboard assuming he got that far, which was highly unlikely-- then he'd worry about how to put a tractor beam on the vessel herself. Could he tow her?

Peter forced himself to consider the big picture. "Mr. Chekov," Peter said crisply, "where are we in relation to the Klingon Neutral Zone?"

Chekov's hands moved over his board, and the viewscreen presented an image of the Neutral Zone in relation to the injured ship. "Three parsecs," Chekov reported,

"sir."

If they didn't have to go into the Neutral Zone, then what ... ? Never mind, the Maru didn't have much time.

"Mr. Chekov, plot us fastest optimal course, skirting the nebula as closely as we can without encountering interference.

ETA to intercept?"

Chekov acknowledged the order, did some quick calculations, then finally reported. "We can circle the nebula around its smallest side, and arrive at Kobayashi Maru in fifteen minutes, sir. Optimal speed this close to the nebula ... warp two."

"If I might suggest, Captain," Spock interjected, "we could reduce that time by ten point eighteen minutes by going through the nebula at warp one."

Peter looked back at the colorful schematic. That was true, but why did that make him uneasy?

"We are the only ship in this quadrant, sir," Spock continued. "And, as you yourself confirmed, we are a safe distance from the Klingon Neutral Zone. Going through the nebula would seem to be the most efficient course of action."

Peter set his jaw. "All of that is true, Mr. Spock, but going through the nebula leaves us blind, deaf, dumb, and helpless.

We can't even engage our shields in there. When we come out the other side there would be several seconds before we became reoriented." He smiled at the Vulcan.

"For some reason, that makes me uneasy," he added, dryly.

"Lieutenant s'bysh." He swung his chair back around.

"Take us around the nebula using Mr. Chekov's suggested course. Warp two."

He turned to address his first officer. "Mr. Spock, I want you to send a buoy with a long-range sensor scan in it through the nebula, that can send us back information on the conditions on the other side of the nebula, before we arrive there. It'll stay ahead of us and help us pinpoint the Maru, or warn us of any other possible problems before we stumble into them."

Spock reported the firing of the sensor buoy. Then, Peter slapped the console. "Engineering!"

"Aye, sir!" a thick Scottish burr responded.

Why am I not surprised to hear you? "Scotty, we're going to need to beam over more than three hundred people in less than thirty minutes ... "

"It isn't possible, Captain! If we used every transporter in the bloody ship it wouldn't ..."

"The cargo transporters, Mr. Scott. Can't they be adjusted to transport people?"

"Aye, sir, but--" Scott began hesitantly.

"Use all the cargo bays, and get everyone you've got on this. We need to be able to get those people on board fast, and from long range. There's a cranky matter-antimatter pod floating somewhere around this area, so we're not going to be able to get too close. We'll be on site in ten minutes."

"Ten minutes!" the Scotsman protested. "But, Captain "

"You're running out of time, Mr. Scott!"

"Halfway around the rim of the nebula, sir," Chekov reported dutifully.

"Anything new from the Maru, Uhura?" Peter asked.

"I can't raise them, sir," she informed him.

"Long-range scanning, Mr. Chekov. Any signs of enemy ships out there?" Peter found himself twitching in the chair.

Chekov shrugged, totally unconcerned. "Nothing, sir. But there have been no reports of hostile activity in this region."

"Is that right?" he murmured. This was wrong, all wrong.

Where were the damned Klingons? Where was the enemy?

This was too easy. He realized his mouth was dry. "Mr. Spock, are we getting any reports from that buoy?"

"Yes, sir, data coming in now."

"Put it on the screen." A new image came up, one that did not have the nebula. The nebula would be behind the buoy, so it would be offscreen. Before the buoy hung nothing but the blackness of space, and the twinkling of far distant stars.

And in the foreground, but still at a distance, the crew could see a damaged ship, drifting aimlessly. Dangerously close to it remained the

matter-antimatter pod. He'd have to make Scotty transport those people from the farthest reach of transporter range. Oh, damn, damn, damn ... this is too easy.

He blinked, staring at the viewscreen so hard his eyes burned.

"Approaching the other side of the nebula, sir," Chekov said quietly.

"Course and speed, Captain?" s'bysh asked.

