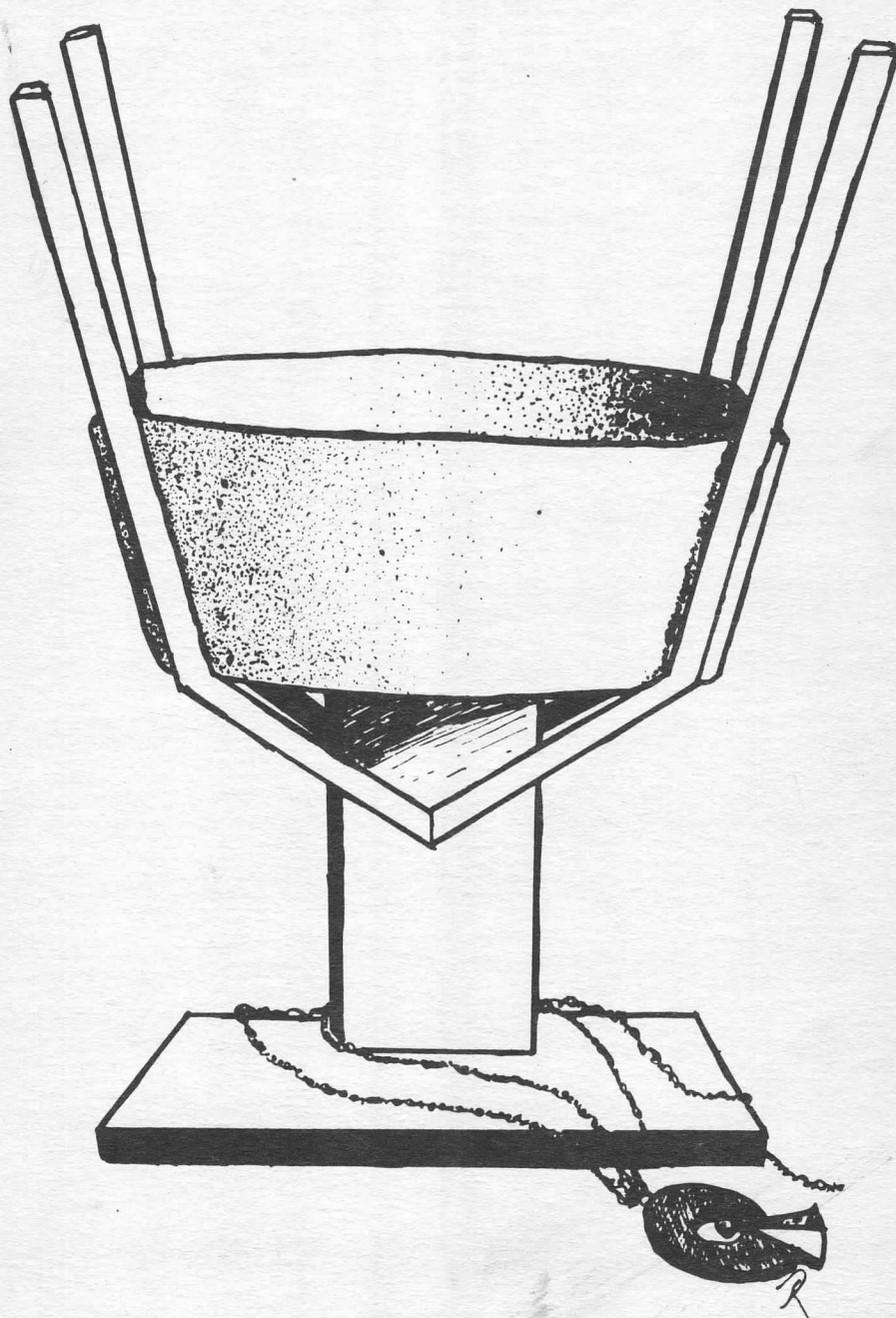


# KRAITH COLLECTED



vol. 3

# KRAITH COLLECTED

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## Dedication

### TO MY MOTHER:

the ten fingered, without  
whose assistance this  
zine would still not be  
typed.



# EDITOR'S PREFACE

PEACE AND GREETINGS -

Here it is, fans, the third installment on my way to insanity. At least I have the satisfaction of knowing I'm taking my friends along with me.

Which brings me to a very important point. In the past several months I have received several very good pieces of artwork that would have fit marvelously into the first Collected volume. The artists read Kraith and sat down to illustrate it. Tremendous! I tried to work in as many of these pieces of artwork as I could. However, I had to discard several simply because no amount of fudging would make them appropriate for the current volume.

I imagine that this is going to happen again (and again and again) as the volumes keep rolling out. If there is anyone out there with the urge to illustrate Kraith, please write me and I will send you scenes from the next volume to illustrate. Let me know what type of drawings you prefer doing (space shots, women, people, faces, odd alien devices, etc.) and I will do my best to match up artists with the appropriate scenes. Hopefully, this will result in an improvement in the quality and quantity of artwork that I have available for publication.

Just to whet your curiosity unbearably, I know I'm going to need representations of a utsulan like the one in "The Obligation" for an upcoming story called "Spock's Pilgrimage". Anyone care to tackle it?

On page 44 of this volume, Jacqueline has an open letter criticising her story "Coup de Grace". She lists its faults and ends by calling it the worst Kraith story ever written. I take exception to that. In my opinion that dubious honor goes to another story in this volume called "The Obligation/Through Time andTears". I apologize to the authors, but I had to cut out over 5 pages of redundancy just to get it into the poor shape it is in now.

It isn't that the ideas presented in the story are invalid, or that the writing style is ghastly, or that the characterizations are too horribly off. That poor story suffers, terminally I'm afraid, from the typical Kraith malaise of trying to do too much in too little wordage. Ideas are thrown in right and left with no explanations and precious little continuity.

I can see right now that people are going to be jumping all over me for that last bit.

"Ah hah! If it's too short why did she cut out 5 pages?" they shout, triumphant.

But, still, It's rather difficult to credit Sarek with such a poor memory that less than a day after a discussion with Spock he must go through the whole line of reasoning again alone and then again trying to convince Spock that he should do what he (Spock) had suggested to him (Sarek) yesterday! It was too much. Editorial judgement prevailed. It went.

Read the story carefully. So much is brought to the surface in this story that hints at developments to come; a couple of volumes from now you will be astounded at how much you took for granted when it was presented.

On another vein, I have a 14 page poem by Jacqueline in my files. It's called the "Ballad of Dokamralnor" and it desperately needs a rewrite. Among the many things that can be said about Jacqueline, add, she never mastered iambic pentameter.

The poem deals with the first kataytkh, Dokamralnor, his origins, family and, obliquely, of the fall of Top-of-World. If anyone out there would like to become a Kraith Creator, and thinks they can manage to whip the poem into shape, either in metered, free verse, or prose form, contact me and I'll get a copy to you.

Until Volume four then,

Live Long and Prosper,

*Paul Lynn*  
Carol Lynn  
6/18/73



# THE LEARNING PROCESS

Jean Sellar

Kraith II(1)

The cramped sickbay of the Halbird hummed in a muted bass. The tiny ship didn't absorb sound in the way of the massive Enterprise, but Spock rested comfortably nonetheless.

Ex-ambassador Sarek stood looking down at his unconscious son. Spock's facial bones were sharply delineated by fever-taut skin and his lips were broken and dry. The battles at his childhood sickbed were vivid memories to Sarek as he stood there. Spock's dual physiology was usually beyond the help, or even understanding, of conventional Vulcan physicians. Though hours would go by as Suvil and Sarek guided his immature efforts at self healing, always it was Spock's growing knowledge of the contradictory forces within him that triumphed.

He fought thusly now, with only the assistance of McCoy's transfusions. Primitive though the technique was, it did seem to be helping. He was coming out of it, and Sarek wondered what he would say to his only son when those eyes opened once more. He'd never in his long life been so at a loss for expression.

The door whispered open behind him. McCoy was standing in the opening, watching him. "He's doing well. The antibodies you gave him are increasing rapidly, and his vital signs are stabilized. I was afraid ..."

Sarek's arched brow encouraged the doctor to continue.

"I ... well, he whispered T'Rruel's name a few times. Something akin to delirium in humans, I suppose. I was afraid the grief her death must have caused was surfacing and would interfere with his will to live."

"You postulate a human reaction, Doctor. Most illogical when applied to a Vulcan."

"Spock's not only Vulcan ... sir! You ought to be proud of all he's done since the Kraith was stolen, but all you talk about is logic!"

"Logic," replied Sarek mildly, "is the dominant factor in both our lives, as is fitting."

"You ... you." A passion he'd repressed until then surged up within McCoy and he couldn't stop. "When you fathered that child, you assumed a responsibility .. but you and your precious logic failed in that responsibility. You failed to teach him what his human half needed to survive sanely. You cast him out! No thanks to you, he managed. Now you're perfectly willing to take credit for the fruits of his genius. You ought to be ashamed!"

Sarek felt the storm of the doctor's words and emotions but schooled his features and mind so as not to inflict his own reaction on McCoy. It was a consideration so ingrained he was not conscious of it as he said, "I've taken no credit from Spock. What he has achieved, I presume he would have achieved without my help."

At that moment, Spock moaned, head tossing from side to side. Sarek reached over to the tray and picked up a spongestraw, wetting his son's lips and mouth with it. It was a simple, compassionate gesture, one which the Vulcan had performed many times in the last hours. He dried the lips and applied the light balm McCoy had scrounged from somewhere.

Spock's tossing became more pronounced. Sarek positioned his fingers around Spock's skull, somehow emphasizing his awareness of those aesthetically pleasing lines. A moment later, strong Vulcan fingers locked into position. Spock's hands rose toward Sarek's face, contacted, and father and son mutely gazed at one another.

Gradually, the rigor went from their arms, and fingers withdrew. As if continuing an uninterrupted conversation, Spock said, "One should not speculate from an inadequate factual basis."

"A lesson well worth relearning. However, a father's responsibilities exclude making learning difficult; especially, they exclude the omission of vital facts.

"Difficulty is inherent in the learning process, and the systematic search for data is a part of learning."

McCoy got the distinct impression he was listening to some strange sort of informal zyeto match. Despite the mild tones and abstract words, these two were into an argument not ten seconds after Spock woke from a quasi-coma.

After several firmly ignored attempts to interrupt, McCoy beat a hasty retreat. He found Kirk in the Control Room and with two well chosen words, brought the captain on the double. The words had been "Spock's awake."

Kirk surveyed the battlefield from under beetling brows. Assessing the situation as basically hopeless, he gathered his strength and bellowed a hearty, "Well, Spock, welcome back."

Breaking off in mid-sentence, Spock returned, "Than you, Captian. You have little conception of how glad I am to be back."

Kirk performed one of his ever-so-disturbing intuitional feats: "Bad dreams?"

Sarek stepped between the two. "Vulcans rarely dream."

Kirk snorted and paced to a new position from which he could see both Vulcans. "We've just established communications with the Kongo. They're headed for Vulcan, so Starfleet Command detailed them to pick us up. Rendezvous in four hours twenty minutes."

"Then," said Sarek, "I'd better gather my reports. If you'll excuse me ..." He exited past McCoy with a glance that might have been friendly. Whatever it was, McCoy was certain he'd scored a point with the ex-ambassador. He followed Sarek out into the hall, leaving Kirk and Spock alone.

Spock looked surprisingly at his captain. "You didn't take another Flame."

Kirk avoided Spock's eyes. "No. It hurt, but Sarek and Tanya helped. I'll make it."

"Protestant ethic."

"What?"

"The Protestant ethic from old Earth -- you are imbued with more than your share, considering."

Kirk laughed in relief. "Oh, is that all that's wrong with me?"

Spock tilted his head to one side, in the manner he had with specimens. "You were thinking there was something wrong with you?"

"No. I was thinking you'd think I thought there was something wrong with you."

"Oh?" Spock enunciated with exaggerated care.

"Yeah."

"Would you care to elaborate, Captain?"

"Well ... sometimes when a person gives a gift that's rejected, he thinks that he is being rejected -- rebuffed if you will."

"I recall reading that somewhere. Do you realize that what passes for healthy among humans would be considered pathological among Vulcans?"

"I had gotten that impression on occasion. In fact, I've run into humans who've said the same thing about Vulcans."

Spock half smiled. "Incredible."

"Well, anyway. I'm glad you're not hurt at my not taking another Flame."

"Hurt? No. Although I did expect it. You are the one who will be hurt. But that is a matter for the future. For now, I would like to get out of this bed."

"I'll get Bones to check you over." Kirk left, pondering that odd remark. The loss

of the Flame was already fading. Why should it hurt in the future?

The next day, with the Halbird safely aboard the Kongo, Kirk found McCoy in the tiny galley which had come to serve the ship as a combination rec-room and waiting room. Hands on hips, he sniffed the air, following the wafted scent to its point of origin -- the cup McCoy held between two hands as he sat at the table. Kirk sniffed once more. "I don't believe it. Irish coffee?"

"Just programmed the chef for it. Use the blank button on the end. I'll make a label later."

Kirk accepted the invitation and drew himself a cup of the steaming, enticingly fragrant liquid. He sat down opposite his friend and sipped.

"How'd you find me here?"

"Wasn't hard. I just asked myself, 'Aboard a ship full of logical Vulcans, where would you find Bones?' The logical answer: 'Wherever Vulcans weren't!' But why the Irish coffee?"

"Why not?"

"Come on. You've got a Starship's sickbay at your fingers, and a really top-flight crew to man the labs. Why aren't you up there, running tests or studying or something?"

"I'm thinkin'," drawled McCoy.

"About ...?"

"Oh, Sarek mostly, I guess."

"What about Sarek?"

"Well, yesterday I kinda gave him a piece of my mind. Not too gently. I just got through talking to him a few minutes ago. He didn't seem offended. In fact ..."

"In fact," said a voice from the doorway, "I wanted to extend an invitation to stay in my home again before returning to active duty."

Kirk turned and started to rise from his chair. "Sir!"

"Please remain seated, Captain," said the elder statesman smoothly. "I did not mean to intrude, but I did want to ask the doctor if he perhaps had any idea why the Romulans held me so long, undamaged."

"No, sir," said McCoy with guarded deference. Sarek took a seat at the end of the table, looking from one human to the other. "I thought perhaps the nature of the infection we picked up might have given you a clue."

Kirk excitedly broke in. "You mean they might have wanted you to be rescued? To infect the rest of Vulcan?"

"They're no longer contagious," said McCoy.

"Well, then, maybe to study the cross-immunity factors? Biological warfare?"

Another voice joined them from the door. "I hardly think so, Captain," said Spock, quietly entering. "It seems far more likely that they would have planned to use the Ambassadorial rank as a bargaining tool in some future negotiations."

"I had thought of that," said Sarek. "But what negotiations?"

"I have a theory," said Spock. "The theft of the Kraith was only a small part of a much larger plan. We were not intended to discover who the thieves were, nor were we supposed to recover the Kraith. To us, the theft was the important event in itself. Putting aside our own values for the moment, what might be accomplished by such actions?"

Sarek's eyes became unfocused as he stared at the blank bulkhead. Kirk and McCoy could almost see the circuits shunting. At length, the ex-ambassador nodded gravely. "Yes, we will have to gather much more data, but it is possible that they are plotting a long-term disruption of the ties between different Federation humanoids."

Whistles and raised human eyebrows greeted that.

Spock nodded gravely. "We must not underestimate the Romulans. You will bring this to the attention of Federation Council, father?"

Sarek looked at his son and nodded, his face asking a question.

"I regret, father, that I will not be able to help you present the case. I have received my continuance with the Enterprise, and I have accepted."

Sarek appeared neither surprised nor pleased. "Then the matter is settled ... for the time being." He rose. "I will prepare the dispatches." At the door, he paused and gazed somberly as his gaze flickered momentarily from Kirk to McCoy, then back to Spock.

McCoy rose, placing his cup in the wall receptacle. "I guess I'd better get on up there and see whether S'Dingru needs some help." He sidled around Sarek and disappeared down the companionway. Kirk pulled on his coffee, preparing to go. Sarek chose that moment to speak.

"Spock, I share your regret at T'Rruel's death."

Kirk could feel the words being jerked out of the older man, but Spock mutely refused to face his father.

Sarek finished with, "Her loss is an immeasur able one for Vulcan ... and for you."

Spock's gaze was fixed firmly on the blank center of the table, and Kirk could see the taut neck muscles. The words came from a tight throat. "Then let us not attempt to measure it."

Sarek waited almost a minute longer, but nothing else was forthcoming. He turned and walked silently down the companionway.



# THE OBLIGATION/ THROUGH TIME AND TEARS

Jacqueline Lichtenberg &

J. M. Winston

Kraith III(1)

The ruddy skyglow, overture to a Vulcan sunrise, had washed the valley in shades of pink by the time the silent aircar landed before the ancient stone edifice called D'R'hiset, the ancestral home of Xtmpsrqzntwlfb.

Kirk and McCoy emerged from the front doors of the house to watch Spock and T'Aniyeh approach across the rotunda under the canopy of dancing silver birds flocking to meet the sun. The pair didn't look like triumphant conquerors marching to a celebration. They looked weary.

With typical Vulcan practicality, they went straight to the oval, greenstone table where Amanda was setting out a hearty breakfast. Sarek came from the kitchen with a tray laden with items for which Kirk knew no names. Vials, covered bowls, plastic containers, thermoses steamed and frosted, and packets of what looked like sliced cold-cuts. It was a heavy tray. Kirk suspected Sarek had selected all of Spock's favorite breakfast dishes for the buffet-style homecoming.

Seeing the state of preparations, Spock silently went to a concealed cupboard to one side of the draped colonnade and brought back disposable plates and utensils. Feeling compelled to do something, Kirk fetched glasses from the kitchen and poured juices for everyone.

Trading a warm glance with Amanda, McCoy lifted his glass and said, "I know it's not exactly a Vulcan custom, but I would like to propose a toast. To diversity without destruction."

Standing side-by-side, Sarek and Spock seemed to freeze for a moment. Then Spock raised his glass. "To diversity without destruction."

They all drank to that. And then the customary silence of the Vulcan meal took over. As they circled the table, plates in hand, and selected their feeds, Kirk could sense the weariness and tension draining away. For a moment, he even fantasized that the walls were porous sponges that soaked up strife and exuded peace. Gradually, the weary stoop faded from Spock's shoulders and the spring came back to Tanya's step.

At one point, Spock paused, hand suspended over the array of delectables as if searching for something commonly placed on the table --- as a Terran would expect salt or butter. Sarek awoke from his reverie with a start. "I'll get it." And he was off to the kitchen and back in a moment, murmuring an apology. He placed a wide-mouthed jar-and-ladle beside the bowl of tiny red beads. Spock accepted a generous helping of a gelatinous white sauce. (Kirk tried it and found it impossibly bitter.)

After the meal, the table was cleared with the sort of quiet cooperation one sees only in the intimacy of a family. Kirk said, "Do you suppose it would be proper to issue shore-leave passes to the crew for the day?"

"I don't see why not," said Sarek.

Amanda put in, "We should all get some sleep now. So you may as well let them come aground and stretch their legs." She turned to Kirk and McCoy. "Your rooms are made up just as you left them. And T'Aniyeh, we can open the third-floor guest suite for you. No problem."



McCoy said, "I think I'll take a walk outside while it's still cool enough."

Like a good Vulcan guest, Tanya set off after Amanda without a word of protest. Vulcans never argue over hospitality. It's never offered insincerely and never declined politely. Kirk ordered Scotty to set up shore-leave rotation and register their departure tentatively for late the following day. Then he climbed the stairs together with Sarek and Spock.

It wasn't a long climb, but to Kirk somehow it was a very symbolic climb. He ended up walking between father and son, never sure how that had happened. The Vulcans walked slowly with many pauses for Kirk to catch his breath, although they always found some plausible excuse for the rest stops other than Kirk's breathlessness. They knew he wasn't on tri-ox.

They spoke in low voices of the family history as preserved in the various pieces of sculpture and artifacts displayed in niches along the wide, sweeping staircase. They spoke of peace and of bridges. They spoke of planetary crustal plates, of the pressures grinding those plates together, and of the growth of mountains.

Their words, Kirk knew, were meant for him. Yet the speech was interspersed with Vulcanur terms. He gathered that he was expected to follow the conversation, and somehow, he did seem to understand they were discussing many problems on many levels of abstraction. The two Vulcans did all the talking, yet Kirk did not feel left out, or talked around, or even talked about despite his certainty that one of the problems they were obliquely discussing was Kirk, himself. (Though how he could be a problem, was a mystery to Kirk.)

Kirk's room, adjoining McCoy's, was indeed just as he'd left it. It was very much a homecoming for Kirk. This time Sarek lit the tiny flame that Kirk might never know confusion in this house. The flame reminded Kirk of the flame-sphere he'd lost, but the pain of loss was awakened only for a moment. As he gazed at the light Sarek had kindled, he was warmed and comforted, and unconfused.

That first time, it had been just a flame, a quaint but foreign custom. Now, the flame seemed to speak to something deeper in Kirk. He looked up to find Sarek staring at him intently. He said, "I must thank you. I must."

Sarek's gaze flicked momentarily to Spock who immediately began inspecting the ceiling for leaks. Then the father said, "I...understand...now." He seemed to be addressing Spock, though his eye remained steady on Kirk. You will sleep well, Captain."

And Kirk did sleep well. In fact, he couldn't recall sleeping so well since his last visit. He was still sleeping as the sun lowered in the ruby sky throwing sharp black shadows along the valley floor.

Sarek found Spock on the roof pacing the Gardens of Thought, pausing now and then to examine the setting sun. Sarek hitched himself up onto the parapet railing, and sat, feet dangling, to wait for his son. It was only moments later when Spock noticed him and completed the circuit of the Gardens, to stand beside his father at the railing.

Sarek opened without preamble. "I've arranged utsulan for you this evening."

"Appropriate. T'Aniyeh is also entitled."

"If she will accompany you, I'm sure she'll be admitted."

"Not at Anurash, unless the rotation of attendants has changed things."

"No, not at Anurash---Beom."

"Beom?" repeated Spock with one raised brow. "Yes, that would be...appropriate." Beom was the largest and oldest utsulan still functional on Vulcan. It was the proper place for Spock to go to celebrate his victory, to discharge the energy of Joy his triumph had created. He did not know, at that time, for what compelling reason he would eventually retrieve that energy.

"There is another purpose for you at Beom."

"Oh?"

"I will accompany you. Afterwards, we will enter the wheerr for Pattern Search."

Spock saw instantly what his father meant. Sarek had seen and understood what was happening to the Captain. Spock had great difficulty containing his reaction within the bounds of good taste. After the surge of happiness had run its course, he put it aside to donate to the utsulan along with his victory. All he said aloud was, "Yes, Father."

They chatted a few more moments until the sun had kissed the horizon. Then Sarek entered the Gardens and Spock went below.

It was almost midnight in the hemisphere where Beom was located, by the time Sarek steered the aircar off the Controlled Lanes and skimmed the rocky hills that cut the Beom valley off from the rest of the world. All was in readiness for their arrival. The place was evacuated save for the trained Vulcan Attendants and Residents, and the utsulan was already beginning to function, obscured beneath its shielding sphere of purple light.

They could barely make out the pyramidal shape with the jutting posts at right angles to each surface, supporting strands of glowing objects. But the small geodesic spheres that topped each of those posts were already pulsing ever brighter as Sarek grounded their car beside the corner entrance to the pyramid.

The barren, desert valley sands intruded even here beside the utsulan. Spock stamped his feet to shake the sand from his sandals. He was dressed for the occasion, as they all were, in desert garb, hooded and cloaked against the dessicating air.

The green-robed Chief Attendant met them. The vibration was already too intense to allow speech. He conducted them swiftly to the entrance.

The unusually narrow stone corridors within the utsulan seemed to compress and intensify the vibrations, urging them on as if there were no time to waste. They went single file, Spock in the lead, Sarek following and T'Aniyeh bringing up the rear. They skirted two sides of the pyramid at ground level, and came to the corner gallery from which narrow corridors snaked upward to the crystal that occupied the entire central shaft of the utsulan.

The Chief Attendant selected a corridor for each of the contributors. Then he left them. Spock's eyes met T'Aniyeh's briefly. He knew she was deeply apprehensive of her ability to perform this peculiarly Vulcan exercise. But she had Affirmed. He had faith in her. He had to have faith. If she faltered, he would not be able to reach her in time.

Each of them would approach the crystal through a gallery separate from the others. Contributing to utsulan was both a public duty and an intensely private affair. Spock gathered his cloak and began to climb.

The way was so narrow his shoulders brushed the walls on the turns. He had to circle the crystal, and his sense of direction told him that he'd been given the highest gallery access portal on the north side of the crystal. That was an honor he hadn't expected and he found strangely that it awed him. For the first time, it hit him just what he'd done in Guardian Council.

He let the feeling grow, nursing it and feeding it as one would a campfire of stubborn green wood. He turned his accomplishment around and around in his mind, examining and appreciating every ramification. As he climbed, he built in his mind an acasomy model of the effect of his act, and for the first time, he let himself experience a total, personal reaction to what he'd done.

All the while he climbed, the vibration increased. The dark corridor was lightened by the dull purple glow from the walls. His very bones were vibrating now, his flesh singing the tune of ages, his mind charged with a flaming Joy for which there was only one conceivable expression.

His steps pounded in his ears, his stride lengthening until he fairly flew up the flat, stone steps. At last, when he thought he could stand it no longer, he rounded a bend and came in sight of the brilliant orange glow of the main crystal, the "storage battery" of Vulcan experience.

He ran.

Two steps, three, five, and he was at the crystal face. He tore aside the insulating hanging and fell against the cool surface, both hands spread flat, forehead grinding into the vibrating surface. The crystal face that was exposed to this gallery tilted slightly away from perpendicular, so that the contributor had to lean out over the crystal. Spock looked down into flaming, orange depths.

His teeth vibrated. His whole body seemed a fluid without definable surface. He gasped for breath. The planes of light below him represented the internal facets of the crystal. He understood crystal-lattice theory on the highest levels of science. Yet, at that moment, he was no scientist analysing a phenomenon. He was a Vulcan.

Deliberately, he allowed himself to flow into the crystal, to become one with it through time. He was his ancestors who had built the Beom utsulan. He was their descendants who had guarded it through the most turbulent times of Vulcan history. And he was himself, Guardian and Master of the First Realm Tradition. And he was in Joy.

As he began to feed that Joy into the repository, the vibrations increased. But now, they were his to modulate. They no longer shook him, they resonated with him. He knew the exact moment when the Attendants below ceased to pound out the rhythm on the glass cones that energized the utsulan. The utsulan was his, and he took it up the scale higher and higher, up the scale of harmonics until it had consumed his Joy.

As the flow began to ebb, he felt the Attendants pick up the rhythm at exactly the right point. He let himself ride that current down, down, down into soft happiness, the wake of the unbearable Joy, contentment. He was glad Sarek had chosen Beom now. He hadn't realized just how high he'd have to go to get down. He doubted if Anurash or any other utsulan could have managed to catch him. The Beom Attendants were the best, and they'd just barely been able to reach him.

It was many long moments before his heart slowed to normal, and his breathing subsided. At length, he pushed himself away from the crystal, drew the curtain across the window-like opening, and turned to go back down that long corridor.

Only then did he think what his soaring flight had done to the others riding with him. Thought of T'Aniyeh quickened his steps until he was almost running. He burst forth into the lower gallery to find Sarek emerging from another tunnel-mouth, a wilted T'Aniyeh in his arms.

As he came toward her, she raised her head. "That Impressioning will last until the crystal is dust! If I hadn't been in it, I'd never have believed it possible."

Seeing her revived, Sarek set her feet down. "I must agree with you. There is nothing like it in my memory. Spock, you..."

Suddenly, T'Aniyeh crumpled. Moving in from the archway, the Chief Attendant scooped her into his arms before Sarek could move. Utsulan experience had a tendency to slow the reflexes. "I'll take her to the infirmary to recuperate. She is only weakened from the violence of this Impressioning."

Spock held himself in check by main force of will. Such collapses were common. She was not injured.

"No," said Sarek, "before you shut down, we'd like to Search the Pattern."

The Attendant gave Sarek a piercing look, hesitating. But he wasn't about to tell these two kataytikhe what was customary and what was not! Cradling the slight woman in his arms, he sidled to a wall recess and elbowed open a hinged door revealing an intercom grill. He nudged the switchplate with his elbow and ordered, "Attendants, shut down the eighth harmonic, kill the pulse and rig for Pattern Search. Mind the wheerr. Gone rooms ignice the back-currents. Count five to silence."

He cast a glance toward the two men, but seeing no change in their plans, the Chief Attendant gave the count back from five. When his orders had been obeyed, as evidenced by the subtle changes in the vibration, he said, inclining his head toward the two, "Your wheerr," and left.

Spock followed his father up the narrow, twisting stairs, steep ones this time, and despite his weariness, he felt a sharp twinge of excitement. He couldn't fail now. Couldn't.

Up they climbed, up and up to the very peak of the enormous pyramid where the great geodesic dome englobed the special room known as the wheerr. It was floored by the sheered off top of the truncated pyramid. The walls and ceiling were the hemispherical geodesic dome, each section of which was a thick colored glass panel, some concave, some convex, all now glowing in rainbow splendor, though not nearly as bright as at the peak of Spock's contribution.

They entered the wheerr through the canopied kiosk that jutted up through the floor. The center of the room was occupied by the faceted top of the enormous central crystal that was the pride of Beom. It rose fully waist high from the floor and was surrounded by a collar of insulating material with a dull, gray sheen and protected by loops of rope strung from uprights set in the floor around it.

The rest of the floor was covered with a fine mosaic tile design, complex to the eye, yet somehow fittingly peaceful. For here, in the very top of the utsulan, was the only place where all telepathic noise was damped out. Here was a silence and a privacy unobtainable anywhere else. And here was the only place where the embedded patterns of the main crystal could be monitored.

Sarek said, "Do you remember the previous pattern?"

"Yes, I saw it when I interred the Kraith. I think I must have been the last Interment, so any differences major enough to show ought to be due to tonight's contribution."

Sarek approached the crystal and circled it, peering intently downwards along each of several axes. Had he been human, he would have given a low, appreciative whistle when he'd completed that circuit. There had indeed been changes.

Spock could see that for himself. His had been a major contribution. What concerned him more, however, was the significance of those changes.

He turned from his inspection to see Sarek seated in the lone chair, elbows propped on the chair arms, fingers steepled in meditation. That was, of course, the purpose of the wheerr, so Spock seated himself on the dais which raised the chair high enough for the occupant to see down into the crystal. Waiting for Sarek, he rested.

It was some time before Sarek said, "Can you factor out T'Aniyeh's contribution?"

"Yes. I think...no, I'm certain that she is responsible for the three reflections. She is quite human, you know."

"I believe you are right."

"We will have to adopt him."

"That doesn't follow."

"You saw what's happening to him. On the stairs, he dropped en rapport with us and didn't even know it. And he picked up on the Guesting Flame immediately. That's only his second time, too."

"Merely because T'Aniyeh can contribute higher harmonics doesn't mean that Jim Kirk can do the same."

"No, of course not. But what of his children?"

"True. Why him?"

"I have no choice. If I do not adopt him, then I have destroyed him."

"How?"

"His sensitivity is latent. It would have remained buried under the barriers he erected to endure his childhood environment. He was taught to believe that his is no esper. In order to save his life, my own life, and sometimes the entire crew of the Enterprise, it has been necessary for me to penetrate those carefully learned barriers. The penetrations are slowly destroying his barrier-reflex. It is my responsibility."

"Agreed. However, the responsibility could be discharged with a simple Warder-Liege pact."

"You forget, Jim Kirk is human."

"Explain."

"Observe the Pattern. T'Aniyeh has been reconciled to an extreme telepathic sensitivity from infancy. She has been trained as a Daughter to the best of her not inconsiderable ability. Yet look at what she has done to the Pattern!"

"She is not logical."

"Neither is Jim Kirk. In fact, he is even less logical. He believes that the core-essence of the beauty-experience is subjective human emotion. To show him otherwise will not be easy."

"It should be unnecessary."

"Ordinarily, it would. However, I know his mind. He has a very powerful will. And he is flexible. But he does have a breaking point. He will not accept his condition without a fight. And if he loses that fight, if he rejects his new sensory channels, he faces insanity. If at that point, he values emotion far above logic, he will have no tool powerful enough to adjust himself."

"I begin to see."

"I do not propose to teach him to value logic above emotion, but merely to show him the meaning of a life which does so value logic. If he can see that there is beauty in our way of life, then the adoption will provide the necessary emotional strength to face the ordeal he must go through."

"I do not understand emotional strength."

"Neither do I. But it exists. It is real, and powerful. Since I cannot give him the strength of logic, I must give him the strength of emotion."

"How will adopting him do this?"

"He has no family of his own save a nephew too young to help him and a mother too old to be relied upon even to live until then. His ties to these people are tenuous at best. He turned his head to look up at his father, suddenly aware of the fact which Sarek might have missed. 'With a human, 'family' is a thing of the emotions."

"Ah, yes. So I have discovered. But adoption, especially of an adult, would not ordinarily evince such an emotional component."

"True. But surely you've noticed that the component is already budding."

"If it flowers without formal adoption, so much the better."

"It will not flower. Jim has never been able to express to me how he feels about our home. He will not allow himself to grow further in this direction without a change in status. That is my considered opinion."

"Would not a simple invitation suffice?"

"No. There is another aspect. It is not only necessary to give him a focal point for his familial emotions, it is necessary to establish a formal structure of responsibility and authority. Father, he will be like a child, not knowing which way to turn for advice or what to do for himself just to survive. I must provide him several dimensions of emotional security, but I must do it in a way which will not be obvious to him. He must not know what we want to adopt him...until afterwards."

"I see. This is your judgment."

"It is."

"You do not require my agreement to carry it out."

"True. But I...would prefer...not to act without your agreement."

Sarek rose to pace once more around the top of the orange crystal and to observe closely the pattern of planes, and lines of light that glowed within. When he turned to gaze back at Spock, it was with a great respect for the man he had sired. "Your purpose is to provide him with stable familial ties, and simultaneously to bring alive in him an understanding of our way of life."

"Yes."

"It is your assessment that without these two things, the final awakening of his awareness will destroy him."

"Yes."

Spock remained seated on the step before the chair. Sarek approached across the wheerr and stood looking down into Spock's eyes. At length, the older man gave the peculiar left rotation of the head that was the Vulcan gesture of negation, hardly more than a glance to the left.

Spock said, "Why?"

"T'Pau would never allow it. The life and sanity---the happiness of a single human being---is not worth the risk."

"It is my obligation, my responsibility. She cannot intervene in such a case."

"True, his condition seems to be your doing. However, had you not penetrated his natural barriers, the condition would not exist. He would be dead. He has enjoyed several additional years of life, and that was your gift freely given. His possible death at some future date cannot lay upon you an obligation to act further, and in so doing jeopardize our family name, and possibly All-Vulcan as well."

Spock rose, frowning into his father's eyes, searching. When he blinked, it was as if a human had snapped his fingers. "That is T'Urianne's argument."

"She would be adamantly opposed to adopting Jim Kirk, and it is her name, as well as ours, that we would be giving him."

"Sometimes I think she is not quite...logical."

"Therefore we shall require the power of impeccable logic on our side of the proposal."

"I am not well enough versed in human psychology to check your results. I will assume that you are correct. If you are incorrect, what harm might be done?"

"I have been unable to extrapolate any adverse effects on Jim Kirk. Tsaichrani is another matter. His successful contribution to tsaichrani may make the difference between survival and death for All Vulcan. There is at least a ten percent chance that his contribution will be pivotal."

"Then a certain risk will be in order to insure his successful emergence from training."

One Spockian eyebrow popped upwards. "What risk?"

