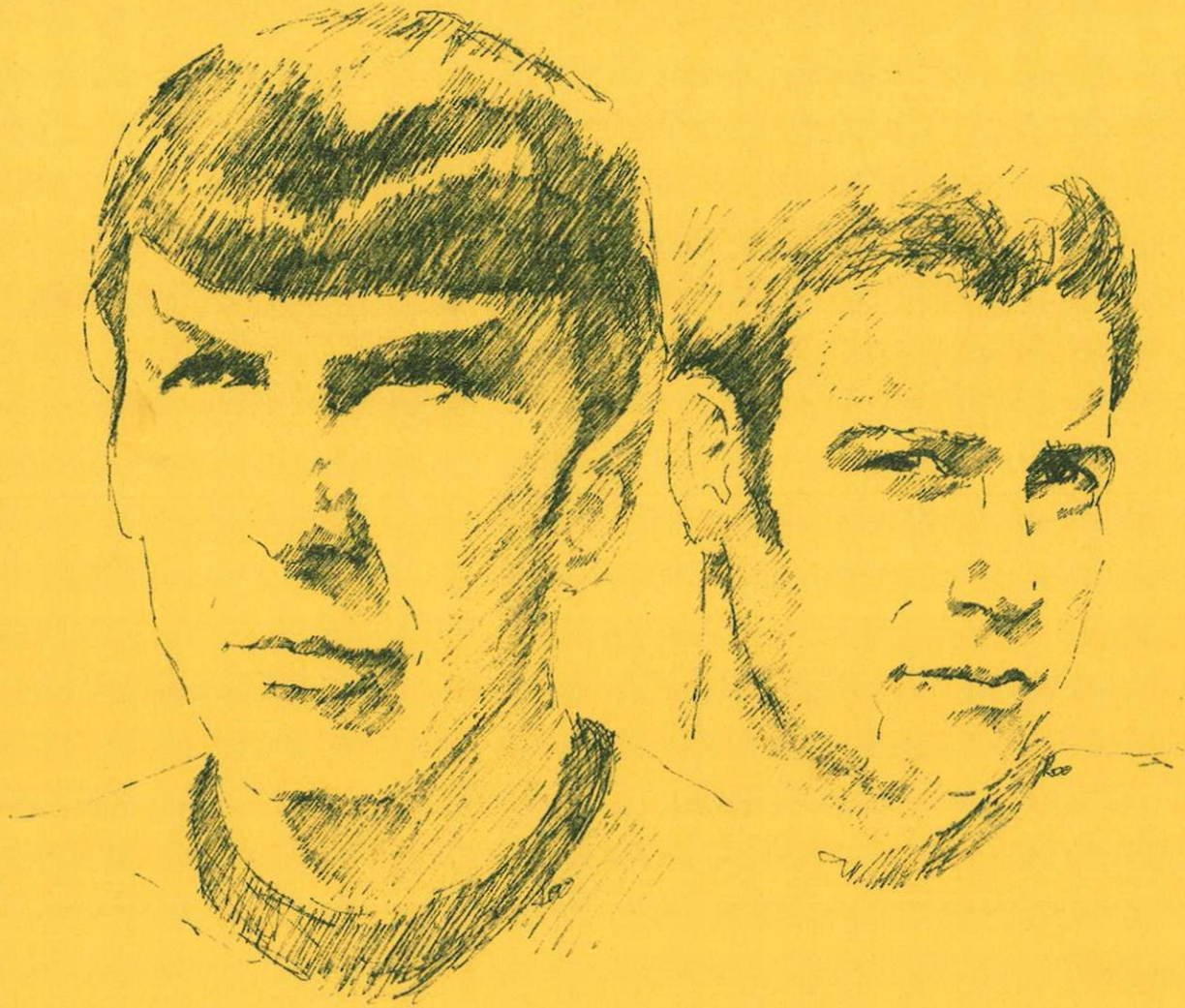


VARIATIONS

ON A THEME **5**



Valerie Piacentini

& Sheila Clark

a

STAR TREK

fanzine

VARIATIONS ON A THEME 5

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In Kraith Collected we met Commodore Spock, from another universe. His Kirk had been killed, and Spock, confused and unhappy, having discovered the existence of other universes, attempted to find a replacement for his own lost Kirk. However, he misinterpreted half-understood data that had been transmitted to him through his sensor equipment, and Kirk resented his interference; when his own Spock arrived to rescue him, he went gladly, leaving the Commodore doubly alone.

