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of

dreams



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WEAVER OF DREAMS

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WEAVER OF DREAMS

Part 1 - Arwen

A slight breeze stirred the fallen leaves underfoot, as the three men made their way along the gravel path towards the administration buildings. The branches of the tall trees growing on each side of the pathway swayed gently, releasing more russet coloured leaves to flutter groundwards.

"This'd be a good place for shore leave, Jim."

"Hmm," Kirk agreed. "But we're here on business, Bones."

"As usual," came the rueful reply.

An elegant eyebrow soared. "I was unaware that we had visited this planet before, Doctor."

"Confound it, Spock! You know what I meant. Whenever we wind up somewhere half decent, it's always official business."

As he spoke, they were passing a large bush laden with berries. From it, issued a tuneful whistling. They paused for a moment, intrigued. They still had several minutes before their appointment with the administrator, and with that in mind, Kirk parted two branches.

They peered through. Crouched behind the bush, her back to them, was a young woman. She seemed to be packing the remains of her breakfast into a small, shabby sack. The long dress she wore was patterned with bright checks, and on her head was a strange, floppy hat, pale green with a bright yellow feather thrust at a jaunty angle into the hat band. Her long ginger hair spilled out from beneath it. She whistled as she drew from the sack a slim woodwind instrument, which she raised to her lips.

Kirk smiled at his companions, and all three stepped back onto the path. As they did so, a series of exquisitely sweet notes trilled out from the bush, stopping them in their tracks. The notes flowed on, rising and falling in an alien melody. Drawn, in spite of themselves, the three men crept back to their vantage points.

The woman now sat cross-legged, her fingers brushing lightly over the positions on the instrument. As he watched, a movement seen from the corner of his eye attracted Kirk's attention, and with an effort, he pulled his gaze away towards it.

A small animal, about the size of a terrestrial squirrel, was bounding over the grass towards the player. And, not that Kirk was free to notice such things, he could see small, brightly-coloured birds soaring down from the trees to alight upon the ground nearby. They hopped closer, seemingly as oblivious of the three men as the girl herself.

An exceptionally bold small animal leaped onto the girl's knee and swarmed up onto her shoulder. It perched there, listening, its head on one side, a look of rapt enjoyment in its dark eyes.

The tune drew to a close, and the girl lowered the instrument from her lips. With a squeal of fright, the tiny animal jumped to the ground and fled. The birds took off in a cloud, bright as flower petals, and in a moment, all the wild creatures had vanished.

Kirk blinked, as if released from a trance. In an undertone, he said, "I think we'd better get to the administrator's office, gentlemen - I have a feeling that we're overdue!"

"Correct, Captain - by two minutes, fifty three point four seconds," Spock's internal time sense was still functioning.

They began to walk quickly towards the white-fronted building ahead.

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As they were ushered into the Administrator's presence, he came forward to greet them, a tall, slim man with a lined face.

"I apologise for our late arrival, Mr. Berek," said Kirk, after the formality of introductions had been completed.

"That's perfectly all right, Captain. I realise that you have a busy schedule."

Kirk gave the man a quick, searching glance, but detected no sarcastic intent in his expression. Berek went on. "I'm very glad that you're here - we've received threats from misguided individuals - "

"What kind of threats, sir?"

"That unless we returned the animals to their 'natural environment' before your arrival, action would be taken - all absolute nonsense; the animals aren't even wild specimens - but I've had extra guards and attendants watching them nevertheless."

"What exactly are their objections?" Spock asked.

"They feel that the chauks will be subjected to vivisection techniques; it's useless to explain the importance of this research, or that the scientists will be anxious to keep as many of the animals alive as possible."

Kirk nodded. "Yes, this is more Dr. McCoy's field than mine. Bones?"

"Well, Jim, there have been folk tales here for generations, apparently, that the substance produced by scent glands on the flanks of the animals has a powerful therapeutic effect. Outback doctors use it as a cure-all in ointments for wounds, medicines for fevers and infections - not always successfully, of course - but enough results have been achieved to make the Federation Medical Council interested in finding out one way or another."

"You said that the animals are not wild, Dr. Berek?"

"That's correct, Captain. They've been domesticated for centuries by the outback doctors that Dr. McCoy mentioned. Some chauks still exist in the wild, but the ones that the Federation is buying for this research have been purchased from the medics. That's why the price is so high - some of them drove a pretty hard bargain even though we weren't depriving them of their livelihood; they each have several animals so that they can breed their own stock. Anyway, we chose domestic chauks as they'd adapt more easily to laboratory conditions - they're already used to Human handling. If you'd like to come with me now, gentlemen, I'll take you to the holding room."

Berek led them down a corridor to double doors guarded by two men. As one opened a door for them, a faint odour wafted out, slightly sweet and not unpleasant.

"That odour - it's produced by the scent glands," Berek explained, as he ushered them down the corridor beyond, to a second set of doors, also guarded. "You can see I've had adequate security, Captain."

Beyond these second doors was a room in which various white-robed attendants were preparing containers of dried grasses. A short, grey-haired man bustled towards the visitors.

"This is Connors, an expert in the care of these animals," Berek said after he had introduced them.

"Mr. Berek - we were just preparing to feed the chauks - do you want them transported now?"

"No, we wish merely to inspect them."

Connors reached into a pocket of his tunic, and produced a flat, rectangular piece of plastic. "Shall I open the door for you, sir?"

"No, thank you, Connors. I have my own key with me."

Berek led them to a door on one side of the room. "We have a hundred thousand tons of foodstuffs, Captain, all ready for transport, and more than adequate



for the voyage. I will give you the co-ordinates for that later. Connors and the rest of his team are packed and ready to leave..."

As he spoke, he had placed his electronic key against a plaque on the wall. He commenced to recite a long sequence of numbers. There was a muted buzzing and the door began to slide open.

"This key is voice-coded to myself, as Connors' is to himself. We've taken every precaution - "

They stepped through into a large room, full of transport cages.

" - as you can see..." Berek's voice trailed away in shock. The cages were empty. "They're gone! Captain, this is impossible - the cages have electronic locks - the animals couldn't escape - "

As Spock began a tricorder scan, Connors appeared in the doorway. "Sir? Is something wrong..." He paled visibly.

"Mr. Berek - who besides yourself and Mr. Connors possesses a key?" Kirk's commanding tone forced Berek to take control of himself.

"No-one, Captain. All the codes are programmed into here," he replied, flourishing his key. "Each cage has its own code. And the keys will only operate when the voice print is matched. Connors - when did you last see the animals?"

Connors, who had been staring in shock at the empty cages, made an effort to concentrate. "I checked on them fifteen minutes ago, sir, at the half-hourly check. And the room out there has been full of people the whole time. I can't understand - "

"Neither can I." Berek stalked back into the anteroom, where the attendants stood around in stunned silence. Savagely, he struck the wall-communicator button.

"Security alert. Seal the building and search everywhere - the chauks are missing. I want them found!" He turned back as Kirk and the others joined him. "Gentlemen..." He spread out his hands in a gesture of loss. "I can only apologise for this - unfortunate occurrence. I realise that if they cannot be found, I shall have to procure replacements...somehow. And at our planet's own expense."

"I'll send down a security team to assist your men, Mr. Berek."

"Thank you, Captain. I'll brief them on what they'll be looking for."

.

"Jim, what makes you think that girl we saw has something to do with all this?"

"Just a hunch, Bones. From what we saw, she has some kind of power over animals."

"And not only animals," was McCoy's wry rejoinder.

They rounded the bushes where they had seen the young woman. As they had half expected, no-one was there."

"Captain." Spock's voice drew Kirk's attention. He gazed in the direction which his First Officer indicated. A figure was visible, but too far away for identification. However, he trusted Spock's keener vision. As they followed, he said, "You haven't given us your theory on the disappearance, Spock. I know it goes against the grain to speculate without facts, but what do you think?"

Spock raised an eyebrow at his Captain's picturesque analogy, but chose not to comment on it. "There are two distinct possibilities, Captain. One is that Connors is responsible, that he has bribed his team and the guards to say nothing while he removed the animals, perhaps with their assistance. If so, he is a remarkably skilled actor."

"Hmm." Kirk recalled Connors' shocked reaction. "And the other?"

"That the chauks are still there."

Both Kirk and McCoy gazed at Spock in amazement. They were about to speak but realised that they had caught up with the young woman. She was strolling slowly, swinging the sack that she carried. Her long ginger hair blew back in the breeze which tugged at the feather in her hat. Kirk was struck anew by how eccentric and out of place her mode of dress seemed on this conventional colonial planet. She turned, smiling, "Yes?" Her voice was low and pleasant, and the eyes that met Kirk's were a bright emerald.

"Ms...er?" he prompted.

"Tithoniél. Arwen Tithoniél."

"I'm Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship Enterprise; this is my First Officer, Mr. Spock, and Dr. McCoy, Chief Surgeon."

"I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, gentlemen. There has been much talk of your coming - we are far from the hub of the Federation here, and such events are the only break in our monotony. What did you wish to ask me?"

Her question was very direct after such a meandering preamble, as if she wished to throw Kirk off balance.

"It's the matter of the chauks, Ms. Tithoniél."

"Then won't you be seated?" She indicated a nearby bench. They sat down; around them most of the finely laid-out park which surrounded the Administration buildings was visible. There was no sign of any animal.

"We were on our way to see the Administrator earlier, when we heard you playing," Kirk began.

"Yes," Arwen smiled. "You were behind the bushes."

Kirk felt his face glow a delicate shade of pink, like a small boy caught spying on the grown-ups. "Yes," he admitted. "We were - spell-bound. I'm sorry if we intruded."

Arwen waved aside his apology. "Do not fear, Captain; I play for all who would hear. I am not offended."

"We wondered if you could help us. You probably haven't heard yet, but the chauks have disappeared from their cages."

Arwen raised an eyebrow. "Am I a suspect?"

Kirk shook his head. "No, not at all. "But you might be able to recover them for us - if chauks will come to you like the animals we saw earlier."

"All creatures at liberty and in hearing range will come to me while I play, Captain. But if someone took the chauks, they must surely have removed them from the area. It would not be possible to conceal a herd of them in this park. If you have never seen one, they are about so high - " She indicated a point about one metre above the ground.

"If we should need your abilities, where may we find you?"

"In this park." In response to their puzzled expressions, she continued. "I have no home, gentlemen. I play my music here to earn money - for food and to save for a passage from this planet. I was not born here, and I wish to return home."

Kiri nodded. "We'll keep you in mind, Ms. Tithoniél. Please excuse us now; we must return to our ship."

"Good day, gentlemen." Arwen stood, shouldering her sack, and strolled away. At the dematerialisation sound, she glanced back, in time to see the three sparkling forms fade from sight.

"Yes, gentlemen - a good day to you." She smiled mirthlessly and turned away.

.



Sitting lost in thought, Kirk was jolted into awareness by the sound of the door buzzer. "Come."

Spock entered the cabin, carrying his tricorder. Kirk smiled, gesturing for the Vulcan to sit.

"Captain, I request permission to beam down to the Administrator's office."

"Granted, of course. Any particular reason why?"

Spock hesitated. "The tricorder scan that I made of the animal cages revealed nothing. However, I wish to carry out an experiment."

Kirk waited, then since nothing was forthcoming, spoke. "What kind of experiment?"

"Without the precise data, I am at present reluctant to say, Captain."

Kirk's eyes twinkled. "A hunch, Mr. Spock?"

"Not at all, sir; it is merely the pursuit of my previous conclusions, arrived at by logical means."

Kirk smiled. "All right - but on the condition that I come along. I trust I won't spoil your experiment?"

"Your presence will be most welcome, sir."

.

As Kirk entered the office just ahead of Spock, he was almost pounced upon by Berek.

"Kirk! Captain! Look at this!"

He thrust a note into Kirk's hand; it was a yellowed scrap of paper. In block capitals, it bore a demand for five hundred credits for the safe return of the chauks to a specified remote area of the park.

"How was this delivered?"

"Pushed under the door. No-one there to see who delivered it, of course; they're all out searching. Captain, this must be genuine. The only people who know are my staff - and the writer of this note."

"Mr. Berek - we'd like to take another look at the room where the chauks were kept."

"Yes, if you wish; but whatever for?"

"Mr. Spock has an idea - an experiment he wishes to try out."

"Very well; I'll come with you to open the door. Connors is out looking with the rest of his team."

.

Berek opened the door and stood aside.

"Captain, if you do know something, I would appreciate it greatly if you would let me know."

"Mr. Berek, as soon as I know more than you, I'll inform you, please rest assured."

Berek nodded. "I'll remain out here, then. It seems pointless to keep the room locked now that it's empty, but one must keep to procedure."

Kirk followed Spock inside. The Vulcan began to scan with his tricorder.

"As before, Captain. There are no life readings, no sounds, no scent..." He turned to Kirk. "Isn't it strange that although we detected the animals' odour in the corridor outside, both times that we have been here, once we entered the outer room we could no longer do so."

Kirk frowned. "Yes..." He sniffed the air. "It should be strongest in here."