Peter's head jerked up, and he stared at the innocent-looking viewscreen. "Lieutenant Uhura, any word from the Kobayashi Maru?"

"Nothing, sir," she reported. "I keep hailing, but ..."

"We're past the nebula, they should be able to respond," Peter said to himself.

"Unless their accident has destroyed their communications abilities," Spock suggested. "Shall we increase speed, Captain? We are still only traveling at warp two ..."

Peter cut him off with a quick chop of his hand. "Helm, full stop."

s'bysh hesitated, and Peter shot her a look.

"Full stop, aye," she repeated, and obeyed.

"Captain!" McCoy snapped. "We're runnin' out of time!

Those people are breathin' away the last of their air!"

"Those people," Peter informed his crew tightly, "are sitting in the middle of a trap. Mr. Chekov, what is our position relative to the Romulan Neutral Zone?"

"Ve are just outside it, sir."

Oho/They almost got me there. If I'd gone straight in, I'd have been over the Neutral Zone before I knew it. Nudging Chekov over, Peter tapped in a sequence on his board. A scrolling line of data ran down the side of the viewscreen for the crew to see. "Check out those readings. There are five anomalies surrounding the Maru, and each of those anomalies possesses a specific energy signature--a sure sign of cloaked vessels."

The cadet took a deep breath. "The Kobayashi Maru is being used as the bait in an elaborate trap. Yellow alert, everyone." He turned to Spock. The Vulcan was clearly surprised by Peter's announcement and was double-checking the readings. "They're there, aren't they, Mr. Spock?"

Amazingly, Spock hesitated. "Data does seem to show certain anomalies
"He trailed off, and continued to his viewscreen.

came barreling out of his chair. "Well, what are we gonna do about those
people? You can't just leave 'em there, Captain!"

"I have no intention of abandoning those people, Dr. McCoy," Peter
assured him, even as he began to unbutton his uniform jacket.

"Captain, what is it that makes you think these anomalies are the
readings of cloaked Romulan vessels?" Spock asked.

finished removing his jacket and draped it over the command chair.
"Well, since we're on the edge of the Romulan Neutral Zone, and we're
currently waging peace with the Klingons, my guess is those cloaked
vessels are Romulan cruisers ... from the size of them. Call it a 'gut
feeling," Spock, but we're about to test it out." He pressed the
intercom. "Mr. Scott, have one of your staff program the synthesizer to
manufacture two Vulcan lirpas." He turned to McCoy. "Doctor, please
bring those lirpas back to me as soon as they are ready."

"Lirpas?" McCoy drew himself up. "Me? What are you talking about,
lirpas?"

At the same moment, Scotty was saying, "Lirpas? Sir?"

Peter's voice took on an edge. "That was an order, Doctor! That was an
order, Engineer!"

McCoy cleared his throat, grunted, and left the bridge without further
comment.

"Lirpas?" Spock said, incredulously.

"Mr. Scott!" Peter called, slapping the console hurriedly.

"What's happening with those transporters?"

"We're almost ready, sir," Scott reported.

"Power it up, Mr. Scott. Two minutes. On my signal." He slapped off the
con before Scott could protest again.

"Excuse me, Captain," said Mr. Spock in his driest tone.

"If you believe we are confronting Romulan vessels, shouldn't we engage
our shields?"

"No," Peter countermanded, shaking his head. "We're not in firing range,
and we're not going to be for three minutes. However, Mr. Spock, if any
of those 'anomalies' move within the next several minutes, indicating

that one or more of those vessels is approaching, you are to raise shields immediately. Understood?"

"Aye, sir," Spock agreed.

"Enterprise," a gasping voice called over the intercom,

"batteries have ruptured and are draining. We have less than ten minutes' air

"The garbled message was drowned in static.

"Lieutenant Uhura," Peter instructed, removing his vest, "beam a message to the Maru. Remind them of standard Federation evacuation drills. They should already have all personnel in spacesuits or encased in protective fields in accordance with abandon-ship procedures. We can't afford to rush in there."

turned at the sound of the bridge doors and saw Dr. McCoy entering, dragging two heavy liras behind him.

a baffled expression, the doctor handed them over to the young captain.