Sarek told him.

Spock sat immobile for long seconds after that bombshell. Offer Jim Kirk the kraith of adoption? He turned the idea around and around in his mind. "T'Pau would never consent."

"Leave T'Pau to me."

"It will contribute to weakening his barriers."

"The older he gets, the greater the risk of the breakthrough. Therefore, the sooner the better."

"I need time to prepare him."

"You should be able to prepare him within the time it takes me to instruct the Guardians. It will have to be a very carefully balanced meld. I will oversee the construction of the kraith of adoption myself."

"It would have to be very well trapped."

"It will be. I will hand-pick the group." He looked at Spock wryly, "My grandfather trained me well. Come. Your mother will be waiting for us."

Spock followed with one backward glance at the pulsing, orange crystal. If the welling joy that possessed him now was any measure, one day he would return to Beom to deliver an even greater Joy to the utsulan. Perhaps Kirk would be with him on that day.

When the aircar carrying Spock, Sarek and the revived T'Aniyeh arrived back at D'R'hiset,

dawn once again reddened the sky. Amanda was waiting for them, standing on the wide front porch and shading her eyes to peer upwards as the car settled on the rotunda. Without waiting for the occupants to climb down, she ran toward them.

"Spock, come quickly!"

Instantly alert, Spock jogged toward her. "What's happened?"

"It's Jim!"

Spock took his mother's shoulders in his big hands and almost shook her. "What happened!"

"His mother. He just got a stargram. She died two days ago."

It took a few seconds for that to sink in. Spock's first reaction was relief, followed by annoyance at his mother for calling a Red Alert over nothing. The duration of those reactions was less than one second. Next came horror at what the sudden news might do to Jim Kirk. Finally, before T'Aniyeh and Sarek had caught up to him, Spock himself had reached Red Alert status, and was planning action.

His long, purposeful strides took him into the house. He found Kirk in the living room, leaning over the table with the stargram still in the viewer before him. It couldn't have been more than five minutes since he'd first read the contents.

Spock came up beside him, standing just at the edge of Kirk's vision, not intruding but there if needed. A few minutes later Sarek and Amanda came through the archway on the far side of the room. Glancing up, Spock motioned them away. After a moment, Sarek took Amanda's fingers and guided her from the scene.

Spock examined his Captain's face. There was a blankness there. The blankness of shock. Spock knew enough human psychology to recognize the shock which precedes the full realization of a loss. Starfleet's mysterious custom of granting home-leave upon a death in the family suddenly became understandable. Kirk was in no condition to command.

Gently, he withdrew the stargram cartridge from the viewer and placed it in Kirk's hand. He had to curl the fingers around it before the Captain gripped the capsule. Then Spock guided him to a seat which commanded a view of the gardens beyond the veranda.

Moving steadily now, Spock used the viewer to call Vulcan Space Central and have a message sent direct to Starfleet Command as per regulations. He waited beside the Captain as morning shadows gave way before the rising sun.

It wasn't long before Kirk struggled to speak against the rapid currents of his private thoughts. "Spock...the Enterprise. We're supposed to leave orbit at..."

"I've informed Starfleet Command of the news, Captain. I took the liberty of ordering Scotty to continue with the shoreleave rotation until we receive our new orders. The only question remaining is, "Do you wish to go to Earth immediately?"

Dazed, Kirk slowly turned his head to look out upon the gardens and the arching red sky, the flaming sun. "Earth?"

"According to the stargram, the funeral was held yesterday. It is Starfleet's custom to grant home leave on such occasions. But I think you should stay here, with us, for a few days." He refrained from adding that it would be illogical to travel half way across the Federation to visit a burial site, or farther, to visit a child who had never really known the deceased.

"Not much point in going to Earth, now, is there? I missed my chance. I missed. It's too late..."

The chime signal interrupted, but Kirk didn't notice as his thoughts once more hurtled down corridors of memory...of vital things left unsaid.

"Spock here."

It was Uhura's face, steady and calm, that gazed out at him. Spock saw the sympathy in that gaze. "...the Captain is...meditating," he offered.

"We've received our orders, Mister Spock. The Captain is on-leave, effective immediately, for the next two weeks minimum. The Enterprise is assigned to Recruitment Duty under Vulcan Starbase Command. We're to hold open house, and then stand by for an Admiral's Inspection after the Captain returns. What are your orders, Mister Spock?"

Spock nodded. As the newest Starship in the fleet, the Enterprise was the logical choice as a showpiece. "Have Mr. Scott draw up plans for any maintenance or repair procedures he deems necessary. I'll be up later to prepare a duty roster. Meanwhile, continue the shoreleave rotation. I'll want to see all Department Heads this afternoon. Spock, out."

He turned from the viewer. He'd have to wake McCoy. Then he could get some sleep. He was tired. In no condition to command, himself. But his Captain needed him. He would manage.

Kirk sat in the Gardens of Thought staring down at the sundrenched valley of D'R'hiset. His every nerve ending reached out for the peace he had always found here at this house, but this time the bonds around his mind and heart did not loosen and fall away. They were still there as tight and painful as the moment he had first read of his mother's death. His mind still could not accept the finality of the fact. She couldn't be dead. His mother was one of the most alive and vital human beings Kirk had ever known.

All the guilt flooded in on him like a black miasmatic cloud, dimming the bright sunlight. All the times he could have - should have - gone home on leave and didn't. The time Sam and his wife died he had meant to go, but something happened, as usual, and he sent a tape instead. He didn't even want to think of the times he had forgotten her birthday.

Logically (how Spock would like that), he should not feel this way. She had lived a satisfyingly rich life, had seen and done more than most. Her death had been sudden, a stroke, no pain or discomfort, she had passed away in her sleep.

He just couldn't accept the reality that she was no longer there. At home. She had always been there and he had never given thought to the time when she would be gone, and that he would be alone, truly alone. Alone in a way he never felt before.

He sighed, walked across the roof and downstairs.

From his own corner of the garden Spock watched his captain as he walked away. Spock's eyes were dark and heavy with pain. He might not be able to completely understand what Kirk was feeling but his mental antenna could register the depth and intensity of it. "I grieve with thee," he thought.

McCoy paused with one foot on the stairs. "Jim, I was just coming to get you. We're going to have lunch."

"Uh, Bones, I really don't feel like eating now. Maybe later."

"Look, Jim, you've got to eat sometime and one of the many good Vulcan rules is - no conversation with meals. Just come on and enjoy the food."

Kirk was just about to refuse when he realized how worried McCoy looked and it suddenly occurred to him that he couldn't remember the last time he had eaten. He could almost hear his mother's voice saying, "Jamie, I don't care what you're doing, you have got to eat. Now come in this minute."

McCoy saw the far away look in Kirk's eyes, sighed and was about to turn away when Kirk seemed to come to with a start.

"All right, Bones, just let me wash up and I'll come right down."

"Right, fine, I'll tell Amanda."

McCoy found Amanda in the kitchen and told her the good news. Her face glowed as she turned to him.

"I'm so glad. I was really starting to worry. Maybe he is coming back to us. He has been so distant - so far away. Almost unreachable."

McCoy's sensitive face was filled with concern as he told Amanda of his distress over Kirk's condition.

"I have never seen him like this. The closest he ever came, (this was so difficult for him to say because he in a way had been responsible), was when Edith Keeler died. But it didn't last as long and wasn't this deep."

...Lunch was over and Sarek suggested a game of chess to Kirk, remarking that anyone who could so consistently beat his son would be a worthy opponent. Kirk declined and retired to his room. Even Amanda could not get him to come down for dinner. No one seemed very hungry that evening. "Not very logical," had said Spock, "but nevertheless very true."

Amanda, especially seemed quite depressed. Sarek looked after her departing figure as she went for a walk in the garden. He knew how much she felt for Kirk, how disturbed she was over his unhappiness. He remembered her telling him of her feelings on Kirk's first visit to their home.

"It was when he took the ceremonial cup of water from me after I had said the words of welcome. Something in his eyes and manner, I just knew that he would mean more to me, us, than just our son's friend and commander. Perhaps it is because he reminds me of the son I might have had back on Earth if I hadn't let a certain Vulcan sweep me off my feet."

Sarek had remarked that Vulcans did not sweep females off their extremities. They were a very logical and well-controlled species. Amanda had just smiled.

The walk in the garden had made her tired but it had not relaxed her. She was still worried, still concerned. As she walked down the hallway leading to the stairs to Sarek's and her room, she heard a noise. It seemed to come from the adjoining passageway. As she peered into the darkness she could just make out the doorway at the end of the hall. It was a voice, calling. She

could not hear the words but she could make out the tone. She realized it was Kirk's room. If either Amanda or the occupant of the room had been Vulcan, she would not have dreamed of entering. But she was human and so was Kirk.

As she swept aside the arras she discovered she could see quite clearly by the light of the guesting flame. The bedclothes were half on the floor, kicked there by restless legs. He was still tossing and twisting as she moved closer. She could hear words now. "No...please... I'm sorry...so sorry. Please forgive me."

As she bent over the bed to brush the damp hair off his flushed face his eyes opened. Unfocused and disoriented, all he could see was a female form silhouetted against the starlight. His eyes filled with tears as he whispered one word and suddenly started to cry with huge, racking sobs. The one word had been, "Mother."

Amanda gathered him into her arms, holding him close as she had not dared to do with Spock, the many times she had longed to do so. All the emotion that she had denied herself for so many years welled up within her and flowed out to this fine warmly sensitive young man. She could feel the spasms shake and tear his body, and she stroked his head and crooned to him, as mothers from time immemorial have done. She remembered his mother's pet name for him and said it over and over. "Jamie, Jamie, Jamie."

Finally, he regained command of himself and pulled away from her gently. It had been as if they had been through some sort of catharsis together and had attained a euphoric release.

"Jamie, please let me help you the way you helped me when we thought Sarek was dead. Your sympathy - no, it was more - empathy - was such a comfort to me. Don't take this moment away from me. I need to give you this as much as you need to receive it. Please, Jamie, let me help."

As he lay exhausted, Kirk suddenly thought back across time and tears to when another deeply sensitive woman had said those same words to him. Edith. Edith Keeler. But she was dead, too. All the women who ever meant anything to him seemed to be dead or gone beyond reach. But Amanda - Amanda was here.

"Amanda," he whispered, "Stay with me, stay."

They talked for a long time, about everything and about nothing.

"You and she would have liked each other very much. She could even understand my dreams and ambitions. I didn't realize until much later how terribly lonely she must have been when I went off to the Academy. I can still see her face when I told her of my first space mission. Sam had been gone for over a year and now I was leaving. I never really gave much thought to her loneliness, just my own excitement at my first long trip." He bit his lip, "I never realized how selfish I've been."

"No, not selfish, you mustn't think that. Think instead how proud she must have been. You were the youngest in your class and you were graduated first in your class with every honor the academy could bestow. She must have known you would get your own command one day and be away from her for long periods of time. Your father had been in the service and you could pay him no finer tribute than to follow in his footsteps.

"What was your father like, Jamie?"

Kirk told her all he could remember about the big, jovial, suntanned man who had been his father. His memories were warm and happy ones and he was glad to share them with her. They had never been afraid to say, "I love you" to each other. He almost felt that that was the most important legacy his father had left him. That it was not shameful for two men to feel deeply about each other, that a man could have as meaningful a relationship with another man as with a woman without any overt connotations - as in his friendship with Spock.

Amanda gazed at him thoughtfully. Does Spock realize how fortunate he is to have such a friend? Yes, he does, I am sure of it.

Kirk finally fell asleep looking very young and peaceful.

Sarek was awake when Amanda entered the room. He was instantly aware that something of import had occurred. He did not question her, he knew that she would tell him, in time.

"I've just come from Jamie's room." She said, completely unaware that she had used that name and not the more formal, James. "He is feeling much better and I think we will see a vast improvement tomorrow."

Any other man but Sarek might have been a bit disturbed to hear that his wife had just come from spending several hours in the room of a very attractive and virile young man. However, Sarek being Vulcan, and knowing his Amanda and Spock's Kirk, knew no unrest.

"I'm so happy I was able to help him, Sarek. For a while it was as if we had a second son." She smiled, "So different from our own Spock, but dear all the same."

Sarek suddenly swung around to face Amanda. "Would you like him for a son?"

Startled, she stared at him. "What do you mean?"



"I mean, to formally adopt him into our family and become one of us."

Amanda sat down on the bed, weak-kneed. It was all so sudden. Then joy flooded through her as she looked up at Sarek with tears in her eyes. "I never knew that you cared so much for him."

"I have the utmost respect for the Captain and his accomplishments. He will make a most satisfactory addition to our family."

She smiled at him, well aware he would never admit his feelings but knew quite well they were there, perhaps different from human feelings but in their own way just as intense. It would not be until later that the full political implications of this move would occur to her.

Suddenly her smile faded and she looked up at him worriedly. "Sarek, can it be done? Will it be allowed?"

"Up to now it has only been done in extreme cases and with very young children. Of course, there are many things to take into consideration. I must confer with T'Pol and discuss precedents and the effect on the council." He had to be sure of his ground before setting such involved legalities into motion.

"Spock." Amanda cried, "What about Spock and the effect on him?"

"I believe Spock can be convinced."

A society based upon pure logic. How would Kirk react? He knew Kirk to be an excellent commander who could control himself with an almost Vulcan-like strength but who also could be a most volatile individual at times. He was strong, but was he strong enough? Would he submit to the rigorous training involved and who would be his instructor? Would he be able to see with full perspective the entire effect his action would have on the Federation and Vulcan? Yes, there were many questions and he would have to think deeply and well to arrive at the correct solutions.

When Sarek arose the next morning his thoughts were clear and concise. The first person to be told of his decision would be Spock. This he owed to his only son.

He put the communicator screen on Spock's wavelength and set it for shimmer. If Spock were awake he would see it, if he were asleep it would not disturb him.

Spock answered almost immediately and Sarek received permission to visit the roof-top aerie.

After the amenities, Sarek and Spock faced each other in silence and Spock waited, patient and relaxed, for his father to speak.

"The kraith of adoption will necessitate the Warder-Liege compact and the Interim afterwards which will train him."

Spock picked up the train of thought. "And if he is so instructed, he will not act to further destroy Tsaichrani. That is what you will bring to T'Pol."

"Yes. We will have to convince her that the Warder-Liege training will insure that he will understand the purpose of Sarek's Construct. He will learn the Vulcan heart and the Vulcan soul as no other man before him. But he will not become Vulcan. He will be the other half of the bridge which your birth created."

"In the eyes of the Federation, he will be Vulcan. The entire galaxy will be viewing his every move. He will have to go through a vigorous and exhaustive training period to prepare him for his acceptance by the Vulcan Council. No longer will any faux pas be excused. We must choose his teacher with utmost consideration."

"Precisely. That is why I have chosen you."

Spock's eyebrows shot upwards and lowered slowly as the implication sank in. "Logical, of course, but difficult, also. I would become, for this time, his commander. It would be a very trying time for both of us."

"Can you do it?"

Spock noticed his father did not say, "Will you do it?"

He pondered a moment before committing himself to something quite in excess of what he'd planned. He turned the situation around and around in his mind, looking for flaws. At last he came to see that with any other Liege, it wouldn't work. He suspected, not for the first time, that his father understood human nature much better than he did. "If he agrees to it, yes, I will."

Sarek pursed his lips, eyes unfocused as if gazing deep into the future. "With the training you could provide, he might be able, if he lived that long, to share in the next Affirmation."

Spock shifted to English, "I think Mother would say, 'Let us cross our bridges as we come to them'."

Sarek rose decisively. "She does have her logical moments. I will go to see him now."

"May I suggest that you first ascertain whether he has had his coffee? For some reason, that seems to make a great deal of difference in his personality in the morning."

"Indeed. Your mother is much the same way. It has something to do with the blood-sugar, I believe."

Kirk was indeed drinking his second cup of coffee when Sarek found him in the study toying with the intricately carved chess set, a gift from the Schillian Ambassador to Vulcan.

Sarek started the conversation. "I am concerned with the direction the Vulcan/Federation relationship is taking."

Kirk agreed with the older Vulcan that the situation was precarious.

"Would you do anything that was in your power to change the situation?" Sarek asked.

"That's a strange question. Of course, I would. It would be my duty as an Officer in Star Fleet and a human being."

"What if this same solution would also create Joy for some people whom you cherish?"

Kirk had no idea what Sarek was leading up to, but if a plan had all those virtues...

Sarek told him the plan.

Kirk's first reaction was numbed surprise. He realized the honor offered him. However, as Sarek continued to speak he began to see the terrible responsibilities he would be shouldering. He was used to responsibility, what Star Ship Captain wasn't - but the inroads on his privacy - his every movement. He had spoken of making people happy, did he mean himself and Amanda? What about Spock? Then his thoughts turned to Vulcan and the all-encompassing peace he had been able to find there. He smiled inwardly...to have a place to call home again.

Kirk sat silent after Sarek finished. He wanted to say something but his thoughts were still in a jumble. It was a great honor but Star Fleet - how would they react to this? Of course if the Federation Council agreed, Star Fleet would have to follow suit. He needed some time to mull this over.

But Sarek wasn't leaving him time.

"You see, Captain, there are many facets to this plan. Adoption on Vulcan is not taken lightly, and what we propose is not adoption in its simplest form. It will be a joining which is ... something more than the joining of two families in marriage. What we propose is to give our name into your safekeeping. Your performance will show all Vulcan what a human is."

"I'm not sure that I would do honor to that name. I can see the bridge you are trying to build, but I..."

"We realize we would be asking a great deal of you, Captain. We would not expect you to assume such a burden without instruction. Spock will explain it all to you, later. For the moment, the important thing for you to decide is, will you call D'R'hiset home? That must be a decision based upon your own, private values, and I cannot help you with it."

"I would like a little time to think."

"I am afraid time is at a premium, James. T'Pau is leaving on a pilgrimage this evening and I had hoped we could see her before she left. She will be gone for several weeks and your leave will be up before then. Spock has often commented on the speed with which you are able to make decisions. I believe that is a prerequisite to being a Star Ship Captain?"

"What time is T'Pau leaving?"

"Four point five hours from now."

Kirk got up, flexed his knees and walked over to the chess set. He knew Sarek was right. Making decisions was his business but never had he had to make one of such galactic proportions before.

Kirk took a deep breath and released it slowly. "Will you want me with you when you call on her?"

"Yes, but I will go in first to prepare the way. I suggest that you wear the new tunic Amanda has had made for you. Your appearance in Vulcan attire would be most pleasing to her."

"The start of my Vulcan training, Sarek?"

"I did not mean it to sound that way, James."

"I'm sure you didn't but I will take it as such. If I may ask - who will be my instructor? You?"

"No. Spock."

Kirk was startled for one fraction of a moment, then raising one eyebrow, just to show he could, said, "Indeed."

Sarek could not prevent the gleam from showing in his own eyes. He was sure T'Pol would agree that here was one worthy to be an adopted son of Vulcan.



# SECRET OF GROSKIN

## Jacqueline Lichtenberg

### Kraith IIIB

Admiral Freemont placed both hands on his desk and spoke across the lightyears that separated him from the Enterprise. "Captain Kirk. A situation has arisen which I believe can't be handled by anyone else."

"I'm listening, Sir." Kirk adjusted the viewscreen on his desk so that Freemont seemed to look straight out at him. The Admiral had salt-and-pepper hair swiftly receding from a deeply tanned forehead. Kirk judged him near retirement age.

"Since your crew testified before the Starfleet subcommittee, Thirlev's supporters have been gaining ground. Now, some of the human admirals are going to be asked to retire early in order to make room for hastily promoted nonhumans. You can imagine the chaos that could result."

At Kirk's nod, Freemont picked up a tape as if about to hand it over. We've been given a test situation to see if this plan is feasible. A number of problems have been chosen for the human admirals while an equivalent brace of problems has been assigned to the nonhuman flag officers. One of the most important of our assignments is a little planet called Groskin."

"Never heard of it, Sir."

"It was discovered by the Medusans. They formed an alliance with the Andorians in an attempt to study the planet thoroughly, but they were unsuccessful. Its main value at the moment is sociological."

"Sociological...value, Sir?"

"Yes, you see, Groskin has five sentient races living in peace together. Apparently, they don't have a machine-age technology yet, but they are in the middle of the horsecollar revolution. As soon as one of those five races thinks of it, the industrial revolution will spread like a nova's corona."

"Which means that we'll have to work under severe restrictions."

"The severest, Captain. I've arranged for you to abide by Schedule D."

"The proposed Directive?"

"Right. I know, it's not ratified yet, but laws require field testing just like any new machine."

"Yes, Sir. But just what is our mission?"

"Groskin is located on the far border of Sector Twenty...and it's the only Class M-I planet in the vicinity. Your assignment is to secure permission from the natives to use a particular river delta for a Starfleet R&R installation. You will then garrison a staff of xenologists there to study the locals---'Towsin' they call themselves. You will pose as natives of another continent of their planet. There must be no mistakes on this mission."

"There won't be."

"Remember, the Andorians failed five separate times to gain the native's confidence... and they at least have the same color skin as the Towsin. If you succeed, it will demonstrate once and for all that the Admiralty's judgment concerning you...human values is not unjustified."

"Yes, Sir."

"Your official orders will arrive within the hour. Freemont, out."

Kirk spun his chair around and rocked meditatively. Admiral Freemont would reap half the credit if the Enterprise succeeded. But if they failed, James T. Kirk would take all the blame."

Fist clenched, Kirk punched the intercom. "Mr. Spock to briefing room twelve, immediately."

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Near noon of the fourth day after receiving the assignment, the Enterprise assumed standard orbit about Groskin.

Kirk was eating lunch in his quarters while Spock had the con. Soon, they would keep the Andorian's appointment with the local chieftan, Towsin Mirmel, and somehow succeed where the non-humans had failed. Kirk had no idea how he would succeed because, after days of study, he still didn't know why the others had failed.

Suddenly, the damage control hooters began to whoop stridently. Over the din, the speakers erupted with order for the Damage Control duty officer and then, "Captain Kirk to Mr. Spock's quarters. There's been an explosion."

Kirk made the distance at a fast trot, arriving just as Spock strode out of the turbo-lift joining McCoy who came from the opposite direction. McCoy looked from Spock to the green smoke billowing from the open door. "Well, nobody hurt?"

Without breaking stride, Spock elbowed his way through the knot of Damage Control crewmen and dove into the smoke. There was a sizzling crackle and a bolt of chartreuse lightening etched itself across the doorway. Then the smoke stopped billowing and the Vulcan emerged carrying a limp form cradled in his arms.

The damage control crew began spraying coarse globules of some quasi-liquid into the air. Within moments, the smoke was gathered and precipitated to the floor while the aromatic globules popped like soap bubbles. But neither the Captain nor the Doctor noticed.

McCoy shooed crewmen away to make space for the Vulcan to lay his burden. It was Lieutenant Tanya Minos.

Stunned, Kirk knelt to examine the singed face. "Bones!"

Silently, McCoy went over her with a medical scanner while Kirk rose. "Spock, what happened?"

"My...idlomput...exploded, Captain."

"The Culling Flame?" Kirk knew that despite its gargoyl danger-symbol, the firepot that many of Starfleet's Vulcans kept were certified absolutely safe. "But, it doesn't generate enough heat to ignite a phosphorous match!"

"Correct, Captain. There is no way it could accidentally cause damage of any sort."

"But...accidentally? Are you saying..."

"Yes, T'Aniyeh triggered the explosion deliberately."

"But how can a firepot explode?"

"It is not actually a fire, Captain. As with the Flame Spheres, there is a reserve of power which can be released by a mind attuned to the unit."

"But how could Tanya...I mean, I thought it was a very, well, personal sort of possession."

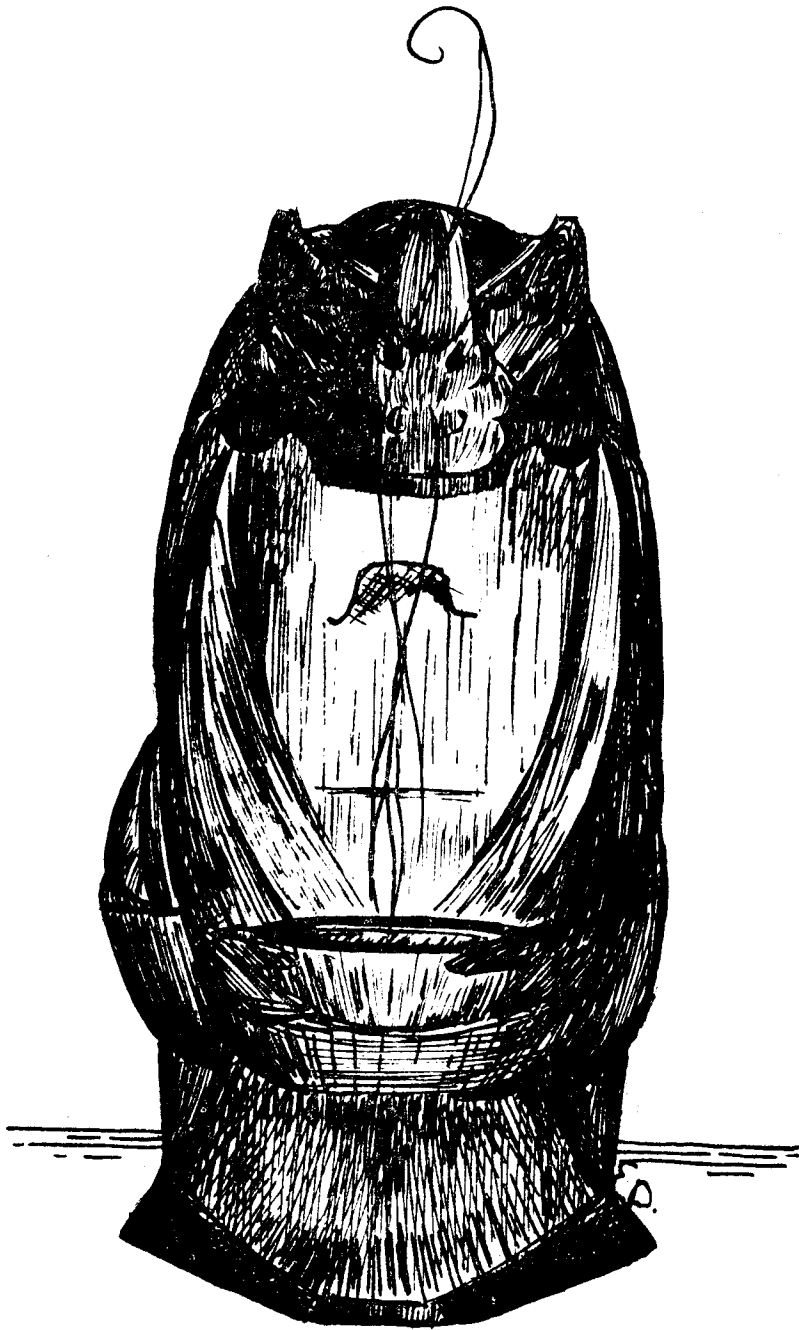
"T'Aniyeh is partially trained in the use of the idlomputt. I made the requisite adjustments so she could use mine."

Two orderlies came with a stretcher and took the unconscious girl away. McCoy rose. "She'll be all right. Slight concussion but no burns."

"It could have killed her, couldn't it, Spock?"

"Yes, Captain, it could have."

"Mr. Spock?" A crewman stepped forward. "Perhaps this is a bad time, but..."



"Yes, Ensign?"

"This package came for you this morning. I was trying to deliver it when the explosion occurred."

"Thank you, Ensign." Spock took the box in one hand. It was rectangular, flat like a jewelry box but not very heavy.

One of the damage control men emerged from the green haze that still drifted in the doorway. "Mr. Spock, I'm afraid everything in there is a total loss. Something corrosive splattered all over and the smoke..."

"Yes, I saw, Mr. Mauser. Thank you."

"Spock, you'll be assigned temporary quarters later. Mr. Mauser, just close up when you are through. Gentlemen," Kirk said, including McCoy, "Let us adjourn to the briefing room."

As they seated themselves around the table, McCoy said thoughtfully, "What would make a Vulcan commit suicide?"

"T'Aniyeh is not wholly Vulcan."

"I know that," drawled McCoy. "But I know some of the reasons humans commit suicide, and some of the reasons they don't. But I've never seen that aspect of Vulcan culture analysed."

Spock took his place at the computer console and flashed Tanya's psychological profiles on the tri-screen. "Do you see anything that would indicate such an instability, Doctor?"

"No," growled McCoy. "I've studied those profiles until I'm crosseyed from it. She's healthy. If you call her anti-human attitude healthy."

"I do," said Spock without elaborating.

"Well, then," Kirk slapped the table. "Tell me this. Why did she blow up your room?"

"I don't know."

"You'd better see if you can find out why," said McCoy, "because of all the people on this ship only you and Tanya knew that firepot could blow up. You entrusted her with a dangerous..."

"You can't accuse me of negligence, Doctor. You cleared her to handle phasers and similar dangerous equipment. Even a tricorder can be caused to explode."

Kirk frowned. "You're certain she must have done it deliberately? It couldn't have been an accident?"

Spock toyed with the package before him. The idlomputt was a quasi-telepathic device. The trick of releasing all the nascent energy at once required timing and coordination. "It was deliberate, Captain. No other possibility."

"But, why?" asked Kirk. "Could she have any reason to want to hurt you?"

"Illogical, Captain. If she wanted to hurt me, she'd have triggered it to explode when I activated it."

"But your room is a mess," objected McCoy.

"Nothing of any value was destroyed."

"Except," said Kirk, "our confidence in Tanya. I was going to use her in the contact party. She's a competent linguist with a flare for this kind of work."

"Spock," said McCoy thoughtfully, "she destroyed your Culling Flame. Doesn't that hurt you? Isn't it essential to your own psychological well-being?"

"Not that essential, Doctor. I can construct a new one easily enough."

"So we're back where we started," said McCoy. "No motive."

"Well, Bones, I guess we'll just have to ask her why she did it."

"Not today you won't. That concussion will keep her out for hours, and I've left orders for sedatives if necessary. A blow on the head can be very bad for a telepath, you know."

Suddenly, Spock sat bolt upright muttering something under his breath. Glancing at the humans in consternation, he charged out the door. By the time they caught up with him, he was emerging from the smoking ruin of his quarters.

"Well?" asked Kirk.

"Certain items were laid on the Flame before it was triggered. They were totally

destroyed."

"Which items, may I ask?" said McCoy.

"Those necessary for constructing a new Culling Flame."

"Fascinating," said Kirk.

They paced along the corridor back to the briefing room lost in thought. Once again settled at the computer console, Spock said, "No, Captain, not fascinating, but illogical."

"What?"

"If she wanted to deprive me of the Culling Flame, the time to destroy it would be after we leave Federation space on the six year mission... not now. As it is, I will merely order replacement."

"Expensive," said McCoy.

"So is a blow on the head," said Kirk. Then he brightened, "Could she have supposed she'd get off without being hurt?"

"Improbable, Captain. The risk in such an undertaking is very high. On the order of..."

"Skip it. What time is it?"

McCoy jumped up. "Time to go! The Towsin make a fetish of punctuality. Has something to do with their visualization of time."

Spock rose, one hand on the com-button. "Who will assume T'Aniyeh's place?"

Kirk looked at the Vulcan in sudden comprehension. "That's the worst effect of what she did. Spock was she scared of this mission?"

"No, Sir."

McCoy snorted. "She didn't want to go, that's for sure."

Negative, Doctor. She was anticipating a pleasurable experience."

"How do you know?" asked Kirk.

"She told me."

"Oh."

"Whom shall I summon, Captain?"

"Nobody. We'll go alone. Bones, get your kit and meet us in the transporter room."

Ten minutes later the trio mounted the pads of the transporter. No communicators hung from their belts; no phasers nestled beside the universal translator's loops, and the loops themselves were missing. Instead, McCoy had inserted a small unit under the skin of each man's arm. It would serve not only to translate for them but also to make a permanent record in the Enterprise's log of all that occurred below.

Kirk looked his men over. "Mr. Spock, what's that in your hand?"

Spock picked up his hand and examined the package as if he'd never seen it before. "Mail, Captain. I haven't yet been assigned quarters..." He broke the seals and flipped up the lid of the box. Frowning he plucked black fuzz out of the dark interior and came up with a long, intricately carved chain.

"A fine piece of jewelry," said Kirk admiringly. "Why don't you just let Scotty take care of it for you until we get back?"

The Engineer started to step around the transporter console, but stopped as Spock said, "Sorry, Sir, I can't do that." He held out the chain for Kirk's inspection. "Recognize the carving?"

"Looks just like that chain T'Uriamne wore..."

"It is a miniature copy. It is very like a badge of office, Captain. Since I have no place to put it, may I be allowed to wear it?"

"All right. Scotty, whenever you're ready, energize."

Hastily, Spock discarded the box and looped the long chain around one shoulder, across his chest, and then around his waist.

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They materialized beside a wide, deceptively placid river. True to expectation, a boat made from native material (but by offworld craftsmen) floated at anchor. They scrambled aboard and set the sail noting with some trepidation that the sail was decorated with Andorian symbols. With Kirk at the tiller, the little craft scudded briskly down the river toward the appointed place. Within fifteen minutes, they came in sight of the delta island that they were to secure for Starfleet. Kirk drew a deep lungful of the spicy air. It did indeed look like a pleasant place to take a dose of R&R.

Spock sat absently fingering his chain, staring off into the distance, apparently unaware of the great beauty about him. At length McCoy said, "Seasick, Spock?"

"No, Doctor." The denial fell into the silence with the thud of a dead tennis ball.

Kirk cleared his throat. "Uhummm, why don't you tell us about the chain, Spock? On Earth, the officials of cities used to use chains as badges of office...but I'll bet this one is different."

"It is indeed, Captain. You have a proverb, 'a chain is as strong as its weakest link.' The first time I heard it, I thought it somewhat oblique."

"Oblique?" said McCoy edging himself toward the centerboard. "In what way?"

"In the same way that the human mind seemed oblique, Doctor."

McCoy glanced at the lowering sun and back at Spock's chain. The links were of some golden alloy that seemed to collect the sunlight into warm pools. Each link was intricately carved and in the center hung a tiny medallion which, McCoy guessed, was a replica of the komatt representing the name of each Guardian on the Council. He recognized T'Pau's as it was larger than the others. But what else could a chain symbolize other than teamwork?

"All right," said McCoy, "you've got me beat. What does a chain symbolize on Vulcan?"

The First Officer picked up the end of the chain, wrapped it around his fingers, let it fall off, curled it in the palm of one hand, stretched it out straight, then curled it again. "Could you do that with a wire as many times as with a chain before it would break?"

"No, certainly not."

Spock gathered a length of the chain and pulled on it with both hands, obviously using most of his great strength in an attempt to break it. "Yet it is as strong as a wire. Each link is rigid, but the structure as a whole is flexible. Tsaichrani is founded on regulations which are strong and rigid.

"Some of us," he fingered the medallion, "are designated Guardians over the strength of one set of regulations, for in truth, the chain is no stronger than its weakest link. But a society which is rigid breaks before the pressures of evolution. So, our Tradition is not formed as a solid shaft connecting what was with what will be...rather it is a chain, having both rigidity and flexibility. A chain can transmit force around corners where a rod would shatter."

"So," said Kirk, "when it comes to understanding how Vulcan society functions, you are an expert?"

"Of sorts. Even the head of the Guardian Council cannot understand all."

"Even so, that makes you the xenologist in this party."

"The society of the Lowmin and Towsin is not likely to be a logical one, Captain. Logical societies are very rare, even though they are fairly simple to understand."

"Not for me, they're not," said McCoy.

"Well," said Kirk squinting ahead, "you said you understood something about sails. I suggest you get busy."