"I shall enter deep concentration for this experiment, Captain. Please do not be alarmed."

Kirk watched as Spock closed his eyes, his breathing seeming to become shallower. After a few minutes, he opened his eyes. In the cages in front of him, there seemed to be dark blurs. He made a stronger effort of will...

Abruptly, there was a shift in reality. The room was full of cages - in each of which was a small antelope-like animal, snorting and grunting, trying to force its way from the cage.

Spock raised an eyebrow. "The experiment was a success, Captain; the chauks are here - and I believe they are hungry."

"Here, Spock? How..." He stared for a moment. "Some kind of mental control - an illusion?"

"Yes, Captain; and remarkably powerful, suppressing all sensory perception - including the perception of instrument readings." He scanned again. This time his tricorder showed the presence of the chauks. "A remarkable feat."

"Yes - and who's responsible?" Kirk crossed to the door. Berek was sitting in the anteroom. "Mr. Berek - **you'd** better call the search off - and get your guards back here on the double."

"Why? What's the matter, Captain?"

"The animals were here all along - but we can't see them or sense them in any way."

A look of frank disbelief crossed Berek's face.

"I know how it sounds, Administrator, but Mr. Spock is Vulcan. Someone has placed some kind of illusion in there - one that Mr. Spock has been able to overcome."

"Then what shall I do? If there's an illusion, can it be counteracted? How..."

"Get your staff back here and give the animals their food. Spock and I will try to find out who's responsible."

.

The two men were striding towards the brightly-clothed figure seated on the grass, playing her pipe. Her hat lay upturned on the ground, containing a solitary half credit. As she saw them approach, she stopped playing and laid down the pipe.

"As you see, gentlemen, the public has not been overgenerous today." She placed the money in a small draw-string purse, and replaced both pipe and purse into her sack. "You have discovered the whereabouts of the chauks and want my help, Captain?"

"Yes..." Kirk glanced at Spock. He was only half convinced that Arwen was responsible. Feeling distinctly uncomfortable, he continued. "Ms. Tithoniël, we believe that you have placed an illusion on the animal cages. We know that the chauks are still there, but you have created an illusion that they are not."

"What are you talking about?" She laughed, incredulously. "I am a minstrel, that's all, not a magician!"

"Ms. Tithoniël." The Vulcan spoke. "The second time that we met, I sensed a powerful personal aura about you - I sense it now. It must be a great drain on your vitality to maintain such a powerful illusion - it is now fifty five point eight minutes since discovery of the chauks' disappearance, and you presumably began as soon as we entered the building as you could not be sure of the precise time of discovery."

Arwen's eyes flashed angrily. "I have never heard such - nonsense." She got to her feet hurriedly, snatching up the sack. "Kindly go away and don't bother me again!" She turned and began striding away.

"Well, Spock," Kirk said as he turned to his First Officer. "Looks like that's it - we can't force her to admit it - "

"Captain, she is responsible; I - " He broke off. Kirk followed his gaze, and simultaneously they broke into a run.

Arwen had collapsed, crumpling to the turf like a rag doll. As they reached her, Kirk pulled out his communicator.

"No! I will not go to your ship!"

"Ms. Tithoniél; you must cease to project the illusion immediately."

Arwen looked up at Spock. "It's nothing; I'm just faint. I don't get much to eat..."

"Break the illusion before you kill yourself!" To other ears, Spock's voice would still have sounded controlled, but to Kirk, the concern was apparent.

Arwen shut her eyes, her face clenched in desperation. "No! Not till you agree!"

"To let the chauks go?" Kirk asked.

"No - I want...passage off this planet. I must leave - now!"

"All right, Arwen. You'll have passage - " Kirk gazed anxiously at her white face.

She relaxed, opening her eyes. "The chauks are returned," she whispered.

Then she passed out.

.

When she awoke, several hours later, it was in a comfortable bed in the starship's sickbay. Her head was aching as it always did after maintaining an illusion for a long period of time, but it was more severe than usual. It had, after all, been the most difficult illusion that she had ever attempted - and for the longest period of time. She closed her eyes and drifted off again into sleep.

The second time she awoke, she felt much better. Dr. McCoy was there to confirm her recovery, and he summoned Kirk and Spock to sickbay.

"Now then Ms. Tithoniél: perhaps you'll tell us the full story."

She hesitated for a moment. "All right," she said reluctantly. "I've been trying to raise enough money to get to Earth; I need to get there quickly. When I heard you were coming, to transport the chauks to the Cygnus Magna medical research station, it seemed the ideal opportunity - so I held them to ransom."

"Yes, Mr. Berek received your note." Kirk paused. "Why do you want to go to Earth?"

"I was born there - as you'll already know, if you've found my identification papers among my belongings. I want to find out what happened to my father; he brought me to Falkey's Planet when I was a baby; his sister, Aunt Bethiline, brought me up. He used to visit us occasionally, when he could, or send messages - I've heard nothing for two years. Then Bethiline died, and the house and everything in it had to be sold to pay off the debts. I've been living in that park ever since, and I don't intend to spend another winter there!"

"Don't you have any relatives on Earth you could contact by message?"

"Let's just say I prefer to go there and ask in person." She paused, seeing that Kirk wasn't satisfied with her explanation. "All right; my dad has a lot of enemies - he brought me here for my own protection. He keeps on the move - from system to system - which is why he couldn't visit us often. There are people on Earth who will know what has happened to him...and if you were going to ask me



where I get my abilities from - well, it runs in the family."

McCoy spoke. "Ms. Tithoniél - Arwen - the medical scans I've made show that you aren't Human."

There was silence. Arwen stared at McCoy.

"You must've had medical examinations before - I take it that you created the illusion that the readings were Human."

Arwen tried to control the dismay she felt. She should have realised that the Doctor would have examined her while she was unconscious. "I was born on Earth; that's the truth. I can't tell you any more."

"It's all right, Arwen. We only want to help you - "

"Doctor, my people have lived on Earth for many thousands of years; we've done no harm. I won't betray my people by saying any more. I know Humans have always feared those who are different - in the past, we were persecuted. If it becomes public - our presence on Earth - "

"Arwen," Kirk began. "Things are different now; we accept differences - "

"If you can see them! But how would Humans feel to learn that we have lived among them for millenia as their neighbours? Just get me a passage to Earth; I want nothing more!"

.

Once more Kirk and his officers were facing Administrator Berek in his office.

"Mr. Connors informs me that the animals have settled in well in their new accomodation - and I must say how relieved I am after all the trouble we've had." Berek shook his head. "I still can't believe it - that gypsy flute player casting an illusion over all of us. I'll be glad when she leaves."

"We'll be taking her as far as Cygnus Magna - after that, our course lies away from Earth."

"Yes. I'm just grateful to you for removing her from our planet - there's no telling what other disruption she could have caused."

.

It was with some relief that Kirk saw the last of the zoological teams fade from the transporter platform, and Arwen step towards it. Not that she had caused any trouble on the flight, but the knowledge of her illusory abilities did make him a little uncomfortable, in spite of his efforts to accept them.

"So. Captain, your task is over - the chauks and their keepers safely delivered to their destination. A pity that you couldn't have delivered me to mine."

Kirk smiled gallantly. "Unfortunately, this is the closest the Enterprise will get to Earth for some time."

"Yes, of course. Well, I will manage the rest of the journey by myself - eventually I'll earn enough for a passage."

"No more chauk kidnapping, I hope?" Kirk chided, teasingly.

Arwen's eyebrows soared. "Of course not, Captain - they're all wise to that one now!" She shouldered her sack. "Well, I must go - I cannot detain your ship any longer - goodbye, Captain, for now. We will meet again."

"A prognostication, Ms. Tithoniél? I didn't realise clairvoyance was also one of your talents."

Arwen shrugged. "Long ago, such a talent was numbered among my peoples'. Perhaps a remnant remains." She stepped onto the platform. "I regret that their duties kept them from bidding me farewell, but please give my regards to Dr. McCoy and the very perceptive Mr. Spock."

"I will - goodbye, Arwen." He gave the command to energise.

Arwen sparkled into being outside the research centre, where the last of the chauks in their cages were being conveyed into the building with the help of antigravs. It was evening, and a pleasant breeze blew back her hair. She looked up, in time to see a sparkling star moving away, pulling out of orbit.

"Yes, James T. Kirk, we will meet again."

She drew out her hat and set it on her head at a jaunty angle. Then, with a last glance upwards, and a slight smile on her lips, she set off into the darkness.

Part 2 - A Chance Encounter

James T. Kirk relaxed in his command chair, listening to the subdued sounds on the bridge as the crew efficiently carried out their duties. Things had been uneventful for several days; he found himself wishing, not for the first time, for a break in the monotony, however minor.

Suddenly Uhura's voice broke into his reverie.

"Sir! I'm picking up a distress signal." She anticipated his request. "On audio for you."

A filtered voice filled the bridge.

"Mayday! Can anyone hear me? This is the S.S. Carnival. Mayday - "

Kirk activated a control stud on the arm of his chair.

"This is the Enterprise, Carnival. State your position and the nature of your emergency."

"Enterprise? We need help - we have a reactor leak, Enterprise - it's out of control, building to overload - "

"All right, Carnival. We'll be right with you. Just give us your co-ordinates."

The man's voice calmed and delivered a series of numbers.

"Course plotted and laid in, sir," Sulu's voice came almost instantly.

"Warp factor six, Mr. Sulu." Kirk turned to Spock, an enquiring expression on his features. Spock, who had already begun checking library records, spoke.

"The Carnival is listed as a small reconverted cargo vessel, owned by a company of entertainers, Captain."

"Seems an unusual name for a ship, Spock."

"It was originally named the S.S. Fearless. The registration was changed by its present owners." Spock bent over his hooded viewer. "It's coming into sensor range now, Captain. Radiation detectable - I estimate another four point nine two minutes before it reaches critical level. There are twelve humanoids registering, concentrated in the forward section of the ship."

The small vessel was now clearly visible on the main screen.

"Feed their co-ordinates to the transporter room, Mr. Spock."

"Doing so now, Captain."

Kirk pressed the intercom button. "Transporter room, prepare for emergency beaming. Twelve humanoids."

"Aye, sir. Commencing now."

There was a pause, then the voice resumed. "I have six of them safely, sir; I'm bringing the rest aboard now."

There was a sudden flare of energy on the screen, which automatically darkened. Kirk blinked. Where the S.S. Carnival had been was a spreading cloud

of glowing energy particles.

"Transporter room?"

"Here, sir. I have them all safely aboard."

"Good work, Mr. Kyle. I'm on my way." Kirk stood. "Lt. Uhura, have Dr. McCoy report to the transporter room. Mr. Spock, you have the con."

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The door swished open, admitting Kirk to the transporter room, which appeared almost crowded as twelve humanoids of assorted races milled about, chattering with relief. Their clothes were of multi-coloured brilliance, and in their hands they clutched small bundles of belongings. From the furry tunic of a green-skinned girl, Kirk saw a strange snake-like head peer out nervously. The girl patted it and murmured words of reassurance. The agitated performers had been clustered around Mr. Kyle, who was attempting to calm them, but seeing Kirk, they abruptly converged on this newcomer, all trying to talk at once. An Andorian male who had eased his way to the front called for silence. As the voices faded away, he turned to Kirk, a pleasant expression on his features.

"You must be Captain Kirk, of whom we have heard a great deal. I am Thelan, manager of the Carnival troupe. On behalf of us all, I offer sincere thanks for our timely rescue."

Kirk nodded, smiling. "Thank you, Mr. Thelan. I hope your company has suffered no ill-effects?"

"We are unharmed, Captain, but I anticipate that your doctors will wish to check for any damage caused by radiation."

As if on cue, McCoy entered, tricorder in hand.

"I heard about the rescue, Jim - "

"Mr. Thelan, this is Dr. McCoy, Chief Medical Officer. Doctor, Mr. Thelan is manager of the company."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Thelan. Could you ask your company to follow me to sickbay? Nothing to alarm yourselves; just a routine examination."

"I understand perfectly, Doctor." Thelan turned to the members of his troupe. "We are to go with the Doctor to sickbay. I expect that we will all welcome the opportunity to rest and recover?"

There were several affirmatives. The party began to trail after McCoy, like a brood of chicks following their mother. As they filed outside, one hung back.

"Hello, Captain."

Kirk experienced a small shock of recognition. "Arwen!"

She smiled. "It seems that I do have precog ability, after all."

A fleeting image of his previous encounter with the alien girl flittered across the surface of Kirk's mind. It had been nearly a solar year ago. She wore the same clothes that he remembered, the gaudy checkered dress and the pale green hat with its bright yellow feather, but the bag she carried was new, bigger than her old sack, and doubtless holding newly acquired belongings.

"Did you make it to Earth after all?"

"Yes - I joined this troupe when they stopped on Cygnus Magna; eventually our itinerary took us to Earth. I found some of the answers I sought - but not all." She smiled, and continued. "So you see, Captain - my talents have proved very useful."