"Commander Uhura," Peter continued, "open a hailing frequency in the direction of those cloaked coordinates. Prepare to transmit a message on wide beam."

smiled at the bridge crew, knowing they must think he'd gone crazy. Maybe he was crazy, because he was starting to enjoy himself. This whole situation was a real challenge, and he already knew he'd kept his ship from being blown to smithereens far longer than most candidates made it. Of course, it was all for nothing if he couldn't pull off the rescue of at least the personnel aboard Kobayashi Maru.

looked over at Communications inquiringly.

"Sir, hailing frequencies are open." She looked over at Spock and shrugged.

"This is Captain Peter Kirk hailing the commander of the fleet surrounding the injured ship Kobayashi Maru. We are aware of the trap you have set and, frankly, Commander, I find your clumsy ploy insulting. In response to this slight, I now have something to say to you T'kevoidors a skelitus dunt'ryala aikriian paselitan ... Toriatal." He heard Spock take a sharp breath that was almost a gasp. "Commander" --Peter dropped back into Standard English-- "I issue this challenge under the ancient law of Toriatal. By rights, you must respond to my declaration." Silence. Total, dead silence.

Peter waited, sweating. It no longer mattered that it was just a simulation. He was as charged up as if he really were facing an

invisible enemy. Clutching the two lirpas, he listened to the blood rushing in his ears.

The simulation program, he thought as he waited. It's trying to figure out how to respond to my challenge.

Suddenly, Uhura's mouth dropped open. "Captain," she said breathlessly,

"we're being hailed ... by the Romulan commander!"

"On-screen, Lieutenant," he said, as he lifted one of the lirpas and held it in a defensive position. The screen shifted,

changing, showing the interior of a Romulan cruiser, and an image of a Romulan commander standing there.

"Who are you to issue the ancient challenge?" the holo-commander demanded. "You are merely human. I am not obligated to respond to an outworlder who dares to issue the Toriatat."

"You are obligated," Peter insisted, trying to remain cool.

His shirt was sticking to him as he held the heavy lirpa at the ready, with the other leaning against the command chair beside him. "The law is clear. "Whoever issues the Toriatat challenge has the right to be answered. No leader may ignore a pi'operly given challenge." I have issued it in the tradition of your oldest laws. What do you say? Do you accept the challenge? Or are you afraid to fight a human?"

Again the long pause. Finally, the holo-commander said, hollowly, "I accept the challenge."

"The choice of weapons is mine," Peter announced, "and I have chosen lirpas."

"Captain," Spock said clearly, "several of the Romulan vessels are bringing their weapons on-line."

"Will you disobey your own law, Romulan, and allow your ships to fire upon us, even after I have issued the challenge?" Peter demanded. "If you do, you dishonor your own heritage! The Toriatat mandates a state of truce while it is in effect!"

The holo-commander was still for nearly a minute; then the image turned its head and spoke to someone not in visual range.

Peter saw Spock's eyebrow climb. "Weapons ... are being taken off-line, sir."

"Mr. Spock, I order you to beam me over to those coordinates," Peter instructed his science officer. "While I am engaging the Romulan

commander, you and Mr. Scott will beam over every survivor from the Kobayashi Maru. As soon as you have them all, order full astern speed, and retreat back into the nebula. The Romulans will not be willing to follow you in there. From there, you can make your escape."

Before Spock could offer his own protest, McCoy blurted,

"Are you crazy? He's gonna slice you into ribbons with that thing, and while he's doin' it, his other ships are gonna play target practice with us!"

"No, they won't," Peter told McCoy. "While the commander and I are in combat, his troops must, by law, hold their fire, as must we. But there's nothing in the law that says you can't quietly transport those people off the Maru and get the hell out of here."

"Captain, I cannot allow you to do this," Spock said, quietly. "Even if you were to defeat the Romulan commander, it is unlikely they will return you to us. This is suicide."

Peter paused. "It's a no-win situation, Mr. Spock, I'll give you that. But only for me. The Enterprise and the Kobayashi Maru will be safe. And as the captain, my job is to insure the safety of the ship." He picked up the second lirpa and keyed the intercom. "Mr. Scott, stand by with those cargo transporters.

Transporter Chief?."

A mechanical-sounding voice said, "Transporter room, aye."