Glancing at the pier they were approaching, McCoy ducked under the boom and muttered something salty. But he performed the duties with a surprising alacrity, steadying their tiny craft as Kirk leaped ashore with the painter. Then the doctor made a big show of helping the Vulcan ashore.

Spock let McCoy have his fun before he pointed out that despite the fact that Vulcans don't sail for recreation, seamanship was required for graduation from the Academy.

They had only moments to wait before the delegation of Lowmin who were to meet them came marching from between two hulking warehouses. There were eight of the humanoids. Dressed in well-tailored, soft leathers, they were indigo skinned, slender people with almost perfectly spherical skulls. The group looked friendly though there were no females among them.

Kirk stepped forward to be met by one of the group.

"You are from beyond the sea?"

"We are, yes." Kirk winced as his head tingled in warning. He knew it was only the Schedule D psycho-conditioning preventing him from saying too much, but it left him uncomfortable.

"You are punctual," said the native solemnly.

"As my hosts are punctual." Kirk returned the compliment.

"Then let us proceed. The Towsin are punctual."

Kirk knew the Towsin were the noblemen of this feudal culture. The Lowmin were the peasants according to the Andorian tapes. But Kirk saw no signs of peasantry in his guides. No overdeveloped muscles, no starvation, not much grime or callous on the hands, good clothes...they seemed neither over-worked nor under-fed and moved with the surety of those accustomed to ruling, not to being ruled.

They trudged up the bank from the wide sluggish river and entered a stone-paved street of weathered buildings.

The street opened out onto a large plaza which had some polygonal shape Kirk couldn't name. But there was no community well or fountain here. Kirk wondered if they had piped water. The sewers were open troughs in the paving stones, but they were covered with a network of live vines on which one could walk.

There were women and children gathered about the market stalls at one side of the square. These citizens ignored the strangers with cosmopolitan sophistication. Marching behind the guides Kirk wondered what these people used for transportation. No animals or carts were visible on the twisted streets.

At the other side of the plaza they entered another street overhung with balconies and festooned with laundry. They passed a tiny cafe with a few tables outside. A girl scrubbing the table with singleminded diligence caught Kirk's eye and returned to work with renewed determination. This Kirk found bewildering as the setting was more in keeping with a negligent flip of a filthy rag than any practice of asepsis.

Finally they climbed flight after flight of steps carved from the living rock of an escarpment above the town. Set well back from the edge of the cliff and surrounded by lesser structures was the wall of a castle. There was no moat and no porculis, only a bare archway leading into the court before the keep.

The building itself was a multiplex of towers thrusting skyward as if in a static effort to pull free of the festoons of varicolored cables that hung between them like cobwebs among pirate's treasure. Never had Kirk seen such an eye-shattering sight as the glittering mosaics that coated those towers. He gathered the distinct impression it wasn't just reflected sunlight, but an inner fire that burned brighter than the sun.

However, the throne room was reassuringly standard. A single immense chair at the apex of a V of lesser chairs occupied a raised dias. The hangings were soft and rich, though undecorated. There were no chairs for the guests who were, Kirk surmised, expected to kneel.

Almost before he'd really looked the room over, five Towsin arrived. They were a darker indigo-skinned breed with shocking white hair that stood out from their spherical heads in a halo. None seemed old, yet all carried themselves with the unbending dignity of the aged. They entered one at a time through the hangings and took places...on the smaller chairs.

Kirk looked questioningly at the throne. Apparently they weren't going to be granted an audience with the important one. But then one of the Lowsin stepped forward and intoned with grand formality, "Strangers, these are the Towsin of Lhoredy. No higher authority exists in Lhoredy."

Kirk introduced himself and McCoy---but when he got to Spock there arose such a buzzing in his ears he couldn't go on.

The buzz rose to a howl that threatened to crack his skull. But while the Captain and his companions fell to their knees clutching their bursting heads, one of the Towsin struggled to speak to another pointing at Spock. The one who spoke suddenly toppled down the steps where he lay at Kirk's feet, unconscious but still twitching spasmodically. Another Towsin staggered to the wall behind the throne and brought back something that looked like a hose made from very fine chain-mesh.

As he twisted the nozzle, the empty cylinder of the hose stiffened as if some sort of fluid flowed its length and issued from the orifice which he aimed at Spock.

Instantly, the chain shimmered and began to glow bright orange! It was a cold light that seemed to slice into the brain and freeze his very thoughts in the making. But, at the same time, Kirk felt the pain subsiding as the cold numbed him.

Through the shimmering haze of orange light, Kirk saw Spock fumble with the chain until he worked free of it and flung it away. Then the Vulcan slumped to the floor, apparently unconscious.

The haze cleared quickly when one of the Lowmin yanked down a heavy drape and heaped it over the chain. The Towsin manning the hose twisted the nozzle, and the hose collapsed. Then he drew himself up in righteous indignation and roared, "Lowmin! Take these away from us. Confine them as if they were detestable beasts unfit for the company of others. Let it be known that no weapon of mass destruction will be tolerated in the presence of the Towsin!"

Still sick from the frozen pain, Kirk only felt himself dragged away from the scene

behind Spock who was rolled in a drapery and transported like an oversized sausage. They were taken out of the castle, down twisting stairs to a rough wood stockade just outside the castle wall. After the three of them had been thrust inside the stockade, the gate was nailed shut with the finality of a coffin lid.

After a time, Kirk struggled to his feet and focused his eyes. The stockade walls were about twenty feet high with a wicked set of spikes jutting out from the top. The spikes gleamed with a red paste that Kirk thought must certainly be poison. He shuddered and surveyed the enclosure. It was floored with smooth stone. A sewer channel cut across one corner. There was a small fountain and catch basin obviously intended to supply drinking water. Clean straw was piled near one wall where a slight overhang from the castle abutments protected it from dew.

The sun was going down, and it was getting very chilly.

Wordlessly, Kirk helped McCoy move Spock onto the pile of straw. The Vulcan had been hit hard by the bizzare forces unleashed by the Towsin, but it wasn't long before he was conscious and apparently unhurt. At length, McCoy pronounced him fit, and Kirk stood over him, worried concern turning to a peculiar anger. "What the hell happened, Spock?"

Squinting upwards at his Captain, Spock said, "If you'll speak a little louder, Sir, I think I will be able to hear you."

"It was some sort of sonic?" asked Kirk.

"Yes, Sir, among other things."

"What did he mean, weapon? Was that chain some sort of weapon?"

"Not unless any sort of chain is considered a weapon among these people."

"Hardly likely," said McCoy. "That little trinket of yours was obviously jewelry."

Spock placed both hands over his ears and closed his eyes for several moments. At length, he shook his head again. "That's better now. My hearing has returned to ninety percent of normal. You needn't shout."

Kirk threw himself down on the straw beside the Vulcan and seized his right arm, pushing the sleeve up. Where the translator unit was imbedded, the Vulcan's arm showed a greenish bruise while Kirk's own was angry red and very tender.

"The transmitter must have overloaded," said Spock. "Fortunate."

Kirk pierced the dusk with a glance. "What do you mean, fortunate? Scotty will be going crazy...but this time he can't do anything to help us until we get ack to the beamdown point. If he does interfere, the repercussions won't stop short of the Federation Council itself!"

"If the transmitter hadn't overloaded, the resonances would have destroyed the translator which would leave us unable to communicate with our captors."

McCoy paced. "Some good that's going to do us until we find out why they turned against us."

"I can think of only one possible explanation---and it is impossible."

"Well," said Kirk, "out with it!"

Spock sighed. "It must have been the Taith emanations. The Towsin are telepathic, apparently."

"Taith emanations!" cried Kirk bouncing to his feet. "First the perfectly harmless firepot practically blows the ship apart, and now a piece of innocent jewelry attacks our hosts! Don't you think..."

"Captain." Spock's low voice cut through the tirade restoring reason. "Nobody could possibly predict any sort of adverse reaction to t'aith---no more than you would expect humanoids to go into convulsions from exposure to your body heat. T'aith could not possibly be construed as a weapon. The universal translator itself is a stronger telepathic interference, and it is barely perceptible to the most highly trained minds."

"Then," said McCoy, "maybe it was the universal translators they objected to?"

"Negative, Doctor. If it had been the translators, the Lowmin guides would have reacted. They, too, are sensitive. We would never have reached the throne room. It must have been some combination of circumstances peculiar to the room and its occupants."

Kirk sighed. "Now let me get this straight. The chain puts out a signal which can affect a telepath?"

"Of course."

"Of course," repeated Kirk. "All Vulcan jewelry puts out telepathic signals."

Spock leaned his head against the stone wall and looked up patiently. "Negative, Captain. Only items concerned with identification. The t'aith pattern of each link corresponds exactly to the pattern of each Guardian. The t'aith is amplified only when the proper person touches the proper link. Otherwise, it is imperceptible."

"But," said McCoy, "one of those links is tuned to you, isn't it?"

"True. And that must be the source of the Towsin's discomfort...though I am at a loss to understand the reason."

"You should have left it with Scotty," said Kirk.

"I could not have done that, Sir."

"Would it have hurt him?"

"Negative, Captain."

"Well, if you'd left it with him, you'd be getting it back just as soon as we finished here. Now it looks like you'll never see it again."

Spock only frowned into the deep shadows, averting his face from the humans.

Suddenly, there was a loud smack on the far side of the compound. Kirk ran to see what had happened. He took one glance and turned. "Soup's on."

McCoy approached cautiously. A white cloth wrapped around a haunch of some sort of meat had landed on the stones. It had been skinned and roasted, then served still warm.

"I wonder," said McCoy eyeing the unappetizing grease, "how long they intend to keep us here."

"We may as well eat," said Kirk. "Bio cleared the native foods. The Andorian tests found nothing in the microbes to worry us. And," he grinned slyly, "It would be a change from re-constituted meatloaf."

"Well," said McCoy dubiously, "what are we going to eat with?"

Kirk wriggled his fingers under McCoy's nose and went purposefully toward the fountain to scrub as best he could without soap. Reluctantly, McCoy followed suit. He, too, had a feeling they'd be there for a long time to come.

"Spock?" called Kirk.

"No thank you, Captain."

Kirk shrugged. The meat came apart easily in his hands and tasted fine. The logic of the situation would prevail in a few days no doubt. Meanwhile, he had no business pushing his values onto his nonhuman crewman...or so said Thirlev and his supporters.

After sunset, they all burrowed into the heap of straw, clinging together against the chill. The mysterious, multicolored glow from the castle towers lit the city more effectively than any moon. The heavy beat of sentry boots on stone was the only sound left after the city quieted.

How many nights would they spend this way, wondered Kirk. They had come prepared to be here a week as guests. Scotty would wait that long at least. And probably another week to make sure. Then he'd have to report to Freemont. Would they mount a search?

The first two Andorian expeditions had disappeared without a trace. The last one had been rebuffed but had managed to set up this appointment for Starfleet. Nowhere in the Andorian tapes was there mention of telepathy among the natives. So they'd learned something, anyway. How long should they wait before trying a jailbreak?

Kirk fell asleep mulling that one over.

The days piled up in monotonous routine. The two humans took to chattering incessantly at each other while the Vulcan rarely moved, and as far as the humans knew, never slept.

The main excitement of the week occurred when they decided to tie up the moldering meat scraps in the white cloths and throw them back over the wall. There was a malicious glee in hearing the startled cries from the other side.

But by noon of the second dreary day after that, Kirk had still found no way to attract the attention of their captors. Spock had been unable to make contact with Tanya, claiming some sort of telepathic interference from the castle. This sent Kirk to pacing circles around the fountain, groping for something he almost understood---some connection between Tanya, telepathy, t'aith, and their current situation.

Dropping down on the straw beside his First Officer, Kirk said, "Spock, does the Culling Flame emit...t'aith?"

"Naturally. How else could it function?"

"And to the Towsin, T'aith is a weapon. Do you suppose Tanya got some sort of--- well, premonition---about that and destroyed all the t'aith emanators aboard in order to avoid..."

McCoy slammed fist to palm. "Jim, that's it! The only explanation! Tanya isn't the suicidal type, but sacrifice is well within her character. Why didn't we think of it before?"

Vulcan brows climbed in appreciation. "True, the only items deliberately destroyed were t'aith emanators. The other damage was only incidental." For the first time in days, Spock rose and moved to the center of the pen where he could get a clear view of the scintillating towers. And as he looked, his eyes widened as if he saw and comprehended for the first time.

Kirk saw his friend come alive for the first time in days with his typical delight in new knowledge. It was as if a spirit consumed by a fatal disease had suddenly been granted a reprieve.

McCoy asked, "Does Tanya know the chain is an emanator?"

"Of course. But she doesn't know I have it."

"You don't," said Kirk. "The Towsin have it, if they haven't melted it down for scrap. Don't you think you should do something to try to get it back?"

Spock continued to stare at the towers as he answered absently, "To attempt to escape from a secure pen is the act of an animal."

Kirk and McCoy traded glances, looked from Spock to the towers, and then locked gazes again as they chorused, "That's it!"

The unharmonious duet attracted Spock's attention. "What is what?"

In unison, the two advanced on the Vulcan, each taking one arm and escorting him back to the straw. Solicitously, McCoy said, "You shouldn't be on your feet, Spock. You're starving to death, suffering from exposure and other deprivations. You're about to lose consciousness, aren't you?"

Spock looked to Kirk for help, but Kirk only nodded, "Yes, Bones, his eyes are beginning to glaze over. He's certainly not long for this world."

That atrocious pun earned Kirk a piercing stab from his Schedule D conditioning, but he continued, "Quick, here they come with dinner. You just passed out."

Eyes closed, Spock answered remotely, "Affirmative, captain."

Meanwhile, Kirk plunged across the compound to the spot where the cloth wrapped haunch had just arrived. He took a deep breath and hollered, "Hey! Guard! My friend's sick. He can't eat meat. He's starving to death!"

There was a low murmur from the crowd on the other side of the wall, but nobody answered him. Kirk yelled, "You tell the Towsin that among us, even the animals are entitled to medical care. We are beginning to doubt if Lhoredy is fit to associate with us!"

But as with all the other times he'd tried to talk to their captors, there was no response at all. He strode back to where Spock lay, apparently oblivious to their surroundings. "Keep it up, Mr. Spock. Unless I miss my guess, they'll be back with a higher official soon."

The dusk turned to night and nothing happened. Eventually, they burrowed into the straw, and Kirk made sure Spock was well covered before sleep overtook them all.

At dawn, Kirk roused to the sound of nails being drawn screechingly out of wood. "Bones! This is it! Wake up!"

"Wha..?"

"They're here. Come on." He stood, brushing straw out of his hair. Then he dug Spock out of the heap. "Spock. Hang on just a few minutes more. Your audience is about to arrive."

They waited by the door until it was pried open a crack. Four Lowmin edged in and pounced on Kirk and McCoy, binding their hands behind their backs with leather thongs. Then the door swung wide admitting the five Towsin of the throne room in V formation.

The middle Towsin approached the recumbent Vulcan, and passed his hands slowly over the still body, finally encircling the head with what looked like gentle concern.

Kirk said, "He meant you no harm, and look what you've done to him! Is this the way you always treat ambassadors? We are a peaceful people, far from home, among strangers. How could we dare harm any of you?"

The Towsin rose and turned to his companions. "This one suffers as we would suffer here. He is a man. We must make amends."

"No, High One. He almost killed Fedra. Those others are not men. They eat flesh. They speak only with sounds."

"But," said another, "they have a device which amplifies for them."

"Did they make the device?" asked another Towsin. "No. It must be the product of the man's wisdom. They are animals."

The leader said, "Are the Drur animals because they learned horticulture from the Ktith?"

"But he uses man's science to contest with force the clear decisions of logic. Is it not true that the only difference between man and beast is that among beasts strength prevails while among men wisdom settles all differences?"

Kirk stepped up to the Towsin, "And so it is among our people. We settle our disputes only with wisdom spoken in council chambers ... we use force of weapons only against beasts who would overcome us with their unthinking strength."

"Then why," said the high one, "Did he try to kill Thvin?"

"He didn't," said Kirk. "It was all an accident. A misunderstanding. Surely you can't expect complete strangers to know all your customs? You do not know ours. You do not know how we have suffered in this beast's pen. But yet we do not blame you. We hold no ill will toward you for your ignorance. We do not threaten to exterminate Lhoredy as if you were vermin because you have treated us as vermin. We ask again to negotiate as equals. We are men, just as you are men."

Abruptly, the High One motioned to the Lowmin by the door to carry Spock out. The four who had tied the human's hands cut the thongs and stood back like an honor guard. As the exiting procession formed, the High One came to Kirk. "Forgive us for arguing while you languished in distress. It seemed logical at the time."

Kirk began to nod, but coughed spasmodically. Logical! But all he said was, "Forgiveness can only be granted by men."

"I see now that you are indeed men; however strange your habits may be."

"Fine. Let's forget the whole incident and start fresh."

"Selective memory erasure is against our principles." The Towsin turned and stalked off regally, letting the Lowmin take charge of his guests.

Three hours later after a hot bath and an enormous vegetarian meal, Kirk sat across from the five Towsin. He felt somewhat at a disadvantage with only McCoy on his side of the long stone table that separated them. But he expected Spock momentarily, and that should even the odds.

In the center of the table sat a murky glass sphere in which was just visible the chain which had started this whole thing. Kirk said, "Will you return my friend's property?"

"I regret that may be impossible ... "

"And I," said Spock from the archway, "Regret the injury you suffered, Fedre. Never has a race been discovered that reacted so disastrously to a simple patterning device."

"You claim then," said the High One, "that this is not intended as a weapon to disrupt our thrultar?"

"Definitely not," said Spock. "Among my people, it would take ten to the tenth power times as much force to disrupt our equivalent of your thrultar."

"You then are Towsin among your people and these are as Lowmin?"

"As I understand it, we have no direct equivalent."

"But," said Fedre, "you can manipulate thrultar."

"Among my people, such skills are taught to a few that they be not lost ... but they are of no practical use."

"I don't understand," said Fedre. "If you can manipulate thrultar and he," he indicated Kirk, "cannot, how is it that he speaks for you?"

"He is my captain."

This brought a murmured exchange among the Towsin, and Kirk wondered how that term had translated. Probably Liege Lord or something similar judging from the feudal state these people seemed to live under.

"Then," the High One cut off the debate saying, "he is responsible for your actions?"

"I am responsible to him for my actions."

After another hasty conference the High One said, "That seems illogical."

"The logic, gentlemen, may be symbolized by the chain which you have confiscated. Within my field of expertise, my judgement is unchallenged. The same is true of the captain. The same is

true of the doctor. Yet we link ourselves together to provide flexibility for our strengths. The captain is the central link to which all others are joined."

This pronouncement brought on yet another conference between the five. At length the High One declared, "It is indeed logical. Since you are all linked thusly, you must all bear responsibility for bringing a weapon into our thrutar."

"But," said Kirk, "it's not a weapon!"

"We were destroyed by it," said Fedre relentlessly. "Such is the function of weapons. It must be proved in test that it is not a weapon."

"And if we can prove the chain is no weapon," said Kirk, "will you grant my people a lease on your delta island?"

"Non sequitur," ruled the High One.

"My captain does not always govern his thoughts with the strictest logic, however, his conclusions are usually valid."

Fedre pounced on that. "Then he is not a man!"

"One moment," cautioned the High One, "there is a relationship here we do not fully comprehend. The Spock could not live among those governed by the illogic of beasts."

"Thank you, High One," said Spock bowing graciously. "When logic is required, the captain consults me. When I require a non-logical evaluation, I consult him. Thus we share our strengths."

"Such a system," said Fedre thoughtfully, "would also abrogate weaknesses. It is logical. Nevertheless, I call for the Test on this weapon."

"And that too, is the only logical course," said the High One. "We will adjourn to the laboratory." He rose and swept out of the room carrying the sphere as if it were filled with nitroglycerin.

Kirk followed the procession down stone corridors and up narrow, twisting stairs -- all polished to a scrupulous cleanliness. Every few hundred feet there was a niche with a glazed window through which Kirk could see they were climbing the inside of a central tower coated with mosaics. Save for that, it looked like the keep of a feudal castle -- but a laboratory?

About two-thirds of the way up, they came to a large airy room surrounded by open balconies. Surprisingly, the altitude didn't seem to reach the wind-whipped heights Kirk associated with such towers. Noon sunlight poured in, striking gleaming highlights off polished glassware and metal. The place looked like a cross between an alchemist's den and Scotty's machine shop.

The five Towsin took places around a massive horseshoe workbench and began a ritual that reminded Kirk of the countdown for a twentieth century missile launch. From a nozzle that hung under the bench, a shaft of ruby light struck out to hit the floor inside the horseshoe. Another nozzle lowered itself from the underside of the bench and, after a moment's hesitation, zeroed in on the ruby light's target with a shaft of green light. Finally, a cone of golden light sprang from the ceiling directly above the intersection point veiling the target in misty ripples of nearly tangible light.

The Towsin locked their controls and left their places, continuing the orderly drill. Two of them wrestled a pair of eight-foot tall posts from one corner, and, with great precision, placed them in the target area of the lights.

Meanwhile, the High One retreated to the balcony where he shattered the sphere with a twisted wand. Fedre busied himself positioning small devices around the base of each pole while his assistant tested the aim. Another Towsin finished some other measurement and moved to help Fedre complete his task.

At length the three conferred and then turned to Spock, approaching in triangular formation. Docily, the Vulcan allowed himself to be escorted out onto the balcony opposite where the High One stood holding out the chain with a pair of long handled insulating tongs.

Spock did not seem worried to Kirk's experienced eye; rather, the Science Officer seemed to regard the entire performance with bemused astonishment.

As soon as Spock was in position, the High One came back into the room and stepped up onto a stool to drape the chain between the tops of the two poles. He handled it with such care, Kirk was beginning to think of it as extremely dangerous.

When he'd fastened the ends so the chain hung down in a graceful parabola, Fedre came and removed the stool while one of the others rolled out a cloudy glass disk about a foot thick and positioned it between the two poles to form a dias.

Now, the cone of golden light played down upon the area containing the two poles, the draped chain, and directly beneath the center of the chain a round glassy dias. The shafts of ruby and green light still converged at the exact center of the cone where the dias seemed to gather them together and pulse ever brighter.

Silently, the five Towsin returned to their places gesturing Spock to rejoin the group. They worked among their controls for a few seconds and then a sheet of rainbow haze sprang to scintillating life between the two posts and beneath the chain. Braids of clear orange fire spiraled around the posts like palpable electricity.

The High One came around to Kirk's side. "Now, you must pass through the membrane without breaking it. When all three of you have done so, we will discuss the matter which brought you here. It will be as if you had never brought destruction into our chambers."

Spock walked around the outside of the assembled test, careful not to pass between the workbench and the posts for fear of breaking the ruby and green lightbeams. He examined the glowing dias from every angle, sighted along the spotlights, measured the angles with his eyes; then put out a hand to the dancing braids of orange fire, cautiously feeling out how close he dared come. Hands behind his back, he examined the array from all sides until, finally, he turned to the High One.

"If we pass the test, the chain will be destroyed. If we fail, we will be destroyed."

"Of course. If you pass the test, the chain will be payment for the destruction it wrought. If you fail the test, you will be payment for the destruction you wrought."

"Logical," agreed Spock.

Indignant, Kirk took a breath to object, but the High One cut him off with a withering glance and serenely accepted Spock's compliment, "Thank you."

"Now wait just a minute!" McCoy burst out of his self imposed silence, "You can't..."

Spock silenced him with a terse gesture. "If we had brought a weapon into a thrultar, we would be guilty of a crime which would logically require the surrender of life. Since we did not, we are in no danger."

"But," said Kirk, "your chain will be destroyed!" He turned to the High One. "That is an invaluable heirloom of enormous significance to my friend! It's destruction cannot be accepted lightly."

The High One addressed Spock. "It has another function?"

"It has many functions. Loss of it will be considered disgraceful. However, I possess nothing which could replace that which it accidentally took from you, Therefore, it is your right to claim it as your own."

"Spock!" said Kirk, horrified.

The Vulcan held up a restraining hand while the Towsin went into conference. Kirk subsided, aware that Spock probably understood the situation better than he. He consoled himself with the promise of extracting a full explanation later.

At length, the High One said, "The test will proceed."

"But first," said Spock, "I ask leave to protect my associates from the disorientation. They are sensitive to the forces used here and might suffer irreversible damage."

Fedre frowned, "You are Towsin?"

"My people used such things," Spock gestured to the test area. "I am a student of ancient history. We no longer depend on power grids such as your thrultar to light our homes and provide services. But a few of us remember."

"Very well, then. Proceed." The High One took his place along the bench and adjusted his instruments.

Turning to McCoy, Spock said, "A state resembling mild hypnosis will be necessary, Doctor. With your permission?"

McCoy took a deep breath. "Is this really needed, Spock?"

"You will thank me for it."

"All right. Let's get it over with."

The Vulcan touched his fingertips together, and then he passed his hands lightly over the doctor's forehead. He stepped back. "Just walk through the veil, doctor, and wait on the other side. Remain calm, Any severe emotional disturbance could be fatal."

McCoy stepped up onto the glass disk and moved through the shimmering curtain of light. There was a faint sound as a soap bubble breaking. Then he was standing on the other side squinting at the Towsin arrayed before him as if his vision were blurred.

Spock turned to Kirk who nodded brusquely. He administered the same light touch releasing Kirk to walk through the curtain of rainbows. Kirk emerged from the other side, one hand



to his head, nursing an incipient migraine. The Vulcan followed on his Captain's heels, moving out hastily.

A moment later the chain disappeared in a rain of molten metal. The orange braids of light crawled back into the floor. The spotlights winked out -- first the ruby, then the green.

Imperturbably, the High One glided toward the exit. "Very well, then. Let us convene the negotiations."

Once again the conference room, the High One faced them. "I have seen the Spock provide logic. Logic could be accepted only by a man. I have seen the Kirk accept the Spock's logic. The Kirk is a man. We negotiate as men."

Kirk took a deep breath and launched into the speech he'd prepared so long ago. After some haggling about limitations and conditions concerning the number of different foreign species who could occupy the delta, Kirk concluded the agreement. It was easier than he'd expected since the Towsin were eager to make amends for treating guests as animals.

The captain gave assurances that cautious investigators would come first to ascertain the hazards of misunderstanding that lurked between civilizations. Then the Star Fleet officers departed leaving only the appointment for the followup xenologists.

Kirk could hardly wait to see Freemont's face when he learned that Groskin housed a another logical society ... one developing along the same lines that ancient Vulcan had -- first logic, philosophy, biological science, and then esper technology used to supply the electric power that Earth had liberated from fossil fuels. He wondered how his ancestors would have reacted to strangers whose presence rendered the vast 20th century power grids inoperative.

Then he made a special note to recommend Tanya for a commendation and a long, special leave to enjoy a bonus in.



# COUP DE GRACE

Jacqueline Lichtenberg

Kraith IIC

Crewman Folsome was screaming when they brought him into Sickbay, but McCoy's air-hypo quieted him down quickly. McCoy lifted the sheet that draped the casualty's body and felt his stomach turn over as it hadn't since his sophomore year in medical school. He didn't even hear Spock and Kirk skid to a halt just outside the door. The doctor was still tingling with shock when the Vulcan gently took the sheet from his hands and laid it back over the partially dissolved legs and the raw abdomen.

Spock was the first to break the silence, "Where did this happen?"

"Where?" McCoy flared as if blaming the First Officer for the injury, "You don't ask 'how' or 'when' but only where?"

"How' is obvious ... xsrthi attack ... plainly a recent one or he'd be dead. 'Where' is the only logical question." Spock delivered this speech slowly, granting the human time to adjust to the situation.

"Uh, Mr. Spock?" Crewman Langwright stepped away from the wall, a tall, lanky blond nursing a bloody nose, "I was there. I can show you on the map..."

"Excellent, Mr. Langwright. Use that screen," he pointed to the Sickbay's desk viewer and turned back to McCoy, but before he could speak, Kirk said, "Bones, can you save him?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"Then you'd better get busy," Kirk snapped, "Mr. Spock, I've seen that expression before. What's bothering you?"

Langwright called, "I've got the map, sir."

Spock led the way to the desk, "Captain, xsrthi do not normally attack warm-blooded creatures. When they do, it is often due to either extensive provocation ... or a disease induced insanity." The Vulcan leaned down to examine the screen where Langwright was pointing, automatically noting the co-ordinates, "Do you have a view of the exact place?"

"Yes," said Langwright working the controls, "the tricorder was feeding back to the ship's log at the time."

A scene appeared on the screen: a rift cut in the solid stone of the bleak desert floor and, at the bottom of the rift, scraggly, salt encrusted vegetation surrounding blank patches of smooth sand. In the foreground, a huge mound of mottled flesh was in the process of engulfing a struggling figure ... Crewman Folsome.

Langwright pointed shakily to one of the patches of sand. "It came up out of that one, Mr. Spock, a big slug, with edges like ..."

The Science Officer interrupted, "Did it go back down the same hole?"

"Hole, sir?" Langwright twisted around in the chair to eye the Vulcan blankly over his handkerchief, "There wasn't any hole, sir. The sand just flowed right back..."

"Each of those sand patches is a 'hole', Mr. Langwright. Did the creature go back into the same one?"

"Yes, sir. It just disappeared."

"I see. What was Mr. Folsome doing just before the creature attacked him?"

"Snipping samples off the bushes with tin-snips. I was holding the branch with a spanner I'd borrowed from Mr. Scott when ..."

"Thank you, Mr. Langwright. Now if you'll be good enough to accompany me back to the site of the attack ..."

Langwright paled and couldn't hide the trembling of his body.

Kirk said, "I don't think that will be necessary, Mr. Spock. We're about through with this planet. We'll complete the survey of the rest of the system and ..."

"Begging the Captain's pardon," Spock said stiffly, "But the Science Department is not yet finished with this world."

Kirk tilted his head to one side and eyed the Vulcan speculatively, "You know something I don't?"

"I'm more concerned with what I don't know, captain."

"Which is?" prompted Kirk.

"Why that xsrthi attacked our specimen collectors. From Mr. Langwright's description, the attack was unprovoked."

"That's the third time you've named the creature a ... well, whatever you said. Why do you call it that?"

"It's a general description which includes all carnivores with such habits."

"Are they common on Vulcan?" prompted Kirk.

"Yes, sir."

"And" added Kirk nodding, "this is a Vulcan-type world. But what I don't understand is why you insist on going down there? You've got all the specimens ..."

Spock repeated, "We don't know why this creature ..."

"Why do you want to know why?" asked Kirk doggedly.

"Because it is important if we are to save Folsome's life."

"McCoy joined the group, "I didn't see any signs of poison."

Spock turned to Langwright, "Did Mr. Folsome disturb the sand hole at any time during his presence in the gorge?"

"No, sir, not that I saw. We were working on the plants."

Spock turned to Kirk, "Captain, I formally request permission to conduct an investigation. As far as I can see, the attack on Mr. Folsome was unprovoked."

"Spock, what are you thinking?" McCoy said.

"That a puzzling circumstance should be investigated. The standing orders of a survey mission..."

Kirk said, "All right, Mr. Spock. Conduct your investigation. But see to it that no more men are lost on that planet. Report to me in twenty-four hours." He eyed Langwright, "Crewman, come with me." Then he turned and marched out of the Sickbay, Langwright on his heels.

Spock shrugged an eyebrow and punched out a call for a security team to meet him in the transporter room.

The sun was still high in the burning sky as the First Officer and his security team materialized on the parched rock table just above the dry gorge where the sand holes lay in treacherous innocence.

Spock looked around, noting the twisted, wind molded scrub-vines still gleaming in the spring coat of salt crystals; the almost white sky seemed bluer as his eyes adjusted to the glare; and the distant black peaks of the continental ridge mountains were just visible in the distance. At night, one could see the orange glow of eruptions even from here. It was an uninviting wilderness even by Vulcan standards ... but it was not a dead place.

The First Officer approached the edge of the canyon gingerly and craned his neck to find the trail that had been cut out of the rock with phasers. He found it and eased himself over the rim, leading the three security guards who'd volunteered for this mission.

They'd volunteered only after Spock had announced his intention to kill the beast that had attacked Folsome. Killing wasn't the Vulcan way, nor was arousing the lust for revenge. But Spock knew he had to have that carcass in order to run the tests that might avoid a plague ... and if that required inciting humans to revenge, he was prepared to accept the guilt.

They reached the bottom of the gorge and advanced single file. Ensign Piermont, a plump youngster with freckles, gestured with a phaser at one of the sand holes, "It's like quicksand, isn't it Mr. Spock?"

"In a way, Ensign. Although on Earth 'quicksand' doesn't support the wide variety of fauna generally found in the Vulcan analog. And," he added circling a small, pale white patch that resembled thin farina, "the mathematics is quite different."

The three humans looked at one another and shrugged, joining in the thought that there were advantages to being in Ship's Services rather than in Sciences. The man at the rear, Lt. Harris, muttered, "The Mathematics of Quicksand. Just what I needed for Christmas!" His black skin already glistened with sweat.

"What was that, Lieutenant?" asked Spock.

"Making up a gift list for my friend, the rock-gardener."

"I suggest," answered the Vulcan mildly, "that you keep your mind on the job, Lieutenant."

Finally, they arrived at the sight of the skirmish. The shrubbery had been trampled and several shorn plants evidenced the passage of human specimen collectors. Spock picked up one of the broken branches, shook some of the salt crystals into his hand and tasted them cautiously. Yes, he thought, mostly potassium chloride with only a slight admixture of sodium. That should do it.

"Mr. Philmore, take your small bag and collect as much of these salts as you can. Lt. Harris, guard Mr. Philmore. Mr. Piermont, come with me."

The group separated and within five minutes they had two pounds of the salts in their bags. When they gathered again around the site of the attack, the humans were wiping sweat from their eyes and wishing for a quick beam up. Spock hefted the two bags of salt and eyed the eight foot diameter sand hole. Quickly, he made a crude estimate of the activity coefficients and transport numbers of the impure mixture and then nodded, "Take cover and remain absolutely still until I signal. You know the plan."

"Mr. Spock," said Piermont, "how do you know this will work? There could be any number of those creatures down there..."

"I doubt that, Ensign. A carnivore of such bulk requires a large territory to supply its needs."

"Still..." said Harris dubiously, "how can we be certain we've got the right one?"

"We have the tape which shows the attacker clearly," lectured Spock with grieved patience. "We shall know from its markings if it is the same one."

Muttering, the humans dispersed. When they were safely crouched behind rocks, the Science Officer sprinkled handfuls of the salt over the surface of the sand hole, looking unintentionally like a retired executive feeding the pigeons. Then he took his own place several yards from the hole ... as bait.

An hour passed and nothing moved under the fierce sun. Spock noted several varieties of night blooming plants and a pervasive aroma that told of adequate underground water. He searched the sides of the cliff upstream and down until he spotted the caves he knew had to be there. Undoubtedly, there would be free running water within and that meant free running carnivores thronging the gorge at night. He squinted at the angle of the sun and recalculated his dispersal quotients in a close imitation of human nervousness. He wasn't eager to be in the gorge at dusk.

Suddenly, the surface of the sand hole heaved, puckered and spewed forth a seething mass of grey skirted flesh that undulated across the soupy surface and surged out on firm ground making straight for Spock, and moving faster than a charging lythma.

The Vulcan paused a moment to admire the beast's grace and to ascertain if the hide bore the same markings as Folsome's attacker.

"Fire, Mr. Spock, fire!!" screamed Piermont.

"Spock!" shrieked Philmore, "What's the matter? Should we shoot?"

The First Officer calmly held up a hand to deter rash action and continued to observe the orange tinge around the edges of the beast's flanged foot. He pursed his lips and nodded. He watched it charge another ten feet closer, examining its co-ordination carefully.

When the thing was less than five feet from him, Spock raised his phaser and waited for the flap of armor-tissue to rise in preparation for the strike. He wanted to dispatch it neatly. It was a female and might be carrying young.