Kirk wondered for a moment if she was trying to instil those old sensations of unease that he had experienced in her company before. He refused to be discouraged from his line of questioning.

"Did you find your father?"

Arwen's face darkened, and she turned half away from him, to glance at Mr. Kyle, who was giving an excellent impression of someone checking the control circuits and not listening to a word. She turned back and spoke in a low voice. "He was murdered, Captain - by one of our own people. I am now engaged in tracking down his murderer. A travelling company seemed as good a means as any for that, and solved the problem of having to pay my way between systems - until now."

"Do you know who the murderer is?"

"Yes." She paused. "You wouldn't understand, Captain."

"Try me."

"Very well. My father - was - chief of the Tithoniél. For some years, there has been rivalry between our family and the other most important family, that of Listra. It seems that the former head of that family died some years ago; his heir is even more ruthless. He will stop at nothing to become chief of all Tithoniél."

"I thought Tithoniél was your family name?"

"No, that is Simra; Tithoniél is the name of my clan, the Dream Weavers."

"If you know his identity, why not report it to the authorities - "

"No!" She paused, and continued softly. "I cannot advertise our presence on Earth and in the colonies; we are unauthorised aliens with no true home, even though we settled on Earth millenia ago. I have to find Piras myself - besides, he's probably already looking for me."

Kirk was feeling distinctly uncomfortable. "Why should - "

"Because, Captain, I am my father's heir. To become chief of Tithoniél, he must also kill me!"

.

It was with an uneasy mind that Kirk returned to the bridge. His hand strayed towards the intercom button on his chair in an impulse to call sickbay and ask if Arwen, escorted by Mr. Kyle, had arrived. But he resisted the prompting. Spock, sensing that he was troubled, came to his side and spoke softly.

"Something troubles you, Captain?"

Kirk looked up, a half smile on his lips.

"Yes, as usual, you're right. One of the travelling entertainers is Ms. Arwen Tithoniél."

"Indeed?" Spock's eyebrow rose fractionally.

"And if that's not bad enough, her father's dead - murdered. She's looking for the killer and she thinks he's looking for her. Apparently, to become chief of the Tithoniél, he has to kill her too. But there's something even worse!"

Spock waited expectantly.

"What's she going to say when she finds out what I didn't have the guts to tell her!"

.

In sickbay, McCoy had persuaded Arwen to climb onto a diagnostic bed in a side ward where they would not be overheard. The rest of the troupe, all cleared medically, were resting in the main ward.

"You'll have to relax that illusion control, Arwen. How am I going to know what shape you're in, if you make the instruments read Human?"

Arwen sighed. "They don't read Human, Doctor, you just think they do. How can I relax - it's become second nature to me to fake medicals - the Federation must never know - "

"But they already do."

"What? Who knows?"

As Arwen stared in shocked fury, the Doctor blinked, and saw that the instruments were now giving quite different readings than a moment before. "I trusted Kirk! All of you! You mean, as soon as I left the ship, you told them? I thought you were men of honour!"

She was beginning to climb off the bed. McCoy forestalled her.

"Just relax, and get back on there. If you remember, we never actually said we wouldn't tell Starfleet. But in any case," he said, raising his voice as she attempted to give tongue to another angry tirade, "you should have realised that we'd have no choice. Jim - the Captain - had to tell the whole story; Berek sent in his own report anyway, which put you in a pretty bad light from what Jim said - "

Arwen had subsided somewhat, but her eyes still glowed emerald in suppressed fury. "Damn Berek! If I ever get back to that lousy planet, I'll weave him a dream he'll never forget!"

"Take it easy. The Captain did a good job of getting you off the hook. Starfleet has decided to keep everything quiet, in case of panic, but they're not as narrow minded as you seem to think. They gave Jim special orders in case you ever showed up again; he's to negotiate with you or another authorised representative of your people. You can all be settled on your own world, where you can live openly. You'd have full colony status. Jim knows the details; you can work it out with him."

Arwen brushed back an unruly strand of ginger hair, her temper mollified for the moment.

"It's possible that we'd accept," she said at last. "But we'd have to contact the others first; the telepaths, precogs and all the rest of them. Some are spread around the colonies. They'd all have to be consulted."

McCoy was staring. "You mean, there's more of you?"

"Yes, our people splintered into clans. I will explain all that later - to Jim - and the rest of you. How many know of us?"

"Certain high-up officials in Starfleet, and the Federation Council, of course; they voted to give you the planet. Other than that - just Jim, Spock and myself."

"Good." Arwen sank back. "You may complete your examination now, Doctor."

.

A few hours later, all four were seated around the briefing room table. The computer had been programmed by Spock, so that the conversation about to be recorded would only be played back on receipt of a restricted access code.

"Dr. McCoy tells me that your clan - the Tithoniél - is only one among many."

"Yes, Captain. I suppose it's best if I explain from the beginning. It was long ago when we came to Earth, many thousands of years. We had to leave our world; the exact reason why, or even our planet's location, are now forgotten, but we came to colonise peacefully. At that time, we were mardra - whole, that is; we possessed all the talents - telepathy, illusion-creation, precognition, telekinensis, and teleportation. We were called the Mardrata - whole ones, or people-of-the-five-talents. We still call ourselves that, although it is no longer so."

"You lost the other abilities?"

Arwen nodded. "When we first came to Earth, although we each possessed all the talents, the strength of each would vary greatly between individuals, and most people had a dominant talent. After some years, those with identical

dominant talents began to group together, and to put their interests before those of the whole. The Council of the Mardrata found it increasingly difficult to reconcile these diversified interests, and the situation worsened until Council members began to side with their own groups. Each group - or clan, as we call it - began to marry within itself to strengthen the dominant talent. It took centuries, but by the time the clans severed themselves, each from the other, there were five clans, each with one talent apiece, strengthened at the expense of the other four."

"So you don't know where the other clans are?" asked McCoy.

Arwen half smiled. "Ah, but we do, Doctor. I am coming to that. There was no contact, however, for centuries. During that time, some inter-marriages with Humans occurred; perhaps that is the source of the latent psychic abilities that some of you have. Mostly, however, we kept to our own kind for fear of discovery and persecution.

"From that period, each clan has been led by the head of the major family; those families took their position through strength, not consensus. The clan chiefs made laws forbidding their people to have contact with the other clans. It was many centuries before more enlightened chiefs repealed those laws and tried to re-establish contact. By then, our numbers had dwindled; in fact, one clan, the telekinetics, died out completely a short while afterwards. I suppose we had weakened ourselves by inbreeding."

"Arwen - you spoke of your father as if he was a hunted man. Has your family declined in strength?"

"Yes, we are fewer, Captain. The move to try to reunite the clans has not been popular with everyone. Since that time - about half a century ago - there has been strife again, this time within the clans. My family, Simra, has inter-married with the ruling families of two other clans to get new blood and to try to regain our lost abilities. The Listra family has led the cause of intolerance against us - they call themselves purists and say we are 'tainted', no longer fit to rule. When my father became chief, the situation became so bad that he took me to Falkey's Planet where his sister Bethiline lived; no-one else knew my whereabouts. Then he went into hiding - on the move from system to system. You know the rest..."

"Yes." Kirk paused. "So you wouldn't be able to persuade the rest of your people to accept the Federation's offer?"

"I might - once Piras, head of the Listra, is out of the way. When I was on Earth, I learned that a lot of my father's old enemies are now dead; the disaffection centres around Piras now. I don't think the others would cause trouble without him. I should be able to persuade them."

She looked directly at Kirk. "That's not a confession before the act, Captain, but in any case, under our law I am entitled to make challenge on him on two counts; he attempts to usurp my position by calling himself chief of Tithoniél, and he murdered my father. If he lives it is the just penalty."

"What about the other clans - would they agree?"

"Once the Tithoniél are won over, I will contact them - until I am the undisputed leader, my word will carry no authority."

"So, it seems wh'll have to wait until - Piras - capitulates."

"He'll never do that, Captain."

"However that may be, I am empowered by the Federation to offer you a colony planet once the consent of your people is obtained."

"A tempting offer, Captain - and a voice in your Federation council to go with it. The Mardrata would welcome a chance to influence their own destiny! But first, I shall have to find Piras..."

.

It was two days later that a message was received from Starfleet in response to the report Kirk had ordered transmitted, concerning the rescue of the entertainers. The ship would not be permitted to divert from her chartered course in order to set the troupe down on Trantor, where their next engagement lay. Instead, Kirk was **instructed** to continue the routine mapping mission on which the Enterprise was currently engaged, and take the troupe on to Starbase 8, where the Enterprise crew was due for some shore leave in a few days' time. Trantor would not be difficult to reach from there, provided that the troupe could procure another reconverted old ship. Mr. Thelan had already sent off a full report to the insurance company, backed by technical data supplied by the Enterprise, and the entire troupe was in a state of trepidation as they awaited the reply. Kirk went in person to give Thelan the news.

"It's quite all right, Captain. I appreciate that you have your duty to perform." The Andorian spoke philosophically. "Starbase 8 will be perfectly satisfactory for us provided that our insurance company credits our account. If so, we should be able to obtain another old ship from a dealer at the Starbase - if not," he shrugged, "then the company must be disbanded."

"I would be sorry to see that, Mr. Thelan."

"And I, Captain. So I have decided - with your permission, of course - that if this is to be the end of the troupe, we will give a last performance on your ship."

Kirk smiled in surprise. "We'd be delighted, of course. If you'd like to arrange it for any evening in the recreation hall - "

"Would tomorrow evening be convenient?"

Kirk nodded. "Yes, that would be fine."

.

Applause was ringing loudly in the hall as the green-skinned girl and her large snake dancing partner took a final bow and departed the stage. Mr. Thelan came forward to announce the next act; Arwen, the Weaver of Dreams. Kirk glanced up as Spock took the seat reserved vacant beside him.

"So you made it in time, Spock?" McCoy commented.

Spock had declined to sit through the rest of the show, saying that he could see nothing particularly edifying in acrobatics or erotic snake-dancing. He had timed his entrance to the minute by memorising the programme, and taking an occasional glance at the viewing screen in his room; the show was being broadcast around the ship for the benefit of those on non-essential duties.

"The opportunity to see this talent in display should prove fascinating, Captain."

Kirk nodded; he was watching the stage, where Arwen had made her entrance. She had discarded her everyday dress in favour of a tunic and trousers of shimmering green material. She bowed stylishly.

"I offer you the substance of which your dreams are made." Her voice was clear and ringing. "Things of beauty and desire..."

Kirk wondered if it was merely his imagination; no, the hall definitely was becoming dark. And through the blackness came fluttering enormous butterflies with wings of scintillating fire. They hovered tantalisingly above the audience. Several people reached up; their hands passed through empty air and the butterflies were gone. As Spock lowered his arm, McCoy prepared to deliver a sarcastic quip.

"No tactile reality, Captain," Spock observed.

"Are you trying to fool us that you were carrying out a scientific experiment?" McCoy grinned expectantly.

"I am not trying to 'fool you' about anything, Doctor; but then, in your

case I would not have to try."

Kirk grinned at McCoy's discomfiture.

"Watch the show, Bones."

Bright flowers were drifting down from the ceiling onto their heads; around them, the familiar walls of the ship seemed to have receded, for visible in the distance and rapidly approaching, was a herd of glowing white four-legged animals. They thundered nearer, their manes and tails glittering with stars, their heads tossing. On each forehead was a single gilded horn. They leaped onto the stage and plunged off, to race down the centre aisle and vanish into the distance behind the audience. A vast reptilian shape had materialised above Arwen; its huge wings beat the air with a sound like thunder as it alighted beside her and regarded the audience, green smoke spiralling upwards from its nostrils. Then its jaws opened to issue a great gout of flame, which passed harmlessly over the heads of those watching, many of whom ducked.

Kirk swallowed, and resisted an impulse to check if his hair was scorched.

"That felt real enough to me, Spock."

The scene was changing, the light returning again, revealing them to be seated on a beach of golden sands, stretching into infinity.

"Before we reached for the stars, there was the mystery of the sea to contemplate..." Behind Arwen, lapped a calm azure sea. It seemed to be drawing nearer; then they were beneath the waves, enwrapped in an enormous air bubble. As they sank deeper, curious creatures peered in at them; seals and dolphins - and mermaids.

"The sea gave up its secrets; now we have a new challenge..."

The blue-green waters were giving way to the blackness of space, the stars sprinkled across it like spilled diamonds. Their protective air bubble had become a gossamer force-field, keeping the airless void at bay. Through it, they could see the glory of distant galaxies; spirals of gorgeous colours. Suns and planets spun majestically by.

"The final mystery - the unknown worlds that lie before us... No dream now, but reality..."

Slowly, the stars faded as they were returned to the recreation hall. Still spellbound, there was a pause until someone began to applaud; suddenly, everyone was joining in, raising such a tumult of whistling and cheering that Spock almost raised his hands to protect his sensitive eardrums.

McCoy yelled above the noise. "After that, Starbase 8's gonna seem like an anticlimax, huh, Jim?"