"Beam me directly from the bridge to the bridge of the Romulan vessel," Peter said, and, checking Chekov's readouts, gave the coordinates. "Energize!" What's going to happen now? he wondered. Would they actually beam him someplace? Would he really have to fight someone?

Suddenly, a voice outside the bridge doors called out,

"Wait a minute, wait a minute! Open these doors! Lights on!" The bridge doors slid open and Commandant Kyle Anderson stormed in. "What the hell is going on here?"

Cadet, where did you come up with these 'anomalies' and energy readings you're talking about? This is totally irregular."

Peter had to blink to reorient himself out of the simulation and back to real life. His blood pressure was up, and he was really ready for a good fight. "Here, sir," Peter said, putting down his lirpa and walking over to Chekov's console.

"The anomalies are hard to spot, but the energy signature gives you something to look for "

"That's impossible!" the commandant protested, not even looking at the readout. "No one can spot a cloaked vessel!"

Spock suddenly cleared his throat. "With all due respect, Commandant, I am afraid that Cadet Kirk is correct. While he was aboard the Enterprise, I acquainted him with some research that Mr. Scott and I have been conducting. Our discoveries are still in the developmental stage, but, during our escape from Qo'nos, Cadet Kirk had occasion to monitor electromagnetic signatures on Klingon vessels."

"I see," the commandant said, as Spock showed him the anomalies. "All right. I can see where that gave you an advantage in this scenario, but what's all this nonsense about ancient Romulan challenges? Those ships would've blown you out of space while you were waving that thing"--he pointed to the lirpa--"in their faces."

Again, Spock came to his rescue. "With all due respect, sir, that's not the case. That challenge dates from Pre-Reformation times on Vulcan, and is respected by the Romulans. Cadet Kirk issued it correctly, Commandant.

Even his pronunciation in Old High Vulcan was nearly perfect."

"Hmmm," the commandant said, "and they'd have to cease hostilities while he fought the commander?" Spock nodded.

Anderson's features suddenly broke out in a wide grin.

"Well ... damn! Looks like you've spent too much time in space, Cadet Kirk. This test is designed for inexperienced trainees!" He shook his head. "Believe me, we'll fix those readings for the next poor fool who has to face this scenario!"

But for now ... it looks like you're the second Kirk to beat the no-win scenario. And you didn't have to reprogram the computer to do it!" He extended his hand to the cadet, who took it, shaking it heartily.

"But sir," Chekov protested, "the Romulans would have surely killed him!"

"But he would've saved his ship and the people from the Kobayashi Maru, and all without firing a shot!" another voice added from the bridge doors.

Peter looked up to see his uncle standing there, smiling at him.

"A captain must be willing to sacrifice himself for his ship," Kirk reminded everyone. "That's his job. Congratulations, Peter. That was one hell of a test."

Peter nodded at everyone as they filed out. It was several minutes before Peter and his uncle had privacy. The captain held out his hand and, when his nephew took it, clapped him on the shoulder, grinning proudly. "I knew you could do it," he exclaimed.

"I was inspired by recent events," Peter said, dryly.

"Obviously--but that doesn't take away from the fact that you kept your head, and figured it all out. You're going to make a great captain someday."

The younger man shook his head. "With all due respect, Uncle Jim ... I'm quitting Command track today. I'm requesting reassignment to the Starfleet diplomatic corps.

Ambassador Sarek is giving me a recommendation. Recent events have made me realize that that's what I really want to do with my life."

Kirk regarded his nephew intently for nearly a minute, then nodded. "It's your choice, Peter, and I respect you for making a difficult decision." Humor glinted in the hazel eyes. "You weren't influenced in your decision by the notion of attending long diplomatic conferences with the Klingons, were you?"

Peter grinned. "Let's just say that I'll be taking a lot more classes in Klingon language and culture," he admitted.

The two fell into step and went out into the corridor, through the gleaming lobby of the Starfleet Academy.

"You're writing to her?" the captain asked.

"Yes ... and I got a reply last week. She's in school already and likes it. She's taking a course in advanced Standard English!"

"By the time you two meet again, any language barrier should be a thing of the past," Kirk said, as they crossed the broad plaza that lay at the foot of Starfleet's gleaming towers.