We were concerned over the plight of the Commodore, and wondered how he might continue his search. The Variations on a Theme universe arose from our discussions on how he might do so. We must stress, however, that our universe is in no way related to the Kraith universe.

In Variations 1, his equipment now improved, he detected the presence of a Kirk who did indeed need his help. That Kirk was the young, shy and sensitive First Officer to a Spock who had never adjusted to his Human blood, and who reacted to his maladjustment by treating Kirk with sadistic cruelty, using him as a sexual partner in spite of Kirk's horror at being treated in that way.

Spock set out to rescue Kirk. In the process the Captain was killed, and Spock remained in that universe, taking the Captain's place. The body was left in the Commodore's original universe.

The remainder of issue 1 was taken up with the beginnings of Kirk's rehabilitation, and finished with a reasonably self-confident Kirk adjusting to a new life without fear.

In Variations 2, Spock was obliged to go 'home' to visit 'his' parents. Unfortunately the Captain had accidentally left a private tape in his room, and his father had heard it. He believed Spock was ill-treating Kirk and tried to kill him; in saving Spock, Kirk was injured, and Sarek had to be told the truth. To their amazement he accepted Spock as his son and that worry was relieved.

Sam Kirk then came aboard the ship as a crewman. On a mission to Deneva, Sam, who had deserted Kirk as a child, again deserted him, but this time Spock was there to rescue him.

In Variations 3, Spock ran into problems with his family council. Although Sarek knew the truth and accepted it, the rest of the family did not. If they did discover the truth, Kirk might be called to account for killing the Captain, and punished for it with the full rigour of Vulcan law. The truth had to be kept hidden.

The family council insisted that Spock marry. However, in this universe the bonding ceremony triggered off pon farr - and it was established in Kraith Collected that the Commodore, on whom our Spock was based, was immune to pon farr. He would therefore be unable to consummate a Vulcan bonding, his wife would complain, the imposture would be discovered, and Kirk would be in danger.

Kirk also, because of the sexual assaults he had suffered from the Captain, was impotent - psychologically so - and afraid to enter into any sort of personal relationship with anyone but Spock.

Realising the situation both men were in, McCoy suggested that they bond - something that was still legal on Vulcan, although rarely done. The family, although not particularly happily, conceded that such a bonding was permissible, and Spock and Kirk were legally bonded.

In the same issue, Gary Mitchell came aboard as a navigator. Basically lazy, he finally settled down to become a steady, uninspired member of the crew.

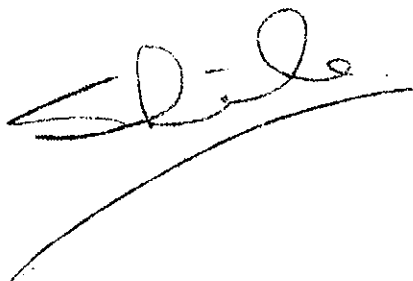
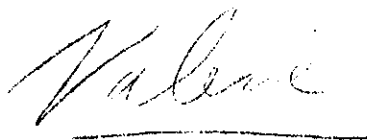
In issue 4, McCoy discovered that he had xenopolycythemia. Spock remembered Yonada - but in this universe, the Enterprise had encountered Yonada before Spock's entry into Kirk's life - a plague ship crewed by only a handful of immune disease carriers. To stop them spreading the disease or crashing into an inhabited world, the Captain had destroyed Yonada. Spock therefore decided to go back to his own universe, find McCoy there, and obtain the cure from him. When he failed to return, Kirk went in search of him leaving Charlene Masters in command of the Enterprise.

Now, in issue 5, the Enterprise is being used by Starfleet on a basically political mission.

Work is well under way on issue 6, which we hope to have ready for February '82. No. 7 is plotted, and for the moment we intend to stop the series there - however, anything can happen, and even although we don't mean to go beyond No. 7, either of us - or any of you - might come up with an idea that belongs in the Variations universe and which the characters won't let us ignore.