Kirk could only nod affirmative.

.

After the performance, Kirk invited the troupe to a small dinner party with himself and his senior officers in one of the recreation rooms. Arwen, still in her green stage outfit, was seated beside him.

"That was quite a performance you gave; absolutely breathtaking."

"Thank you, Captain." Arwen smiled. "I shall sleep the clock round tomorrow."

"Yes, you must find it tiring."

Arwen sipped her drink. "Mmm; I didn't have to sustain any particular illusion for too long, though; I try to avoid that since it gives me a headache."

"You were definitely wasted on Falkey's Planet. Are all your people so gifted?"

"Well, to produce a routine like that demands practice. Also, our powers tend to increase with age. But I must admit that Simra is traditionally a family that has produced great artists. I can't really take the credit for good

genes! Listra is another such family, of course..." Her eyes took on a far-away look.

"What are your plans if the insurance company doesn't come across?"

"Hmm? Oh, I don't know really." She shrugged. "Perhaps the Artistes Union will help us out - otherwise I shall have to beg for my bread again."

"With an act like yours, that shouldn't prove too difficult."

"I'm - reluctant to use those talents unaccompanied - perhaps it's a hang-over from the time I had to keep them hidden. In a company of entertainers, it seems safer somehow, less conspicuous. I don't think I'll feel secure until we have our own planet, where we can use our abilities freely, without fear of retribution. I'm sorry, Captain, I'm being gloomy, aren't I?"

"Not at all. And my name's Jim, remember?"

She smiled and nodded. He touched his glass to hers.

"Here's to the future success of your company - and your people."

.

A few days later, the Enterprise put in to Starbase 8. As the ship took up parking orbit, a message was received, to the effect that the insurance company had honoured its agreement. It was with much relief and jubilation therefore that the troupe beamed down to the base, along with the first section of the crew to be granted R & R. While Mr. Thelan set off to locate a dealer in second-hand spacecraft, the members of his company relaxed around the bars and shops.

Arwen had accompanied Kirk and the others for a farewell drink; for once, even Spock had been persuaded to join them, and partake of a fruit juice.

Together they entered a small bar, glanced around, and headed across to an unoccupied table in one of the alcoves. They were soon served; Kirk took an appreciative sip of the brandy set before him.

"Well, Arwen, you'll soon - "

"Jim!" Arwen caught his arm.

"What is it?"

She released him, speaking quietly. "The man at the bar..."

Casually, the three men directed their gaze on two men leaning against the bar, talking animatedly. Both were young and tall; one was fair-haired and clad in blue trousers and tunic, the other was dark and wore a black and silver jump suit which accentuated his slim build.

Arwen reached into her bag beneath the table, and drew out a holograph. She passed it to Kirk.

"The dark one is Piras."

Kirk compared the head and shoulders portrait, then handed it to Spock. "It does look very like him..."

"It is Piras."

"Where did you get this, Arwen?"

Without taking her eyes from the young man, she answered McCoy's question. "From his family."

"Then how can you be sure the picture's of him and not somebody else? Surely they want him to be chief as well - "

"They do, Doctor. It is our way. Under our law, challenge must be enabled to be lawfully carried out. Especially since Piras has sought the chieftainship through murder."

"I assume, then, that your father's death was not accomplished by challenge?"

McCoy glared at Spock, as if about to reprimand him for his lack of tact, but Arwen answered without flinching. "That is so. Piras sent Dad a message via one of the Telkma; they're a neutral family, powerless. Apparently, the message was that he wished for an end to the strife between our families. The Telkma eventually tracked my father down and brought him back to Earth."

She paused, staring down into her drink.

"The rendezvous was at an empty apartment. The Telkma got word to one of our family - he'd become suspicious - but too late. When they got there, they found my father - dead - knifed in the back. They said...there was an expression of...horror...on his face. I think Piras greeted him with an illusion when he walked through that door - something monstrous - " She drew a ragged breath and looked up. "Now, gentlemen, please excuse me. I have a challenge to declare."

She made to rise, but was halted by a firm hand on her wrist.

"First I want you to explain; what does 'challenge' involve?"

She met Kirk's gaze steadily. "Illusion-making; one creates illusions to mislead the opponent and at the same time, must dispel theirs in order to distinguish reality. It's usually played over dangerous terrain - "

"Then you could get yourself killed?"

"It doesn't have to be to the death, Jim." She smiled, hoping to reassure him. "The opponent can become too exhausted to continue, and concedes defeat."

"But is Piras likely to give in?"

Arwen shrugged. "It's something I must do for the sake of my people. A leader must take risks; surely you, of all people, **understand** that, Jim?"

He nodded, releasing her arm.

"If Piras wins - warn your Starfleet. He is a dangerous enemy. He might accept that offer of a colony world, but underneath, he'd have some ulterior motive."

She rose and left the table, walking towards the bar. Her demeanour was one of calmness, but inside, she battled for control of her fear and hatred.

"Piras." She was surprised to hear her voice sound so steady.

The dark-haired man turned, raising a languid eyebrow. "I'm sorry?"

"I make challenge for the Chieftainship of Tithoniél."

His face assumed a perplexed expression. "I think you must have the wrong man - "

"No, Piras, there is no mistake. I offer honourable challenge; you must accept."

The man deliberately turned his back on her, with a look of ennui stamped on his features.

"Better ignore her, Nahis; she must be drunk." He spoke to his companion.

"Piras - your family told me you waited for six months on Earth for me to arrive. After that, you left, presumably to seek me out. Well, here I am. What are you afraid of - that you cannot defeat me without back-stabbing?"

As her voice rose in anger, everyone in the bar turned their gaze on her. Desperately, she fought for control; she needed all her concentration for the contest; she could not afford to indulge in rage.

Piras stepped away.

"I think we'd better call Security, Nihis - " As his friend hesitated, he began to walk away.

"Piras!" Her voice rang out. "Kisheru medrak su remas Tithoniél!"



Piras spun round. His voice was filled with a peculiar malice.

"Let me show you something - "

Arwen stepped forward, then froze in shock. A shape had materialised at her feet. She looked down -

A man lay sprawled on the floor, a knife protruding from his back. His face, turned towards her, was contorted in horror.

"Dad!"

Arwen stared, trying to will her senses to see through the illusion, recognise it for what it was. There was a shout.

"Arwen, look out!"

Something bright flashed towards her. Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion. She twisted aside -

But not enough. There was a sharp blow to her upper arm as she collapsed to the floor.

She clutched her arm, trying to rise as she dimly sensed two figures running past her. Something warm and sticky was trickling between her fingers. Then McCoy was beside her, running the mediscanner over her arm.

"That's how he got Dad - he showed him me - dead."

The room was beginning to rock dizzily around her. She grabbed at McCoy's arm for support.

"Piras - I must get after him - "

"You're staying right here." Arwen felt the hiss of a hypo against her arm. "Jim and Spock will take care of him."

"What did you give me - what drug?"

"A painkiller, that's all." McCoy drew out his communicator. "McCoy to Enterprise; two to beam up."

"Wait, I have to know if they've caught him - "

Before she could say another word, the transporter took them both.

.

Arwen was recovering in sickbay, her upper arm encased in a protective dressing, when Kirk and Spock entered.

"Did you - " She stopped. Kirk's expression gave her the answer.

"We were right behind him - but when we got outside, nothing."

Arwen nodded, smiling bitterly.

"He 'changed' for you, Jim. He could have been anyone in the crowd; even the person next to you." She sighed. "No doubt he's making arrangements to leave, if he hasn't already left. Still, it's lucky for me he didn't accept the challenge."

She saw their puzzled expressions.

"The key point to remember with challenge, gentlemen, is that a clear head is essential. One needs one hundred percent concentration. And that, I most assuredly did not have. I got good and mad. So if Piras hadn't tried to kill me, I would probably be dead anyway."

"His murder attempt was illogical - unless he fears you too greatly to risk a straightforward challenge."

Arwen nodded. "Perhaps he was afraid that I'd cool off in a hurry once he accepted. Anyway, it's clear he prefers murder. I'll watch my back from now on."

"How's the arm, Bones?" Kirk asked, changing the subject.

"Only a flesh wound," McCoy replied, turning to Arwen. "You were pretty lucky."

"I know, Doctor. My thanks to you all."

The videoscreen signalled. Kirk crossed the room to it.

"Kirk here."

"Captain, I have a message for Ms. Tithoniél from Mr. Thelan. He has successfully negotiated for a reconverted freighter and says that the company will be leaving as soon as the registration papers go through and the preparations are completed."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Kirk out."

"Doctor, will I be able to rejoin the company before they're ready to leave?"

McCoy nodded. "Just take it easy with that arm for a few days; you'll be fine."

.

Arwen was standing by the door leading to the docking hangar. The last of her fellow artistes had passed through it moments before. She had changed into her old, eccentric clothes once more.

"I'm sorry to see you go, Arwen," Kirk was saying.

"The show must go on, Jim; we're already two days late for our engagement on TranTOR." She smiled at them. "Well, enjoy the rest of your shore leave, gentlemen; I look forward to the day when we'll be able to negotiate for that planet the Federation promises. Goodbye till then." She made the Vulcan salute. "But I must also say goodbye in a Tithoniél manner..."

Aburptly, a shower of glowing flower petals fell around the startled men. When they cleared, Arwen could be seen running across the hangar to the S.S. Carnival II. She paused in the hatchway to wave, then was gone.

Kirk turned to his friends with a bemused smile.

"Well, perhaps I have a trace of that Mardrata blood because something tells me we'll be seeing Arwen before we reach the negotiating table!"

"I get that feeling too, Jim. How about a drink?"

Together, they moved off across the crowded bay area.

"Care to compute the odds of our meeting up with her again, Spock?"

"No, Doctor, I do not. Ms. Tithoniél is an unknown quantity."

Behind them, a small ship exited the outer airlock and began its journey to TranTOR. Arwen turned away from the viewing port with a smile.

"Well, my friends, I'll see you again!"

Then she squatted in a corner, drew out her pipe and began to play a tune of Tithoniél...

Part 3 - Ordeal

Arwen raised her arm to wipe her forehead with the back of her hand. It came away moist and gritty. Despite her loose, reflective clothing, she was sweating profusely. She reached into her pack and drew out a water container. The liquid was warm, but still welcome to her dry throat. Replacing the lid, she sat down, leaning back against the broad bole of a tall, cactus-like plant.

For a moment, she just sat, listening to the irritating buzz of small insects. The alien landscape around her shimmered perceptibly, baked a dry, brick-like red. Everywhere she looked the same colour was repeated; even the

sky was this strange hue.

With a sigh of pure weariness, she clambered to her feet and shouldered her pack. It would be a long trek back to the aircar.

.

Kirk smiled at his First Officer; although Spock had said nothing, there was a faint relaxation of his features that showed his pleasure at being home once more. Together, they stepped away from the beam-down point and headed across the busy spaceport towards the aircar park, where the vehicle of Spock's parents had been sent to meet them.

As they progressed slowly through the crowd of hurrying Humans and the occasional calm, unruffled Vulcan, Kirk paused as someone caught his attention. He had seen a face, young, and framed by dark hair. As Spock halted and turned back towards him, the crowd surged together again, swallowing up the young man.

"Is something amiss, Captain?"

Kirk blinked abstractedly. "No, nothing wrong, Spock. I thought I saw a man I recognised, that's all."

Spock studied his Captain's face for a moment; before they had beamed down, he had invited Kirk to spend shore leave at his parents' home. However, knowing the great store Humans put on the company of friends, perhaps the correct response would be to release the Captain from what might have become an inconvenient commitment.

"Captain, if you have seen an old friend, then, perhaps..."

Kirk recognised the hesitation and what it implied. "No, Spock, he wasn't an old friend; just reminded me of someone, that's all. We'd better get to the aircar; we don't want to keep your parents waiting."

.

Arwen collapsed into the air-conditioned interior of her hired aircar, and lay still for a moment, her eyes closed.

"Damn you, Piras," she murmured.

Another false trail, probably; yet the shuttle pilot had identified Piras so positively from the holograph she carried. A genuine mistake, perhaps?

She sat up, gazing out at the arid desert landscape through the windscreen that she had dialled to its darkest setting. At least she could now look at it in comfort, without squinting, but it remained as unattractive as ever. Somewhere out there - perhaps - was Piras, but if so, he was playing a game of cat and mouse. She recognised that he was directing all the moves; if that had been him on the shuttle to Vulcan as the pilot had affirmed, then he had deliberately appeared in his true guise just to give her a straw to grasp at. If she did not find him soon, all the money she had saved during the year of ~~tearing~~ ^{living} with the company would be gone, and how could she earn more? Not here; illusions are illogical, serving no purpose - the Vulcans would not pay her for entertainment. She would have to throw herself on the mercy of the Ambassador from Earth; after all, if the Federation wanted her people off the planet Earth, then the least they could do was make some financial grant towards that end.

Reassured by that thought, she activated the aircar controls, and headed for a range of low-lying hills.

.