At the last possible second, he fired a narrow beam through the mass the creature used as a brain. It skidded to a halt not two feet from his boots, twitched a few times and died.

The three humans came trotting out of concealment, and Harris demanded, "Mr. Spock, why didn't you fire? You could have been killed!"

"I was in no danger, Lieutenant."

Philmore choked, "How can you say that, sir!? The beast was ready to eat you like it did Folsome."

"Xsrthi are quasi-telepathic. They use brain emanations on certain wavelengths much as the pit-viper uses infra-red. To become 'invisible' one merely controls one's thoughts." Spock turned to find Philmore and relieved him of the telescoping pole he carried at his belt. "Mr. Piermont, collect the tricorder. Lt. Harris give me a hand with the carcass."

Shaking his head ruefully, Piermont went to get the tricorder that had been set to record the scene for the log, and, incidently, to signal for an emergency beam up if anyone called the code word.

Spock took the long probe, extended it to full length, and inserted it between the lump of flaccid tissue and the hard ground, "Lieutenant, you have the large specimen bag?"

Harris produced a folded sheet of white material and handed it to Spock. It was a flat sheet that could be made into a bag by sealing the edges. The First Officer said, "Now, if you gentlemen will lift the body by means of this lever ..."

Harris and Philmore moved in to lean hard on the pole as Spock kicked a rock into fulcrum position. Soggily, the edge of the mass of flesh lifted clear of the ground and Spock moved in cautiously. He threw the specimen bag over the creature as a fisherman might spread a net in the wind. Then he used the impervious fabric of the bag to heave the creature onto its side.

Yes, he thought, a female ... and with a whelp. He took the pole and prodded the baby away from the dead mother. "Fortunately," he said grunting, "the whelp is old enough to survive alone. We'll leave it in that sand hole over there." He picked the whelp up on the end of the pole, draped like so much soggy dough, and tossed it into the chosen hole like a farmer forking hay.

Harris said, "Do you think that wise? If the mother was diseased..."

Spock said, "There is little chance for such a young one to have contracted any disease inimical to warm-blooded creatures."

The humans paused to squint dubiously at the Vulcan, then they bent to the task like the trained team they were. Soon they had the bag sealed around the carcass and then they placed all the instruments that had touched it into the quarantine box. Two minutes later, they were aboard the Enterprise, delivering the cargo to a special anti-grav isolation unit that awaited it.

Spock insisted on conducting the biological analyses himself, then he ran rack after rack of spot tests assisted by Nurse Chapel and nineteen technicians. When the lab work was done, the Vulcan sat up all night over the computer checking and rechecking. It was fine to insist that genetic analysis eliminated the need for growing cultures, but Spock knew the pitfalls of the method very well. He wished fervently that he had time to wait for the cultures to mature, but Folsome's fever was already rising.

Finally, he pushed himself away from the console, stretched and headed for Sickbay. It was late enough into the ship's morning that McCoy should have finished breakfast.

Sickbay was quiet except for the urgent beeping of the diagnostic panel over Folsome's bed. Presently, Nurse Chapel hurried in from the office and administered another heavy dose of the pain-reliever McCoy had prescribed. She fussed about feeling helpless until the beeping subsided. The man was in such pain and one look at his body was enough to make anyone wish him an easy death.

"Nurse," said Spock softly.

Christine started guiltily, and said, "Yes, Mr. Spock?"

"Where is Dr. McCoy?"

"In his office ... with the captain."

"Thank you, there should be no need to disturb them." He strode purposefully toward the bed and plucked the air-hypo from her hand to examine its setting, "You just administered Scc?"

"Yes, but..."

Spock nodded and reset the instrument to deliver a double dose. Then, holding the hypo in one hand, he looked up at the diagnostic panel and down at the bloated body. Finally, he

sighed deeply and began to administer the second dose while the flabbergasted nurse gesticulated helplessly. She would have seized the hypo but McCoy's voice interrupted, "Mr. Spock!"

The doctor strode into the room and paused, "What do you think you're doing?!"

Kirk followed close on McCoy's heels, "Yes, Mr. Spock, explain!"

Without looking at them, Spock froze. He said, "There's no time to argue, captain. This must be done."

McCoy strode toward the Vulcan, "Are you out of your mind. Another dose of this will kill him."

"I'm aware of that, doctor," said the First Officer and calmly plunged the trigger home.

McCoy leaped the last two yards to the patients side, "Nurse, twelve cc of Kaoninone."

Christine ran out the door leaving Kirk staring at the First Officer in shock. Finally, the captain managed to whisper, "Mr. Spock, if that man dies, you'll be guilty of murder."

"Yes, sir. It is sufficient that only one of us be guilty. I take full responsibility."

McCoy watched the life sign indicators falling and then turned to Spock, cold with fury, "I thought mercy-killing was against Vulcan ethics."

"It's not a question of mercy, doctor. But a question of survival. The lab tests indicate that he is infected with kye-fi-par. If his body temperature rises above 105 degrees Fahrenheit, the spores will..."

The nurse returned breathlessly, "Here it is, doctor," she said slapping a new air-hypo into McCoy's hand with professional brusqueness.

Automatically, McCoy started to administer the antidote and then paused, "Kye-fi-par..." he repeated, "Vulcan rabies! But I thought that was eradicated two centuries ago!"

Spock nodded, "On Vulcan."

Horrified, McCoy looked at the hypo holding the antidote and then down at the patient.

"Go ahead, doctor," said Spock calmly watching the indicators, "Satisfy the requirements of your oath. You can't save him now."

McCoy followed his gaze to the electronic miracle whose assistance he welcomed but whose philosophy he loathed. He read the indicators and then methodically administered the injection, "Spock, are you absolutely certain?"

"You will have absolute confirmation within three days, when the cultures mature. And you will probably live to evaluate those cultures personally, doctor."

Kirk snapped, "Mr. Spock, consider yourself confined to quarters. Need I call a security detail to escort you?"

"No, sir. I have no other plans." No, his thought continued to himself, the act I've just performed requires a period of intense meditation.

On his way out the door, Spock paused to say to McCoy, "When he dies, be sure to place the body in cryo-storage, with absolutely perfect isolation and handled by the most scrupulous technique. In fact, I would suggest that the procedure commence immediately, although it may already be too late." Then he left and the door slipped shut behind him.

Kirk stared at the closed door for a few seconds and then at his Chief Surgeon, "Bones, I want an interim report from you within the hour ... and keep me posted on Folsome's condition. I'll be in my quarters." He started for the door but McCoy said, "Hold it."

"What?"

"Folsome's condition isn't likely to change much, Jim. He's dead. My final report will be on your desk within the hour."

Kirk took a deep breath, nodded once and set out for the door again. It seemed a long trip to the corridor and he was very weary. What a way to end a brilliant career.

It was fully two weeks later when the reply came from Starfleet Command and Kirk settled down with the Captain's decoder to view the tape in the locked privacy of his quarters. Spock had neither eaten nor slept in the whole two weeks. The few times Kirk had visited him, he'd found the Vulcan either seated crosslegged with his lytherette, or stretched out on the bed. Either way, Spock had been oblivious of the captain's presence and soon Kirk had departed in silence.

Now, the Captain found his hands shaking as he deposited the tape in the decoder and

hooked it into the viewscreen. It ran about five minutes and when it was finished, Kirk replayed it three times to make sure he understood. Then he jammed the apparatus back into his safe and took off for Spock's quarters, restraining himself from running in the corridor only by sternest self-discipline.

As usual, the Vulcan was seated with his instrument, plucking at the strings in what sounded like random dischords. Kirk had found himself utterly unable to appreciate Vulcan symphonies composed on beat-frequencies and he winced as his teeth vibrated unpleasantly.

"Spock, put that thing away and listen to me."

The Vulcan looked up and silenced his instrument but didn't set it aside, "Yes, captain?"

"The answer came today from Starfleet Command."

The First Officer nodded placidly, "Yes."

Exasperated, Kirk flared, "Well, aren't you even curious?"

"I try not to be."

Kirk threw up his hands in mock despair, "Here I've been bending over backwards to save your neck and you aren't even interested in the results."

Mildly, the Vulcan said, "I didn't say that. Logically, I must interest myself in the verdict since it affects what I shall be doing for the rest of this afternoon."

Frowning, Kirk reached down and snatched the lytherette from him, "On your feet, Commander."

Spock rose with an alacrity that belied the hours he'd spent in that position, "Aye, sir." And he came to attention with a parade ground snap that must have been audible all the way to the Academy.

Kirk walked around the Vulcan like an Academy instructor discovering a cadet who'd reported for Admiral's Inspection in pajamas. But, in truth, Kirk found nothing counter-regulation except the near skeletal thinness of the Vulcan.

When he'd drawn out the agony as long as he could, Kirk said, "You are hereby ordered to eat a good meal ... and then report to the bridge and resume your duties. You've been docked six months pay... and that's the sum total of penalties leveled against you. Reading between the lines, I think somebody has been teaching Vulcan medical history to a certain Admiral Laurillard. You wouldn't happen to know who that somebody might be, would you?"

"No, sir."

Kirk doubted that, but he said sternly, "I'll want to see you in my quarters in four hours. Come prepared to discuss the Starfleet Manual regarding discipline in the Service. That is all. Dismissed."

Kirk marched smartly toward the door. Then he paused, walked back to hand Spock the lytherette and returned to the door. As it slid open before him, he said, "Oh, and Mr. Spock."

"Yes, sir?"

Kirk allowed himself a thin smile. "Don't ever do anything like that again."

"Sir," said the Vulcan gravely, "I certainly hope I will not be required to do so."

Kirk stepped out into the corridor and let the door close behind him. That answered his question. Spock was content in his own mind that he'd done the right thing. But how, thought Kirk, could the Vulcan rationalize a cold-blooded killing? No matter. Spock could view it as a matter of logical necessity and it was Spock's conscience that Kirk had been most worried about. He had enough problems without being saddled with a Vulcan hatching a guilt complex.

For example, in three weeks time, they'd be passing the effective sub-space radio perimeter of the Federation and they'd be literally on their own.

# COUP DE PARTIE

Ruth Berman

Kraith IIC(1)

Leaving Spock's room, Kirk went to Sickbay. In the lift it occurred to him that he had scarcely seen McCoy in the two weeks since Folsome's death. He knew, of course, that the Doctor had been upset when Spock deliberately killed a man to prevent the spread of kye-fi-par -- Vulcan rabies. Still, he was sure McCoy would be glad to learn that Spock's career was not going to suffer as a result.

"Where's McCoy?" he asked, after swinging into Sickbay and finding only Nurse Chapel, checking readings on a couple of crewmen with minor complaints.

"Down the hall, sir, in the lab."

"Oh, so that's where he's been the last couple of weeks?"

"Yes, sir, he's been doing some research."

"Thanks." Kirk went on down to the lab.

McCoy was sipping a cold drink and studying a tapé. He snapped off his viewer and set down his drink at the captain's entrance. "Something wrong, sir?"

It occurred to Kirk, with a little shock of surprise, that on the few times they had met recently, McCoy had been constantly sirring him. "Bones, what's eating you?"

McCoy pursed his lips and held out one hand as if weighing his answer, "Working too hard, maybe."

Kirk wasn't satisfied, but decided to let it ride until McCoy felt like talking. Instead he sat down and told McCoy about Starfleet's decision on Spock.

"Docked six months' pay!" McCoy said. His blue eyes opened wide and, catching the light, blazed at Kirk. "Are you serious, Jim?"

"Well, I'm glad we're on first name terms again. Why shouldn't I be serious? Would you want to see Spock court-martialed for saving our lives?"

McCoy sighed and shook his head wearily. "I don't know. But I do know he made the wrong decision. Made it the wrong way, at least."

Kirk looked at him closely. "You aren't miffed because he made a medical decision over your head? He is your senior officer, you know."

"That gives him the right to reject my advice, sir. It doesn't give him the right not to ask for it. Who pressured the admiral? T'Pau?"

"I don't think the admiral would take very kindly to your calling it pressure if someone explains to him some facts about Vulcan medicine."

That brought the blaze back. "How about some facts of military protocol? And plain common sense?" McCoy snorted, picked up his forgotten drink and took a mouthful. "Another Terran advantage -- not counting the English, of course. Englishmen and Vulcans don't understand about ice-cubes."



Kirk started to demand a more lucid reaction, but at that point the bridge put in a call for the captain. "Kirk here," he said, switching on the circuit.

"Sir, a Vulcan ship is approaching, the Kthir. They request medical aid," said Uhura.

"Navigator, Helmsman, set course for rendezvous. Call Mr. Spock to the bridge. On my way. Kirk out. Doctor --" Kirk set off for the bridge, with McCoy close behind.

Scott turned command over to the captain, and Spock arrived a moment later, a smudge of purple salad dressing still on his cheek, as Kirk said, "Kthir, how can we help you?"

Uhura had already checked the ship's registry and put the information on one of the smaller viewing screens. The Kthir was a small private craft, owned by the Vulcan Academy of Science, and currently crewed by a geological husband and wife team, Smural and T'Ven.

The ship was not quite in viewscreen range yet. A woman's low voice, filtered by the translators, came on. "We were exploring a Vulcanoid planet in this vicinity, when Smural stepped too far aside in avoiding a nest and disturbed a xsrthi hole. A xsrthi whelp attacked him before he could control the situation, and he has lost most of one leg. The other is partly damaged but could, I think, be healed without amputation given the medical resources of a Starship. Your flight plan indicated that you were within range; there were no other possibilities. I regret the interference with your own assignments."

"That's no problem, T'Ven," Kirk answered, suppressing his amusement at the Vulcan courtesy which operated even when a medical emergency was occurring.

Meanwhile, the viewscreen had come on, revealing a tall woman, thin even for a Vulcan, wearing an incongruously cheerful robe of shades of pink set off by grey and silver. A screen behind her evidently hid her husband.

"As soon as you're in beaming range -- " Kirk started to say.

"With the captain's permission," said McCoy.

Kirk swung his chair around, careless of what T'Ven might think of such a display of surprise. McCoy's face was somber, and Spock's mouth was still open, apparently from having tried to interrupt Kirk just after McCoy had already done so. Spock closed his mouth and looked quizzically at the doctor. "Go ahead, Bones," said Kirk.

"Madam, we were on that planet and encountered a case of kye-fi-par."

Her eyes slightly widened. "Indeed?"

"It's not likely that your husband's case involves the disease, but we must take precautions. Bring your ship directly onto our hangar deck."

"Very well, Physician. T'Ven out."

The Kthir was something of a tight fit through the hangar doors, but T'Ven piloted the little ship in with a swift grace that spelled both expertise and anxiety to Kirk. As soon as the deck was re-pressurized, he and Spock followed McCoy in. The doctor went ahead of them, pushing a cart full of a wide variety of paraphernalia, and edgily refused their assistance.

T'Ven let down a ramp from her ship, and McCoy grudgingly allowed his commanding officers to help him apply an anti-grav and steer the near weightless cart up the ramp and into the Kthir. T'Ven, still in her soft colored robe, stepped forward.

"It is almost certainly kye-fi-par," she said without preamble. "After you suggested the possibility, Physician, I checked for symptoms according to the directions of our computer's medif-program -- "

"Name's McCoy. Let's recheck to be sure." McCoy accepted the clipboard which held her notes and went over her husband with his own diagnostic equipment. "I agree. And with that Vulcan body temperature, it could be any time now, so -- "

"I accept your judgement, McCoy." She closed her eyes for a moment, then started to leave the ship.

"Now, you hold on a moment, ma'am! I want your help." McCoy started unpacking what looked like an oxygen tent from his cart.

She looked puzzled and turned to Spock for explanation. The First Officer had a somewhat strained expression which Kirk thought would have been open exasperation if there had been no other Vulcans present. "The doctor wishes to attempt to search for a cure up until the moment of death from the disease. Or have you discovered a cure in the past two weeks, Doctor?"

"No, sir." McCoy drew aside the screen and started setting up the tent over Smural's bed. He beckoned to T'Ven to help him.

"You have no right to endanger the lives of over 400 crewmen by attempting to confine the spread of the spores. A vacuum seal may hold them -- "

" -- but in the past has proved only 52.37% effective. I know that, sir. Now, unless you care to order me off this case, sir, get out."

"Explain," said Spock, showing no reaction.

"To keep you from any risk of catching the disease, sir, and to keep you from killing him while my back is turned."

"I order you off the case, Doctor."

"I countermand your order, Mr. Spock," said Kirk softly.

Spock allowed himself a raised eyebrow and looked at T'ven.

She stopped helping McCoy set up and seal the tent, and she looked at all three men carefully. "Human logic is subject to disturbance by 'emotion'?" she said.

"That is correct," said Spock. "And Dr. McCoy's emotions are involved in this case."

"And you're not a doctor," grunted McCoy.

"Are the captain's emotions involved, also?"

Spock looked a little puzzled. "Possibly."

T'ven set her hands together, palm to palm, and looked down for a moment, then went back to helping McCoy.

Spock turned around, without another word, and left the ship.

"Jim, you go, too," said McCoy. "Set up a link with the radios so I'm in touch with our computer continuously without having to fiddle with those damn controls. And after I send the lady out, open the hangar doors, so I can take this ship out into space far enough to make sure this plague can't get across to the Enterprise."

"If I can be of assistance, I would prefer to stay," said T'ven.

"You can't."

"Very well, McCoy."

Kirk said, "Bones -- take care." McCoy made no answer. Kirk grimaced and walked out.

T'ven soon followed, and the Kthir, somewhat clumsily, slid out the hangar door and into space.

During the uncomfortable week that followed, McCoy continued to research kye-fi-par, with the aid of the computer. Kirk guessed that the disease had already been the doctor's constant preoccupation for the past two weeks, and confirmed the guess by asking the computer. He tried to read some of the literature on the subject himself, but found the terminology beyond him.

McCoy, evidently on stim-pills, worked round the clock, so far as they could tell. Of his patient he said nothing. The computer said only that McCoy's researches so far had not produced a drug which could kill the virus without killing the patient. Kirk was first anxious and then confused.

Smural should have died days earlier, leaving McCoy free to return, unless he had caught the disease, too. For a few days Kirk feared that McCoy was infected and wasn't telling them, but he dared not disturb McCoy by demanding to know.

But McCoy continued his research, and too much time went by for him to be still alive if he had caught kye-fi-par.

Once, during the period when there was still anxiety over McCoy, Spock failed to show up in time for his watch. Worried that something might have happened to Spock, Kirk went down to the Vulcan's room and found Spock staring into the flame of his firepot. T'ven was there, too, reading a text on geology. The woman looked even thinner than when she had first come on the Enterprise.

"Mr. Spock, you're late."

"My apologies, Captain."

Spock got up to go, but Kirk said, "Are you all right?"

"Affirmative, Captain. I was engrossed in attempting a reassessment of my original judgments. I erred, unquestionably, in considering the xrsthi whelp too young to be diseased; the analogy between that variety and the ones known to me was not as close as it appeared."

"But you didn't want to kill a puppy?" said Kirk.

"I did not want to kill at all."

They left the room in silence, leaving T'ven still reading. The watches went by, and

But finally, in the middle of the watch, he put in a call to the captain. His voice was rough with fatigue, but the triumph showed through. "My patient's alive, and the spores are dead. Request permission to beam aboard. Have a stretcher cart meet us. You'll have to send over a better navigator than I am right now to get this thing back on the hangar deck, though."

Kirk, Spock, and T'ven met McCoy and Smural in the transporter chamber, and Spock and T'ven lifted Smural onto the cart. Kirk stared at the injured Vulcan. He was missing most of his left leg and his right foot.

Smural held out his hand to T'ven, two fingers extended. She touched her hand to his and said, "My husband."

McCoy stumbled coming off the transporter. His face was pale, and the skin under his eyes was dark.

"Spock." Kirk pointed at the tired doctor. It would be a quick way to see if McCoy was still mad at Spock, he thought. McCoy accepted the Vulcan's help without questions. Kirk smiled and took charge of pushing the cart to sickbay. T'ven walked alongside where Smural could see her.

"Ma'am," said McCoy, "I'm sorry about the amputation. I wasn't able to handle both problems at once, I'm afraid."

"Your management appears to have been fully competent, McCoy."

"Thank you," he said, grinning. "Thank you very much."

Spock's curiosity could no longer be held down. "Doctor, I followed the course of your research through the computer. You did not succeed in discovering a way to kill the kye-fi-par spores."

"You're telling me!" McCoy yawned widely. "No, an antitoxin's still beyond me. But I found a treatment that worked -- kept the patient in an ice bath that discouraged the spores from multiplying until the body's own defenses could get rid of them. And if you don't think programming a Vulcan life support system to keep a bed temperature low is hard -- "

Spock started to say, "Such a treatment would ..."

McCoy shook his head, unable to find an adequate close to the sentence. "Of course, all that cold damn near killed the patient, too. I had to fight off one of your wierd Vulcan equivalents of pneumonia in him. If Vulcans didn't have that ridiculous tolerance for extremes, I don't think I could have done it at all. I guess that's why the Vulcan doctors two centuries back didn't try this treatment -- the cures for that group of pneumonias were only developed a few years back. Or," he added, "maybe they just couldn't imagine that being that cold could be good for anything."

They had reached the sickbay by then, and McCoy fussily supervised the transference of Smural to a bed. It would be some time yet before the man's stumps would be completely healed, and he would have to be fitted with artificial legs before he and T'ven took their ship off the Enterprise and returned to work. Once Smural was settled, McCoy crawled into the neighboring bed and fell asleep without even removing his boots.

Kirk looked doubtfully at him. "Miss Chapel, can you handle him?"

"Yes, sir. I'll tuck him in properly later, when he's sounder asleep."

T'ven drew up a chair beside her husband's bed and sat there quietly.

Kirk gestured Spock to follow him, and went into the doctor's office next door. "It's finally dawned on me what was bugging the doctor about...what happened earlier."

Spock looked stubborn. "This cure is the result of intensive study. Dr. McCoy could not possibly have produced the same results before, and he has just told us that even this cure would not work on a human."

"I know. But you should have given him the chance to offer to try. You couldn't have known for sure that he'd fail. He said it himself -- you have the authority to dismiss his arguments, but if you assume from the start that a human's arguments are biased by his emotions and don't waste time even listening to biased arguments -- you'll never command humans successfully."

"There was no time for argument in Folsome's case."

"There would have been if you'd let McCoy in on your suspicions in the first place. You've got to delegate your authority, Science Officer. Let others take part."

"At the risk of their own lives?"

"If they want to risk it, yes. Risking lives is a command prerogative, my friend."

Spock blinked and hesitated a long time before answering. "That is true, Captain," he said at last. "Should I request a court-martial?"



" A court martial ? Oh, No, you shouldn't. That poor kid would have died anyway. If you'd asked me to back you up the first time...I think I would have. But I don't know, Spock, I don't know." Kirk was silent for some moments. "Anyway, we're pretty well outside the effective radius for even sub-space communication by now. Come on, Spock, we have a ship to run."

MAY YOU LIVE LONG AND PROSPER:

The following is a commentary on Ruth Berman's Kraithlette, "Coup de Partie".

Let me start by saying that "Coup de Grace" is the single most embarrassing story I've entered into the Kraith chronology. I prefaced that story with some deep misgivings about it and since its first publication, I've had those misgivings reinforced ten ways from Sunday. When it came time to put together Kraith Collected, I was very reluctant to even consider it. I still consider that story a total failure. In some ways I wish I'd never written it; yet it does serve a purpose of sorts.

Ruth Berman was one of the first to put in words some of the many things wrong with "Coup de Grace". She's the first to come up with a fictional statement of some of those arguments. Her story, "Coup de Partie", makes "Coup de Grace" worth publishing, if only to open debate on this area of thought.

Her story opened up some new thoughts for me and I hope it will do the same for you. The ease with which Ruth has dispensed with some of my arguments in "Coup de Grace" only serves to illustrate how flimsy my arguments were. If "Coup de Grace" had been properly structured, Ruth's story would be invalid. As it is, Ruth's story is not only valid but important.

I am most thoroughly unsatisfied with the disease "Vulcan rabies" or kye-fi-par. If it had been properly invented, it would be genuinely incurable. Ruth cured it brilliantly. So much for that.

The point of "Coup de Grace" was to illustrate the cultural gulf between human and Vulcan. It didn't do that. It would have been enough if the story had actually backed Spock into a corner where he would have to kill a sentient creature in order to save it from undue suffering. It didn't do that very well. Perhaps the reason the story didn't come off too well is that I, myself, haven't figured out where the Kraith Vulcans stand on mercy killing. This, as you know, is one of the hottest issues in medicine today. We can already prolong life long beyond logical limits of usefulness or even consciousness. We've begun to discuss "the right to die" -- and I am not altogether certain exactly where I stand on all sides of this issue. If "Coup de Grace" had discussed this problem intelligently, displaying some unique Vulcan solution to this problem, then it would have been worthy of publication in the Kraith Series. It didn't do that either.

Ruth's objections -- that life should be prolonged even at risk to others on the chance that a cure might be found, or a 'miracle' occur (a given individual displaying some unique resistance that might lead to the discovery of a cure, for example), happen to be in tune with my own opinion. I think the Kraith Vulcans would be apt to take such risks; I think they'd approve of McCoy's isolation chamber approach to the problem. They could have used a shuttlecraft in like manner in "Coup de Grace" if somebody had wished to risk their life with the patient's.

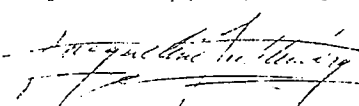
Basically, it's the characterization that is all wrong in "Coup de Grace". Spock just wouldn't react to a disease in that fashion, not even so deadly a disease. Ruth has brought this out on the last pages of "Coup de Partie". If Spock had acted as he did in "Coup de Grace", then he would have to learn from his errors however painful the lesson.

This is, perhaps, the only claim to validity in the Kraith series that these two stories have. Spock does make an error -- or a series of errors -- in judgement based on his assesment of human nature. In "Coup de Partie", he lives to face those errors and to correct them.

One of the most often leveled objections to the Kraith Series is that the Kraith Spock is too "superhuman", too unerring. This was not an intentional implication of the characterization. The Kraith Spock is fumbling his way, trail-and-error, through a complex situation which had never before been encountered, analysed and dealt with before he came on the scene -- namely the human/Vulcan cultural interface; the impact of the emotional cultures of other sentients of the Federation on Vulcan's emotionless culture.

"Coup de Grace" and "Coup de Partie" together depict one of Spock's errors, and the correcting forces. Unfortunately, that was not one of the original purposes in writing "Coup de Grace". And the background of these stories is still subtly "wrong".

Nevertheless, I think they should be retained in the Series because they do attempt to deal with an area of discussion which is topical and undeniably important. By retaining this pair of stories, I hope we will stimulate others to tackle this subject matter, perhaps doing a better job at it than I have.

  
Jacqueline Lichtenberg  
11/13/72

**DANCE**

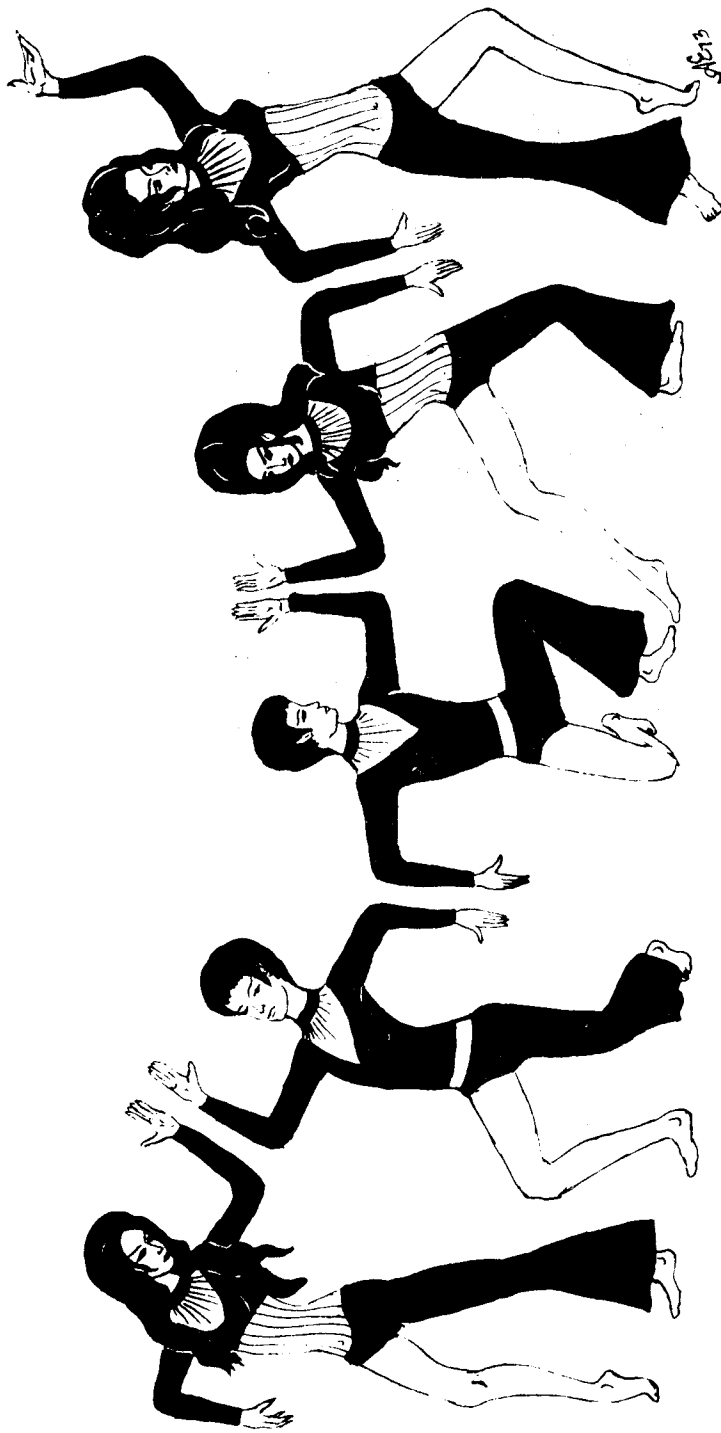
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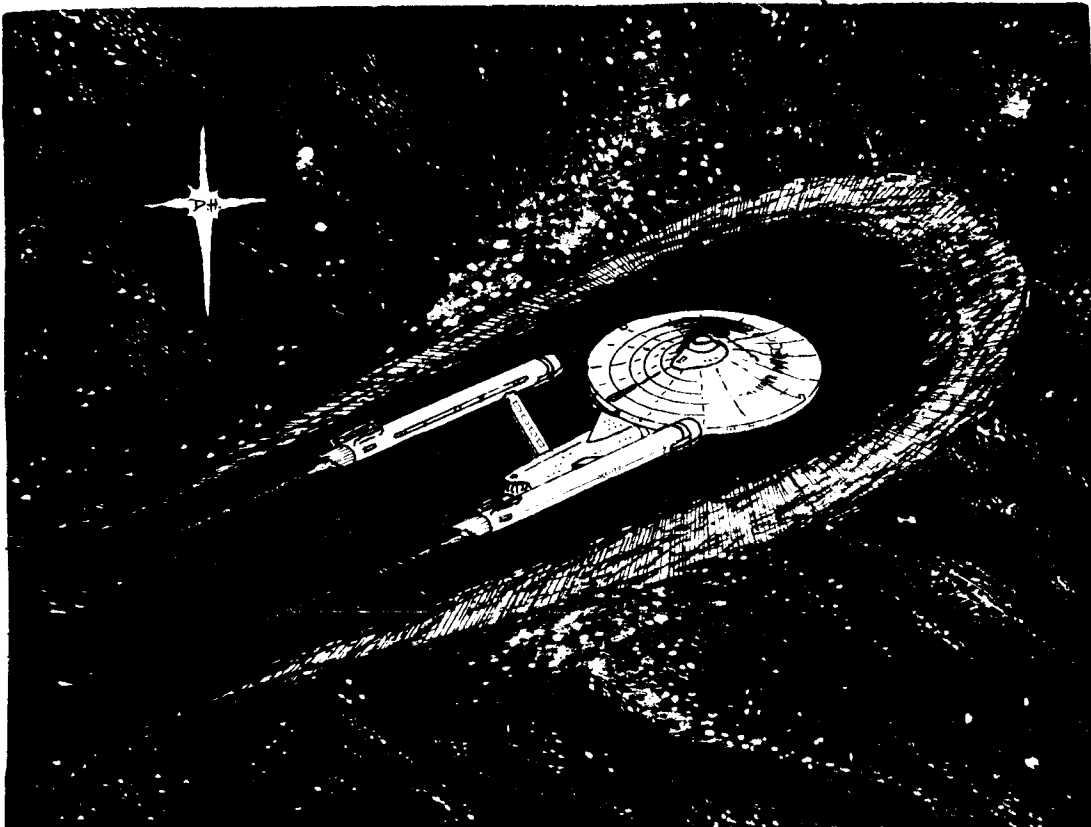
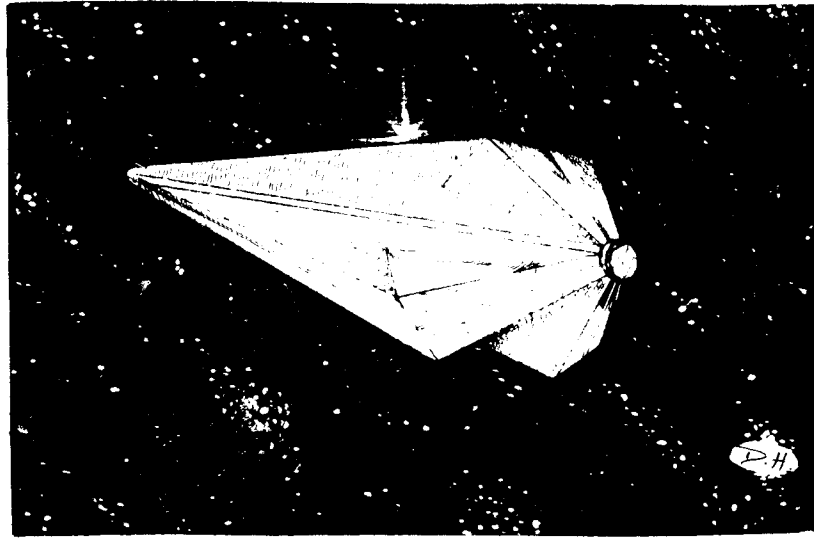
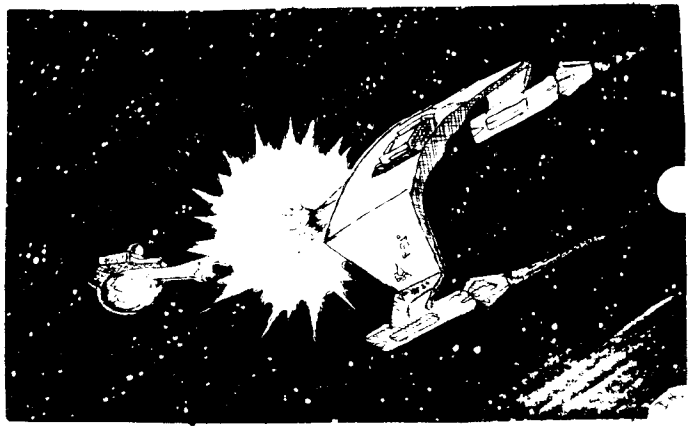
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# spock's NEMESIS





# Jacqueline Lichtenberg

## Kraith IV

The U.S.S. Enterprise hung in synchronus orbit over a single spot on a nameless planet far outside the frontiers of the United Federation of Planets. The digital readout on the helmsman's console read Stardate 7-2750.6. The subjective time ellapsed since they'd left the Federation's space was almost two years.