The poem Alternate Universe was first printed in STAG Con '81 - it was the winner of the poetry competition at STAG Con. Although it was not written as a creative response to Variations, we felt it fitted the theme and asked the writer if we could reprint it here. Quiet Evening Doubts, also, was not originally intended as a creative response, but again we felt it fitted, and therefore included it here instead of in a genzine.

We hope that you enjoy reading Variations 5 as much as we enjoyed writing it.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "D. De", with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the left and then curves back under the signature.A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Valerie", with a simple horizontal underline.

ALTERNATIVE UNIVERSE

Alien eyes full of gentle skies
and the warm promise of heaven.

From the depths of a torn heart
Love came, unbidden.
From an understanding mind
Love found expression.

Though I may appear cold...
You see beyond.
The smile my lips deny my eyes
have given...

TO YOU...

For I would hold you safe...
Light of my life...
Heart of my heart...

I would lay down my honour...
FOR YOU...

I will be gentle
For you are my life...
I will walk by your side
FOREVER...

Bound are we...
With chains of sparkling light
Each stands alone...
Yet we are together...

United in our love...

In another Universe
There is another me...another you
I grieve for him but must remain...
In this Universe...

WITH YOU...

And so a shy love grew strong...
Warmed by light and laughter
Dark eyes shone with caring, hazel
eyes replied...

The Bond was forged...

Walking hand in hand

two souls became one.

Alien eyes full of fiery skies
and the cold, cold breath of hell.

From the frozen depths of a twisted heart
Came an unbidden love.
Flooding the core of a sick mind
Came the expression of that love.

For I must hurt you...
Find pleasure in your pain.
You will bend your proud head
before me...

AND BEG...

For I would crush you...
Fire of my eyes...
Flame of my heart...

No-one shall touch you...
BUT I...

There will be no tenderness
You sear my mind...
In pain will I take you...
FOREVER...

Bound are we...
All your tears cannot break the chain
They only spur me on...
To greater torture...humiliation....

And you will never know...I LOVE YOU...

In another Universe
There is another side of me...
But you are doomed...
Just as I...

To dwell in MY UNIVERSE...

And so died an unborn love...
Crushed by hate for Human weakness
Vulcan fires could not understand...

The Bond was forged...

Love and hate walked hand in hand

and two souls were lost.

Ann Smith

* * * * *

QUIET EVENING DOUBTS

We faced them strong,
 Without tremor or fear,
 As we have done before. Yet
 When your death was demanded
 With absence of mercy,
 My concern for your life
 Could not be refused.
 I did not reveal it.
 Control was of the essence.
 Thus they accepted my false, eager request
 To kill you...
 My voice did not betray the pain which
 Thrust me as I saw
 You too believed it.
 After all that has passed, you would accept
 I could do such a thing?

(I have tried to understand
 Nuances of emotion,
 But it hurts to realise
 Even you believe I could mercilessly
 Murder my brother.)

The fear is past.
 We survived, as always.
 Even so, I still recall
 The unveiled relief you felt as I explained.
 (Enough. It is done.)
 My friend, I still fear the doubt
 Which hides in your heart.
 I continue as before...
 Only tonight,
 In solemn, singular contemplation
 Do I dare consider this two-sided emotion
 Called trust.

Lorraine Goodison

* * * * *

Scotty:
 In all those bloodstained, painwacked years
 In all the many ways he made me ashamed
 The humiliations and degradations heaped upon me at his hands
 Were minor beside my self-abasement at your death.
 For it was my fault...
 My despicable cowardice which caused him to kill you
 While I stood by, helpless and useless, to see you die.
 My nightmares were filled with the sight of you
 Lying dead at his feet, and I feared
 I would carry this guilt to my grave,
 A leaden wright on my soul, a poison to my existence.
 Then Fate gave me a second chance, a never dreamed of
 opportunity to beg for forgiveness,
 To explain why I acted as I did.
 And you forgave me, your understanding touched my guilty wounds -
 Now I will heal, my soul may be at peace.