When Kirk and Spock reached the city of ShiKahr, they discovered that Sarek had been called away on important business and would be absent for a couple of days. However, Amanda made them welcome as always, and soon Kirk was feeling perfectly at home. After an excellent meal, he and Spock were seated on a bench outside in the IDIC garden, meditating on the beauty of the landscape as the shadows of evening submerged it in blues and violets.



A half buried thought struggled to emerge into the light of Kirk's conscious mind; he frowned as he dug into his memories, trying to uncover the source of this urgent prompting.

"Spock!"

Spock started, shaken from the meditative state into which he had sunk. Belatedly, Kirk realised his mistake.

"Spock... I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you - "

"I am quite all right, Captain. What is wrong?"

"I...remember who it was I saw at the spaceport... Piras."

Spock was silent for a moment; Kirk began to worry that he might have caused his friend some harm. After pausing thus, Spock replied.

"If that is so...we must assume that Ms. Tithoniél may also be here."

Kirk considered the implications.

"If they were to fight their duel here..."

"That would be most unwelcome, Jim."

"Hmm...perhaps we should make enquiries at the spaceport in the morning?"

"Yes. At least Arwen would have registered in her true name, if not Piras. If she has arrived, we might be able to persuade her to carry out this vendetta elsewhere."

"If not?"

"Influence could be brought to bear in order to have her deported. Jim, there are many on Vulcan who would regard the death here of one outworlder at the hands of another, adequate reason for Vulcan to leave the Federation. Outworlders are permitted here on the understanding that they conduct themselves peaceably and cause no disruption in Vulcan society. An incident of that nature could have very serious consequences." Spock paused. "We'll make enquiries as you suggested; there is no need to inform anyone else at present."

.

Kirk's face was serious as he examined the data revealed on the illuminated screen.

"So, she arrived here seventeen days ago..."

"Yes; she has probably hired an aircar and gone into the desert. If you recall, Jim; she told us that a challenge is usually carried out over hazardous terrain."

Kiri nodded. "But if she followed him here he doesn't show any eagerness to comply. If I'm correct, he was still hanging around the spaceport yesterday."

"Whatever happens, we must not divulge that particular piece of information to her, Captain."

The two men moved away from the desk, after thanking the arrivals/departures clerk.

"She might not be anxious to leave if she thinks he's here, Spock. Still, there's always that other alternative you mentioned last night."

They headed for the premises of the aircar rental office to make their enquiries.

.

Hours later, they were flying over the Vulcan desert. Their suspicions had been confirmed; Arwen had hired an aircar.

"There's a lot of ground to cover, Spock..."

"Affirmative, Jim. However..." Spock broke off. "I can see an aircar, Jim - "

"Yes, I see it on the scanner." Kirk looked up, squinting into the distance but his less keen vision could not detect it.

Spock increased speed, chasing the other craft. They flew in silence until they had reduced the distance between them to less than five hundred metres. The canopy of the other aircar was dimmed so that its occupant was not visible.

"Try to establish contact, Captain."

Kirk operated the aircar's communications device.

"This is Captain James Kirk speaking. I am travelling in the aircar approximately four hundred and fifty metres behind you, with my First Officer, Mr. Spock. Please state your identity."

There was no reply from the speaker.

"I repeat, this is Captain Kirk speaking. Please respond; we are looking for a friend named Arwen Tithoniél. Our intentions are entirely peaceful. Please identify yourself."

He paused, but there was still no answer.

"Arwen, if it is you, we just wish to talk. There's no reason for you to fear us..."

The aircar in front had slowed a little; they were now within two hundred metres of it. Ahead, there loomed up an escarpment of hard rock; Spock prepared to bring the aircar safely above it.

Abruptly, the aircar in front winked out. Simultaneously the wall of rock before them reared up less than fifteen metres away. Spock veered the aircar immediately, but it was travelling too fast...

It swung round, grazing the rock with a high scream of tortured metal. The control panel exploded violently, sending them flying backwards toward the rear of the craft. The aircar hurtled groundwards, totally out of control.

There was a terrible crash, then blackness...

.

Slowly, Spock became aware of pain which began as a gnawing ache then quickly rose to a pitch of agony as he regained consciousness. He fought for control; the pain began to retreat into the background once more. Cautiously he moved. Blood was running down his face from a gash on his forehead, and his right arm hung limply. He hauled himself up, then was halted by a structural beam lying across his legs. It had fallen, taking the weight of a tangle of twisted metal that would otherwise have impaled him, but he was pinned down. He managed to sit upright and tried to raise the beam with his good arm. Somewhere behind him, he heard the crackle of flames; the scent of burning plastic wafted over to him. He began to feel the heat on his back as smoke billowed around him.

There came the sound of an aircar landing close by, then running footsteps and the clatter of rocks. A voice cursed softly, and then the reddish light streaming in through a large gap in the torn side of the vehicle was cut off as a figure squeezed through. It was clad in a loose white robe, but on its head was a battered pale green hat with a yellow feather.

"You!" Spock felt a surge of anger.

Arwen reached forward, adding her strength to his. The beam rose a fraction and Spock hastily wriggled out from beneath. He attempted to stand and succeeded, bent over in the cramped confines of the distorted machine. His legs were bruised but otherwise seemed undamaged.

Arwen brushed back her unruly ginger hair.

"Was anyone with you? Jim or the Doctor?"



Spock forgot his anger momentarily; he spun round and started to pick his way through the wreckage.

"The Captain was with me."

He peered through the smoke that stung his eyes. The flames were licking nearer, engulfing the seat covers. On one seat was a smear of red blood and a fragment of the loose Vulcan robe that Spock had lent his Captain. As he reached out for it, it was engulfed by the fire.

"Jim!"

Arwen pulled his hand away from the flames. Coughing, she tried to speak.

"Spock, he's not here. Maybe he got out - "

He turned on her, an expression almost of fury struggling for supremacy with his Vulcan mask.

"What have you done to him?"

"Me? Look - let's get out of here before it blows up or something."

She turned and scrambled out through the gap, wiping the stinging tears from her eyes.

"He must have come to and crawled outside; maybe he was too stunned to realise you were still trapped. He can't have gone far." She began to call out. "Jim! Jim, can you hear me?"

Spock strode to her side, seizing her arm in a painful grip and pulling her round to face him.

"You will cease this charade and tell me what you've done to the Captain!"

Arwen gazed up at him in shock, deciding that his head injury was not as superficial as she had assumed.

"Spock, you're hurting me!"

As if stung, he let go.

"I saw the smoke and came to investigate. That's how I found you. I haven't seen Jim at all."

"You deny that you were flying in front of us, that Jim hailed you but you wouldn't reply? That your aircar then disappeared and this outcropping of rock was suddenly two hundred metres nearer than it had appeared? One of your illusions - "

"Are you crazy? Would I do that? It wasn't me; I told you - "

"Then who?"

"Piras! Spock, it must be! Piras has got Jim!"

Spock stared at her for a moment, then regained control.

"If that is so, why did you not see him as you approached?"

"It's difficult to see through an illusion if you don't know it's there, even for a Tithoniël. They must be miles away by now."

They both scanned the sky; nothing was in sight.

"If Piras has the Captain, then he must intend to use him as a hostage - against you."

Arwen nodded. "Do you have a communicator with you?"

"Negative. We left all our equipment at my parents' house. To return now would take fifty seven point nine standard minutes; and if the ship were to make a sensor scan, Piras will probably have seen to it that he and Jim do not register on the sensors."

"But Jim may be injured. We need to get him back to the ship quickly -- besides, we don't know where Piras has gone. We've got no choice but to go back -- "

"Look."

Arwen turned her head in the direction in which Spock was gazing. On the horizon, huge letters were etched against the sky; COME AND GET ME.

"Piras obviously wishes you to follow."

"All right, Spock; get in."

.

They had been flying in pursuit of the other aircar for just over a standard hour. It was now visible; it had led them into a deep gorge, winding and twisting around jagged bends. Momentarily, it disappeared around the next bend. Their aircar rounded it...the other craft was nowhere in sight.

Arwen gazed from side to side at the sheer rock walls. Nothing...

"I'm going to land, Spock."

She brought the craft in for a soft landing. The door slid open and they stepped out.

Arwen looked up at the rocky walls. It was inconceivable that Piras could have landed anywhere up there, which left the rocky outcrops and scattered boulders at the foot of the bluffs. As the thought crossed her mind, a blue-white beam of energy split the air a few centimetres in front of her.

"Spock!" She threw herself down. An anxious glance showed that the Vulcan had joined her with all the speed and agility that his broken arm would allow.

"It appeared to originate from that opening in the cliff face -- approximately ten metres along and three metres up, to our left." From the tone of his voice, he might have been commenting on the condition of the weather, Arwen thought.

"I see it." She eyed the pile of rubble beneath the dark, irregular crack; it must have afforded precarious access to the hiding place. Presumably it was the result of a rockfall... She peered closer using the peculiar mental shift of which her people were capable. The heap of rock metamorphosed into an aircar.

"Spock, that's Piras' aircar -- that pile of rocks -- "

A mocking voice rang out from the crevice, bouncing back against the high walls.

"I have your Captain with me. He's injured but alive. If you want him to stay that way, you will comply with my terms."

"Prove it! Prove that he's alive!" Arwen yelled.

"All right. But make no move, or he dies."

A figure appeared in the opening; it wore a tattered and dusty robe, further discoloured by the brown of dried blood stains. Fresh blood was seeping from a wound in Kirk's abdomen; he hugged his arms to his body in obvious pain. With an effort, he spoke.

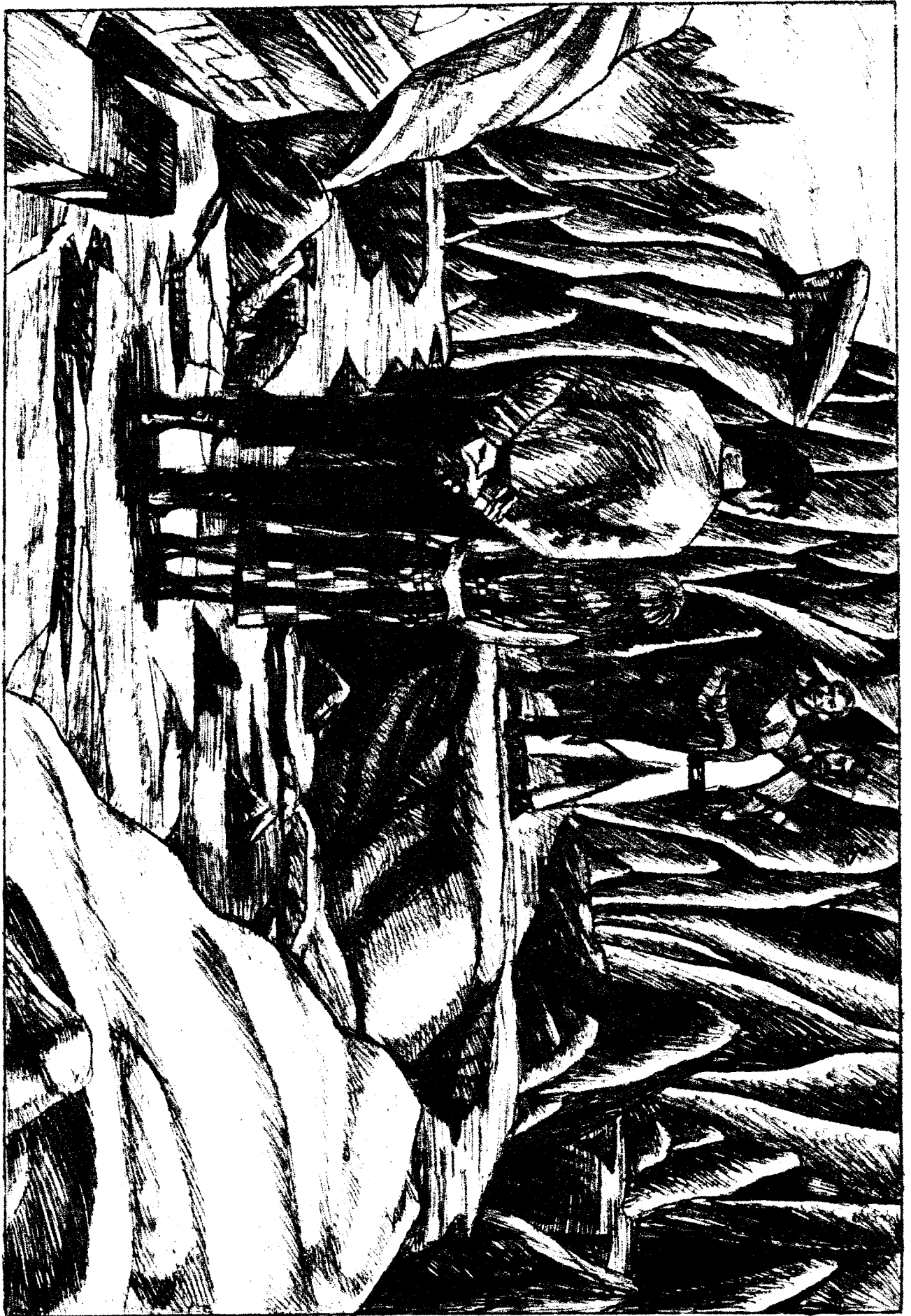
"Spock...Arwen...don't listen to him -- don't..."