The huge main viewscreen faithfully recorded the bright oranges and shimmering reds of the planet below although not one eye aboard was watching. The ship's high-ceilinged corridors were buttressed against the oppressive silence by the triangular archways and overhead cross beams that were brightly decorated in sharp contrast to the unobtrusive blue-greys of the bulkheads.

The quiet, however, was deceptive.

Four hundred seven human brains labored on circular tracks of vivid memories almost too painful to bear, yet too captivating to relinquish. One half-human brain suffered the same fate... almost.

On the bridge, bodies lay forgotten in every imaginable position -- draped, jackknifed, prone, propped -- as if they had all suddenly collapsed.

In the turbo lifts, along corridors, in quarters, recreation rooms, gymnasium laboratories, duty stations, and in dark crawlways, bodies were heaped or sprawled with the boneless grace of the totally unconscious.

From Captain Kirk slumped with abandoned dignity at the center of the circular bridge to the yeoman draped over a tray of toppled coffee cups, they were locked in their memory tracks as securely as a current confined to a super conducting curcuit.

Only in sick bay did the pattern vary. There, Chief Surgeon Leonard McCoy lay crumpled at his desk, stricken in the act of recording a Medical Log entry on the patient in the next room.

The patient, Spock of Vulcan, also lived only within his memory, but he was not locked on an invariant memory cycle. His body lay below the diagnostic panel while all six life-sign indicators hovered near the bottom of their scales. But, at the moment, in his mind, Spock was preparing to voice his Life's Decision to his father as they faced one another in the spacious central hall of the austere, ancestral mansion that had been his boyhood home.

The gigantic, imported air-cooling unit vibrated the massive stone walls, an oppressive reminder of his mother's humanity which had made this decision necessary. To dedicate himself to the Vulcan Science Academy? To acknowledge that he'd never be totally at peace within himself if he ignored the needs of his human half? A balance must be struck or sanity would be forfeit. To allow that to happen would be illogical.

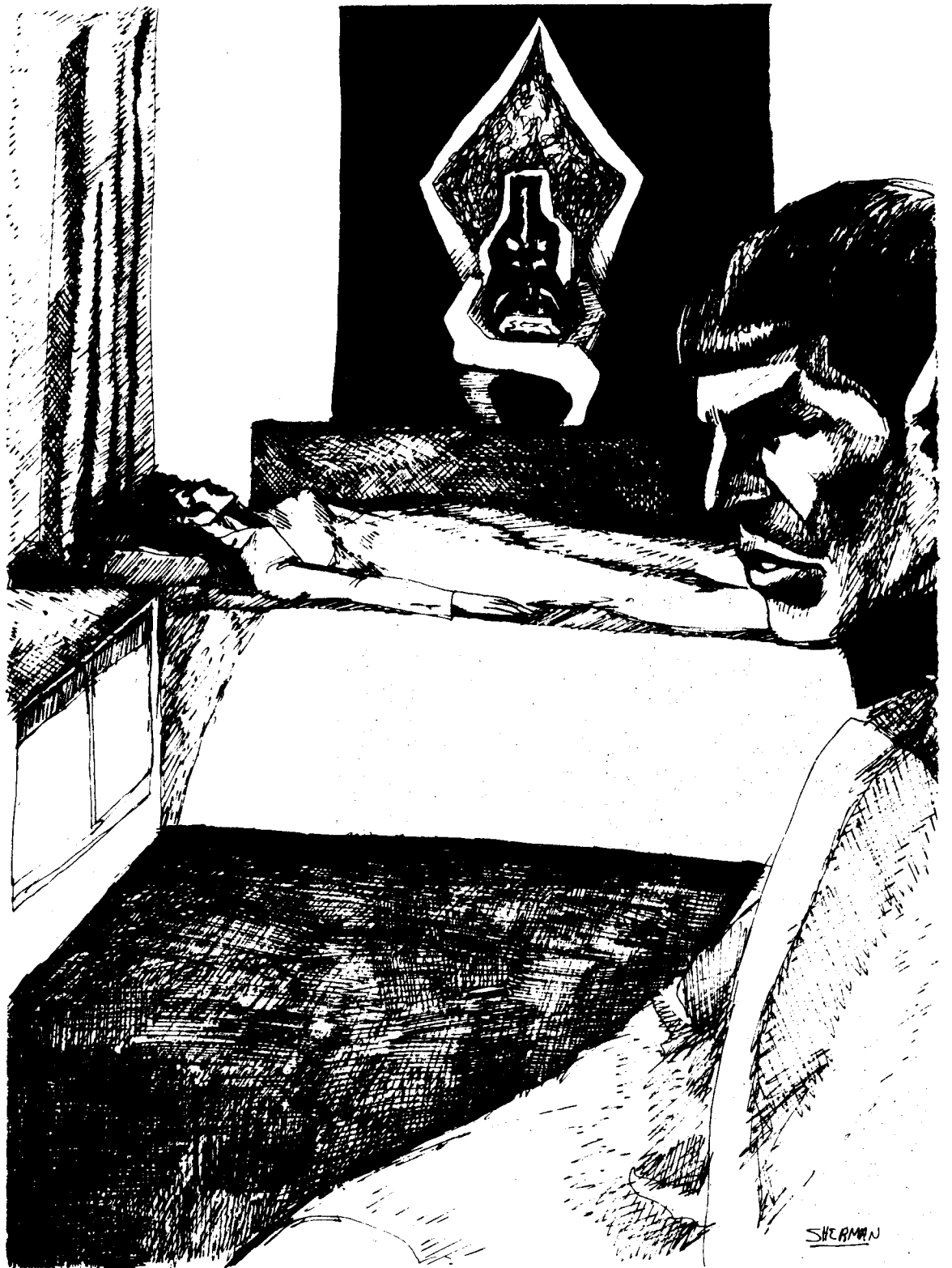
Having made the decision, he spoke the words to his father and suffered his father's pain without a flicker of outward reaction.

With the peculiar pride known only to those whose sole motivation is logic, he turned his back and walked away from his father, away from his home, toward Star Fleet Academy.

Eighteen years later, he was already a full Commander when his father finally acknowledged the validity of his reasoning and his successful adjustment to his chosen life.

Shortly after that, his second greatest trial had begun when T'Pring had divorced him. Before the growing pressure of his relentless Vulcan metabolism could blurr his reasoning, he chose T'Aniyeh ... human of body but Vulcan in spirit, and sent her his summons.

In the condensed reality of his memories, he lived again the distastefully emotional shock when her reply had caught up with the Enterprise. She hadn't rejected him, but she had refused him the peace that was his right. Her logic was sound enough as far as it went, but the disappointment was a leaden burden ... until T'Rruel had come to him.



T'Ruel had taught him the meaning of marriage ... and of life. Her death had taught him the meaning of tragedy and opened in him depths of humanity he feared to explore.

But, finally, he stood before T'Aniyeh, offering the touch that did not touch and yet would always touch. It was a touch deeper than the soul and broader than all existence whose fruition lay hidden in the unguessable reaches of the future but whose immediate meaning was peace in mind and body.

And he'd been accepted! Not only from logical necessity, but with full eager willingness to accept a bound Unity ... a Unity defined by uncountable ages of Vulcan tradition and regulated by modern Vulcan philosophy.

Thus established, the touch brought to them both a peace and strength rooted in a logical harmony with the forces that rule all life ... and death.

Death! There was danger!

DANGER!

The alarm thrilled along his nerves. Somewhere in that complex Vulcan brain, was the dread knowledge of an immanent crisis ... but mental apathy swallowed the disturbance and returned his mind to inner paths.

He stood again on the bridge of the Enterprise, secure in the new confident peace that was his right, and scanned the surface of the planet searching for the landing party. They should have reported half an hour ago.

No cause for alarm, he told himself sternly, but they were in for a reprimand if not worse. T'Aniyeh had gone down with them and he'd seen no reason to object. Risks were an accepted part of a Service career and there were no known hazards below ... just his growing ... illogical ... concern for her welfare.

The planet was quite beautiful really, a Class M-IV, almost a twin of Vulcan, and T'Aniyeh would welcome a brisk walk in fresh air and sunshine. Being human, she missed home more than he did, and through their link, he knew her yearning and the satisfaction she'd feel as the dry wind lifted her dark hair and her volatile spirits.

He reached out to her mind, opening channels of sensitivity deep in the subconscious levels.

Bending over the hooded viewscreen, he shifted the focus of his scanners and combed an adjacent area of the planet below. They must have walked far. There were natives down there, too. Very sparsely scattered. Humanoids. Readings fairly close to Vulcan norms. Possibly a related species. They'd found a number of such peoples in this region of space.

He flipped a switch, adjusted a dial and began to home in on the landing party's communicators. They should have answered Uhura's signal by now! He'd have to put them all on report.

Suddenly, before he could get a clear fix on the party, a lance of pain skewered his head and sent him stumbling back from his desk, sagging into the startled Captain's arms. His last memory before consciousness disintegrated was a cold orange explosion in his brain that sent white-hot agony through every nerve, a sensation vaguely similar to the backlash from two cross-linked Flame Spheres focused and energized into the equivalent of a phaser on strong stun.

IT WASN'T HIS PAIN ... IT WAS HERS!!

T'Aniyeh was in trouble!

He struggled to rise. But nothing happened. He tried again, straining against nothingness as if he were totally unconscious ... or tied down.

Tied down?

He directed his attention to his tactile senses as he again tried to sit up. But he got no feedback. He tried again, making a concerted effort to co-ordinate his body. Nothing.

That could only mean that he wasn't conscious. But he was! He puzzled over the contradiction, searching for a fallacy.

He'd had a similar experience once, when his grandfather had been training him in the six hundred seventy Disciplines.

Suvil had detached the young Spock's consciousness from his physical awareness in such a way that his body continued to function but his mind was unable to connect to imminent reality. The object of the exercise had been to teach the boy that he couldn't break out of the prison of his mind without outside aid. The moral had been that the science-of-mind is a dangerous tool that demands all the respect one accords a matter-antimatter generator activated in a populous city.

He'd had occasion to induce a mild form of the state for healing but always with modifications that would bring him up to semi-awareness before the chrysalis of his own mental barriers could enclose him forever. This time, he theorized, he'd slipped below the threshold while making a similar attempt.

He checked for new scars. There were none.

And why? The only remaining possibility was that somebody had done this to him. But who?

No matter. He must undo it. T'Aniyeh was in danger, and he was in no mood to tolerate that.

The immediate problem was how to reach full consciousness. The classical answer was the sensory cue. He'd been trained to respond to pain, therefore he should simply have someone inflict pain.

But, he'd already sunk too deep to reach out to anyone. Therefore, the only way to obtain a pain-cue was from his own memory.

Visualizing the search for the landing party and T'Aniyeh he nursed uneasy doubts about her well being, deliberately lowering all his pain barriers and then he conjured the mind deadening blow again, and found himself no closer to reality.

All right, he thought, try a more severe pain! He reconstructed the events at Deneva when they'd encountered those oddly detached braincells that invaded more tightly organized nervous systems controlling their victims with pain. But the experience was etched indelibly in his Vulcan memory.

Once again that terrible agony flashed along abused nerves, triggering bone-bending muscle spasms. He made no effort to defend himself as wave after wave of white-hot agony seared every receptor of his brain.

And, slowly, through the blanketing haze, he became aware of his body. The linkages were re-establishing ... with clumsy slowness.. almost as if nerve tissue were regenerating ... but it was happening. He could feel the pain more sharply now.

It was REAL!

As he lay on the sick bay bed, the six life sign indicators on the diagnostic panel over his head wobbled up from their base lines, beginning to oscillate around mid-scale ... some higher, some lower, but all, at last, alive again. The second indicator from the left... pain ... clung tightly to the top of the scale.

Then, slowly, the pain indicator lowered, hovered for a moment as if confused, then dropped smoothly to the bottom of the scale. A few seconds later, it rejoined its fellows, dancing around the Spock-norm readings.

Commander Spock, First Officer of the U.S.S. Enterprise opened his eyes, then rose smoothly to sit on the side of the bed dangling his feet in puzzlement. There should have been an attendant.

He slid down, stretched systematically to relieve some last cramps ... he'd apparently been motionless several days ... and went into the Doctor's office.

Two quick strides brought him to McCoy's body and ten seconds later, he realized that whatever had imprisoned his mind had also attacked McCoy ... and the whole ship.

Frowning slightly, he positioned his fingertips around the human's skull, hunting for the braincenters that he needed. Then he opened his mind to the thought-flow within.

After several minutes he pulled away, stunned. The attacking force was still operative. And he could do nothing to break its grip on the human.

He took a medical scanner and went in search of the Captain, checking everyone he passed on the way. He found he could touch the minds of anyone he'd previously touched, but the rest were as closed to him as if they were dead.

That, in itself, was unusual. In fact, fascinating. He needed more data.

Medical scanner whirring, Spock bent over the Captain, carefully checking his vital signs. As with the others, the body was in fair condition. But the mind was locked.

Spock went to his library computer and trained all available sensors on the planet beneath. He left the readouts feeding into the computer and went to the navigator's station. Their orbit appeared stable enough and there were no other ships in range of their sensors. Whatever was attacking must be below them.

Gently removing Sulu from the Helmsman's chair, he sat down and grimly worked an orbit change into the board and laid it in.

Nothing happened. He checked the circuitry ... Auxiliary Control, Engineering ... all wide open. He should have control of the ship from here. He stared at the planetary image on the screen. Illusion?

The library computer bleeped and he called for the readout.

The high pitched, mechanically modulated female voice said in its staccato monotone, "All-sensor-readings ... no-significant-change-for-last-sixty-one-hours ... Landing-party-still-missing ... Presumed-lost ... Tower-structure-directly-below-ship-..."

"Stop!" Spock swiveled out of the chair and pounced on the computer console.

Twelve minutes later, he'd extracted all the data on the artifact below their position. It wasn't much, but coupled with the aberrant behavior of the main computer it led him to a wild surmise ... and a desperate course of action.

Pausing to grab several packets of field rations, he hurried to the medical lab to load two hypoguns with a potent mixture of nutritional concentrate and mild, time-released stimulants and set about dosing the crew. If he succeeded in deactivating the dze-ut', as he now thought of the tower, it would do little good if the crew were all dead.

Once again on the bridge, he made the necessary log entries describing the situation and his proposed course of action, hinting at the nature of his theory in the warning he left in case he never returned. Then he balanced the Captain's body over his shoulder and entered the lift. In sick bay, he picked up McCoy and Nurse Chapel. After a brief stop in Engineering to collect Mr. Scott and a longer pause in the Quartermaster's sanctum, he set the lift on course for the hangar deck.

There, as everywhere else aboard ship, crewmen sprawled in ungainly disarray. He munched his last ration packet as he surveyed the cavernous chamber. Glumly, he counted the bodies he'd have to remove and inject with fortificant before opening the huge shell-doors to hard vacuum. Then he set to work.

The turbo-lift brought a shuttlecraft, Galileo 7, up into launch position on the deck and he loaded his somnolent passengers aboard. Then, carrying a crewman's body, he went back to the turbo-lift with a pair of anti-grav lift-bars and unloaded the supplies he'd requisitioned.

Half an hour later, he took a last turn around the hangar, searching for stray bodies even though the counter on his hypogun read 406. Then he set the main doors on automatic and climbed into the shuttle.

It was a tight fit for the five of them and all the gear. Empty, the long rectangular cabin seemed quite spacious. There was adequate room to walk between the four high-backed chairs and ample room to stand. But now, he had converted all available deck for cargo stowage. Only the co-pilot's chair remained empty beside him.

Checking once more that all his passengers were secured in safety harnesses, Spock seated himself at the control desk and took a deep breath. His long fingers caressed levers with a sure familiarity that belied the uncertainty in his heart. Ahead of him, the hangar doors cracked and parted to expel the tiny craft into the void. He activated all three view panels over the control desk and cut an orbit for the landing site that would put a logging forest between them and the dze-ut'.

He chose the site with care. He wanted to be as close to T'Aniyeh as he could get and still remain free of the dze-ut'. He picked a sandy crater surrounded by precipitous rock walls that promised, to Vulcan eyes, a plentiful water supply as well as potentially useful materials and a certain amount of strategic cover, even though the crater wall was breached at several points.

It was all he could do to aim the shuttle for the flat center of the crater headed away from T'Aniyeh when every cell of his body yearned to dash to her rescue ... to enfold and protect her. Every foot of distance he placed between them heightened the vague tension he refused to admit he felt. Yet, logically, the crater was the best possible compromise.

Well before he touched down, he made one last check with the shuttlecraft's sensors. They registered no natives in the vicinity, and no hostile animal life, but he remained skeptically alert.

And it was well he did. The tiny vessel swooped into the atmosphere, obeying the auto-helm flawlessly until a bare twenty kilometers above target, the soft, arhythmic clicking of the simple device began to repeat its pattern for the third time.

Leaning forward alertly, Spock frowned. In the silence of the cabin, he could hear the humans' breathing and under that, the unobtrusive operational sounds of the machinery. He concentrated on the musical clicks of the autohelm as the complex tonal pattern began a fourth time. Then he flicked switches until he obtained a simultaneous readout of the orbital calculations on his central screen.

Calculating swiftly, he nodded and a moment later was on his knees opening the access

panel under the autohelm. He lay down on his back and slid, head first, into the recess. In a few seconds he had discerned the computer's difficulty.

It was imposed by a new, external field and there was nothing he could do to rectify it.

Quickly he disconnected the autohelm, engaged the Emergency Manual Override and snapped the access panel closed as he set his mind to the rapid calculations.

Seconds later, eyes fixed on the viewscreens, his fingers hovering over the controls, he prepared for a tricky manual landing. Summoning all his concentration, he eased the ship's vector into the desired value and applied deceleration gently but firmly.

In the cabin the passengers felt nothing, but from the ground the shuttle could be seen to buck and waver as the flesh-and-blood pilot fought for control of the aerodynamically unstable craft.

Then, as speed reduced, the ship steadied and zeroed in on the chosen crater and settled with only a slight bump ... unfelt by the gravity shielded passengers.

Safely grounded on the fine sand, Spock leaned back in his chair and blanked his mind, warily testing for the dze-ut' influence. But they were free of it.

Silently, he turned to examine the humans slumped in the chairs behind him. Not one had begun to stir. He'd hoped they could come out of it spontaneously, but apparently it was not to be so easy.

He had two choices ... wait until they woke, or attempt to break the circular memory track with his own mind.

Ordinarily he would have chosen to wait at least a few hours, but time now was at a premium for him as well as for the whole crew. He would try to reach the Captain and through him the rest of them. But, he'd need a sensory anchor, a life line to reality, lest he become lost in the Captain's dreamworld.

Once decided he moved rapidly. He unstrapped the humans, one by one, and hauled them out onto the wara sand. The terminator was approaching. It would be full night here very soon. All the better.

When he had them all laid out in the fresh air, he chose a convenient, flat rock and struck a fifteen hour magnesite-nitron cube on it.

The fire erupted, then settled to a shaft of blue flame. Kneeling with the Captain's head on his thighs, Spock fixed his eyes on the flame.

Starlight. Fragrant breeze. Rocks. Gritty sand.

When he was sure that all his thoughts would lead out to sensory reality, he flexed his fingers, positioned them on Kirk's skull and sank easily into the strangely flavored, human memory.

## CHAPTER TWO

### MEMORIES

Looking up from his reader, Kirk saw that the Rec Room was crowded this evening. He sipped his ice tea with the solicitous pride of a mother cat watching her kittens struggle over a ball of twine.

In one corner, Chekov and Sulu were wrangling over some exotic new game. In another corner, Spock and Tanya sat over an apparently fascinating text, occasionally discussing it in a serious undertone. Kirk was pleased that Spock had found a point of social contact.

Uhura sat with her magnificent legs propped up and some sort of colorful needlework in her lap. She appeared to be napping. Mr. Scott was writing a letter and Christine Chapel was curled up with a tape-reader.

Pleased by the domestic peacefulness, Kirk went back to his roaring sea saga. He was glad he'd come here tonight. It was good to relax with friends. He finished the chapter and looked up again to savour the warm atmosphere.

Sulu and Chekov had untangled the rules of their game and induced Uhura to join them. Now they were looking around for a fourth. Chekov held up a wait-a-minute hand toward Sulu and crossed the room obviously homing in on Tanya. The whole ship still buzzed with rumors that Chekov had set his sights for her and was thoroughly encouraged by her cool indifference.

The room was small and quiet enough that Chekov's voice carried as he beamed heartily, "Excuse me, Mr. Spock. Tanya, come join us for a new game. It's called Surinko. It's a multi-lingual version of scrabble ..."

Tanya took a deep breath as if she were about to accept, but Spock gestured sharply, shooving Chekov away, "Mr. Chekov, we're busy."

Chekov took a deep breath and started to turn away flushed with anger. Even off duty, you don't talk back at your superior officers. Then temper got the better of him and he rounded on the seated couple aiming his fiery Russian indignation at the impassive Vulcan First Officer ... oblivious of his accent.

"Mr. Spock, you can't keep a human girri verking around the clock all the time! She has a right to a leetle relacazation! Just because she's a great lingvist doesn't mean you own her soul!"

Patiently, mildly, Spock answered the emotional outburst, "Mr. Chekov, the young lady does not welcome your attentions and is weary of your persistence."

"The 'young lady' can speak for herself!" He vibrated with the intensity of the injustice.

Spock's voice was as cool as dark velvet and barely carried but Kirk noticed that every ear was tuned to the charged conversation as the First Officer said, "She has asked me to speak for her."

"I'd like to hear that from her. Is she your girl or something?"

All eyes riveted on the Vulcan in undisguised fascination.

Tanya and Spock traded glances, reached a mutual decision and turned back to Chekov. For a long moment nobody breathed ... nobody moved. Then Spock said, still privately, but positively, "Yes, Mr. Chekov."

Incredulously, Chekov looked to Tanya, who nodded almost imperceptibly.

The Russian gathered his dignity and returned to Sulu. Everyone else traded stunned looks, hardly daring to glance at the Vulcans who continued their discussion as if nothing had happened.

Shortly the humans turned back to what they had been doing, but the warm atmosphere had chilled. Christine was the first to leave. Then Scotty. The game broke up before it actually got started and the three would-be players left. Then Kirk sat pretending to read while trying to decide what to do.

He was chiding himself for being so worried about Spock. The Vulcan was obviously capable of taking care of his own affairs quite efficiently.

Thinking back over it, Kirk realized that it must have been going on for quite awhile. It certainly explained why Spock had been so adamant about having Tanya assigned to the six-year mission. And all without a hint of personal involvement! Not, rationalized Kirk, that he hadn't hoped there was a personal interest there somewhere, but, he admitted, he'd had no idea it had gone so far!

He wished he knew more Vulcan protocol. Would it be proper to offer congratulations? Or should he just leave quietly?

One thing was certain, and even Spock must realize it. The ship would be bursting with the news before morning. Settling on a compromise, Kirk gathered up his reader, climbed to his feet and headed for the door favoring the couple with an approving smile and a nod.

For one strange moment the scene blurred and split into a double image. He seemed to be watching himself leaving the room while he sat approving of his choice of compromise. He shook his head to clear his vision and headed for McCoy's quarters.

Now that the question was resolved, Kirk realized how worried he'd been about Spock. No point fretting about it now. It was all settled. He wondered idly when it had happened ... not that it was any of his business. Tanya had always been cold toward men, but, she'd never been any warmer toward Spock. At least not in public. Her manner toward him seemed to partake of the innocence of a child and the immunity of a nun as if the male/female relationship were completely irrelevant.

T'Rruel, on the other hand, had come aboard carrying a torch that lit up the whole ship. And Spock had responded so strongly, nobody doubted his interest. Maybe, Kirk theorized, that was because he'd just met T'Rruel, but had known Tanya for years?

That idea had a strangely correct ring to it. Again he experienced that odd, splitting sensation, as if part of his thoughts were happening outside his brain. He looked at what he'd been thinking and approved ... with one addition. T'Aniyeh's manners were derived from her upbringing. She'd been raised as a Daughter of the Tradition ... a female of a kataytikh family. Of course, the Daughters lacked the essential physiology to participate in the male/female relationship. But T'Aniyeh, being human, was not exempt.

Actually, his thoughts went on without his guidance, she's quite a passionate individual. He'd known that ever since her foster-father had introduced them. Her previous emotional upheavals were merely one symptom of her foster-father's mistake in failing to mate her. Now, of course, that was fairly well controlled.

Now wait a minute! He thought back at himself, I've never even met Tanya's foster-father. The first time I ever laid eyes on Tanya was at Spock's house ... and at first, I couldn't decide if she were Vulcan or human. In fact, he thought, I'm still not too sure.

Of course, he conceded to himself, that was the first time you ever laid eyes on T'Aniyeh.

You know, he answered himself, wistfully, that was a lovely interlude. Did me worlds of good. Sometimes, I wish I'd let Sarek talk me into another Flame Sphere. That little trinket could conjure up the whole experience in a flash and leave a washed-clean feeling like nothing I've ever experienced before.

You know, he answered himself wryly, I wish you'd taken another Flame Sphere too. One or two more deep-contact shocks and your telepathic barriers will be demolished forever. That can be a deranging experience. The Flame can soothe and guide healing by providing a solid anchor in reality. And that is precisely what we need right now ... both of us. If we had a Flame Sphere, we'd have no immediate problem.

What problem? I don't have a problem. I'm as free as I was that night we climbed the mesa back of Spock's house. Remember that?

Indeed I do. It was one of the most difficult pieces of political maneuvering I've ever undertaken and at the very last minute, I thought you and Dr. McCoy would back out. It's a steep climb up that switch back trail, but it's traditional. It was an experiment that turned out so well it may be credited with saving the Federation.

What in the Universe are you babbling about?

Do you remember the conversation at all?

No, it was mostly in Vulcanar and we weren't carrying translators. Not that they would have helped much I'm sure.

Hummm. Probably not. But as we climbed, I worked very hard on T'Pakra because she is one of the Daughters who has T'Urianna's confidence. The other eighteen in the group were all chosen for their influence in Guardian Council. I wanted them to see, first hand, what humans were like.

Humans!?

Yes. Remember how, when we got to the top of the mesa everybody sat down to give you a chance to rest? It was fully dark by then and the stars were winter brilliant. The chill nightwind hadn't reached us yet, but it was coming. We could smell it ... and hear it far up the valley.

We organized into work parties and I showed you how to work the pollinating rods. It's not difficult, but there is a knack to it. The serious way you took to the strange task impressed the group as words never could. Life ... all life ... is sacred to us. You showed them that humans are able to share our attitude.

And then, later, when the fire leaped high, you danced with us ... without understanding, yet with a reverent joining that transcended all barriers and created something new, something unique in all Vulcan history. That night, two humans taught nineteen Vulcans the meaning of the IDIC.

When the rhythm changed and the traditional argument began, you had sense enough to leave the circle and just watch. That really impressed them.

You may not think that nineteen votes mean very much, but they were nineteen very special votes ... and I think that one episode can be credited with saving the Federation ... at least temporarily.

In Kirk's mind's eye, he saw again the fire on the mountain top, the bright red flames low but steady, fragrant smoke diluted by fresh night breezes. The odor had a strange ambivalence, as if two sets of olfactory nerves responded differently to the same aroma.

Then the scent faded, and the flames were overlaid in his mind by the fire in the ceremonial pit at the Guardian Council ... a deeper more ruddy hue. Joined with this, the flickering of the Guardian Flame held by Sekur duly installed before his red curtain in his quarters aboard ship. And yet another fire burned beneath that ... bright orange coals with an occasional tongue of flame in an open air pit, under a leaning pylon in a two thousand year old amphitheater surviving in weather-worn ruin, yet functional as a place of marriage ... and death!

His two sets of eyes responded differently to the overlaid fire images. Somewhere within the transparent veils of leaping flames the tiny gold Flame of the Sphere danced its peaceful summons. And yet farther beyond, the distinctive hue of the magnesite-nitron flame grew to sharp brilliance. The multiple images were split into unresolved, double images like the view through badly adjusted binoculars.

Abruptly, one set of images shattered and he reeled dizzily before the bright orange glow of the amphitheater pit, fighting for breath against the spasmodic cramps of the surging fever. The embossings on the wide rim of the pit wavered before his eyes alternating between strangeness and a familiar significance he couldn't quite name. Suddenly, he was standing with his back to the pit



and before him marched the ceremonial banner tenders ... around and around they marched and his eyes riveted on the horizontal rows of bells ... the horizontal rows ... the horizontal rows ... the wedding banners!

Finally, someone sprinkled the precious Flame Dust onto the fire coals releasing the billows of life giving smoke. It drifted around, wafted by the gentle breezes until, fully diluted, it reached him. Responding gratefully, his diaphragm unknotted long enough to draw air and it was as if he'd breathed the fire itself deep into his body with the needed oxygen.

The searing flame ate out his lungs, plunged through his diaphragm and curled deep in his abdomen where it grew tendrils that crawled down his thighs and under his lower left rib to infect his heart. With every pulsation, his heart sent fire surging through his body and ultimately, through his brain. His eyes were white-hot coals that strained to leap from his head and all that held him in check was the intermittent, rich chording of the ceremonial bells ... living symbol of the civilization that gave significance to his needs and promise of meaningful surcease to his agony.

Something deep within him cried out, "No! I will not! The mind controls! I WILL NOT!" But as he fought that soundless battle, he knew it was hopeless. Once begun, it could not be stopped by will.

His heart was a ripe nova, blue-white as the sun itself, throbbing to a chanted rhythm more ancient than civilization. Out of that rhythm grew an image, a cool silhouette ... dark, lyt'z and desirable. Promise of relief ... salvation from this unbearable, useless ... senseless ... torture. If he could only reach

The nova exploded!

Darkness.

Silence.

Total lack of sensation.

The strange duality had deserted him. The fire was extinguished as if it had never been. He felt in contact with a pale, flat, unadorned, pragmatic reality.

What a dream!

Way off in the blackness, a tall slender blue flame licked toward the heavens.

He thought, oh, no, no, no, no, not again! I couldn't take it!! I'm washed out, exhausted.

But, menacingly, the flame floated nearer. He tried to retreat but found himself trapped by the leaden weight of his body. Too exhausted to struggle, he watched the fire grow larger.

This time it stayed a single, well focused image ... a magnesite-nitron fire, coldly functional, prosaic artifact of civilized technology. It carried no dark mystery, spoke to no ancient drives, beat no ceremonial rhythm, roused no frightful associations. An ordinary, everyday, useful piece of standard equipment.

It stopped approaching. Now, it was a well defined light in an ordinary darkness. It shed radiance about itself in a perfectly ordinary way, illuminating the flat topped rock on which it stood and the smooth fine grained, multi colored sand on which the rock sat.

He took a breath. The air was hot and dry, but hardly firey. There were scents, strange but not unpleasant. He blinked and his eyes remained cool and moist ... His body ached as if he hadn't moved in a century or two, but it was hardly an unbearable agony.

He shook his head. It wasn't like him to wake disoriented. He looked around. Behind him, a shuttlecraft was parked as if it belonged in the fine, dark sand. Its door was closed. To his left, laid out in a neat row, Scotty, Bones, and Christine Chapel?

Above, hard points of stars decorated a clear, black, moonless sky.

The fire flared briefly, illuminating a dark silhouette. A defiant figure, stiff backed, legs braced slightly apart as if prepared for some demanding test of strength. The arms hung straight down, fists clenched in fierce determination. But that head! He'd know that head anywhere!

Yes! Now he remembered. He'd been on the bridge, worrying about Spock, unconscious in sickbay and about the missing landing party when something had started to happen to the crew. They'd seemed to be falling asleep all around him and he, shocked as he was, couldn't seem to keep his mind on the situation!

Spock had brought them down to the planet. Shakily, Kirk climbed to his feet and wobbled toward his First Officer.

"Spock!" he called, surprised at the miserable croak he produced.

The Vulcan turned stiffly, "Captain," he drew a ragged breath, frowning. "I must apologize. I had not intended to expose you to that. If there can be no forgiveness, I will understand."

With one trembling hand, Kirk brushed that aside. "Nonsense." He bit his lip.  
"But ... was that ... well, I mean it was so real. Was it just a memory? Or Spock, are you all right now?"

"After a fashion. Temporarily."

Kirk shuddered. He hadn't needed to ask that question. He'd known. And he needed an unstable First Officer like he needed a wildcatting antimatter pod. How long had it been since T'Ruel? Four years?

The ground swayed alarmingly under his feet and his knees gave out. But before he collapsed, the firm Vulcan arm tightened about him, supporting, guiding.

"Captain, you've been unconscious for several days. Come inside, drink, eat and I'll brief you."

Weak as he was, Kirk hung back. "What about the others?"

"I can do nothing for them just now."

Pondering the grieved tone of that, Kirk let himself be tended. Soon, a measure of strength returned and he listened to Spock's account with increasing concern.

An hour later, weak but clear-headed, Kirk sat on the sand beside the fire and regarded his sleeping crew somberly. Spock sat crosslegged before him, staring into the fire over steeped fingers, abstracted into deep Vulcan meditation. The captain mulled the situation over and over, culling through the facts with the tactician's keenly incisive reasoning. It seemed like a bizarre final-exam question for some nightmare Academy course.

As he waited for Spock's attention to return, he lined up a set of questions. The more he learned, the greater grew his ignorance.

His impatience mounted. He knew it was both impolite and dangerous to rip a Vulcan out of deep contemplation but as the minutes dragged by and Spock remained locked in thought, Kirk's anxiety grew. The others must be roused soon if they were going to do anything to save the ship.

Then he conceived another fear. The flame-image had triggered a dangerously compelling association for Spock's sensitized nervous system. If he became lost in that again, they might all be doomed. On the other hand, Sarek had said the flame was a multi-valued symbol in Vulcan philosophy. For several more minutes, Kirk fretted at the decision and then with a worried glance at the three bodies laid out on the sand behind him, he reached over and stroked Spock's raised fingers gingerly.

Swift as a Denebian lythma, Spock's hands captured Kirk's wrists in a fierce grip that clamped off his circulation and threatened to snap the bones, but the Vulcan's expression didn't change. For several long seconds, he continued to stare into the fire, immobile. Then, as if swimming up out of ocean depths, the Spock élan infused the granite-like features with personality. Still staring into the fire, Spock said, "You should never do that, Jim."

Slowly, as if only now regaining control of his hands, Spock released Kirk's wrists and turned his gaze toward his captain.

"I know. I'm sorry," said Kirk.

"Apology accepted. But never again."

"I'm frightened, Spock."

"A logical reaction under the circumstances."

"But just what are the circumstances?"

"I believe I explained."

"Only partially. Just what is a ... dze-ut'?" Kirk struggled to get the final aspiration on the "t" just right. He never learned how badly he failed.

"I wish I knew. I call it that because it resembles the mythological structure in shape and function, but I've no idea how deep the resemblance actually goes."

"You'll have to tell me more about it, but first, we must do something for the others."

"I was preparing myself for the attempt when you interrupted. I cannot allow them to experience the confusion of identity that we encountered. I believe I have a method which should be more effective ... with your assistance."

"What can I do?"

"You are a latent telepath, Captain. We've both known that since you were inadvertently en rapport with that gaseous creature that killed Captain Gerrovick."

"Nonsense! That was an accident!"

"I gave you the Flame Sphere mainly because of your reaction to the Household Guardians on your first visit to my home. You'll recall that Dr. McCoy was unaffected by the Guardians. Nor did he perceive any inordinate depth in the hospitality ceremonies." His eyes sought the fire again. "And there were other occasions when your barriers went down spontaneously. It's been happening with increasing frequency. Every time circumstances have forced me to touch your mind, your barriers have been further weakened.

"At this point, I dislike exposing you to further stimulation without protective devices at hand. However, I see no satisfactory alternative."

Vaguely, Kirk remembered dreaming some nonsense about telepathy.