"By the time we meet again, let's hope a lot of barriers will

be a thing of the past," Peter said. "We'll both be working toward that, Uncle Jim." James Tiberius Kirk smiled at his brother's son. "It isn't often that personal interest and duty coincide." Peter nodded. "But when it does ... it's great."

"I wish both of you the best of luck, Peter, I mean that." The younger Kirk smiled. "I know you do. And that means a lot to me, Uncle Jim."

"And I want you to know something else," Jim admitted.

"I also think you would've been a hell of a starship captain." Peter beamed. He knew that, in his uncle's eyes, this was the finest compliment he could give anyone. "Thanks, Uncle Jim. But I'd never hold a candle to you." The senior Kirk grinned and slapped his nephew on the back. The captain of the Enterprise quickened his pace.

"Come on ... everyone's waiting for us." Then, suddenly, the hazel eyes twinkled. "Ambassador Kirk, do you think?

Someday?" Peter shrugged. "You never know ..."

"Ambassador Kirk ..." the captain muttered, trying it on for size. "The more I say it, the better it sounds ... "

Spock stood in the huge, skylighted conference chamber on the world called Khitomer. The new peace conference boasted dozens of beings from many worlds ... but not one Freelan. The absence of the cloaked and masked delegates had been noted and commented upon, but only the member worlds of the Federation Security Council knew the truth.

In the weeks since the Enterprise had brought the captive Vulcans out of the Neutral Zone, the tensions in the galaxy had eased considerably. The ringleaders of the KEHL, including Lisa Tennant, had been arrested and charged with breaking into the computer system at the Vulcan consulate, and for assaulting and abducting Peter Kirk. With its most dedicated members out of action, the group was gradually returning to its status as a harmless fringe organization.

Azetbur's dramatic rescue operation against the Klingon renegades had restored the Federation's faith in the new chancellor, and this new peace conference was a result.

Scientists from many worlds had been asked to join with governmental delegates to advise the Federation on how best to help the Klingon homeworld solve its many problems.

Today's sessions had been devoted to discussion of how the effects of Praxis's explosion on Qo'nos might be overcome. Tomorrow the agenda included the possibility of economic aid.

The Vulcan was attending the conference as one of Starfleet's representatives. He'd enjoyed the day's session; searching for scientific solutions to the problems facing Qo'nos was a stimulating challenge. Now, as the delegates milled around, talking in groups after the formal meetings had broken up, Spock searched the room for his father. He had not seen Sarek since his arrival yesterday.

"A good session today, don't you think, Captain Spock?" came a voice from behind him. Turning, Spock saw the new Romulan delegate, Pardek, standing beside him. The Vulcan had been somewhat surprised when the Empire had sent a delegate to replace Nanclus, in light of recent events

with Freelan, but, then, the Romulans had always excelled at talking peace while plotting war.

"I agree," he said. Pardek was a little older than the Vulcan, with rather heavy features and thick brow ridges.

He was stocky and compactly built, with the air of one who has known military service. Not unusual in a Romulan.

"It is an honor to meet you, Captain," Pardek said. "Your name has been ... prominent ... in the Empire for a long time, now." Spock raised an eyebrow, amused at the word choice.

"Indeed?" he asked dryly.

"You and your father both are well known to my government," Pardek said, and the Vulcan knew he hadn't missed the irony. "Especially in the light of recent events." Spock had to conceal surprise that the Romulan was being even this direct. "Recent events," Spock repeated, "have certainly been ... stimulating."

"Undeniably," Pardek agreed. "By the way ... what has become of that radical organization that was causing Earth so much trouble in the recent past? That group of xeno-phobes.

I have scanned nothing about it in the media reports for days."

Spock slanted the Romulan an ironic glance, but Pardek remained unruffled. "The Keep Earth Human League has been singularly quiet lately," the Starfleet officer replied.

"The membership seems to be ... dissolving. Odd, isn't it?"

"Isn't it?" Pardek agreed, blandly. "I was thinking, Captain Spock. A discussion of ... recent events might prove interesting between us. An ... unofficial discussion, you understand."

"The human phrase for what you mean is 'off the record,'" Delegate Patrick."

"I like that term." Pardek smiled faintly, reminiscently.

"English is such a colorful language ... so descriptive. I enjoyed learning it."

"You were saying there were matters you wished to discuss ... off the record?"