"Illusion, Arwen?"

"No, Spock; that is Jim."

Piras appeared briefly, a powerful phaser rifle in one hand, and pulled the Captain back inside.

"Now, my terms. Arwen Simra; you will renounce all blood right to the chieftainship of Tithoniél; you will sign a document to that effect. Further, said document will proclaim me as chief, the hereditary rule to pass to my heirs."



"I should have known," Arwen muttered angrily. She raised her voice in reply. "I always thought you had no guts, Piras. Now you've proved it! You couldn't beat my dad fairly and you can't beat me either. Let the Captain go - I'll meet you in lawful challenge - with both my arms tied behind my back if you like!"

"No deal, Simra. You swear on the much-vaunted honour of your family - and you sign that paper. Otherwise the Captain dies."

"Don't do it, Arwen! He means to kill you too! He - " Kirk's warning shout was cut short by a cry of pain.

"I advise you to decide quickly, Arwen. My patience with the Captain is wearing thin. I might decide to kill him anyway."

"All right, Piras. You win. But let the Captain and Spock get clear first. Then I'll sign your paper!"

Kirk reappeared at the entrance to the opening again, prodded in the back with the phaser rifle. Awkwardly he climbed down. Arwen moved to help him. Piras swung the rifle to cover her as she led Kirk towards Spock, who was standing by Arwen's aircar. As Kirk reached Spock, he stopped and spoke in a low voice.

"Arwen, he intends to kill you."

"I know, Captain." She met his gaze calmly. "Don't worry, I'll think of something." She and Spock helped Kirk into the passenger seat. "Can you manage with one arm, Spock?"

"Affirmative." Spock paused. "You could come with us."

Arwen shook her head.

"He's got us covered with that rifle. He'd shoot the car down before we'd got two metres..." Her voice sank to barely a whisper. "I don't think Jim would survive another crash, and we'd all be worse off anyway... Well," she took a deep breath and smiled, "good luck to you both."

Kirk was looking at her from inside the aircar. "Arwen..."

"Jim, don't worry. Remember that trace of precog ability that I have? Right now, I've got a lucky feeling that I'm going to get out of this one."

As Spock climbed into the pilot's seat, she added, "Take care of yourselves." She gave Spock the Vulcan salute. "Live long and prosper."

Spock met her gaze directly.

"Be sure to do likewise, Arwen Tithoniél."

Arwen stepped back as Spock one-handedly engaged the drive, and the vehicle rose. She tilted back her head to watch as the craft soared upwards, parallel to the walls of sheer rock. Then it topped the canyon, pivoted, and disappeared, heading over the desert.

"A touching farewell," mocked Piras. "Now, go into my aircar. You will find a document there; bring it outside, read it aloud and sign it. You'll find a pen in there too."

Arwen turned away from regarding the red Vulcan sky. She had had no pre-cognition; Spock, she knew, had seen through her attempt at reassurance, but she hoped that Jim's mind was eased for the present. She walked over to the vehicle, dragging her feet, and looked up at Piras.

"Why don't you get this over with now? Just kill me and have done with it!"

"Ah, no, my dear Arwen. First I must rub salt into the wound. Allow me my fun, won't you?" He chuckled unpleasantly.

Arwen ducked into the aircar, and picked up the document that lay on the control panel. The document was printed on paper; a rare commodity nowadays

when most documents were either reduced onto tapes that could store libraries of information in a container the size of a shoe box, or else impressed onto sheets of thin durable plasti-material. Piras however had had this document printed in an old style script on fine quality paper; the statement was in the Mardrata old language followed by a modern translation. She scanned it, anger rising within her.

'I, Arwen Simra, daughter of the deceased Rinro, chief of Tithoniél, do hereby renounce my hereditary claim to the chieftainship of Tithoniél on behalf of myself and any future offspring of mine. Further, I do hereby declare Piras Listra the rightful and true chieftain of Tithoniél, he and his future heirs to rule in perpetuity.

And to this I do sign my name this one hundred and seventy-ninth day of the year Eight thousand and twenty-three after the coming of the Mardrata to Earth.'

She clenched the pen firmly.

"And what will you do with the Tithoniél once you have them, Piras? Will you kill the other clan chiefs and rule those clans too? Take all our people to the new world and set yourself up as a tyrant over them? But will the rule of an entire planet be enough to satisfy your ambition?"

She stepped out of the aircar; it lay between her and Piras.

"Come out from there, Arwen. I want a good view as you sign that historic document!"

Arwen complied, laying the paper on the front of the vehicle, and lifted the pen.

"Not so fast; first you must read it aloud, remember?"

With a glance of pure hatred, she took up the paper and began to read; the pure, ancient tongue of the Mardrata echoing strangely in the equally old Vulcan gorge. She finished and signed her name.

"Good. I see you've signed it correctly; not tried to be heroic by filling in someone else's name." He tossed the paper through the open door of the aircar. "Now...you are plain Arwen Simra and I am Piras Tithoniél!"

Arwen said nothing; her expression of disgust was sufficiently eloquent.

"One last favour I require of you, my dear - " He paused and then snapped, "Start running!"

"What?" Arwen cried out, incredulous. "You mean all this isn't enough for you? That you have to shoot me in the back - "

"You can die quickly, or I can make it slow and painful. The choice is yours. You have ten seconds to decide, then I start with your legs."

Arwen did not move. She had spotted a large, leathery-skinned, cat-like creature padding swiftly up to Piras from behind. Where it had come from she didn't know, but she tried not to look at it, lest she draw Piras' attention.

Piras smiled cruelly. "All right then - " He raised the rifle, aiming at Arwen's legs.

There was a loud roar behind him. He spun round, startled, in time to see the le matya spring towards him. He fired -

Arwen was running like the wind along the canyon. She heard the phaser blast but did not look back.

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At last she was forced to stop, collapsing against the canyon wall, her chest heaving. Then, over the sound of her agonised breathing which was magnified echoing in the silence, she heard that which she had listened for with

dread; the whine of an aircar motor reverberating against the arid rocks. She looked back; it was not yet in sight. The craft must be travelling slowly; Piras was in no hurry. His quarry was on foot and help would not be forthcoming for another two hours. He would enjoy this game to the full.

She pushed herself away from the rocks and ran on, pain knifing through her chest, her legs weak with fatigue. The canyon seemed to stretch into infinity, but almost imperceptibly, the ground underfoot was sloping upwards.

She glanced back again over her shoulder. The aircar was visible now, just rounding the last bend. She willed herself to run on, her lungs protesting at the scarcity of oxygen in this thinner, alien atmosphere. Slowly the aircar gained, creeping towards her. Piras was playing the game of cat and mouse that he relished so greatly. In his right arm, he cradled the phaser rifle, ready for the moment when with an artist's judgement, he should decide to take the first shot.

He glanced down at the controls, then through the plastiglass windshield again. Arwen was staggering, her legs refusing to obey the commands of her brain any longer. Then she collapsed, trying desperately to rise. Piras brought the aircar lower still, then pressed a button on the control panel. With a subdued hum, the window slid open. Setting the controls to 'hover', he leaned through the open window and took careful aim at the young woman, who had scrambled to her feet and begun, hopelessly, to stumble forward.

He fired.

The blue-white beam shot out and struck Arwen in the back.

"You didn't make it very difficult for me, Arwen," laughed Piras, as he steered the craft nearer and set it down. "You should have tried a little harder!"

He stepped out and strolled casually across to the body of the dying girl, still carrying his rifle. With typical cruelty, he had not set the weapon to vapourise its victim, preferring to inflict a painful death.

Still laughing, he bent down and reached out to pull Arwen's face towards him, so that she could look into that of her murderer.

There was a sudden roar behind him. Piras spun round, as the form at his feet vanished. The aircar shot upwards at maximum vertical speed, climbing swiftly to the top of the canyon.

Piras swung up the rifle in one fluid movement to rest against his shoulder, and took aim. As the aircar turned to escape from the canyon, the phaser beam stabbed out, scoring a hit on its underside. Then the vehicle was gone, the whine of its engine receding.

His face flushed with impotent fury, Piras set off at a run, heading for the canyon exit.

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Arwen fought with the aircar controls. The drive mechanism was emitting an uncharacteristic shrill whistle. She had felt the craft lurch beneath her as the phaser beam hit it; the damage had obviously been to a vital component. Now the aircar dipped and jolted alarmingly, vibrating her with such violence that the controls danced before her eyes and she had to fight down the onset of nausea. She felt the aircar losing power, and brought it down lower until it was skimming less than a metre above the desert surface.

There was a final jolt; hastily, Arwen brought the craft in to land as the engine finally died. She grabbed the arms of her seat and hung on desperately as she was pitched forward by the impact. Then the craft was still.

After a moment's rest to recover, she got up and looked around quickly, examining the craft for a weapon of some kind. In a cupboard, she found a belt; attached to it in a sheath was a knife, previously Piras' favoured

weapon. She buckled it on and prepared to leave. Piras would not have given up, she knew, and he still had the rifle. Hastily, she grabbed a full container of water from the cooler, and slung it across her shoulder. As she swung wide the door, admitting the full heat of the Vulcan desert as if she had opened an oven door, something scuffed against her foot. She looked down. It was the paper that Piras had forced her to sign.

For a moment, her impulse was to tear it up, but she jumped down from the aircar leaving it untouched. She had sworn to that which the paper stated; to destroy it would not release her from her oath.

She strode away in the direction that Spock had taken. If he had been heading for his parents' home and the communicator, that seemed as good a direction as any; in fact, the only one that held any hope at all. She had lost all bearing of any other habitation.

Looking back once in the direction of the canyon, she hurried off in the baking heat.

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Piras stumbled from the canyon, lungs gasping for oxygen, and sank to the ground to rest. After recovering his breath a little, he looked up, shading his eyes against the fierce sunlight. He could see no smoke; the aircar had not crashed, then, even though he was sure that he had badly damaged it. Perhaps the Simra woman had managed to land safely. If so, there might be some water left in the craft if she had not taken it all.

Doggedly, he rose to his feet and set off.

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Arwen sat in the shade of some rocks and took a sip of water. She forced herself to replace the lid of the container before she was tempted to drink her fill; the water was all that stood between her and dehydration. After a moment, she got to her feet and trudged on.

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Piras stopped and shaded his eyes, his lips already cracking, his mouth parched. To his left, some distance ahead - a flash of blue. Water? He staggered forward.

Piras stumbled up to the grounded aircar. Of course; it was obvious now that he remembered. The craft was coloured blue so as to be conspicuous against the uniform dull reds and oranges of the desert.

He climbed through the open door, trembling with exhaustion and fear, and fell to his knees in front of the cooler cupboard where he had stored the water. Hands shaking, he reached within; the interior of the cupboard was now as hot as the rest of the aircar - the power which had operated both it and the air conditioning was no longer available. He lifted one of the canteens and felt by its heaviness that it was full. Frantically, he removed the cap and drank.

As he gulped down the last trickles of water, he was forced to pause for breath. Then he rechecked the cupboard; six full canteens stood inside. The Simra woman was a fool! Hastily, he slung them about himself, then looked around for his rifle.

He stopped, as he remembered. He had been using the weapon to help support himself across the dusty terrain; at some stage, he must have dropped it, and in his exhausted state been oblivious to its loss. He cursed; he could not return for it now. He rummaged in the next cupboard for the knife he had left there; the woman had evidently taken it. No matter; he was sure that she had no training with weapons. Turning to leave, he spied the discarded document, and picking it up, tucked it inside his robe. As he stepped out into the full impact of the Vulcan sun, he scratched the back of his left hand. The slight scratches there had begun to irritate. He looked around; the dusty

ground showed Arwen's tracks plainly.

With a confident smile, he set off.

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Arwen glanced back; the blue dot of the aircar was no longer visible. She gripped the strap of the water canteen; already it was three-quarters empty. She now realised that she had made a serious miscalculation - when she had previously left her aircar on her exploratory walks through the desert, she had only needed one canteen of water. She had then been in no hurry, and the supply had been adequate for her exertions. Now, however, the sustained physical exercise in this unrelenting heat was taking its toll. She had been so anxious to escape from Piras, that she had not stopped to consider the situation logically.

She glanced back again; was it merely her imagination or was there a tiny white speck in the far distance? Like herself, Piras had been wearing a reflective white robe. But he must be lost somewhere, collapsed from exhaustion ... dismissing the sight as an optical effect brought on by a combination of the alien sunlight and her own debilitated condition, she marched onwards.

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Arwen lay unmoving, the hot sun baking down on her unprotected head. She realised dreamily that she had lost her battered old hat in the canyon; this unconnected thought drifted through her half-conscious mind.