"That was no dream, sir. During our confusion of identity, you were thinking with my mind. And I with yours. That can be deadly dangerous, and it must not be repeated."

Shocked, Kirk said, "I've never known you to casually read thought like that. It's very disconcerting."

"Indeed it is. I apologize. However, we are still en rapport, Captain. It is difficult for me to separate spoken from unspoken. That is the only reason you succeeded in rousing me safely. Don't ever try it again."

"I won't. What do we do now?"

Unwinding his long legs, Spock rose smoothly to his feet. "Come."

Obediently, Kirk followed. Spock shifted Scotty's body closer to McCoy and asked Kirk to lay Christine perpendicular to the men's feet. He placed the captain between the men, joining Scotty's hand to the Doctor's and placing Kirk's on top of the two.

"Captain, reach over and grasp Nurse Chapel's hand firmly, then fix your eyes on the fire and think about the danger to the Enterprise. I want you to feel the fear natural to the situation."

Kirk did as he was told, and, surprisingly, as he catalogued the known risks and speculated on the unknown, the situation seemed fearfully hopeless. It wasn't panic that he felt, but the normal fear that sharpened his mind, steadying his hand and strengthening his muscles beyond human norms.

He hardly noticed the hot dry skin that brushed his right temple or the steady, charged presence that invaded his mind.

Then, the fire image split into five ghose images, whirled unsteadily, flared blindingly, and exploded into seared blackness.

Suddenly he was ripped apart, torn from his flesh, sundered from identity. Lancing shafts of burning, nerve-grating pain ripped his mind apart. Raw agony shredded his flesh.

Something hauled him bodily away, tearing his nerve-roots from their moorings, shaking him thunderously.

"Jim! Jim!" The urgency in Spock's voice brought him back. He opened his eyes and found himself sagging against the Vulcan.

"I'm all right, I think. Sorry it didn't work. I tried ... but I'm no telepath ..."

"It did work, Captain. But I thought we were going to loose you."

Regaining his balance, Kirk stood wiping sweat from his brow. He was vaguely aware that his rapport with the Vulcan had been shattered and something told him that Spock was pleased with that. There was a stirring behind him and he turned to see Scotty, Christine and Bones sitting up, dazed and weak. Silently, he set to work with his First Officer, revitalizing the three humans.

### Chapter Three

#### Skirmish

In due course, they all settled down in a circle before the magnesite-nitron fire to make battle plans. This time, Spock sat crosslegged with his back to the fire, Kirk opposite him, McCoy and Christine on one side, Scotty on the other. Interestingly, Kirk noted, McCoy ended up between Spock and Christine. The Vulcan was subtly avoiding her.

The captain led off the discussion, "As I see it, we have two choices. Destroy the tower that's generating this mental field, or remove the ship from its path. Mr. Scott ..."

"Your pardon, Captain ..." Spock interrupted.

"Yes, Mr. Spock?"

"Neither of those alternatives would serve our purpose. If we destroy the tower we'll have no

way to revive the crew ... and we'll destroy the landing party as well. If we succeed in removing the ship from the tower's influence, we'll still have no way to revive the crew. You didn't revive spontaneously when removed from the field."

McCoy said, "But you revived us?"

"True, Doctor. But I've previously had occasion to...touch minds...with each of you. The reason I brought all of you here was that I was unable to reach any of the others."

"And," added Kirk, "the cost to Spock was far greater than anyone has a right to ask."

"Captain," said Scotty, doodling in the sand with a fingertip, "from what I remember just before I...fell asleep... I didn't see how we're going to move that ship... or fire any of her weapons, either. The main computer controls were locked..."

Kirk said, "Spock, why...how...the computers?"

"Captain, the main computer operates on low voltage...very similar to an organic brain. The most sophisticated computers are affected by the dze-ut' field in the same way as an organic brain. The simpler units in the shuttlecraft were largely unaffected...but they, too, were vulnerable at close range."

"All right, Spock," said McCoy, "let's hear your alternative."

The Vulcan eyed him coolly, "We must dismantle the dze-ut' circuit...not destroy it."

"Just what," asked Kirk, "is that going to involve?"

Spock studied the fine sand in the dancing blue firelight, "We must approach the dze-ut' while it is still in operation. We must nullify whatever security guards the natives have posted. We must then penetrate the tower, locate the power nexus, and remove the focusing filters." He looked up, meeting each pair of eyes in turn, then leveling his gaze at Kirk, he said, "It is my guess...hardly more than a wild surmise...that T'Aniyeh is both power-nexus and main focus of the circuit. If we are to free the crew, we must recover her alive."

Kirk blinked. He'd never known Spock to prevaricate or to load the facts toward his personal preference...but there was always a first time. And the pressure on Spock was, Kirk knew from recent personal experience, enormous. Possibly, the only way to save the ship and the crew was to destroy the tower and Tanya with it. But at the moment, Spock's personal values would place Tanya's safety above all of their lives. And Spock was the only one among them who had any knowledge, however hazy, about what they were up against. Just how far could he trust his First Officer?

Kirk said, "Are you certain, Spock, very, very certain, this is the only way to save the ship?"

Levelly, as if aware of Kirk's doubts, he answered, "No, Sir, I'm not at all certain. My reasoning is based on possibly fallacious analogy, and fragmented legends which are notoriously inconsistent with one another. I may be wrong."

"We must act," said Kirk. "Time is short, just how short we don't know. Bones, how much longer would you say the crew can survive in that state?"

McCoy cleared his throat, pulling a long face, "Well, now Captain, it's hard to say..."

Spock broke in, "It is also irrelevant. The important question is how much longer T'Aniyeh can survive."

Kirk snapped, "Explain!"

"When she dies...if she dies while still holding the crew in paralysis...they all will die with her."

"How certain are you of that?" asked Kirk.

"No more than of the rest. But I do know that the stress of the nexus operator of a dze-ut' circuit is such that he will certainly die well before the subjects. This circuit has been operating for almost four days. Our legends quote a maximum of a little more than twice that. However, T'Aniyeh is human. If she is at the nexus, we may have much less time." He frowned, "But she is also a Daughter of the Tradition. There is an ancient fragment of legend to the effect that only a Daughter who is...betrothed...can survive the focal-nexus."

Scotty unfurrowed his brow, "How does this...circuit you've postulated actually work?"

"That, Engineer, is something which I couldn't explain to you even if I did understand it myself. The dze-ut' come down to us from our equivalent of thaumaturgy, alchemy, witchcraft and magic. No dze-ut' has been constructed on Vulcan...if indeed one ever was...in more than ten thousand Earth-years."

Scotty was helplessly intrigued, "Ten thousand years! Then how do you know of it at all?"

Spock shrugged, "Fragmentary references to legends of an oral tradition recorded hundreds of years after writing was invented. Nobody even knows to what language the word dze-'ut belongs."

McCoy shifted his weight on the sand, fishing under one hip to remove a sharp stone, "I knew you were a history buff, Spock, but I never realized you went so far!" He tossed the offending rock into the darkness.

Spock skewered him with a glance, "My family takes its responsibilities very seriously, doctor."

"All right," Kirk interrupted, "let's presume we're going to remove Tanya alive. The first step is to approach the tower. How can we do that, if the minute we enter the field we're rendered unconscious again?"

Spock's eyebrows climbed innocently, "It will, of course, be necessary to construct a protective device."

McCoy nodded, his inherent cynicism rising to the occasion, "And I suppose you've got that all planned."

"Unfortunately, no, doctor ... though I have some ideas."

Kirk asked, "And just what will this device do?"

"It should render each of you immune to the dze-'ut field ... that is, if it can be constructed, and if it can be made to work."

Kirk sighed, "Supposing we have such a device ... then what?"

"We must deal with their guards."

Scotty wiped sweat off the back of his neck and peered anxiously toward the sunrise line, "You make it sound too simple."

"Not intentionally, Engineer. That may well be the most difficult part of the operation. You may ask yourself what kind of a society could, without discernable technology, detect and nullify a starship in orbit? What kind of a society would construct an operational dze-'ut and incorporate an alien entity into the circuit? These people are armed with devices that generally destroy the operator as well as the target. What does that imply of their psychology?"

Determined to hear the worst, Kirk pressed, "And what happens after we get into the tower?"

"I have no idea, captain."

"Take a guess."

He shrugged an eyebrow, "T'aniyeh and the others must be removed from the circuit ... alive. If that is accomplished, the crew should waken spontaneously, and so should T'Aniyeh ... and anyone else affected by the circuit."

McCoy challenged, "You seem awfully sure Tanya is in the thing."

The expression on Spock's face belied his words, "I'm not certain, doctor. I can only guess."

"All right," said the captain, "I guess we haven't much choice. We'll try it your way. What's the first step in constructing this field nullifier?"

Spock said, "While you're resting, I'll do some prospecting."

"For what?" asked Kirk.

"I don't know, sir. But this world must be rich in raw materials and this region looks most promising."

Kirk shrugged. He was in over his head ... and his head was spinning from cumulative exhaustion. "Good luck."

A few moments later, Spock strode off into the pitch darkness, a field exploration belt buckled low on his slender hips.

Tucking his apprehension under his captain's braid, Kirk got everybody bedded down in the open. There was still a good seven hours before dawn so there was no reason to crawl themselves into the shuttle. Kirk had elected the first watch, giving Scotty the second, and McCoy the third. That way they'd each get almost four hours sleep.

After setting the automatic alarms, he perched on a warm rock in the light spilling from the open door of the shuttlecraft. It was a little late to worry. They'd already chosen a course of action. Nevertheless, Kirk spent two hours in intensive worry. That, after all, was a Captain's job.

Then Scotty tapped him on the shoulder, interrupting a doze he hadn't been aware of entering. He found himself a place on the soft sand and was asleep immediately.

He woke to the tweet of his Communicator and had it open before McCoy could grab it. The first hint of dawn was paling the sky as Spock's voice came tensely, "Captain, check your tricorder readings. I believe the natives know we're here."

He turned to McCoy who re-checked the readings he'd been checking every five minutes for the last hour. McCoy shook his head.

Kirk said, "Spock, we don't read anything here. Where are you?"

"On the far perimeter of the crater, Captain. Due west of you. And I do read a group approaching slowly. Bearing 119 mark 0. Range...approximately one mile."

"Did you find what you went after?"

"A suitable facsimile."

"Fine, then return immediately. We'll prepare to take the Galileo up."

There was a long pause followed by a hesitant, "Yes, Sir. Spock out."

Lips pursed, Kirk closed the grid with his forefinger and tapped it thoughtfully. Then he said, "Bones, get everybody up. Yellow alert. I'm going to check our supplies."

Kirk climbed into the shuttle and began sorting through the packing cases stowed precisely according to regulations in every available square foot. When he'd finished the inventory, he rocked in the pilot's chair, meditatively staring at the non-reflective blue-gray bulkheads, the round-hooded plotting scopes, the triplets of levers and twinkling control lights. Deactivated, the three forward viewscreens were hidden by safety shields the same color as the bulkheads, giving the cabin a closed, almost claustrophobic feeling that wasn't quite dispelled by the white light of the overhead glow-panel striking clean highlights off the six shiny, black chairs.

Mechanical miracles. Technological slaves. Polished sterility. Against...what? They'd confronted many formidable telepaths...but never anything like this.

His glum thoughts were interrupted by the sound of familiar steps in the sand. He called, "Spock, come in here!"

Tapping the fine dust off his boots, Spock entered, "Yes, Captain?"

"You knew we wouldn't be taking the shuttle up again didn't you?"

"No, Sir. But it seemed a reasonable assumption in view of what happened to the shuttle on the way down...and what they've done to the Enterprise Computers."

"Will destroying the dze-ut' fix the Enterprise Computers?"

"Destroying the dze-ut' will fix nothing."

"Your pardon. I meant dismantling...or whatever you have in mind."

"Unknown, Captain."

"And you're not particularly interested in that aspect of the problem right now?"

Spock lowered his eyes. The gray-green lids were like sore bruises under the sharply slanted brows.

"Spock, level with me. How long do you have?"

The Vulcan paced stiffly to the far end of the cabin, removed his equipment belt and began to sort items. He said, "I wasn't mistaken about those readings, Captain. A group of natives is approaching."

"Don't change the subject. I'm not moving out until I know what I've got to contend with."

Speaking to the wall, the First Officer continued, "I was proud of you, that night on the mountain. You are of my mother's people and in that sense I was proud. But at this moment, I am ashamed."

"Spock, it would be illogical to hold me to Vulcan standards of behavior. I ask because I need to know and I've no other way to find out...unless you want me to order Bones to..."

Spock held up his hand, "I apologize, Jim."

"Unnecessary and irrelevant. Just answer the question."

He met Kirk's eyes soberly for a moment, then turned back to his sorting, "I estimate

about thirteen standard days before..." he trailed off, unable to find the words.

Kirk supplied, "...before you'd be likely to do anything foolish?"

He nodded turning back to his equipment.

McCoy's voice drifted in, "Jim, we've got a flicker of a life-reading now. Someone is approaching...make that a group...maybe ten individuals."

Spock added softly, "At least fifteen."

Kirk went to the door, "All right, Bones, we're leaving...on foot. Get a directional fix on the group. Nurse Chapel, douse the fire. Scotty, get in here and give us a hand."

As the Engineer climbed into the cabin, stamping sand, yawning and scratching, Kirk went to the pile of equipment and hefted a ruck sack. Just hauling one's own body around in this gravity was a chore...but it would be more of a chore without food or water. He began choosing and sorting items.

When Scotty saw what the Captain was doing, he picked up another of the feather-light packs and exercised his own judgment in loading up. He said, "Captain, I dinna see that we'll get vera far on foot. The heat, gravity, low oxygen...and the sun will be up soon."

Kirk answered, "We may not get very far, Mr. Scott, but it will probably be farther than we'd get in the shuttle now that they know we're here. It will just have to be far enough."

Scotty nodded gravely, "Aye. But how will we carry enough water to last more than a day out there?"

Spock turned, strapping the re-stocked belt about his hips, "We won't carry that much water, Mr. Scott. Two quart canteens will be sufficient."

Highland skepticism played about those expressive eyes, "I havna seen any sign of water aroun' here."

Cocking his head to one side in peculiarly Spockian amusement, the Vulcan said, "You 'havna' looked, Engineer."

Kirk backed off from the array of crates, swung his pack to his shoulder and leaned out the door, "Bones, your turn."

As the Doctor approached, Kirk continued. "Take whatever medical supplies you think will be useful. Split the load between you and Christine. I've got rations for five days for you both. If we haven't succeeded by then, we'll be dead."

Mentally gauging the weight of Kirk's pack, McCoy started to protest, then subsided. He was a Doctor, not an explorer.

Scotty finished stowing his load and backed out leaving McCoy and Spock to work over the remaining three packs. Scotty joined the Captain at the shuttle's controls trying to milk the last possible shred of meaning from the larger sensor system of the shuttlecraft.

Presently, Spock joined them, "Those readings are almost meaningless."

Scotty turned, offended by the insult to his carefully tended machines. "Oh, are they now? And how would you be sa' wise?"

Spock placed a transparent orange crystal on the desk before them. It looked like a natural growth of quartz with faceted spikes jutting in every direction. "This is far more reliable than a tricorder or sensor system under the circumstances. The natives have something that distorts all sensor readings that are based on neural activity." He brought out a second crystal, a long, emerald-green shaft. As he touched it to one of the projecting facets of the orange crystal, a blue spark jumped the gap and a tiny picture materialized in the green crystal.

The humans bent forward to peer at the image. There was a sandy plain dotted with petrified growths and sand sculpted rock outcroppings. Filtering among these with obvious stealth, fifteen tiny figures advanced along a curving front, arrayed for battle.

The image wavered and broke apart. Spock drew a ragged breath, "I can't do that for sustained periods, but I assure you it's accurate."

Scotty's head swiveled on tense shoulders, "A bloomin' crystal ball!"

Not exactly, Engineer," replied Spock dryly.

Kirk asked bemused, "How does it work?"

"I don't know, Captain. I've never heard of anything like it before. I stumbled on it by accident while looking for something else. That group is much closer than our tricorders indicate. I suggest we move if such is our intention." He pocketed the two crystals and sealed the flap.

Kirk wondered what other surprises his First Officer would spring on them from that loaded belt. But he gave the orders to lock up the shuttlecraft and soon they were wading through loose sand...toward a barely visible cleft in the crater wall.

The stars were disappearing already and the half-gray, shadow-less pre-dawn light lent a wierd, shifting quality to the rugged skyline that surrounded them. Spock kept throwing worried glances around them and stepping up the pace until the humans were choking on dry throats and searing lungs.

As the first slice of blue-white sun topped the horizon, and they were only ten yards from the heap of loose boulders that filled the cleft, Spock whirled around, bent into a fighting crouch, pushing Scotty on ahead with one outflung arm, "Run!"

Simultaneously, five silhouettes topped the ridge behind them and to their right, and a blood-curdling shriek echoed across the silent desert. One of the five silhouettes leaped high and seemed to float down to the sand not twenty yards from them.

Kirk whipped out his phaser, but Spock's hand shot to his wrist, deflecting his aim, "General Order One, Captain."

Kirk replaced the weapon grimly, "You're right."

The First Officer added, "Our phasers wouldn't affect them on anything less than maximum. They have some sort of neural shield."

Kirk glanced behind. Scotty, McCoy and Nurse Chapel were scrambling for cover among the rocks.

Abruptly, a ton of glowing, orange gelatin seemed to whomp him soundlessly on the back of the head and then it crawled into his brain!

He stumbled two more paces and sprawled full length on the warm sand, mouth and eyes frozen wide open in the gritty sand. His thoughts oozed orange gelatin and sent orange ice down his nerves, jerking his body spasmodically. Then, suddenly, it was gone and momentum carried him to his feet.

Spock's strong hand on his elbow propelled him toward the rocks. He staggered a few steps and the hand was gone, "Captain, take cover!"

Spitting dry grit from his mouth, Kirk wiped his streaming eyes and turned back to face their attackers. More heads were silhouetted against the paling sky now and six tall, thin natives faced off in a parabola with Spock at the focus. The Vulcan stood frozen in the act of reaching for one of his belt pockets.

Out of the corner of his eye, Kirk saw Scotty's head bobbing up from behind a boulder and sensed the phaser the Engineer held. Blinking away tears, Kirk gestured hold-your-fire.

Spock's arm jerked another inch toward his belt. The six natives arrayed on the flat sand before him tensed in unison as if linked in exerting some common force. At once, Kirk knew the orange gelatin was invading Spock's mind, but he was fighting it...successfully enough to engage six opponents at once.

The others on the ridge above them seemed content to stay out of it, but Kirk wasn't. Warily, he moved in under Spock's line of sight, crouching low, keeping a close eye on the six natives. When he'd reached the Vulcan, he hesitated, trying to decide which of those pockets Spock's hand was going for. Then he seized one of the flaps and fumbled it open.

Within were several porous rocks, spongy-soft inside, but lava-sharp on the jagged surface. He took the largest and placed it in Spock's hand waiting out the eternity until those fingers closed on the pale orange treasure.

Then Kirk retreated the way he'd come, giving Spock room to do whatever it was he'd planned.

Spock's arm swung up and around in an overhand pitch and the rock soared...not toward the six natives confronting him, but high up onto the rim of the crater. The six opponents cut and ran in terror and at the same instant, Spock turned, grabbed Kirk's arm and pounded for the rocks where the others waited. As he ran, the Vulcan shouted, "Take cover!"

A split second later, he threw the Captain down behind a boulder and flung himself onto Kirk's body as if protecting a child from a force that could rip flesh from bones.

Then the world ended in searing orange flame that encased Kirk's mind in ice-cold gelatin. The explosion behind Kirk's eyes seemed to split his head open like a ripe cantaloupe. Then, mercifully, he blacked out.



A moment...or a year?...later, Kirk opened his eyes to find his First Officer seated on a convenient rock, elbows propped on knees, two fingers steepled in that peculiar gesture of immersion in subjective reality. Kirk rubbed the nape of his neck looking for the source of the migraine that was nesting in his skull as he watched McCoy lead the ungainly scramble down the rock-slide with Scotty and Christine racing behind him.

#### CHAPTER FOUR

#### GADGETATION

McCoy had his medical scanner out and going before he was even in range and he couldn't seem to decide who to start on. With a disgusted glance toward the Vulcan, he tackled Kirk, "What happened?"

The Captain submitted to the examination passively, "You're asking the wrong man, Bones."

"It doesn't look as if I'm likely to get anything out of him," he chinned in the direction of steepled fingers, "for a while."

Kirk nodded, regretted the extravagance of the motion and said softly, "We'd better leave him to his own devices."

McCoy fumbled in Christine's rucksack and came up with a squeeze bottle, "Tilt your head back, Jim, and look at the sky."

Gentle fingers deftly peeled Kirk's eyeball. Reflexes aside, the irrigation did him worlds of good. A few seconds later, a hypo finished off the headache and a mouthful of water rinsed the sand from his teeth. He felt almost human again before Spock lowered his hands to rub his left calf, gingerly.

McCoy drew the medical scanner on the Vulcan, but as he consulted the three-inch tube, Spock snatched it, switched it off and returned it to McCoy's belt pouch, "I suffered no physical injury save for a slight muscle strain."

McCoy grunted skeptically, but Spock moved past him before the Doctor could check for pulled muscles and torn ligaments. The Vulcan walked smoothly enough, but that was no guarantee he was uninjured.

Then Spock looked into Kirk's eyes solemnly and time seemed to pause in its headlong dash to eternity. The three humans watching the confrontation sensed an interflow compounded of deep regret, denial, and slow resignation. It was as if both Kirk and Spock had died in the skirmish and now, meeting as ghosts, they were about to call a conference on haunting tactics.

The sun cleared the horizon, rolling back the shadows like the veils of a limbo set rising to reveal...reality.

Kirk said quietly, "You might have broken my ribs, Mr. Spock."

"Which is worse, Captain, a cracked rib or a mind shattered beyond repair?"

Kirk blinked, "That bad?"

"Worse."

"Are you all right?"

"Functional."

"I don't understand any of this."

"Neither do I. I've learned much in the last few minutes. I'll require some time to digest it. Meanwhile, I suggest we place as much distance between us and our opponents as the advancing day will allow."

"We'll need shelter from the sun. We should return to the shuttlecraft and wait until night."

"That's what they expect us to do, Sir. They will use the daylight remaining after they regain their senses to see to it that the shuttle never rises again."

Kirk rubbed his chin, "How long will it be before they wake up?"

"Unknown. However, we'll find suitable shelter along our path."

Gauging the remaining shadows, Kirk rubbed the back of his neck, "Did you scout the region from the air?"

"Fleetingly. But I gained much more data from our recent attackers."

With one more glance at the sun and an ineffectual swipe at his streaming brow, Kirk said, "All right, let's move out!"

Once more, the group scrambled over the jumbled heap of boulders, this time Spock took the lead while the humans helped each other up the steepest parts.

By the time they crested the pile of rubble, the sun was fully master of the glaring sky. The rolling hills of pale ochre rock and sand that stretched before them undulated beneath an early morning blanket of heat-shimmer reminding the Captain queasily of the gelatin that had frozen his mind.

As they paused to catch their breath, Spock came to Kirk's side...as far away from Christine as he could inconspicuously arrange...and scanned the view before the, "It's going to be a nice day. Unfortunate that we must spend it in a cave."

Kirk looked at him suspiciously, "Mr. Spock, are you joking?"

"No, Captain, it would never occur to me. I was merely stating the fact as I see it."

Kirk gestured to the broken country before them. "Well, that looks like a vision of purgatory to me. On Earth, they call stretches like that 'badlands'."

Expressive eyebrows arched upwards, "On Vulcan, they call it a forest."

"Oh, come now, Mr. Spock. It takes trees to make a forest. That's a definition true on any planet."

"Correct."

"Well, I don't see any trees."

"I do." He walked over to an ashen-gray boulder that stood as high as his head and ran a hand appreciatively over the rough surface. "This, for example, is a healthy sapling resembling the genus portunakreas. Its root system must reach down almost fifteen hundred feet already. When it taps the water table, it will flower, spreading surface tendrils hundreds of feet in all directions."

Kirk joined him, touching the pulpy surface hesitantly. It did seem to be alive!

"May I suggest, Captain, that you caution everyone to watch carefully where they put their feet from now on. Within the crater, the sand effectively protected the life-forms, but here, one might injure the vegetation by tripping over tendrils or exposed root-nodules."

Kirk gaped incredulously. Vulcans! Indeed! More worried about injured vegetation than injured humans! But all he said was, "A wise precaution, Mr. Spock. However, a wiser one would be to find shelter before we all collapse from the heat."

Spock pointed straight ahead...directly along their line of march to the tower, "On the far side of the next ridge, just below the crest, is a deep, root-cavern and a water supply."

"You seem certain of that."

"I am." The gravely drawn planes of the Vulcan's features didn't invite further inquiry. They moved out.

A hundred weary years and two gallons of sweat later, they ducked into the moist darkness of an oasis and, shedding their packs, collapsed on the soft dirt floor to rub sore legs and gulp the cool air into desiccated lungs. The last to eschew the sun and duck into the tunnel was the Vulcan. The body responds to the life-surges of the biosphere where it belongs and no amount of intellectual discipline can lessen the call of the seasons.

Unlimbering his canteen, Kirk called his First Officer over, then swigged luxuriously at the precious liquid.

"Spock, what kind of a place is this?" He offered the canteen and, at the expected refusal, stoppered it.

"An unpleasantly chilly one," Spock answered glumly.

Scotty had arranged a field lantern and the long, moist tunnel was revealed for a good twenty yards back. It was about four yards wide and rose to barely seven feet high after the low entrance. Then it tapered sharply as it slanted downward and back. Spacious enough, and seemingly pleasant enough. Kirk said, "You expect dangerous animals?"

"No, Captain. The few species of insect likely to be found here are harmless."

Kirk looked around for the tricorder, spotted it, and called, "Nurse Chapel, what was the temperature out there?"

"A hundred thirty and rising, Sir. It's about ninety in here. Shall I check again?"

"No...no. Just morbid curiosity. Mr.Spock, what do you expect the peak temperature in here will be?"

"I doubt if it will be more than a hundred degrees Fahrenheit. There is considerable evaporation holding the temperature down."

Kirk nodded and pulled his shirt over his head, "You mentioned a water source...?"

Spock gestured toward the sloping rear of the tunnel, "The moisture is coming from the main taproot. It shouldn't be too far back. Shall I collect the canteens and refill them?"

Kirk shrugged a helpless little smile, "Why not? Tell me, Mr. Spock, is this a common phenomenon on Vulcan, too?"

Spock nodded, "In certain areas where this species abounds and logging operations are in progress."

"Logging operations?" Kirk prompted numbly determined to hear the whole incredible story.

"Yes. Harvesting of the surface nodules after the tendrils have dried stimulates the seeding process if it's done properly." He put a hand out to test the tunnel walls, "Whatever else these people lack, they do have an efficient logging policy...and considerable sophistication in agriculture in general."

A bit dizzy from the heat, Kirk leaned his shoulders against the cool, moist wall. Against his bare skin, the tender root fibres entwined in the silky soil felt as good as satin sheets. He said, "Isn't it strange to find a species of Vulcan 'tree' here?"

"No, Sir. Throughout Federation Space, we've found life-forms virtually identical to those evolved on Earth. And we've found much other evidence of the activities of The Preservers. In this galactic sector, M-IV worlds abound. It is not surprising to find Vulcanoid species. You'll recall that it has been suggested we are not native to Vulcan."

Spock gathered the canteens, purification pellets and a filtration funnel and disappeared down into the dark hole, his belt light gyrating wildly against the walls revealing the mat of thread-like roots that supported the loose dirt.

Christine knelt by Kirk, expertly opening and presenting his ration packet, "Captain, what's the matter with Mr. Spock? I've been afraid to utter a sound in his hearing ever since we woke up in that...crater. Did you see the look he gave me when I reported the temperature? It's as if he's furious with me for some dreadfully careless error...?"

Kirk pulled a face to hide his amusement. "No, Miss Chapel, it's no mistake of yours. Let's just say he's...very concerned...for the safety of the landing party."

"Oh." She became all stiffly starched nurse as she arranged his meal and moved on. Even covered with sweat, dust, and sand, strained with anxiety, fear, and battle-shock, she could still project an image of aseptic efficiency. It was the kind of unquestioning obedience that could only be given by the quick-witted, strong-willed, and highly-educated.

Scotty dropped down near Kirk and wriggled himself a comfortable seat in the rich soil, "I've never known Spock's concern for anyone's safety to make him snub someone. And he's too good a command officer to intentionally demoralize his crew, though he can be vera' difficult at times."

"Well, Scotty, there's always a first time."

The Engineer's slight turn of head and furrowed brow was purest highland skepticism.

Kirk's lips pursed. Then he sighed, "We're all entitled to our little...obsessions... from time to time. It's only natural."

Scotty frowned his puzzlement.

Reluctantly, Kirk continued, nearly in a whisper, "At the moment, Spock is very, very concerned for Tanya's safety. In fact, I'd say he's somewhat...emotional...about it."

"He's really serious about her...?"

Kirk nodded.

A knowing smile lit Scotty's face, "Ah," he nodded, "Well, as you say, Sir, even Vulcans are entitled."

Just then, the dull clinking and the flashing light announced Spock's return and Scotty pulled his face down to innocent neutrality. The Vulcan marched casually into the group placing each canteen by its proper owner with a courteous, matter-of-fact air. In some undefinable way, his manner discouraged the humans' reflexive but almost meaningless, thank-you's. He stepped around Christine with the fastidiousness of a cat and settled near the entrance where it was warmer.

As Scotty, McCoy and Christine searched out sleeping places and made themselves comfort-

able, Kirk rose, scratching his bare chest, wondering if he could sleep again. He went over and hunkered down next to the Vulcan who was sorting through his rock collection. "Don't you think you should get some sleep, Mr. Spock? You were up all night."

"I will, Captain, but first I have some work to do."

"Mind explaining what?"

"I am building a mechanical mind-shield."

"But, that's impossible, isn't it?"

Spock gave him a reproachful look.

"Well, I mean the designers of the Universal Translator have tried to produce one for years and haven't got a commercial model yet."

"Wrong approach, Captain."

"So what is the right approach?"

He held up one of his raw jewels, "This...with a little magic, some superstition, and a dash of legend for flavoring."

Kirk looked askance. That didn't sound like Spock.

Impassively, the Vulcan continued fashioning, chipping, grinding, probing, poking, and taking tricorder readings. He said, "I learned a great deal from our late enemies."

"Are you sure they didn't learn a lot from you, too?"

"I don't believe they gained anything of value."

"And what did you learn about them?"

With nearly savage concentration on his task, the Vulcan spat out his words in little, toneless bursts as if reciting strings of transporter co-ordinates, "They've turned their minds into offensive weapons. The strongest mind in a clan-family group actually dominates and physically controls those under him. They were attempting to take control of us in the same way they took T'Aniyeh. They are incredibly strong-willed and they use augmenting devices of subtly sophisticated design."

Avoiding Kirk's eyes, he continued with un-suppressible distaste, "They do not have marriage, but only demand-rights within the clan-group. They sell their children to the strongest bidder, and destroy the un-sellable ones. They live like animals who know no beauty. I want nothing more than to leave this world as swiftly as possible."

The intensity carried across the two feet of moist soil and shook Kirk. Never before had he known Spock to condemn the values of an alien society. But, as he'd told Scotty, there was always a first time. He was sure the Vulcan would regain his perspective...afterwards.

With every cell of his body, Kirk experienced Spock's primordial horror at the use the natives had made of the mind-meld.

The mind-mind touching was a deeply personal experience, a sharing that can weld two fiercely independent beings into an indivisible unity. Kirk knew the Vulcan's reverence for this touching, and knew within his bones, that the only time such subjugation is justified is the only time it is unavoidable...when the ancient drives surface and cannot be denied.

With his own glands, Kirk knew the many-pronged fear that was eating at Spock's vitals. Uppermost, was a black horror at the kind of people who had their hands on her.

He remembered their fatuous gloating when, during their second attack on his mind, they'd discovered his condition. He'd let them presume that to be his only motivation in seeking her out. That had provoked a vague, ill-defined threat to...use...her at some imminent opportunity.

The disgust! The primitive anger that rose at the memory flooded his body with liquid flame. Only with grim determination did he master that surge. He would bring her out of their hands...untouched. There was no reason for haste. There remained much work to be done...and plenty of time...

But his mind refused to let it lie. Their time would come in due course. But, what then?

Of course, the probability of conception was relatively low. Such a pregnancy would be very dangerous. The Enterprise certainly couldn't abandon the mission for the sake of two lives. He had absolutely no faith in McCoy. Saptiir was the only man living who could be trusted with such a problem. And he was beyond reach, at home.

He'd not expected this situation to develop until they were well on their way back into

Federation territory. But, apparently, his human half wasn't about to cooperate ... as usual.

Nevertheless, danger or no danger, he knew beyond the slightest question that they'd both do their best to assure conception. Nature provided for the survival of the species ... not individuals. They were helpless in the face of that.

He became aware that his eyes had closed and he sat in limbo. Outside... way outside... somebody was calling him, "Jim! Jim! Break it off! Withdraw! You are Captain James Kirk! Captain!"

"No," he protested feebly "I'm ..."

He opened his eyes. Dizzily, he saw himself standing in front of himself shaking himself by the shoulders. The scene flipped insideout with a sickening blur and he was staring at Spock.

"Captain?"

"Spock! What happened?"

Spock closed his eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath, deliberately draining the tension from his face. Then he released Kirk and went to sit down beside the rock where he'd spread out his collection of oddments.

"I was afraid we'd lost you that time, Captain. We must be much more careful."

Kirk looked around. The others were all asleep. He sat down. "Spock ... for a few minutes ... I ... we ..."

"I warned you before, Captain. It is dangerous to do that."

"But, I didn't do ..."

"Your pardon, sir, but you did. You reached out ... touched ... and joined. You have a very tenacious will. It was all I could do to disentangle from the linkage."

He turned from his work to frown penetratingly at the human, "Jim, violation of mental privacy is a very, very serious crime ... among Vulcans. We tend to react with ... violence."

Kirk took a deep breath. He'd just been reprimanded and warned by his First Officer. But, he now knew the fierce sincerity behind those coolly spoken words. He said, "I understand ..."

Spock dropped his eyes, "You must learn to control your need ... for contact ... at least until we get home."

"I'll try. But I wasn't aware ..."

"I know. You must try very hard."

Kirk climbed to his feet.

"Captian," Spock looked up at the human, "it's very like asking a baby not to try to walk. I know that. But you must restrain yourself ... you must."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock. Now, I think we both must get some sleep."

"Yes. It's quite exhausting. I'll have part of this working in a few minutes. Then I'll rest. We'll be safer with a nullifyer over us."

Kirk nodded and stumbled off to find himself a place to sleep. His mind was reeling under the load it had absorbed in the last half day. Sleep might help to digest some of it and give him the vitality to face the rest.

As he stretched out and squirmed himself comfortable, laying his head on his pack and spreading his shirt under his bare shoulder, he thought, one advantage to being in Spock's mind was that the smothering heat became a delightful chill and the dead dry, tasteless air became moist with delicate fragrances, rich vegetation, and teeming life. The grim hell out there turned into an unspoiled picnic ground good for roaming aimlessly and communing with nature in the Vulcan way.

He caught himself. Those were the kind of thoughts Spock had just warned him against. He cast about for some peculiarly Kirkian thing to dream about and in five minutes was sound asleep on an ancient, square rigged sailing ship, creaking and groaning against the waves with the quiet, *reassuring* twitter of wice busy in the holds, inches above the balck bilge water.

"NO!"

Kirk woke to Spock's husky cry of anguished denial. With one motion, he rolled over and was on his knees searching the darkness for his friend.