Pardek hesitated, then said, "Your name and your father's but especially the name of Sarek--have been on everyone's lips lately. Including the praetor's?"

"For some reason," Spock said, "that does not surprise me. My father has a ... friend ... who was setting off on a journey to see the praetor. Perhaps you know of him?"

Pardek's fleshy features were carefully neutral. "Possibly," he admitted. "Are we speaking of someone in the military?"

"Yes. He is rather highly ranked."

Pardek looked away. "'Was' is a more appropriate term, I fear."

"Ah," Spock said. "I am ... grieved ... to hear you say that."

Pardek raised an eyebrow. "But hardly surprised."

"No."

"It is regrettable," Pardek said, after a moment. "He was my friend, too."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, I knew him for many years. And I cannot find it in myself to condemn his actions in effecting the release of a number of captives. Far better," Pardek said thoughtfully,

"to allow those who wished to leave to do so."

"But not all of those in question chose to leave," Spock pointed out. "Which concerns me. There was a possibility of ... bloodshed. Reprisal, on those who stayed."

"I am pleased to tell you that no such tragedy has occurred," Pardek said earnestly. "The individuals who did not choose to leave have gone underground, merging into the general population. No active search for them has been mounted, under the circumstances. Most of the ones who stayed did so because they had married into Romulan families. The praetor understands this. He values public opinion, like any head of state."

"Understandably. These individuals we are speaking of---" Spock began.

"Off the record, of course. Not in any official capacity ..." Pardek reminded him.

"Of course. These individuals ... they have successfully managed to infiltrate, to mingle and become lost amid the rest of your society?"

"Quite successfully. It was remarkable how quickly they simply ... melted away. I suspect most of them have changed their names, and will

simply keep a low profile as a part of their Romulan families. They will raise their children, grow old ... live ordinary lives as respectable citizens of the Empire. In time, they will be virtually indistinguishable from native-born Romulans."

"The praetor is not searching for them?"

"Not at all. As long as none of them surface to cause trouble, I expect that policy to continue."

"Fascinating," Spock murmured. "Who knows how this ... mingling will affect your people, in years to come ..."

"I have been wondering the same thing, Captain," the Romulan said.

"Perhaps this is not so surprising after all," Spock murmured thoughtfully. "In days past, we were, after all, one people."

"Millennia past," Parrick pointed out. "Still, as recent events have shown, there are still ... cultural links."

"Indeed," Spock agreed, thinking of the challenge and the senapa duel. Watching it had brought home to him, as nothing else ever had, that Vulcans and Romulans had once been one people. They were still far more similar than they were different, at least physically ...

"Perhaps we might discuss our idea further. During the conference ... and afterward."

"I would like that, Spock," the delegate said, and the Vulcan realized they were speaking almost as if they both took some kind of vow to explore this concept together.

"After I return to Romulus ... perhaps we might stay in contact? Correspond?"

"I would be honored," Spock said.

"Spock?" A third voice reached them, and the Vulcan turned to see Sarek approaching through the thinning crowd of diplomats.

After quickly introducing his father to the Romulan delegate, Spock excused himself to leave the chamber with his father. Together, they walked out of the conference center and down the massive steps.

As Sarek and his son walked down the steps leading from the conference chamber, he reminded himself not to push the rapprochement between them was still very fragile. It was extremely ... satisfactory ... to simply walk beside his son again, shoulder to shoulder.

"For a first day, the negotiations went well," the ambassador observed

as they strolled across a manicured lawn beneath a vivid blue sky. In the east, the sun was setting in a magnificent splash of coral and fuchsia.

"I agree," Spock replied. "It seems possible that Qo'nos the planet may indeed be salvageable. Destruction of the ring would be a colossal task ... but, given the time frame, it is feasible."

Sarek nodded; then the curiosity he had been holding back overcame him. He searched for an appropriate opening.

"I was not expecting the Romulans to send a delegate," he began.

"I must admit I was surprised myself," Spock said.

Then Spock hesitated, and his father gained the impression that he was about to say something, but changed his mind. "It has been nearly three weeks since the Enterprise brought the captured Vulcans back to their native world," he observed. "Tell me, Father, how are they doing? Are the efforts at reeducating them regarding the ethics of mental contact succeeding?"