With an effort, she raised herself to her elbows. She had no idea of how long she had lain there, too exhausted to rise. Shakily, she clambered to her hands and knees and reached for the fallen canteen. She upended it against her mouth; only a trace of water trickled out onto her slightly swollen tongue.

She lowered the container, staring at it in befuddled shock; when had she drunk the last of the water? With an incoherent cry, she flung the canteen away and buried her face in her hands. Her body shook for a few seconds then she looked up, shaking her head. What was the use of tears? They only wasted bodily fluid that she could ill afford to lose. Besides, she did not think that she could squeeze out a tear anyway; her eyes felt dry and gritty.

She staggered to her feet, and felt inside the loose folds of her robe for Piras' dagger. If there were only some animal that she could kill...but even if there were, she felt as weak as a kitten. So she only stood, gazing at the knife, examining its every plane and contour and feeling the texture of its handle in her palm. Thoughts drifted through her head, almost aimlessly. She grasped on one; her life had not been wasted - if nothing else, she had saved the lives of both Jim and Spock. Surely it was better to end it now, quickly, rather than suffer the prolonged agonies of death by dehydration?

She elevated the knife, reversing the blade carefully, so that it pointed inwards to her heart. Her hand trembled slightly; she took a deep breath, trying to strengthen her resolution.

Come on, don't you have any guts at all?

Her hand shook more violently; she grasped the hilt of the knife with both hands. Her eyes stung as if tears hovered there after all.

Abruptly, there was the sound of applause.

"Very entertaining, my dear Arwen."

Her head jerked round. She turned the knife to point outwards at the figure which seemed to waver slightly like a heat haze.

"You!"

Her voice sounded strange to her own ears, slightly muffled; no doubt because of the slight increase in the size of her tongue. Her eyes blazed with hatred.

Still with a mocking expression on his face, Piras unhooked a canteen from his shoulder and tossed it to her.

"Here!"

Instinctively, Arwen put out her free hand to catch it, but it fell from her weakened fingers. She bent slowly, still holding the knife towards Piras. The canteen felt heavy as she lifted it.

"What's this? Poisoned water?"

"No. I assure you, it's pure."

Piras watched with amusement as Arwen backed away, fearing to lay down her knife. She edged behind a rock, and keeping her eyes on Piras, put down the knife and opened the canteen. He made no move as she raised it to her lips and drank as slowly as she could, knowing it was dangerous to drink too much too quickly. After a few mouthfuls, she lowered it.

"Why so merciful? I thought you wanted me dead."

"Yes, I did, didn't I? However, I've been thinking; you're really no threat to me now. I have the paper - it will be more sweet to witness your humiliation, and to see you suffer from your family's punishment, than to kill you."

"I see." She drank some more water. "I know it's useless to beg you to spare my family so I won't try. But what about your crimes? The murder of my father, the crash you caused; holding Captain Kirk to ransom?"

Piras shrugged.

The Federation will have to deal with me if they want the Mardrata off Earth. They have no other contact; only you - and your word will never carry any weight with our people, now."

Arwen drank some more water, finishing the canteen.

"What are you going to do with me?"

"You can walk back to civilisation - you should make it, now. I'm afraid I can't afford to spare any more water - "

"What will you do with our new planet, once it is yours?"

"I haven't really made any detailed plans... I'll 'persuade' the other clans to make me supreme chief of them all. It's my great dream, you know; to reunite the clans and restore our people to their former glory." His teeth shone whitely as he spoke the mocking words.

"No doubt. However, the Tithoniél are the true Mardrata, aren't they? The rest are scum who'll be suitably employed in the menial tasks of the colony."

Piras grinned more broadly.

"I can see now that on so much we think alike. It's a pity we couldn't have joined forces in the beginning. As it is, I have a special design for you - you'll be displayed in the stocks, I think, for public humiliation - and so you'll have a good view of the execution of the rest of the Simra breed. Yes, that will be so much better than killing you..."

Arwen swallowed, but kept her voice as neutral as possible.

"What makes you think I'll be around? It's a big galaxy - I can lose myself in it forever - "

"Ah, but you won't. That's one of your charming characteristics, Arwen. You're so delightfully predictable. You won't just abandon your family to its fate as any sensible soul would."

"I'm going to stop you, Piras."

Piras laughed in response.

"You? Stop me? I must make you my court jester; you can wear a cap and bells - "

"Yes, I will stop you." Arwen stepped forward, a strange half smile on her lips. "I, Arwen Simra, on behalf of the family of Simra, make challenge against you, Piras Tithoniél, for the chieftainship of Tithoniél." She finished reciting the ancient formula and waited.

"What? You can't do that - " Piras produced the paper and waved it at her.

"Oh, but I can. I only renounced my hereditary right to rule. You should know as well as I that by law any adult of the Tithoniél can take the chieftainship by challenge - that's the way you were supposed to have taken it."

"I should have let you kill yourself - "

Arwen smiled, resheathing the knife inside her robe.

"You must honour challenge now, Piras. Though you wouldn't make challenge before, leaving me to try and settle this dispute by forcing the issue, remember that a chief of Tithoniél who declines challenge, automatically forfeits the chieftainship to the challenger. Do you decline?"

"No!" Piras roared furiously. "I accept your challenge. You should have been content with your life!"

"No doubt. Name the ground - it is your right."

Piras glanced quickly around, searching for a suitably hazardous spot. He pointed ahead to an outcropping of harder rock, thrusting up from the desert surface.

"There!"

"All right. Now give me half the water."

Piras stared at her, incredulous. She merely extended her hand towards him.

"Have you forgotten that too? The law of challenge states that if the contest is to be conducted within the confines of a desert region, the parties must first divide equally between them whatever water they have."

Piras stared at her for a moment, his face flushing angrily, then he uncapped one of the remaining three canteens he carried, and drank down half its contents. Replacing the lid, he handed it and another, full, canteen to Arwen.

"Your one and a half," he snapped. As he turned to march towards the place of challenge, he swayed as if dizzy and staggered forward, clutching at a boulder to steady himself.

"What is it? Are you ill?"

"No, nothing. Just this damned heat!"

He pulled himself upright and walked slowly away. Arwen sat down on a rock and drank the half canteen of water, taking her time. She knew that challenge could not commence until both participants were in position. She threw the empty container away, and set off towards the outcropping. As she walked, she regarded the full canteen of water she carried; if she survived this challenge, the Enterprise would soon be coming to her aid - if she did not, she would have no need of the water. Reasoning thus, she drank most of the contents, then began to climb the craggy slope to the top, pausing frequently to catch her breath in the thin air.

At the top, Piras waited, arms folded, his expression thundrous.

"Let's get this - charade - over with. You haven't a chance of winning."

Arwen made no reply as she took position. Piras smiled; his face transformed the curving of his lips into a sneer.

"The first move belongs to the chief, Simra."

Abruptly the contours of the outcropping altered drastically. Deep chasms opened up where moments before had been firm rock, and true crevices were covered over.

"You must keep moving, Arwen - that is, if you're playing by the rules," taunted Piras from the high rock on which he stood. Arwen stepped forward to the crevasse below him, which separated them. She probed the fabric of illusion with a precise instrument; her mind. The thin natural bridge of rock which seemed to span the gap safely, wavered under her scrutiny. With confidence, she set her foot onto seemingly empty air just half a metre away from it, and walked calmly to the far side. Scowling, Piras stepped down from his rock pile. As he jumped across another crack in the rocks, Arwen concentrated, and the gap shifted a little. Piras misjudged his leap, and set one foot on ground that did not exist. He wavered, toppling backwards, then desperately threw himself forward to land sprawling on his face on solid ground.

Angrily, he got to his feet as Arwen advanced, her expression serene and confident. She had learned from her mistake in their first meeting; she did not give in to anger or hatred. Keeping her concentration solely upon the task in hand, she prepared to follow Piras across the crevice.

The ground on which she gathered herself to leap forward dropped away into a five hundred metre chasm. She did not flinch; instead, she leaped off from above this illusory void to land safely behind Piras. He turned to move away and found himself trapped by sheer walls of rock. They closed in on him from three sides, pushing him forward in one direction. He stepped forward to escape their stoney embrace, and just in time remembered to examine the ground on which he was about to tread. He was being driven to the edge of the outcropping, his foot poised above empty air. With a supreme effort of will, he broke through the walls of solid rock, back to the safety of the centre of the bluff.

"So it's murder now! You tried to push me off the edge - "

"Don't be naive, Piras. I suppose it wasn't murder when you tried to make me step on a rock bridge that wasn't there - or when you buried your knife in my father's back?" Arwen spoke without emotion; her mind fixed entirely on the business of survival.

A huge bat-winger creature flew at her, slashing with razor-sharp talons and teeth. She stood arms folded, unscathed, as it winked out of existence.

"You'll have to try better than that."

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Spock was bent over his hooded viewer, scanning the canyon area.

"No sign of humanoid life, Captain. I'm widening the area of the sensor scan."

Kirk sat in his chair, still clad in the torn robes he had worn on beaming up. Despite McCoy's protest, he had insisted on postponing proper medical attention until Arwen was safe. McCoy had been forced to content himself with spraying and dressing the Captain's wounds to prevent infection and further loss of blood; his scans had shown no internal injuries.

"Now picking up metallic readings; mass and composition suggest object is a standard model aircar. No life form readings."

"Could it be the one we crashed in?" Kirk had been unconscious during his abduction by Piras and had no clear idea of how far the alien had taken him.

"Negative; this is just beyond the canyon. Also, its power unit is inoperative but intact. I suggest that it may be the vehicle Piras was using."

He continued to scan, as Kirk waited, attempting to curb his impatience. Behind the command chair, McCoy stood, medikit at the ready in case he should be needed.



"Captain, I am picking up unusual readings on an outcropping in the desert some kilometres from the aircar. Its configuration seems to be in a state of flux... I can distinguish no definite readings."

Something that Arwen had once said now sprang into Kirk's mind.

"Spock! Could it be that they're engaged in - challenge?"

Spock straightened, one eyebrow fractionally elevated.

"It would account for these readings, sir. I can distinguish no humanoid traces due to the interference."

"Right! We'll beam down ourselves. Get a security team together - " Kirk made to rise and winced, despite the pain killers McCoy had given him. McCoy pressed him back with a hand on his shoulder.

"Spock will beam down. You're going to sickbay - now."

"Bones, I have to be sure - "

"Don't argue! I'm the doctor, remember? If I have to, I'll make that an order. Spock can handle it."

"With a busted arm?" Kirk persisted.

Spock, who was hovering by the turbolift door, now spoke.

"I am able to function sufficiently, Captain. And I am the only one capable of seeing through Tithoniél illusion."

Kirk nodded wearily, conceding defeat. "All right, Spock - see to it."

The Vulcan exited hastily.

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Spock and the security team materialised at the foot of the outcropping, the fluctuating sensor readings making it impossible to beam safely to the top.

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Arwen spoke as a realisation struck her.

"Piras, there's an extra dimension in your illusions. You're trying to obscure sensor probes as well, aren't you? Why waste your strength?"

"To...try to delay...your beloved Federation." Piras spoke with difficulty, his head swimming. He blinked, trying to clear his vision.

Arwen drank the last of her water; the heat and reduced intake of oxygen was telling on her already weakened physical condition.

"Because you don't want to be arrested for your crimes? Surely you'll be able to escape from them once you recover your strength?"

"No...because I don't want this challenge interrupted. I am going to get rid of you, if it's the last thing..."

He made his move. Arwen stumbled forward, dazed by the brilliant light that suddenly shone into her face, and almost toppled down a crevasse. She pulled back in time, smiling shakily.

"Nice try, Piras."

She sent the landscape through a lightning pattern of changes as she advanced towards him, then stopped.

"Your move."

Piras frowned, struggling to make his thoughts seem material. Seconds passed.

"I - I can't..."

Spock topped the far side of the rise and hurried towards them. As the

security guards appeared, breathing heavily, Piras swayed, still speaking.

"So...you are stronger..." He sank to his knees. "You've defeated me, Simra. You're..."

Spock reached Arwen's side as Piras looked up, his voice barely more than a whisper.

"You're chief...of the Tithoniél..."

He pitched forward onto his face.

"Piras?" Arwen staggered forward, her legs folding with fatigue, but Spock caught her.

"Spock!" She seemed to notice him for the first time. "So there is a Christmas after all..."

One of the security guards bent to examine the fallen man.

"Sir - I think he's in a bad way...there's hardly any pulse."

Supporting Arwen with his injured arm encased in its plastifoam dressing, Spock produced his communicator.

"Spock to Enterprise. Beam us up - medical emergency."

.

When Arwen awoke, she was at first aware only of a pounding headache. She felt a hypo placed gently against her arm. The pain began to recede and she opened her eyes. There were two blue shapes grouped round her; slowly they resolved into the figures of Spock and McCoy.

"Arwen?"

She heard a familiar voice beside her and turned her head. In the bed next to hers was Kirk, propped up by pillows.

"Jim! You're all right!"

Kirk smiled disarmingly. "I wish you could convince Bones of that."