Near the entrance, the dazzling rays of the late afternoon sun struck deep into their hole, drying a half-circle of floor near the entrance to an ashen grey. At the edge of the steaming, cracked soil, stood the Vulcan, braced tall, head thrown back, a grimace of pain distorting his

features as he sucked air through clenched teeth.

Before Kirk could rise, Spock had dropped to his knees, all trace of that bone cracking rigour drained away. By the time the captain reached him, Spock was shaking uncontrollably.

Kirk knelt and placed his hands on Spock's shoulders, "Spock, what is it? What's the matter? Are the natives attacking again?"

Shrinking from the touch of human flesh, he shook his head, "Leave me!"

"I want to help, Spock. Tell me what happened. What's wrong?"

Breathing easier now, he tried to control the shaking enough to rise, "Nothing!"

"You expect me to believe that?" Kirk reached out a hand to steady his friend, not daring to admit to himself how much he feared that that second touch would be rejected.

Gaining his feet independently, Spock grasped Kirk's wrist bruisingly, "I am ... very cold. I am going outside for awhile."

He started past the human, but Kirk blocked his way, "Spock, what happened?"

The Vulcan inspected Kirk's hand as if it were a specimen of poisonous reptile he'd captured, "It's not something that any human should experience. You're too easily subject to cardiac arrest, brain hemorrhages, and similar malfunctions."

The purpling flesh was beginning to prickle. Ignoring the pain of Spock's grip, Kirk implored his friend, "Spock ... !!"

The Vulcan met his eyes, "She knows, Jim. She's waiting ..." He had the shaking under control now and he sighed, "But there's time. Time enough."

As Kirk absorbed this, Spock shifted his attention back to the wrist he held, loosening his grip, "Captian, you absolutely must control yourself. I know it's not easy, but you must wait." Firmly he placed the hand at Kirk's side and released it. "I'll be back in a short while."

Then he was gone. For a pleasantly refreshing stroll in the 145 degree sunshine ... and for the private meditation he needed as a human needs sleep and dreams.

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE BLOOMING

When the sun began to dip below the horizon, they started on their night's journey. The dusk passed swiftly and full night enveloped them as they toiled up low rolling hills and down. The whole universe consisted of a small puddle of light just where the next foot must be placed.

Spock had wired together an assemblage of his "raw materials" insisting that, if they stayed together, it would keep the natives from getting a reliable fix on them. He carried the talisman swinging from his equipment belt like a monk's rosary and often fingered it absently as he led the group with a sure footed ease the humans envied. He'd chosen the heaviest pack for himself and seemed hardly to notice the added weight.

They climbed, scrambled, slid and suffered through the heat of the night. Scotty toiled behind Spock, carrying a tricorder. Christine and McCoy trudged after the Engineer and Kirk brought up the rear with the other tricorder set to flash a warning at the approach of natives. Spock insisted the tricorders were useless, but Kirk kept them working none-the-less. At the very least, they could record for the ship's log.

Even with the sun gone, sweat streamed from every fold of Kirk's skin. It soaked through the clothes around his waist, the crooks of his elbows, the backs of his knees, and, worst of all ... the crotch. He had to wear his shirt to ease the backpack and the sweat stained the golden knap to brown wherever the heavy load touched him.

He fell into a rhythm of ten paces and a swing around with the tricorder followed by another ten paces. Always in the back of his mind was Spock's apprehension that his mind grenade had injured their attackers more seriously than anticipated. If they were badly hurt, they might not attack again ... and so much the better, as far as Kirk was concerned. Even through all his little miseries and big worries, he could almost laugh at the Vulcan. Considering his attitude toward the native's way of life, Spock ought to take pleasure in the death of a few of them ... but, no, he'd suffer a genuine, Vulcan regret over the death of even such an enemy.

At midnight, Kirk called a halt and they all circled around, dropping their burdens and collapsing almost too tired to unlimber their canteens.

After allowing herself two huge sighs, Christine rummaged around the packs and presented each man with his ration packet as if it were vital medication prescribed by a particularly strict physician.

She looked around for Spock, wondering whether she dared urge him to eat.

He was scuffing at the sand at the base of a hulking, black shadow about ten yards downhill, almost beyond the range of the field lanterns. She shrugged and turned away, laying out his portion tidily on a nearby rock. It was always nicer when patients took care of their own needs. And she couldn't help but think of him as a patient.

But the Vulcan returned with a large, ellipsoidal object balanced on one shoulder. It was about the size of a small watermelon. He lowered it to the rock Christine had set his ration packet on. Absently, he swept the ration pack out of the way, and concentrated on examining his find.

The field lantern showed a dull grey stone with a porous, pitted surface. He took out a tricorder and made a swift series of readings, even pulling out a contact probe to check something.

Seeing that the others were too exhausted to even take an interest, Christine gathered her courage and approached the Vulcan. "Mr. Spock, you really should eat something. We've got a long way to go yet."

As rigid as the stone he was working on, Spock said, "I find your rations unacceptable, nurse. I prefer my own discovery."

He stood and raised the stone above his head. For one horrible instant, Kirk thought the Vulcan was going to hurl it at Christine, but he smashed it, end first, on the rock before him.

And it split open, falling apart in neat sections like the petals of a flower, or the sections of an orange. Kirk thought that it was very lucky that the thing was coral red inside. If it had been orange ... Kirk shuddered. He'd rather not think about that.

In the center of the soft flesh of the melon was a flat, black ellipsoid about as large as a man's hand. Spock removed it and reverently buried it in the sand at his feet.

Then, the Vulcan seated himself at his "table", "Would anyone care to join me?"

Horrified, McCoy said, "You're not going to eat that, are you?"

"Yes, Doctor, that is precisely what I am going to do."

"But ... but ..."

Kirk had never seen Bones so close to apoplexy. He said, "Spock, do you think it's wise?"

"Captain, the body requires fuel to function. Certain types of fuel are acceptable ... when others are not."

Kirk took a deep breath. He could order Spock not to eat from the native foods. But the Science Officer had, conspicuously, run the required tests. Obviously, he knew the species. He also knew his own screwed up metabolism better than any other living being.

Heaving himself to his aching feet, the captain went over and wordlessly accepted a piece of the self-slicing melon. Scotty and Christine joined him, but McCoy declined.

The melon was cool, tender and tartly moist with a firm, smooth texture not unlike cantaloupe and it had a fragrance not unlike roasted salt nuts, a Denebian delicacy Kirk had learned to like. One bite seemed to lead to another until the rind lay empty in his hands and his stomach lay peacefully content under his belt. His mouth and throat were gratefully moist and the pervasive thirst was also gone.

He started to thank the Vulcan, then remembered his manners. He'd been invited. No 'thank you' was required or welcome. Instead, he went to where Spock had buried the seed and inserted the rind beside it with the care he'd learned on Vulcan. His duty the generous plant discharged, Kirk turned to find the Vulcan regarding him soberly. For a moment, Kirk felt a warm glow of approval in the Vulcan's glance. Then it was gone ... like a door shutting.

Kirk took a deep breath and gave the order to move out.

They'd only been on their way again a few hours when, suddenly, Spock doused the light he was carrying and silently motioned them to take cover.

Like a ghost in the dark night, the Vulcan flitted between the humans and came to rest beside Kirk. "Captain, a party of twenty natives. Ahead and to our left."

Kirk jiggled the tricorder. "I don't get a flicker."

"They're there. Though I don't know if they are looking for us."

"Can they spot us?"

"I doubt it."

"These hills should be adequate cover. Are they camped or moving?"

The First Officer brought out his orange and green stones and struck a picture for the Captain. Deep in the green crystal a time scene glowed.

There was a fire ... the friendly red-orange of a wood fire ... and huddled about it were ten, no, fifteen natives. Tall, thin, expressionless men with long, black hair tightly drawn back and bound at the nape of the neck. They were dressed in scanty, black and white uniforms vaguely reminiscent of ancient Egyptian cup bearers. Another five men, cast from an identical mold, walked sentry in a large circle about the camp. One of the self slicing melons lay open and partially eaten on a rock, its black seed left carelessly to dry in the open.

The humans waited a few minutes. Then Kirk said, "If they'd spotted us, they'd have moved by now."

"Yes. I think if we circle wide enough, we can avoid them. They must be a logging team."

Kirk felt a new surge of disgust well from Spock.

"What is it?" He asked, his hand reached toward the Vulcan in the darkness.

The picture flicked out and Kirk couldn't even see Spock's face. He felt the unvoiced rejection and withdrew his hand. He didn't need to guess the source of the disgust. The sentries walked under the control of one mind.

They unlimbered a climbing rope, set one of their lanterns at very dim and crept off at a tangent from their original path, linked by a rope clipped through belt loops. Kirk was certain the Vulcan would come back on course like a homing eel-bird. Nevertheless, he set Scotty to check with the tricorder.

If the going had been rough before, it was viscious now. Stumbling in this gravity was a severe shock and falling was true disaster. Several times, when someone fell, they all waited anxiously for McCoy to check for broken bones and then heaved sighs of relief at narrow escapes.

Even so, Spock's anxiety at the long detour made him quicken the pace until they were all ready to cry for mercy. Eventually dawn paled the sky and the voracious sun began to suck the juices from their bodies. They were about where they'd planned to be according to their map, if they could trust the tricorder at all. Topping the crest of another of the infinity of low rippling hills, they paused for breath and Kirk said, "Spock, it's time to think about shelter."

"Past time, Captain. But it should be no problem. We're still in the logging forest. Do you see that cluster of saplings on the far slope?"

Kirk peered through the growing dazzle, trying to sort out the long shadows, "All I see is boulders. I need a tricorder to tell a tree from a rock even after sun-up."

"There's a hole in the pattern of growth that must represent a harvested nodule."

"If you say so. All right, let's go."

They struck off again, drawn forward by the thought of a comfortable haven from the growing heat. And it seemed only two or three lifetimes until they crawled into their new shelter. Kirk hadn't ached so much since field-basic and he was so tired he honestly didn't care if he never moved again. He fell sound asleep without even removing his pack.

The others fared little better, but McCoy's professional conscience wouldn't let him rest until he'd seen everybody properly bedded down. After refilling the canteens for the humans, even Spock placed sleep highest on the list of priorities.

But the Vulcan only allowed himself four hours of replenishment and rose to work on the mindshields. That night they would enter the fringes of the field, and it was essential the humans be protected.

By mid-afternoon, he'd done all he could without testing his handiwork against the dze-ut' field, so he went out to sit where it was warmer and drier.

A little later, McCoy woke to find the First Officer seated just outside the shaded entrance staring at the dazzling, rock strewn barrenness. The Doctor lay watching the lanky silhouette, while he brooded over his own professional problems. Spock would take care of himself. But Tanya?

He might have one very sick young wife on his hands before long. And, as he thought about the various aspects of that, he became more and more worried. Human females were notorious for severe psychological disturbances during pregnancy. Half of obstetrics was psychology. In this particular case, the physiological half alone might prove more than he could handle. Add the unknown effects of her involvement with this ... gadget ... and he could well be in over his head.

He climbed onto his sore feet, made his toilet, and took his canteen out to where Spock



sat. They were on the east side of the hill this time, so the front porch was in shadow. Nevertheless, going out of their hole was like walking into a solid wall of red-hot air, but McCoy ignored the heat as he sat down opposite the Vulcan and swigged thoughtfully while waiting to be noticed.

Recognition came soon in the form of a slight shift in the focus of those dark, brooding eyes and a faint arching of one elegant brow.

McCoy opened, "Tell me about Tanya."

"Tell you about... Tanya?"

"Amy has told me about the forces that shaped her into the ... woman she is. Of course, I consider it priveleged communication ..."

"Of course." Spock's unblinking delivery would have been sour skepticism from a human. McCoy was not quite sure how to interpret it. Painful reluctance at this invasion of privacy? Or was it just that Spock felt so strongly about her?

Brushing his speculations aside, McCoy waded in swinging a blunt scalpel, "How did you meet her?"

When Spock turned that somber gaze on him, McCoy thought for one frightfully heart-racing moment he'd gone too far.

"That, Doctor, is not ..."

"Yes, it is, Spock. For all her Vulcan training, Tanya is still human. Under stress, her mind and body will react in the human mode ... overlaid and distorted with absorbed cultural patterns, but human none-the-less. I have to know how you came to your... agreement."

McCoy had never seen a face so ... shut ... closed ... before. It was as if Spock had dismissed his questioner, leaving him to find his own way out the door. McCoy had to try again, "Spock, the human mind has a peculiar way of ... coming apart at the seams ... Tanya has already had one such episode. It could happen again. I've no idea of what's involved in being hooked up to this gadget ... or in being unhooked. And if she comes out of it half loopy only to find you ... well, further demands placed on her ... Spock, I've got to know where the seams in her mind are ... and how strong they're likely to be."

Speaking in the remote, mechanical way that McCoy has only seen when Spock was technically unconscious, the Vulcan enumerated the factual details of his relationship with his bride. He made it dry enough for a court of law. And when he'd finished, McCoy prompted softly, "But does she love you?"

"I doubt if she is any more capable of 'love' than I am. Our bonding is totally within the Vulcan pattern. The durability of such a union is far greater than any I have observed among humans." Then he lapsed into trance-like silence, refusing to be called forth again.

At last, McCoy left him, not failing to notice that in spite of rigid Vulcan control, the tips of Spock's fingers wandered in a nervous dance. Perhaps he'd pushed too hard. But he'd had to know.

That evening when they resumed their march, there was no more time or energy left for discussion. They plodded through the increasing darkness in grim silence.

And, late that night, they hit the dze-ut' field.

It was an utterly unspectacular event.

They were descending one of the infinitude of low, rocky ridges, scrambling and sliding in the loose, unseen gravel when Spock, ten paces in the lead, suddenly halted, flashing his light back to signal caution.

Then he backed up three paces, set his hand torch down on a rock and advanced again. One pace. Pause. Two paces. Back half a pace. At that point he swayed back and forth for several seconds and then decisively drew a line in the gravel with the toe of his boot.

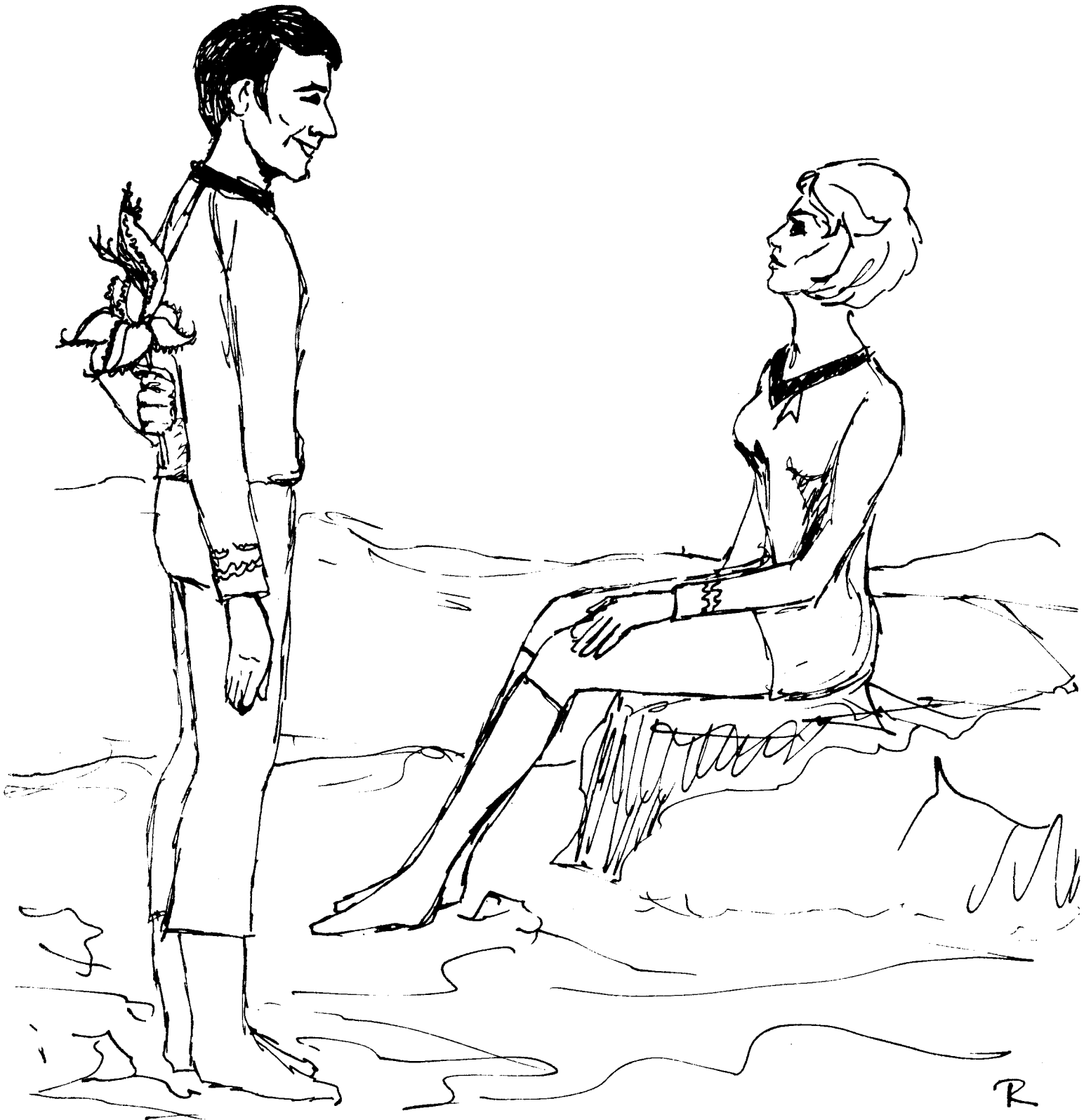
He turned and came up the hillside toward the group of humans. "This is the fringe of the dze-ut' field."

Kirk said, "All right, we'll take our break here while you get your mindshields ready."

With a weary sigh, Scotty shed his pack and went to help Christine off with hers. He admired her courage with quiet, Scott intensity.

Kirk settled himself on a high boulder and twiddled the useless tricorder. He was well aware of the morale-sapping fatigue among his crew. And he had an instinctive grasp of the importance of morale at a time like this. It could be the difference between success and failure.

So, when Scotty wandered off behind a boulder to visit with a sandpile, the captain climbed down and went to where Christine was listlessly groping in a pack.



Before he could get well into his pep talk, Scotty came back holding something behind his back and smothering a grin that could have lit up a half-square-mile of terrain.

Spock was seated uphill from Christine, working over his rock collection. He didn't notice the Engineer until he said, "Lass, I've got something here that must have been put here by the Great Bird of the Galaxy just to cheer your heart." He brought his hand out from behind his back and presented a large, floppy yellow flower. The yellow petals were laced with delicate white tracery of veins and the ruffled edges of the petals were outlined in phosphorescent purple. It looked like a cross between an orchid and an iris created by a royal botanist just to grace a queen's bridal bouquet.

Christine glowed like a young girl presented with her first corsage. She reached out her hands to cup the fragile blossom, feeling the soft texture, and sniffing for the scent. "Oh, it's beautiful, Mr. Scott! I've never seen anything so lovely! Where ..."

Suddenly, Spock cried out, leaping to his feet, hands balled into white knuckled fists, wide eyes riveted on the colorful bloom in Scotty's hands.

Scotty froze in the act of handing the bright yellow flower to Christine. Christine froze in the act of accepting it. McCoy slowly drew his medical scanner, knowing it wouldn't tell him anything he couldn't see already. Kirk looked from the shocked group to his First Officer, who shifted his weight from one foot to the other as some horribly potent rage gripped him and seemed to shake him loose from his foundations.

Scotty was the first to move. He took one step uphill toward the towering Vulcan, holding the flower out until it was scant inches from Spock's chest. Spock stared at the blossom as if he were hypnotized by a swaying serpent's head.

Scotty said placatingly, "Mr. Spock, it's only a flower. A wee thing to warm a brave lass's heart. It may not ..."

Spock roared a full-throated bellow of outrage and launched himself at the engineer.

The two went rolling downhill in a tangle of arms and legs with McCoy and Kirk scrambling behind them. Before the wild Vulcan could throttle the engineer, the other two men grabbed his arms and heaved him back onto his feet.

Scotty picked himself up off the gravel, staggering a bit to avoid stepping on the forlorn remains of his beautiful joy offering.

But Spock wasn't through. With a single thrust of his powerful arms, he sent both his captors flying and lept at Scotty with a savage ferocity Kirk hadn't seen since Spock had almost killed him in the arena of Challenge.

McCoy motioned frantically to Kirk not to use his phaser and fumbled at his belt for his hypo-gun while Scotty clutched Spock's wrists to keep those steely Vulcan fingers off his throat.

But Kirk crouched on the dark hillside, struggling with a memory. What had been the word T'Pol had used to bring the Challenge to a standstill? It had worked on Spock even when he was deep in the .. the plak tow. What was the word?"

Suddenly, Scotty's arm collapsed and the Vulcan fingers closed about his throat.

Kirk took a deep breath and bellowed, "KROYKA!"

Spock froze. He shook his head dazedly. Then he eased off his pressure hold, rose, stepped back and looked down at the motionless body at his feet. Stupefied, his gaze passed around the circle of human faces. Then, with stiff jerks, he moved off to the fringe of the lantern light and stood with his head thrown back, hands clasped tightly in front of him, staring out into the impenetrable dark.

Kirk could see Spock's shoulders quivering as the Vulcan made a desperate effort to control the uncontrollable.

McCoy knelt beside Scotty, laboring feverishly to restore breath to that limp body.

Christine got her hand out of her mouth and went to help the doctor.

Shortly, Scotty groaned .. a small, rusty gurgle. McCoy said over his shoulder to Kirk, "He'll be all right. Some bad bruises, but nothing serious."

Relieved, the captain nodded and turned his attention to his First Officer. The Vulcan's shoulders had resumed their natural slump and his breathing had quieted. Kirk went cautiously up to the Vulcan and spoke in a soft whisper, "Spock?"

He thought he saw a slight nod. He said a little louder, "Spock, are you all right?"

With a deep sigh, the dark figure turned, "No, Captain, I am not all right. But it doesn't matter."

The wan light from the distant lanterns showed an older Spock, fatigue lines etched

in charcoal down his face. The rough voice was lax, almost toneless in defeat.

"Spock, what happened? What was that flower?"

The Vulcan took another breath of the warm night air, blinked once and turned to stagger up the hillside. Kirk followed sensing an explanation formulating somewhere behind those sunken eyes.

But when they reached the small circle of light and the pile of back packs, Spock seated himself on a stone, propped his elbows on his knees and folded his hands. Kirk waited while McCoy helped Scotty up the slope. Christine set about straightening up.

At length Spock looked at Kirk and said, as if no time had passed since his question, "It doesn't matter, Captain. Tonight, the Blooming will finish ... everything."

"What blooming?"

Spock gestured in the direction of the smashed blossom, "That is the flower of a plant that Blooms about every eighty years. The species is very old. And it is dying out. But there are still a few areas where the Blooms cover the land on the Night of the Blooming."

He paused, then drew a deep breath, "Now I know why T'Aniyeh is frightened."

"I still don't get it. Why be afraid of a pretty flower?"

"Not a flower," Spock corrected wearily, "the Blooming. The natives we fought by the shuttlecraft must have known it was coming. They knew there was nothing I could do."

Kirk's frustration was mounting. Spock was often a bit obtuse in his "explanations", but he usually made sense in his fact-mincing way. "Now, wait a minute. Let's start over again. What will the ... Blooming ... finish? And why?"

"Everything. Because the whole plan depends on me, and I'm no longer functional."

"I've seen you function in worse condition. What's so bad now?"

"In a few minutes there will be more Blooms." He shook his head, looking off into the darkness, dismissing the whole affair. "It's no use. It doesn't matter."

"I don't recall ever hearing such a defeatist attitude from you, Spock. What's got into you?"

"It's the Night of the Blooming, Captain."

"Damn it, Spock, this isn't Vulcan."

"I know, but it's too late."

"Not while I breathe, it isn't."

"But the whole plan depends on my continued breathing, and that's almost finished."

"Why!"

"Because this is the Night of the Blooming."

"And how is that going to stop your breathing?"

"It's in the fragrance, Captain. It does ... something ... accelerates ..." averting his face from Kirk's eyes he whispered, "it's ... undeniable ..."

The evasiveness rang a bell in Kirk's mind. "Ohhh! I begin to see." He thought a moment, then added, "But so infrequently? Eighty years? I'd expect seven years, perhaps...?"

"There is a theory that we are not native to Vulcan, captain. If that is so, the plants we've seen here that are also found on Vulcan may well have been imported too."

"You don't think this could be the original home world?"

Spock shook his head, "This world is no more hospitable to the Blooming species than is Vulcan." He sighed hugely, "We almost wiped ourselves out with the wanton slaughter ... with the Blooming coming less and less often with fewer and fewer plants. We solved our problems. These people chose another road. The road to extinction. And they are well along it."

Kirk thought hard. The Blooming intensified the chemical imbalance that led to pon farr. On the home world, the plant probably tied the Vulcan physiological rhythm to the seasons. But, transplanted to a new environment ... Vulcan ... or here ... the rhythm was broken. In spite of this, the Vulcans had stabilized their population. But these people were committed to racial suicide. He'd see to it they didn't take the Enterprise with them. He said, "I'm beginning to understand the problem. But why did you jump Scotty?"

Face averted .. in pain? ... or shame? ... the Vulcan half-whispered, "It is forbidden to touch a Bloom. They are as precious as the life of a child. My reaction was not logical. I would apologize. But it does not matter."

"It does matter, Spock, but apologies can wait. We're wasting time. Have you finished the mindshields?"

"Yes. But I must adjust them to the individual patterns."

Kirk rose to tower over the seated First Officer. "Well, then, get busy. We're obviously not going to have all night."

Unmoving, Spock said, "I don't trust myself. My control is normally somewhat erratic. At the moment it is virtually non-existent."

"I didn't ask for excuses, mister. That was an order."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CATHARSIS

The Vulcan looked up at the Captain, the lantern light turning his face a jaundiced yellow and his uniform shirt a sickly purple. For a moment Kirk thought he'd get solemn defiance, or simply passive disobedience. But after long consideration, Spock moved to obey.

As he gathered up the strings of colored stones he'd laid out on one of the waste high boulders, he moved like a robot, lacking both the will to defy and the drive to succeed. He wasn't stalling. He simply didn't believe there was any use to his actions.

When he had his equipment in hand, the Vulcan turned to survey the humans who were watching him warily. The choice seemed difficult, but finally he said, "Mr. Scott, come with me ... please." His tone was the impersonal one of Command. He was relaying an order from a superior. That, after all, was the prime function of a First Officer.

Scotty hesitated, looking dubiously at the captain. Kirk nodded and the engineer followed Spock down the slope to where he'd drawn the line marking the edge of the 'dze-ut' field.

Just before they crossed the line, Spock halted, placed the four strings of uncut stones on a boulder, took one and faced Scotty. From where Kirk sat, the conversation was inaudible, but Kirk was certain they were exchanging apologies. Shortly, they joined hands and took the remaining steps across the line.

Scotty's knees buckled, but before he crumpled to the ground, Spock placed two fingers on the Engineer's forehead and he straightened up as if nothing had happened. Kirk noted the placement of Spock's fingers was the same he'd used to key the Flame-spheres ... oh so long ago and far away.

Spock slipped the loop of stones about Scotty's neck and released his contact. The Engineer looked around as if saying, "Is that all there is to it? I don't feel a thing."

Spock nodded and strode back up the hill to where he'd left the other necklaces. Scotty rejoined the group, motioning McCoy to go down next.

The process was repeated. Then it was Kirk's turn.

As they faced one another near the line of demarcation, Spock said formally, "I regret the necessity, Captain ..."

"Just get on with it, Spock. We've got work to do."

"There is greater danger for you than ..."

"I realize that, but there's no choice, is there?"

"I wouldn't know. But it doesn't matter. Come with me."

He marched into the field zone and turned just in time to stay the captain's collapse.

For one fleeting instant, Kirk glimpsed the seething cauldron of molten flame that was consuming Spock's body. Then it was shut from him as impenetrable lead baffles slammed into place, locking him into the solitary confinement of his own skull. It was like being isolated in an sensory environment. A scream of hysterical panic bubbled up in his throat.

Then, two powerful hands gripped his shoulders, drawing him a few staggering paces uphill. "Jim! Relax. Give in to it."

But his heart slammed in his chest, his brain throbbed with increasing pressure, his lungs ached as if laboring to draw vacuum.

Suddenly, it was gone. As if it had never been. The world was a clear, totally three dimensional sensory realm. The panic dissipated, leaving only the minor throb of an incipient migraine.

He looked up. Spock stood before him holding the chain of stones, looking concerned for the first time since he'd throttled Scotty.

"What happened?" asked Kirk.

"What I expected. You panicked. I tried to explain ..."

"Alright. Explain now. Did I do something wrong?"

"No. The shield works both ways. A non-telepath doesn't notice. But you felt the cutting-off of an awareness that's only just developing. Normally, you don't notice it's there. But when it's gone ..."

Lips pursed, Kirk considered. He hadn't really believed Spock's theory. James Kirk a telepath? Ridiculous idea. But the others hadn't reacted like this. That seemed objective proof. Well, there wasn't time to worry about it now. "The question is, can I endure that long enough to do our job? Is there any way to lessen the effect?"

"None that I know of. Just remember that you've spent most of your life relying on your other senses. You should adjust readily enough."

Kirk nodded bracing himself, "Let's try it again."

This time Spock merely handed the string of rocks to Kirk. He put out his hand to touch it and was instantly plunged into madness.

He hung on, fighting for breath, grimly determined. He'd not lose his ship through cowardice!

Slowly, the world became visible again ... solid reality.

Spock offered, "The brain is a remarkable adaptable instrument. It can learn to interpret almost any coherent signal pattern."

Kirk nodded, panting a little, "I'm beginning to see." He put the circle over his head, "Will this stop the development of ... what you feared so much ..."

"No. It would hasten it if we were to live long enough." Serenely, he added, "But it doesn't matter."

"Spock," Kirk reprimanded severely, "I don't want you to say that again. I will not tolerate a negative attitude. It undermines morale."

The Vulcan looked at his captain then off at the horizon, "Yes, sir."

"I'll send Christine down." He turned to march up the hill, then had a second thought. Spock had been avoiding Christine so diligently. He paused, inquiring with a cocked head. Spock nodded passively, fingering the remaining chain. He didn't say it. He didn't have to. His negative attitude shone like an overloaded deflector screen.

Kirk shrugged and plodded up the hill cursing every centimeter of elevation climbed against the merciless gravity. It wasn't really all that much more than one standard g, but it was beginning to feel like twelve g's.

Spock went through the procedure for Christine with more clinical detachment than the most experienced bedpan jockey.

Then they formed up in marching line again and trudged off into the deserted night carrying their bubble of reality with them...a pale white radiance shed by an artifact of hard, physical science. Kirk clung to that symbol to balance the nightmarish effect of all the para-psychic wizardry.

About an hour later they topped another rise and came in sight of the dze-ut'. Looking at it, Kirk thought the name had an onomatopoeic sound to it. The deep guttural, ut' was very descriptive of the truncated cone erected on a jumbled heap of undressed stone that had been piled on the top of the highest hill in the whole...'forest'. It was still several miles away, but it glowed with a pulsating orange fire that made it visible against the black night. Strangely, in spite of its light, it shed no illumination.

A tall, orange ghost of a flame seemed to leap upward from the cratered center of the shorn top, pointing insolently at the heavens where the Enterprise rode its dreaming orbit.

The flame seemed like the voiced nasal, "dze-", the crackle of a whip. At that moment, Kirk would have bet his life that 'dze-ut' meant Candle of Dreams.

He said, "Spock. Do you suppose their guards will be out in full force...tonight?"

"Yes. Certainly." He eyed the Captain gravely. "It normally takes several days."

They'd passed a few more of the Blooms and spotted their phosphorescent outlines in more distant nooks. They appeared to be unfolding constantly. The Captain was surprised his First Officer was still in control of himself.

Kirk said, "My tricorder has quit completely. Can you spot any patrols with that green stone of yours?"

Spock reached into his belt pouch for the pair of crystals and brought them out. As he began to touch them together, his hands trembled uncontrollably. His fist closed over the stones, grinding them fiercely into his palm and his breath caught as if smothering a cry of pain.

Then, he swallowed and took a deep breath and his face became again a mask. He struck the picture and swept the tandem receptors in a small semi-circle.

Watching intently, Kirk counted twelve small groups of natives...all males. They were effectively surrounded.

The picture winked out and Spock staggered. The Blooms were everywhere now and even Kirk could smell the heavy, bitter odor that rode the gentle night breeze. It intensified the feeling of nightmarish unreality that gripped him.

He only wanted to get back to the ship and take her far away from this mad planet. He said, "Spock, there are too many of them. We can't hope to slip through undetected. And we've seen what they can do when they catch up with us. Our phasers are useless against them. We'll need some kind of a weapon. What about that grenade you threw at them?"

The Vulcan looked grimly uncooperative, "Remember, Captain, these devices most often destroy the user."

The other humans, smelling another lengthy conference, shed their packs and settled into a circle about their trail lantern as Kirk and Spock found seats on a boulder.

Kirk shrugged out of his harness and rubbed a sore spot on his shoulder, "What are our chances of getting through these guards without a weapon comparable to theirs?"

"Virtually zero," the Vulcan conceded with one eyebrow.

"That's what I figured. So what can we do?"

"You ordered me not to say that."

"What would you do if I ordered you to build us a weapon?"

"I'd ask what, specifically, you had in mind."

"Something with offensive potential that could be used from a distance."

"By whom?"

"Any of us."

"That limits it quite severely. I can think of only one possibility. But I doubt if I could do it at the moment."

"Will you be any more capable an hour from now?"

"No."

"Then hop to it. And remember you'll have to teach us how to use it."

"Since we were speaking hypothetically, I am curious to know what you would do if I refused to obey a direct order."

"I'd probably cry. Now shut up and get to work. That is a direct order."

Those upswept eyebrows climbed in real surprise and Spock shook his head wonderingly, "I shall never understand humans."

Kirk didn't give him a chance to elaborate. He just walked away leaving the Vulcan with his problem. Kirk knew that as long as a shred of Vulcan sanity remained, he could count on his First Officer. The real question was just how many more minutes Spock's mind would remain rational.

He dropped down among the humans and wiped his sweaty palms on his knees. McCoy said, "I don't like it, Jim."

The Engineer contributed, "Aye. He's like a flywheel with a crack in it and a drive that's pumping in just a wee bit more momentum than's healthy. I for one don't want to be anywhere

near when he breaks apart..."

"I agree with you, Scotty. But we haven't much choice. "Bones, isn't there anything you can do for him?"

"No. Nothing. If I try to use a tranquilizer on him, it would only weaken his will to resist and he'd come out of it on a rampage."

Kirk frowned, "But you were going to use something like that when he had Scotty by the throat?"

"I didn't really know what was happening, then. Besides, a phaser stun would have been worse. The Vulcans' nervous system is strange enough...and who's to say just exactly how much of Spock is Vulcan? There just isn't anything I could do. But it doesn't matter." Kirk gave him a sharp glance and he added, "He wouldn't let me. You know how they are about that sort of thing."

Kirk nodded, Scotty looked neutral. Christine was a silent automaton with a haunted look. Kirk made a mental note to recommend her for a commendation and a promotion when they got home. And a big fat bonus. And a leave to spend it on.

"Nurse Chapel," Kirk said crisply, "break out the rations. Looks like we'll be staying here for lunch."

"Yes, Sir." Her smile at his attempted levity was strained, but genuine.