"Their teachers are optimistic," Sarek said. "Particularly since Savel seems to have emerged as a leader for them, and she is committed to using her telepathic abilities ethically, to help others. She told me the last time I saw her that she intends to train to become a Healer, and work as a telepathic therapist. I am encouraged that the newcomers will be able to adjust and prosper in our society."

"I believe they can," Spock said. "I spent considerable time talking with Savel on the voyage back to Vulcan. She seems like a young person with a great deal of potential. I was impressed by her."

"Not as impressed as young Soran is," Sarek said dryly.

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Indeed? And does she return his interest?"

"My impression is that she does."

"Soran is unbonded, is he not?"

"Yes. His parents did not hold with the tradition of bonding as children. That trend appears to be growing," Sarek said, thoughtfully.

"Then Soran is free."

"For the moment," Sarek said, with a glint of humor in his dark eyes. "I do not expect that state of affairs to continue for long, however."

His son cocked an eyebrow at him, and there was an answering glint in his own dark eyes.

Reaching the edge of the park-like grounds, father and son halted to watch the sunset for a few minutes in silence. "On

the whole," Spock said finally, "I am impressed with Pardek. He strikes me as an intelligent individual, one who is something of a visionary." Sarek glanced up at his son, realizing that Spock was deliberately granting him an opening. "Indeed? What makes you say that?"

"Our discussion at the end of today's session." Sarek raised an eyebrow. "Yes? And what were you two discussing, if I may ask? You seemed very intent."

"We wre," Spock admitted. "We began by speaking about the K HL," he said, with a faint glimmer of humor.

"And then we moved on to speaking, off the record, about the young Vulcans who elected not to go with the Enterprise ... "Spock went on to summarize that portion of the conversation with Pardek.

"Knowing that the praetor has decided to ignore their existence is good news," Sarek said, when his son had finished. "Did Pardek give any hint as to Taryn's fate?" Spock nodded, his expression darkening. "Taryn is dead, Father," he said. "I regret that I must be the one to tell you." Sarek closed his eyes briefly. "I have been expecting to discover that," he said, heavily. "It is hardly a surprise, under the circumstances." Finally, Sarek took a deep breath and broke the resulting silence. "Was it Taryn's fate that you and Pardek were speaking of so intently, as I approached?" His son slanted a sidelong glance at him. "Curious, Father?"

"I must admit that I am." Spock took a deep breath, and began walking again, in the general direction of the delegates' living quarters. "Very well. Pardek was saying that it was surprising how easily the young Vulcans were able to adapt to Romulan society. I observed that, after all, we were one people long ago." The officer hesitated, then continued, "I wonder if we might ever hope to be one people again." Sarek stopped in midstride and stared at the other, barely troubling to conceal his consternation. "My son, surely you are not serious."

"Why not?" Spock's expression held a glint of stubborn resolve that his father well remembered. "We are working toward peace with the Klingons. Why not peace--and eventual cooperation--with the Romulans?" Sarek struggled to repress his dismay. "You are speaking of ... a fusion of the two cultures?"

"Yes, I was ... although I concede that it would be ... difficult." The ambassador sighed, shaking his head. "Spock ... my son, do you have any idea how unrealistically idealistic you sound? You are speaking of Romulans, remember? They have grown so far apart from our ideals that there is no longer any common meeting ground, I assure you. Witness

their actions on Freelan--witness Nanclus's treachery and meddling!"

"Witness Taryn," Spock pointed out, quietly. "Witness his response to your challenge. A challenge so old that both our peoples share it."

"Taryn," Sarek reminded him curtly, "was a Vulcan."

"He died a Romulan," Spock countered, with an edge in his voice, "upholding his concept of Romulan honor and duty." Sarek sighed. "Spock ... Spock ... your dedication to the cause of peace does you credit, my son. But the entire notion is ... ridiculous."

"I do not believe so. I intend to explore the concept with Pardek, but I do not choose to discuss the topic further.

Your mind is dosed, Father." Sarek's eyes flashed, but his features never changed. "As you wish," he said, coldly. But then, thinking of how Amanda would react if she could hear them at the moment, the ambassador modulated his tones, attempting to conciliate, using his best diplomatic manner. "Perhaps you are right, Spock ... perhaps there is nothing to be gained from discussing a subject on which we will never agree.