"You're staying right where you are, Jim," McCoy commanded. He turned to Arwen. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I could sleep for a week. How long have I been out?"

"Two days - but most of that was natural sleep."

Arwen glanced around at the other beds. "I don't see Piras."

"He's dead." It was Spock who spoke.

"Dead?"

"Yes," explained McCoy. "He was still alive when he was beamed up but died seconds later."

"What was it - exhaustion?"

"No - le matya poisoning."

Arwen looked blankly at McCoy. "Poison?"

"From the claws of a le matya," Spock put in. "A Vulcan carnivore. He had two small scratches on his left hand."

"I see...that's what the animal was - it was shortly after you left. Piras was about to shoot me, when an animal attacked him from behind. I know he must have shot it, but I didn't see exactly what happened - I was too busy running!"

McCoy sat down on the edge of her bed.

"Do you feel up to telling us what happened yet?"

Arwen nodded. She began to recount her experiences in outline, omitting

to mention her attempt at suicide. Although it had been a reasonable enough decision in the circumstances, she now felt ashamed, viewing it as a moment of weakness. She wondered if she would really have carried it out if Piras had not arrived.

"I hope there was no trouble over the crashed aircars." Arwen spoke as the thought struck her.

"Don't worry - Starfleet has arranged compensation for all those concerned," Kirk assured her. He made no mention of the other, political repercussions that would have ensued if Piras' death had been due to the duel. Starfleet had received a full report; and duly ordered that only an edited version be presented to the Vulcan authorities. Kirk had felt himself placed in an awkward position in having to be less than frank in this way, but the choice was out of his hands.

"Well, you're chief of Tithoniél now, Arwen."

"Yes, Jim - it doesn't feel any different though." She smiled. "I guess this is where the hard work starts."

"Not until you're fully recovered, young lady," insisted McCoy.

Arwen smiled wearily.

"Believe me, Doctor, I have no intention of leaving this bed just yet."

Then she closed her eyes and drifted off into sleep.

Epilogue

Kirk was seated in his command chair, deep in thought as he watched the blue-green planet turning majestically on the main screen. As the turbo-lift doors opened and someone stepped lightly down to his side, he became alert. Glancing up, he saw Arwen.

"So this is the bridge...very impressive."

Kirk smiled. "How does it feel to be promoted from ordinary civilian?"

"Oh, well...I'm only a kind of temporary ambassador, Jim, like the other clan chiefs. Now that our people have all come here from Earth, we have to track down the rest of our long-lost relatives. I have quite a long list of Tithoniél to work through."

"Yes... Have you decided what to name your new planet yet?"

"Of course. That was decided at the first assembly. I wish the rest of the work were that simple. It was the first name that came up - Mardrata-va - home of the people-of-the-five-talents."

"Quite a mouthful for mere Humans! I was pleased to see that they're all settling in so well."

"Yes; it was quite a shambles when you first brought us here, wasn't it? All those Federation experts soon had us organised though. Now that they've got all the temporary settlement buildings erected, they're going to give us all a crash course on agriculture and animal husbandry. Eventually we'll be self sufficient as far as food goes. Still, I'm glad I'm going to miss all that!"

As Kirk grinned, the intercom whistled.

"Kirk here."

"Kyle here, sir. The rest of the Mardrata ambassadors are aboard."

"Very good. Mr. Sulu, lay in a course for Delta Pavonis IV."

"Aye aye, sir."

Kirk turned to Arwen.

"That's our first stop - for the telepathic ambassador, Kledo -. I forget the clan name."

"It's Casreem, Jim. But we're going to try to be a little less clan-conscious from now on."

She dipped into the bag she carried; as she drew out a sheet of plasti-material, Kirk smiled.

"A very notable aim."

"Yes... My first stop is Gamma Cleon. I expect we'll be seeing quite a lot of each other from now on."

"Well...there are other Starships to act as your taxi, Ambassador, but I expect with our luck..." Kirk trailed off, grinning mischievously, then added, "What've you got there?"

Arwen had replaced her list and produced a floppy, pale green hat.

"I lost the original in the canyon on Vulcan, Jim. Do you remember?" As she spoke, she was flexing the hat, to mould it more into a shape of her liking.

"As if I could forget," said Kirk with feeling, massaging his ribs, though they had healed long since their escapade of nearly six months ago.

She looked at him, setting the hat on her head at a jaunty angle. "Yes, well... So anyway, I got wardrobe to turn me out a duplicate just now - ambassadorial privilege, right? She grinned, broadly. "It's a bit new of course, but once I've kicked it around a bit, it'll look just as good as the old one."

She chuckled softly at Kirk's bemused expression.

"Hmm," he commented. "You've certainly settled into your new role. But won't the Tithoniél be a little - overcome - by such magnificence?"

He glanced down at the rest of her outfit; she was wearing her checkered dress again. Her eyes glinted with amusement.

"Not at all, Jim. They appreciate an eccentric clan chief - the glamorous image, you know. Well, I mustn't keep you from your labours. I'd better go and talk politics with the rest of the dummies, I suppose."

"Before you go, it might interest you to know that I'm inviting you and 'the rest of the dummies' to dinner tonight at 20.00 hours; with myself and the senior officers."

"Delighted, Jim, delighted." She ran lightly up the steps to the turbo-lift. "See you tonight."

The door closed softly behind her. Kirk turned away, to meet Spock's gaze. The Vulcan had distinctly raised one eyebrow.

"Well, you have to admit one thing, Spock - she's a lot less trouble than some ambassadors I could name!"

.

Arwen was relaxing in one of the recreation rooms, softly playing on her pipe, when a shadow fell across her. She ceased playing and looked up.

"Hello, Cledo."

Smiling, he sat down. "I hope I didn't disturb you."

"Not at all. I'm pleased to see you; we didn't get much time to talk on Mardrata-va, did we? All those busy preparations."

She observed Kledo as she spoke; he was only a year or two older than herself. "I thought you spoke well at the meeting."

Kledo shrugged. "Not really....I didn't say much - I mean, there wasn't any real disagreement on any of the issues, was there? I don't know if I'd do as well if they'd been debating something controversial."

"Well, I thought it was a good start, considering that's the first meeting of the Mardrata in centuries; I hope the lack of argument was a good omen for us."

Kledo smiled a little self-consciously.

"You know, Arwen, I don't think they'd have dared to disagree with you there. You've become the heroine of our people."

"What? You're joking!"

"No, really, I'm serious. They're all talking about your quest for vengeance and how you saved the Tithoniél, perhaps all of us, from Piras' ambition. Even the Casreem - they're all telling the story of your duel in the desert - suitably embellished, no doubt!"

"Thank you for telling me - I'll put a stop to it as soon as I get back. I don't want the whole affair glamourised - that would be wrong. I suppose I'd better publish the definitive account..."

She paused for a moment, lost in thought. There were some things that were better left out of any account; she remembered in particular the devious means she had employed to secure a passage from Falkey's Planet. Even now, she almost cringed in embarrassment at the thought of how immaturely she had behaved then. The impression she must have made on Jim and the others! Hopefully she had redeemed herself since. She spoke again.

"Yes, I must be sure to make a note to do that as soon as I get home. I daresay those experts will be able to improvise some sort of printing method... Hey, I just realised. I said 'home', didn't I? For the first time we really do have a home - all of us."

Kledo nodded. "It's strange how we've all been isolated till now. Till Mardrata-va, we'd never met, yet we're cousins, aren't we?"

"Yes, your grandfather's sister married my grandfather, didn't she? And did you know that Tasra is also my cousin? My aunt Bethiline taught me the family tree when I was a child. My grandfather's sister married a man from the Colmsarél ruling family. Their daughter was my mother."

"So you're..." Kledo paused, considering. "One quarter a telepath, one quarter a precog and half Tithoniél."

"Yes; no wonder the family Listra were so het up about racial impurity! I wish aunt Bethiline - and dad - could have lived to see all this, though."

There was silence for a moment.

"Arwen, I think that what they hoped for must never be allowed to die or to sink back into the squabbling and division that first parted our people."

Arwen nodded.

"Therefore," Kledo continued, "I've decided to swear on the honour of my family that the Casreem will always keep friendship with the Tithoniél. We are your allies now, for all time."

"You don't have to do that - I know I can count on your friendship without any oath - "

"No, I feel I should. That way, no-one else can ever set aside the friendship of our clans."

"I agree," said a new voice.

They both looked round to see a young woman standing nearby. Her hair was long and dark, and she smiled bewitchingly. Her approach had been so silent

that both of them had been unaware of her presence.

"I too will swear to this, Arwen - on behalf of all Colmsarél. The loyalty of the precogs is yours."

She sat down beside them. Arwen looked from one to the other in frank amazement.

"I just don't know what to say - how to thank you - except to say that the Tithoniél are the friends of both your clans, by my father's honour."

"I swear by my family that you have the friendship of my people always."

"And I."

They joined hands briefly in the friendship oath. Arwen glanced at one of the ship's chronometers nearby.

"And now, I really think that we should join the Captain - we're late for dinner!"

The three clan leaders rose and headed for the door, laughing.

Arwen glanced at her new friends. The Mardrata would be one at last.

They had come home.

ZINE ADS

August 1981

CHEAP THRILLS - a no-frills K/S zine - please do not order if you object to the premise. Carol Hunterton, 43 Old Bergen Rd, Jersey City, NJ 07305, U.S.A.

ENTER-COMM - a genzine from Marjorie McKenna, 1068 Bathgate Drive, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1J 8E8.

FINAL FRONTIER - an explicit K/S zine from Cynthia Drake, 1387 L Street, Elmont, NY 11003, U.S.A. An age statement (over 18) required.

GRIP - a genzine featuring new writers from Roberta Rogow, P.O. Box 124, Fair Lawn, NJ 07410, U.S.A. Also TREXINDEX - a listing of stories and writers, and where these stories appeared.

GALACTIC DISCOURSE - Laurie Huff, 208 W. Crow, Eureka, IL 61530, U.S.A. An excellent genzine; issues 1, 3 & 3 available. Also PRECESSIONAL, a novel dealing with lasting changes in the lives of Kirk and Spock.

OUT OF BOUNDS - a K/S zine from Cindy Deren, 2521 Woodmere Avenue, Akron, Ohio 44312, U.S.A. An age statement (over 18) required.

SPIN DIZZIE - A genzine at a very reasonable price. Marilyn Johansen, 11424 Kensington Drive, Eden Prairie, MN 55344, U.S.A.

T'HY'LA - A K/S zine from Kathleen Resch, P.O. Box 2262 Mission Sta., Santa Clara, CA 95055, U.S.A. Will not knowingly be sold to anyone under 18.

UNIVERSAL TRANSLATOR - a newsletter giving information on zines in print and in the planning stages. Mostly U.S. zines, it does include a section on 'foreign' zines, mostly British. \$2.00 per issue Britain, \$1.50 U.S.A. Rose Jakubjansky, 39-84 48th St, Long Island City, NY 11104, U.S.A.

VAULT OF TOMORROW - a genzine from Marion McChesney, 3429 Chestnut Avenue, Baltimore, MD 21211, U.S.A.

CAPTAIN'S LOG - a genzine from Sylvia Billings, 49 Southampton Rd, Far Cotton, Northampton, England.

LOG ENTRIES - a genzine from STAG. Please make cheques, etc, payable to STAG. In print - LE 38, 40, 41, £1.15 each; LE 39, 42, £1.20 each. Also STAG Con '81 zine, £1.15. Sheila Clark, 6 Craigmill Cottages, Strathmartine, by Dundee, Scotland, until the end of September 1981; thereafter from Sylvia Billings.

NOCTURNE - a K/S zine from Lee Owers, 23 Maiden Rd, Stratford, London E15 4EZ, England. This zine contains explicit same-sex scenes - please do not order if you object to the premise. An age statement (over 18) required.

ORBIT - a genzine from Doreen DaBinett, Greenacres, Howe Rd, Watlington, OXON, England. Issues 301, 302, 303, 304 available. Also some K/S zines which will not knowingly be sold to anyone under 18. These include Duet 1, 2 & 3, and others.

TASMEEN - a new zine of short stories centred on Kirk and Spock. Also LOGICAL THING TO DO, a Sarek/Amanda story; OF DARKNESS AND LIGHT; PRICE OF FRIENDSHIP. Simone Mason, Seranis, Danehill, Haywards Heath, Sussex, England.

UNI-VERSE - a poetry zine from Mrs. Gladys Oliver, 211 Turpin Avenue, Collier Row, Romford, Essex, England. Contains Trek, Blake's Seven and general sci-fi. Issues 1 & 2 available.

ZENITH 3 - a genzine from Sue Meek, 314 Coach Rd Est, Washington, Tyne & Wear, England, or Tina Pole, 11F Prior's Terrace, Tynemouth, Tyne & Wear, England. Also TICKLED PINK, stories in a lighter vein by Tina Pole.

Please send SAE or addressed envelope and 2 IRCs when writing for information on availability and prices of zines.

NB - Doreen DaBinett has changed her address. Now 8 De Quincey Close
Brackley, Northants, England.