Meanwhile, Spock struck a small magnesite nitron tablet in a shelter of rocks he'd piled on top of a large, flat boulder that stood about waist high. Then he emptied his belt pouches onto the bench before his fire. Even from where he sat, Kirk could see the Vulcan's hands shaking. Every few seconds, Spock threw a glance at the dze-ut' tower and Kirk could see the desperation build in those haunted eyes. Kirk felt that at any second, the First Officer would just cut and run.

The Captain rubbed his forehead, smearing the grime in the oily sweat, and ransacked his brains. There must be something they could do for Spock. He climbed to his feet and went toward his friend, determined to do something though he had no idea what.

Suddenly, Spock dropped one of the stones he was working on and clutched his hand as if burned. Then, he bent double over the painful hand, kneeling on the coarse gravel as his whole body was racked with convulsions that forced a grating moan between tight lips.

McCoy came running as Kirk knelt beside the Vulcan, grabbing his shoulders, "Spock?"

Spock shook off the touch with a jerk of his head...a soundless but frantic negation.

McCoy pointed his medical scanner and stared at it unbelievably. He shook his head. That much pain? Impossible. And...good-lord-in-heaven...the man actually had some blood pressure! He concluded his scanner must be as useless as the tricorder. "Spock, let me see that hand." McCoy knelt beside the First Officer, "Did you touch the fire?"

Again that jerk of soundless negation.

Kirk said, "Bones, you better not touch him."

McCoy sat back on his heels biting his lips in frustrated concern. Christine joined the group bringing McCoy's backpack, ready to produce whatever improbable bit of equipment the doctor should request. Kirk thought that if she said anything, she'd either scream or cry and she just wasn't about to do either.

The magnesite-nitron fire struck dazzling yellow, blue, and red highlights in the necklaces that dangled against their uniforms. Kirk was nearly shaking by the time Spock took a deep breath and sat up, examining his hand, "It's no use, Captain. I can not."

McCoy captured the injured hand, opened the fingers looking for something to treat. "What happened, Spock?"

The Science Officer turned to Kirk and said, "Do you believe in God, Captain?"

Startled, Kirk answered, "Well...I suppose I do, in a way. I guess it depends on what you mean..."

"Doesn't everything?"

"What's your point?" Kirk was intrigued. He'd never heard Spock discuss religion in personal terms.

But the Vulcan rounded on the Doctor who was vainly searching for an injury on the hand Spock seemed to have abandoned in his custody, "Doctor. When is life?"

"What? Spock, this is no time for one of your philosophical jags!"

"Can you answer the question?"



"No. What do you mean, 'when'?"

"When does a conglomerate of particles pass the border between the living and the non-living?"

"The more we learn, the less we know about that. In fact, it's debatable whether there is a border."

Spock picked up the rock he'd been handling, held it out to McCoy, "Is this alive?"

McCoy took it, pointed his scanner at it dubiously, turned it over in the flickering light. It was a blue-green crystal, clear as glass...no, it had internal facets like a diamond. It caught the light of the fire and threw it back multiplied. It was beautiful.

"Well, I don't know. It looks like a gemstone to me. It's certainly not like any life I've ever encountered before...which doesn't mean much."

"Your caution is commendable, Doctor. But you don't really believe it to be alive. If it were life, say on the order of the hydra or a coral colony, would you hesitate to destroy it for your own ends?"

"Depends. Not senselessly. But to save a life of a higher order...myself for example...yes. We do it all the time. Even you do that routinely."

"True." He continued to gaze into the blue-green depths as if searching for an answer...or seeking to apologize.

When it was clear Spock wouldn't continue, Kirk said, "You pick the damndest time to wax philosophical."

Those dark eyes flicked to Kirk and locked stares with him, "Jim, I cannot. I am not able to do this thing. Millenia ago, my ancestors chose a different path. That decision is not mine to change."

"I'm not asking you to change it. Only to meet these natives with force in kind. We do that routinely on the Enterprise, too."

"This is not the Enterprise."

"But the discipline of the Service extends even to this situation."

"True. Up to a point."

"And a bit beyond."

Spock didn't answer that. Kirk motioned the others away. He wanted to try to reach Spock in private. When the humans had settled around their lantern, about ten yards away, Kirk said very quietly, "I've never known you to give up like this."

"Nature's...imperatives...cannot be defied."

"I...I've brushed up against one of those imperatives...lightly...second hand..." Kirk pursed his lips, nodding appreciatively. His recent contacts with Spock's mind had given him a deep respect for the power of the pon farr. "But, Spock, if you were really trying, you'd have found another way. What are you going to do? Just sit here until..." Kirk bit his lip. He'd absorbed some Vulcan manners in the last few years...and there were some things that just weren't spoken.

Kirk watched Spock's face. There was anguish there or he'd turn in his captain's braid. Spock's answer, when it came, was a fierce whisper, "What do you know of it?"

"Oh, you've given me a jolt now and again. Or have you forgotten what happened when you plucked me out of dreamland?"

"That? That was nothing. Fringe effect. Spurious noise."

"I got another whiff of smoke when you gave me this." He fingered the necklace.

"Twenty orders of magnitude less than significant."

"That was hours ago. I'll grant it's much worse now. I'm not asking...or expecting...you to go much farther. But we need that weapon, Spock. If there's any conceivable way you can give it to us...we need it...if you're to accomplish your own...private...goals."

Spock looked off into the impenetrable night, "Suvil...my father's father...died experimenting with these things. He was an expert. He spent decades winnowing through fragmentary documents classifying, systematizing, searching for something useful among the dross."

"And he taught you everything he knew?"

"Yes. But it wasn't enough to save him."

Frowning, Kirk asked, "Are you afraid to die?"

"At the moment, I am incapable of endangering my life. Soon that will pass. Then it will be too late."

"Well, we're not going to wait around for that to happen. We'll find a safer way to do the job."

"That is impossible."

"Oh? Have you tried?"

Suddenly, Spock looked at Kirk, "No."

Kirk pounced on that, but in a low whisper that could not carry through the thin air to the other humans, "Now that's what I call illogical. Spock, you've been sulking like a spoiled brat denied an icecream cone before dinner. Next you'll be crying crocodile tears into your beer and singing the blues. I'd like to impress your engrams on a computer...the resulting torrential flood of illogic would be most amusing."

For a moment, Kirk thought Spock had suddenly lost the ability to understand English.

Then the corners of the Vulcan's mouth quirked upward and crinkle lines appeared under the upswept eyebrows. Slowly, as if cracking a sarcophagus mask, the stone face softened, melted and poured itself into a smile that grew until little snorts of unsuppressible laughter bubbled out of the tense, Vulcan throat.

A phrase popped into Kirk's mind, "Like sunrise over a dark swamp." As the transformation took place before his eyes, Kirk became dismayed. But laughter is infectious. Suddenly, he saw the perfectly ridiculous picture he'd painted and he began to chuckle.

Spock laughed experimentally.

Kirk guffawed.

The other humans were attracted by the noise and plodded over to see what was going on. Hands on hips, the two men looked from their Captain to their First Officer and back again.

Deeming his experiment a success, Spock laughed heartily.

Kirk joined him.

In unison, McCoy and Scotty chuckled.

Christine snickered.

Spock was laughing with a single minded concentration which loosed peals of laughter from the others.

Kirk gasped and tried to wipe the grin off his face with the palm of one hand, "Oh, come on now, it wasn't that funny."

Spock was kneeling, doubled over with his head on his kneed, wheezing helplessly. He seemed to be giving himself to the job enthusiastically, making no effort to restrain the mirth or to conserve energy for other tasks.

Worried now, Kirk said, "Spock? Honestly, it wasn't all that funny."

But the Vulcan's eyes were streaming as he shook soundlessly to wave after wave of convulsions, each stronger than the last. Without measuring, McCoy was certain that no human would ever attain such a state from laughter alone. Suddenly, the sight of Spock laughing didn't seem funny any more.

Then the Vulcan gasped and went under for the third time.

McCoy knelt beside the Captain, "Jim, what did you say to him?"

"I doubt if he'd appreciate my telling you. Why don't you ask him?"

"I'd be afraid to...if he ever stops laughing."

McCoy was awed by the scene...and more than a little apprehensive. Just how much of that Spock's system could take, he didn't know.

Kirk was beginning to be frightened by what he'd done.

Shaking his head, Spock drew a deep breath and let out another unrestrained howl of excruciating mirth. Now, Kirk concluded, he was laughing because he was laughing. He knew from experience, that that was a positive feedback that could go on for hours. Resigned, he said, "Well, go ahead and laugh, but try to keep it quiet. We don't want to attract any unwanted attention."

At the next gasp, the First Officer massaged the unfamiliar ache in his jaw and went right on laughing, but more quietly.

McCoy and Kirk traded looks.

Kirk checked his tricorder for the time.

They waited.

After McCoy's awe had turned completely to grave concern and Kirk's fear had transmuted to despair, the Vulcan's guffaws turned to chuckles, subsided to snickers and vanished. His face transformed from an ear-to-ear-grin to ghost-of-a-smile that vanished into solemn stone sarcophagous. Eyes closed, relaxed, opened again to reveal...Spock. The familiar, lively but unemotional Spock.

One elegantly disdainful eyebrow arched slightly, "I see. Yes. Most curiously useful capacity." He frowned, "A secondary, cathartic channel. Not total...and far from complete... but, useful." Both eyebrows in innocent surprise, "Fascinating!"

The humans traded glances all around. Spock took the opportunity to rise.

Kirk checked his tricorder. Fifteen minutes. Undoubtedly a Vulcan record. Human blood! Scandalous.

Rising, McCoy said, "Tears are a third channel, Spock. Don't underrate them. They can be even more effective than laughter. And, under some circumstances, humans have been known to laugh and cry at the same time."

Thoroughly his old self again, Spock enunciated, "So I have observed, Doctor."

Kirk made a mental log entry, "Commander Spock has demonstrated an intuitive grasp of human psychology under field conditions."

Spock was examining the array of 'raw materials' laid out in front of his fire.  
"Doctor?"

"Yes?"

"I'm going to attempt to summon a ghost. But all I may accomplish is to create one. I am half-human and somewhat...distant...from the Vulcan racial memory. But I am also katayikh-trained and Affirmed. I am the Continuity when I so choose. Perhaps I can use my human half to insulate myself from the...ghost...of one who might have helped us had he lived in our time. If it works, it will be the first time any Vulcan has lived through a Summoning. If it fails, I shall be dead. I doubt if there can be any median degree of success...but...if" he drew a shaky breath, "Doctor, see to it that he does no harm to anyone else."

"I understand," McCoy whispered.

Spock chose several items from his stock and paced out a large circle around the humans, placing his stones on the perimeter at precise intervals so that the magnesite-nitron fire occupied the circumference just opposite a large, gold crystal. Then he motioned the humans to leave the circle.

McCoy stood on Kirk's right, Scotty and Christine on his left as they watched the strange performance. All four humans were too dazed to say or do anything.

Spock took one of the other stones from his makeshift workbench, bound it to a long shaft which he produced from his pack, and held it into the hottest part of the magnesite flame.

Kirk knew the flame wasn't really very hot, but presently the stone began to glow... that peculiar, clear orange color that he'd learned to fear. Spock took the glowing stone and planted its shaft in the center of the circle. Then, he took another shaft, another stone, and held it in the fire. Soon, it glowed blood-red...a fearsome, rich color far more chilling than the clear orange. This one he set aside as he repeated the procedure once more, obtaining a blue-green glow.

Then he took the red one in his left hand and the blue-green one in his right and traveled the perimeter of his circle, touching each of the markers with the red stone and then with the blue-green. As each marker-stone was touched, it took fire and glowed with its own hue until the circle was a rainbow against the dark night.

Kirk didn't notice when somebody extinguished the trail lanterns. The fire and the multi-color glowstones were the only source of light under the stars.

When he'd finished his circuit, Spock seated himself crosslegged facing the fire still holding the red and blue glowstones on their short, black poles. The top of the Vulcan's head came almost level with the bottom of the magnesite fire enshrined on top of the boulder.

Then nothing happened. Nothing happened for so long that the humans sat down, too.

The steady glow from the circle of lights, the darkness around and the silhouette of Spock with his deeply lined face lit by the eerie blue-green and blood-red glowstones he held,

combined to create an hypnotic effect that soon had Kirk's eyes drooping.

He fought that drowsiness valiantly for many hours. But, the gravity, thin air, and fatigue finally won.

## CHAPTER 8

### Breaking Point

Hot fingers of sun were burning his neck when Kirk woke. He squinted against the brilliance. Scotty, McCoy and Christine were beginning to stir beside him. The circle had been dismantled, but the magnesite fire still burned. The three glowstones, planted to form a triangle in the center of the circle, still glowed visibly against the sunlight of early morning.

Spock stood before the waist-high rock table where the blue fire still dwelt behind its rock shield. His back was to Kirk, his arms braced still, propping his shoulders up while his head drooped on his chest. He looked like a deflated scarecrow.

Kirk staggered to his feet, ignoring the sharp ache in his joints. "Spock?"

The Vulcan shifted his weight. But he gave no other response.

Kirk stumbled forward, cocking an eye at the bright sky and the swiftly vanishing shadows, "Spock..."

The Vulcan turned, a hundred years older, drained, but taut as a lytherette string. Gesturing to the three glowing stones, he said in a rusty whisper, "Take them. No living thing will menace you as long as you hold them."

"Fine. But what about you...?"

There was a haunted desperation beneath the Vulcan's dry, cracked surface. He was breathing hard, his usually neat hair standing in dirt-encrusted spikes. His face glistened with the oily Vulcan perspiration. His eyes were wild, shifting pits of darkness that returned again and again to the dze-ut' tower.

"Spock..."

"Leave me alone! LEAVE ME ALONE!!" It was the scream of an outraged animal pushed beyond fury, beyond madness.

Before Kirk could move, Spock bolted down the hill, careening in a wild gallop around the largest rocks, leaping others, heedless of scrapes and bruises.

"Bones! We've got to stop him!" Kirk snapped as he took off after his First Officer.

Unable to control his headlong dash down the hill, Kirk leaped a small boulder, climbed the next and launched himself in a flying tackle at the Vulcan who was starting up the far slope.

The Captain landed soundly on top...and rolled desperately, trying to evade the sledge-hammer blows of flailing arms.

Scotty arrived just as Kirk tripped the Vulcan and knelt on his back, capturing his right arm in a hammerlock. The Engineer threw himself on the First Officer's left arm, heedless of the clouds of dust. McCoy came between them with a hypo to the base of Spock's spine.

Five seconds later, Spock was out cold and the humans relaxed.

Scotty looked down at the prone body. "Well, what now?"

"Bones, how long will that hold him?"

"Eight...maybe ten hours. But when he comes out of it, nothing will stop him this side of the grave."

"Except..." said Kirk.

"Right. Except..."

Kirk sighed, scanning the hills, thinking. He could see patches of Blooms everywhere. The bitter smell had turned stifling-sweet. Thankfully, he spotted a dark hole that promised some shelter and an opportunity to refill their canteens.

"Help me get him up there." Kirk pointed out this refuge, "We'll take the dze-ut' apart in broad daylight since we've no choice."

Sweat streamed off them, making two-inch rivulets in the accumulated grime before

the air could dry up the rare moisture. Drops fell from Scotty's chin and evaporated almost before striking ground. But, somehow, the three of them hauled the limp, dust caked body up the hillside and into the shelter.

Kirk staggered back outside wiping his brow in the crook of his elbow, "Come on, let's get Christine and the packs."

An hour later, the three men were out on the desert-forest staggering under the burden of the vicious sun. They'd left Christine with Spock because McCoy insisted someone had to be with a man under such heavy sedation...and because he'd privately informed Kirk she just wouldn't be able to walk half a mile in the sun...pride or no pride.

They left their packs and took only their canteens, phasers, communicators, belt lights and the glowstones mounted on the short sticks...which Kirk now recognized as the legs of a tripod from the exploring kit. McCoy had his belt medikit, Scotty had a tricorder slung over his shoulder and, of course, they still wore the mindshield necklaces.

And that was almost too much. They were all sagging well before the sun hit zenith. Kirk called a halt as he took a new line-of-sight reading on their target, plotting a course around the worst obstructions up the side of the next hill.

McCoy swigged sparingly from his canteen, "The one thing Spock didn't bring is sunglasses."

Scotty said, "I didn't know we stocked them."

Kirk said, "We don't. I have a pair in my cabin."

"Aye. Me, too."

McCoy snorted, "Vulcans probably never heard of them."

Kirk nodded ruefully and plunged down the hill with his improvised burnoose flapping in the breeze of his passage. There were a lot of things Vulcans had never heard of. Sometimes he wished he were one of them.

After miles of up-and-down-and-detrou, Kirk noticed that the Blooms first exposed to the rising sun were wilting. They wouldn't last the day.

Later, he seemed to remember that 140 degrees Fahrenheit was the most the human body could tolerate. He was certain it was hotter than that already. His feet burned inside his boots, his nose and throat would never be the same again, and what he wanted most in all creation was to plunge into the cool, green depths of the Enterprise's swimming pool and set up housekeeping. No Vulcan would ever find him there!

He couldn't believe it when he tore his sweat-glued eyes open and saw the orange glow of the dze-ut' right above his head. Some effort of will moved his numb legs one after the other until he'd swayed and staggered the last hundred yards uphill. He looked back to see Scotty helping McCoy get up off his knees...or was it McCoy helping Scotty?

He lost his balance and plunged through the insubstantial, glowing orange wall...and sprawled headlong on the cold, wet floor. The air was dense with fog droplets that glowed like orange-gelatine swallowing the light from the red glowstone scepter he still clutched in one sharply aching fist.

He picked himself up, turning this way and that. Which way had he come in? Which way to damsel in distress? He felt giddy. He stifled a giggle and was suddenly seized by a gooseflesh shiver and a fit of trembling at the icy cold air.

Wrapping his arms about his torso, he pulled his head into his shirt collar and remembered how Spock had shivered with cold after he'd accidentally contacted Tanya. She must be here.

He called, "Tanya?" But it came out a miserable croak that barely carried to his own ears. He swallowed gritty sand, unlimbered his canteen and tried again, "Tanya!"

McCoy's voice answered, "Jim?"

"Over here, Bones. See any sign of Tanya? Or of anything else?"

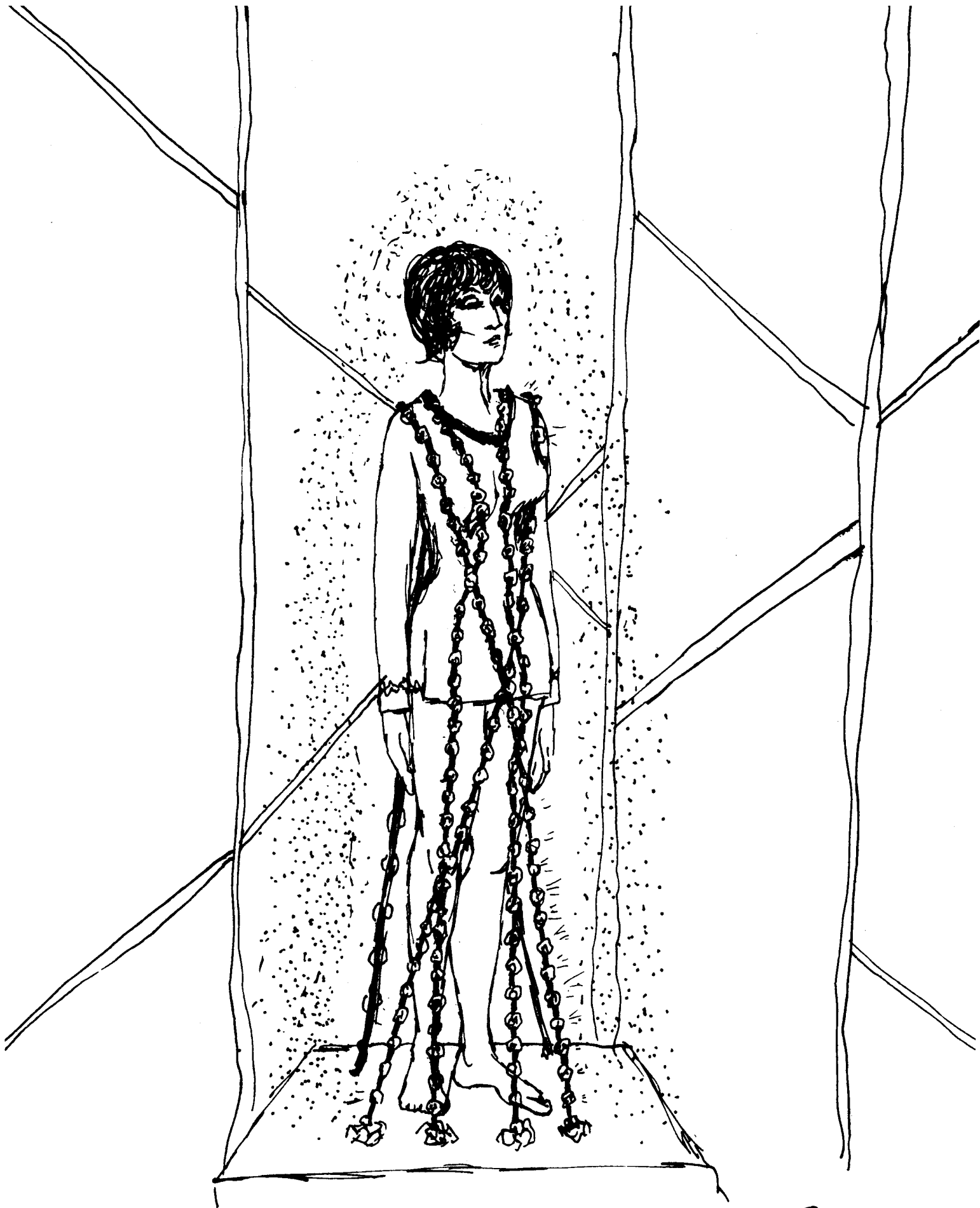
"No. They've captured a genuine Kentucky fog in here."

"I dinna think so," said Scotty, "it's a prime example of an Aberdeen fog...except for the color."

A warm hand joined Kirk's elbow and then another on his other side. Kirk peered hard and could just make out the tousled hair of his Engineer. McCoy's touch was distinctive enough.

"O.K. Spread out in a line and move forward carefully. The first one to encounter something, sing out. And hang onto your glowstones. It's a long way back."

McCoy nodded, remembering all those natives that had eyed them cautiously, from a respectful distance. Then he manned the end of their line and advanced.



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The line jerked, and Scotty let out a juicy, Gaelic curse, "A wall here, Captain."

They converged on the discovery to find a large, rectangular box standing on its small end and open on the far side. They circled around until they all stood in front of the open side of the box. The fog was clearer here.

Kirk surged forward, "Tanya!"

McCoy pulled him back, "Hold it, Jim. Don't touch her. We've no idea what we're doing."

Kirk subsided. He had absolutely no idea what to do next.

"All right, Scotty, have a look at it."

"Aye, Sir. But mind you, I'm not this kind o' engineer."

"I know. Just see if you can untangle this mess into its components."

Kirk surveyed the 'mess' soberly. A cocoon of strings, ropes and cables was woven about the girl. Glowing stones hung in festoons from her shoulders, pulsed in madly clashing colors. She stood on a clear, orange pedestal, rigid as a statue and as conscious as marble. Her eyes were open, but she did not see. Nothing appeared to support her weight or maintain her balance, but she stood.

Kirk left McCoy and Scotty at work and circled around the box, keeping the fingers of one hand brushing the wall while he flailed the fog with the other. He struck something, and let go of Tanya's box to go see what he'd found.

It was another box nearly identical to Tanya's, but it contained the biologist who'd gone down with the landing party. He'd been a small man. Now, he was a crumpled mummy, shriveled and blacked grotesquely, and shrouded in strings of dead jewels.

Shaken, Kirk circled back to the group and reported his find.

McCoy said, "She's alive, Jim...but more than that, I can't say."

"I canna make anything out of this, Captain. There are no circuits in the conventional sense."

Kirk chewed his lip speculatively examining the misty ceiling. Far above, the Enterprise slept in orbit. His closest friend lay dying in a dirt cave. Neither could survive much longer.

Decisively, the Captain slipped off his necklace, dropped it into McCoy's hands, along with his blood-red scepter, and reached over to cup Tanya's stone-rigid, ice-cold cheeks in his hands.

He had no idea how to establish mental contact deliberately. He concentrated on his need to know how to disconnect her from the circuit.

Suddenly, his skull was riven asunder by a diamond chisel, split like a coconut smashed onto a gleaming machete. His mind was fragmented and sucked out by an irresistible vacuum, quick-frozen by an intense cold that turned him...inside out...

She was ensnared at the center of a complex web of forces, laid in intricate patterns throughout her mind. The dynamic throb of energy pouring in through some of those lines had to be re-vectored, focused and sent coursing out along other lines before the next surge arrived. She could stop the outward flow, dam the energy within herself and refuse the compulsion laid upon her. That much she'd accomplished by will alone. And it had been no small task. But, it had taken too long. She no longer had the will to suicide.

HIS CALL BURNED IN HER!!

It could not be denied.

She must break the web that bound her. She must be gone before those...savages...settled their quarrel and returned. It didn't matter which of them won first-rights to her. She would not allow another's touch. She was already possessed. And she burned.

Her hands. She must move her hands. She must unweave the net that held her. First this thread. Now this. And the next. Carefully. None must touch the next. Freedom is dear, but not so dear as life. And danger is great where there is such power. The web is tangled. First this half of this line, then half of the next. Back to the first. Quickly now. Control diminishes. Fury rages. Body wild. It cannot be controlled. And it should not be. It is wrong to try. Swiftly new hands. We must leave. We are CALLED. When one cannot move, the other must. The way is long. Time is short. But not so short as life. Calm and steady hands...or all is lost. This line is alive. Handle it gently. I am nexus and focus. All power resides in me...the others are all dead. They were too weak of body and too strong of ignorance. They fought the power line and died. This line is the life of the hundreds above and of us below. Lift it stone by stone from my body, place each link carefully, oh so gently down on the base, make the circle exactly inscribed in the square, then spiral inward to the center. Now the right foot. Lift it toe first, then heel, put the next stone in its

place. I am falling. It does not matter! Quickly, the last stone ... exactly where the left toe was! Before the heel loses contact!!

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!!!

The scream tore from two open throats, undulated, instinctive terror. The explosion numbed the mind, tinting every brain cell, every blood cell with bright, clear orange gelatin lit in a searing flash, destroying, welding, healing.

Kirk opened his eyes. Aside from a throbbing ache that pervaded his body, he felt reasonably well. The fog was already dissipating, revealing far to one side a steaming trough of water and two other upright, rectangular boxes near the wispy orange walls that were fading slowly, allowing more daylight to filter through. In places, the skeleton of the tower was becoming visible where the mist had already thinned.

The captain climbed to his feet, Scotty at his elbow. The Engineer seemed bewildered, but apparently unhurt. Tanya lay on her back, a tiny figurine, on the rough, clammy stone floor. McCoy bent over her as if afraid to do anything but read her vital signs. Kirk went to her, glancing at the medical scanner over McCoy's shoulder. Most of the readings were off the top of the scale.

"Jim, I've never seen anything like this..."

Suddenly the lifeless doll rolled onto her stomach, got her leg under her and stood.

Kirk said, "Tanya?"

Her back to the humans, she seemed intent on the horizon that was still invisible beyond the misty orange walls. She took three jerky steps toward the wall. Then, slowly, as if moving under water, she broke into a run, leapt the water trough, and disappeared into the ragged orange mist.

"Jim! She's barefoot! And bareheaded!"

Kirk grabbed the blood red scepter and took off after the girl at a dead run.

Scotty and McCoy traded glances and plunged after.

When they broke out of the mist, Tanya was already half way down the hill running lightly, oblivious of the scorching rocks. Kirk was a hundred yards behind and not gaining. As she made the bottom of the hill, Scotty and McCoy launched themselves after the captain.

On the far upslope, Tanya hardly slackened pace but Kirk fought a losing battle against the gravity and air.

McCoy pounded up the hill, "Jim, wait! You'll never catch her like this."

Huffing, the doctor slapped at his medikit, "Tri-ox ... and a stimulant. Take a couple swallows ... water."

When they'd all had the prescribed treatment, they took off again, at a saner pace. Scotty took the lead setting their line with the tricorder which now worked fairly well on some circuits. They caught occasional glimpses of Tanya's head as she topped the next ridge. Several parties of natives watched from a distance. Every time they paused, Kirk tried his communicator, but without luck. Fear pumped his heart as his body mechanically executed the grim task his mind had set. It was almost beyond human endurance.

Panting at the top of one ridge, Kirk checked the tricorder. Spock would be coming out of it any minute. He shuddered to think of Tanya, such a fragile doll of a woman, confronting a beserk Vulcan almost twice her size.

The same thought was crossing Christine's mind as Spock tossed feverishly on the damp, earthen floor. For the first time in her life, she was scared to death of the Vulcan. What would happen if he woke before the others got back?

In his peculiar way, he was the most gentle man she'd ever met. The tragedy of his very existence melted her heart... all the more because he never allowed it to show. She still wanted to be his. She had to admit that to herself. Yet, he'd chosen another. And even though she felt terribly, possessively jealous, still she prayed that Tanya would give him the happiness he so deserved. Who was to say his choice wasn't the wisest?

In all honesty, she asked herself, if she'd been chosen, could she face him when he was like ... this? She didn't know. And she was sure her tempestuous, contradictory emotions destroyed her attractiveness for him. He'd known it for years. She told herself sternly that she must learn that lesson and learn it well. Now.

But still, she wanted him. She called it "love" because she knew no other name for such tender desire. And yet, his life was now tied to another. Tears started to her eyes.

This would never do. A nurse must not become so personally involved with a patient. She sniffed, knuckled her eyes, and ducked out into the merciless sun.



After a quick glance all around, she scrambled up the slope and peered in the direction of the tower. Would they never come?

Spock groaned. It was the first sound he'd made since the doctor had injected the sedative. And the demanding urgency in that simple, unarticulated sound sent a shiver down her spine.

She squinted hard against the sun.. Where was that tower? Hadn't it been ... it was gone! She stood up to get a better look.

The hills danced with heat shimmer, and her eyes streamed from the painful brilliance, but she thought she could make out several moving figures. Heart thumping, she made her way back to the refuge to prepare rations, water, and skin salve.

Then she tried to raise the ship on the communicator.

No luck.

Another dreadful groan from the Vulcan.

She went outside with the communicator, keeping one eye on her patient and one on the top of the ridge above her head. There was absolutely nothing she could do except keep trying to raise the Enterprise. If the captain were moving, he wouldn't have breath to chat with her ... and nothing could make him come faster, of that she was certain.

The hillside was in shadow now that the sun had passed its zenith and she bore the heat with steadfast determination. It seemed like the longest ... and most helpless ... vigil she'd ever kept. The groans came more and more frequently. She'd removed all the rocks from his vicinity so he couldn't hurt himself as he thrashed about. But he'd rolled in the dirt so much he'd become covered with damp soil. All she could do was listen and keep out of the way.

Eventually, she heard a rock-rolling scramble up the far side of her hill and she dodged into her cave mouth, under the protecting umbrella of Spock's sensor-nullifying device. At least, it was supposed to confound the directional fix of the natives'... whatever-they-used.

The purposeful, frantic scramble came down the near side of the hill above the cave and dislodged several rocks that went careening past the entrance followed by a mud-caked apparition in Starfleet red.

The body sprawled headlong into the soft, dry sand and lay prone for an instant before rising onto bare feet. Black hair, whitened with dust, prominent nose, flared nostrils, mouth open in a snarling pant, cracked lips, red blood oozing into the sweat caked dirt. It was Tanya Minos ... but a frightening visage, hardly the same crisply pert girl who was always so patiently willing to teach and so burningly curious to learn.

Stunned, Christine didn't know what to do. Where was the captain? What had happened out there?

Another agonized groan rent the air and the feverishly tossing Vulcan rolled to his knees, panting wildly. His hair stood out straight from his head in a spikey crown and he was totally covered with black, red and ochre dirt.

With a stomach knotting thrill of fear, Christine realized that she stood between the two. Tensely, she backed off and sidled around to stand outside the cave and behind Tanya. There, she froze, transfixed by the tightly leashed ferocity of the confrontation.

Spock crouched within the moist, dark cave; Tanya faced him on the dry, shadowed sand and it seemed as if an elastic cord binding them together, was contracting, drawing them inexorably into each other's arms. Slowly, with tiny steps, they seemed to float toward each other, almost as if afraid of the inevitable contact.

Suddenly, Christine felt the captain's arms around her waist and she collapsed gratefully against his solid strength. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Scotty and the doctor slide to a halt just behind Kirk, but she couldn't take her eyes off the vignette enacted before her.

As Spock straightened, Tanya glided into the tunnel, walking smoothly, unmindful of her feet. As the couple approached each other, they traded low murmuring sentences that didn't carry to the humans through the thin air. Finally, the Vulcans raised both hands, fingers separated in the Vulcan way and joined in a delicate contact, palm to palm ... finger to finger ... eyes locked in silent communion.

The captain pulled his communicator, "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Enterprise. Chen here. Captain?"

"I'll explain later. Lieutenant. Get a fix on this communicator. Wide scan. Six to beam up. Energize then take the ship out of orbit, course one, one, seven mark zero, warp factor six."

"Aye, sir. One, one, seven, mark zero ... warp six."

Presently, the forest/desert vanished in a sparkling whirl while Kirk was laying odds with himself that Spock's first words when he returned to duty would be, "Captain, striking a fellow officer is a court marshal offense."

Somehow, Kirk didn't think that Scotty would remember the incident. Most likely it was all a hallucination.

The familiar soft blue walls of the transporter coalesced around him.

Suddenly, bright orange gelatin exploded behind his eyes and his right arm went numb with a searing cold that oozed up to his shoulder and down his spinal column and sent him pitching forward into blackness.

Shocked by the sudden glare of the disintegrating glowstones, Spock turned to see Scotty, McCoy and the captain collapse.

Distantly, he knew what had happened. The artificial stresses he'd constructed at the gravity-field nexus had collapsed under the influence of the transporter beam; the tangential shear planes that intersected the adjacent living beings had disorganized their nervous systems.

All of this he knew, but it didn't seem important. It was so difficult to focus his mind on such irrelevant trivia.

As his hands sought T'Aniyeh's, he heard his voice giving instructions to Nurse Chapel for immediate treatment of the three victims. But afterwards, he had no memory of what he'd said.

#### EPILOG

Captain's Log, Supplemental: Stardate 7-2759.9

Mr. Spock assures me that there will be no further after-effects of the disintegration of the glowstones that nearly killed Dr. McCoy, Mr. Scott and myself, provided we do not encounter further phenomena of that order for several years. I recommend First Officer Spock for a citation for Dedication Above and Beyond the Call of Duty for his performance throughout this entire action.

The Enterprise is now on course for the dark star cited above as 'anomalous'.

First Officer Spock has the con.

THE END

## Errata volume one

My favorite typo from the first volume of Kraith Collected has got to be the carefully corrected "demonstarting" for "demonstrating". Oh, well, at least I knew something was wrong.

My deepest apologies to Ruth Beruan for misspelling the title of her story "The Disaffirmed" as "The Disaffimed". And a fervent wish for the Great Bird of the Galaxy to do something nasty on John Benson for misspelling "Coup de Partie" as "Coup de Patrie". I almost didn't catch that one.

But the nastiest, rottenest, meanest thing I did in the first volume was to neglect to mention the name of the person who wrote the poem in Anna Mary Hall's story "A Matter of Priority". And I'm going to do something even worse. I have managed to misplace her name, and didn't know it until about five minutes ago when I sat down to type this page. Whoever-you-are please contact me and I'll give you credit where credit is due.

Anyone know a convenient hole I could crawl into?

It was, it was,  
it was Shirley  
MAIEWSKI!