But there are other topics we might discuss ... say, over dinner?" His son turned to regard him, his features cold and composed, but then, in response to what he saw in his father's eyes, they softened fractionally, and he nodded.

"You are right. There are other topics." Spock's expression lightened. "Very well, Father. At dinner, then," he agreed.

Father and son walked on, together, as the shadows of evening lengthened around them.

Sunrise on Vulcan ...

Sarek stood alone in Amanda's garden, waiting for the first light of dawn. As sunrise approached, the darkness of the sky was untouched, stars strewn everywhere--except behind the giant shape of Vulcan's sister world. The Watcher was lit only by light reflected from Vulcan, and so was nearly invisible, a dark ashen color in its newness. Here in the mountains near Gol, dawn came 1.6 hours late, delayed by the intervention of The Watcher.

As the ambassador watched, a glow appeared on the upper limb of The Watcher, subtle at first, but growing brighter. The Vulcan had seen many sunrises from orbit, and was always struck by the similarity to the way Vulcan's sun rose over T'Rukh. The sister planet's tenuous atmosphere, carrying enormous amounts of dust and SO from its myriad volcanoes, caught Nevasa's ruddy light in a thin layer like high cirrus clouds.

Sarek turned and picked up a small container that had been resting on

the bench behind him. It was an ancient jar carved from white stone.

His eyes fixed on the sky, Sarek ran his fingernail around the jar's seal, opening it. Carefully, he worked the stopper loose. Above him, the arc of red spread outward; then, suddenly, the star itself appeared. The hot glow grew

brighter, visibly swelling. Vulcan's sky brightened, hiding T'Rukh behind rosy curtains of light. Slowly, as Nevasa came out of eclipse, a delicate down-curving crescent of light became visible, growing toward the horizon. The stars faded, grew dim, disappeared.

But they will return, Sarek thought. Tonight they will shine

again. The stars ... outlive us all.

Dawn. It was time.

Taking a deep breath, the Vulcan tilted the jar slightly, allowing some of the gray powder within it to fall. The morning breeze caught part of it, wafting it away, but much fell, to land in the soil below.

Sarek moved on a few steps, to a new location. This time he tilted the jar into his hand, letting the ashy powder fill his palm. This is the last time I will touch her, he thought, clenching his fist around the ash, grasping it as he would have her hand. By this time Nevasa had risen further, separating from the enormous arc that was T'Rukh, brightening the Vulcan sky to its normal, searing color.

Day had begun.

A time to gain, a time to lose ... Sarek thought, remembering one of Amanda's favorite quotations. Slowly, one by one, he forced his fingers to open, letting the ash sift down, between them. Letting go.

As the dawn breezes began to die, Sarek upended the jar, shaking it, so the last trace of the ash within could sift out, to drift and finally settle over the stones, the soil, the living plants from so many worlds.

Farewell, Amanda ... The Vulcan's lips moved, but no sound emerged.

Carefully, the ambassador replaced the stopper in the now-empty jar. Then, his steps slow but steady, he turned and left the silent garden behind.

As I write this, it has been ten years since my first novel, *Yesterday's Son*, was published. Since then, I've had an opportunity to meet many of the fans and stars who have helped to keep STAR TREK alive. Great fun ... and most rewarding. Going to a STAR TREK convention is like attending a family reunion.

In writing Sarek, I've explored the planet Vulcan and its people more than I ever did before. I feel privileged ... and content. As though I'd finally reached a formerly inaccessible spot between my artistic shoulder blades and given it a good scratching. Frankly, I've been itching to write the scene of what actually happened the day Spock told Sarek he didn't want to attend the Vulcan Science Academy ever since I watched "Journey to Babel" in 1967. A chance to finally scratch a twenty-six-year itch!

Sarek is the first of my novels to be published after Gene Roddenberry's death (although the Great Bird knew that there was the possibility of a story about Sarek's life in the works, and was, my editors told me, in favor of the idea). All of us who love STAR TREK miss him, but it's fitting and comforting that STAR TREK is continuing as a living legacy to his vision of the future.

Every time I write a new STAR TREK novel, I get letters from people wondering if I write things other than STAR Trek