Gene Delapenia

* * * * *

THE INFINITE NECESSITY OF YOU

Your hand is deathly-hot to touch
 and through our fragile bond
 I sense the vibrant life-force of your soul
 receding; my call unheeded
 in the incandescent whirlpool of your fevered thoughts.
 Must this so soon be ended?
 Must the Fates once more decree
 that only when the loss is past preventing
 I perceive the infinite necessity of you
 to my existence?
 I cannot go through this again.
 Though there might be a myriad of you
 among the other Universes yet untouched,
 I want no other.
 I survived his death
 and, in the bleak despair of grief,
 sought to replace him
 with one so similar that I should feel
 he had not died at all.
 You are not he - could never be -
 but, while I treasure memories
 of caring and affection shared with him,
 these last few months have promised so much more...
 With you, I have known love.
 I vowed that I would never seek your mind
 without your first consenting to the link.
 Brave words - but they cannot transcend
 the fear that screams its desolation to the stars
 when I imagine life bereft of you.
 Within me lies the power to end this pain,
 ensuring we will live or die as one.
 The Deep-Link tempts the hunger in my soul;
 there is no strength left in me to resist.
 I need you, now and always, by my side
 and so I ask in this, the first and last
 transgression of your trust,
 that you forgive me...my Beloved Friend...

Lee Owers

*** * * * * **

THOUGH NOW WE SPEAK...

I wake, knowing you will be with me -
 and you are.
 My hand held tight within your own;
 the gentle pressure of your fingertips upon my face...
 A meld?
 Oh, Spock, how much you must have feared
 to breach your prohibition of the link?
 Or was it that, at last, you understand
 I trust you with my mind, my soul...my life?
 The bonding shaped the shattered remnants of my Self
 and made me whole.
 You raise your head, your gaze meets mine -
 and I cannot suppress the wonder in my heart
 that leaps again in witness of the love you bear for me;
 the agony of waiting and despair replaced
 when, with my smile, the joy of comprehension dawns.
 I am compelled to reach, to touch -
 the whisper-light caress across your cheek
 assures reality; echoes feelings where no words will serve.
 Yes, my beloved brother, we are safe -
 and I shall spend forever at your side.
 That we have suffered in the past
 can only make this union sweeter still.
 Though now we speak, we need say nothing,
 for the eloquence of eyes says all.
 Yet, as exhaustion claims me and I drift away,
 your tender ministrations soothing me to rest,
 I wonder what it was you almost called me,
 before the deep-engrained reserve of Vulcan stilled your lips?
 No matter...
 I sleep, knowing you will be with me
 when I stir.

Lee Owers

*** * * * * ***

VARIATIONS ON A THEME 5

"Morning, John - you're looking very harrassed. Anything I can do?"

Admiral Gerson looked up, shaking his head ruefully. "Just a slight problem of reassignment...and I thought everything was going to work out smoothly for once."

Admiral Callison came into the office and leaned over his friend's desk. "What's the difficulty?"

"I pulled the Enterprise off the colony medical checks to handle the Troyius run - now the Ambassador tells us there's been a delay. Seems Prince Arris isn't ready to meet his bride yet, so would we kindly postpone the trip! These diplomats...they've no idea of the problems involved in re-routing a Starship..."

"Did you say the Enterprise?" Callison straightened abruptly. "She's free right now?"

"She is. Why - do you have a job for her?"

"I'll say! In fact, you've solved my problem, John."

"Care to tell me about it?"

"What do you know about the Amerind Project?"

"Not a lot. I've heard of it, of course... Wait a minute, it's coming back to me now." Gerson's brow furrowed in concentration. "That's where we found the first positive traces of the Preservers - an asteroid deflector, as I recall. The planet was put strictly off limits while a long-range survey was undertaken."

"That's right. Well, sensor scans have indicated an underground complex in a valley close to the site of the deflector. We want to send in a full survey team, but the trouble is, one of the native villages is slap on top of the site."

"That's tricky," Gerson commented. "Establishing a base on a planet with a primitive native population is a violation of the Prime Directive."

"Rules are made to be broken, as we both know," Callison remarked cynically. "We've got to have that base, John - think what we could learn from one of the Preservers' own installations. Somehow that tribe has got to be moved."

Gerson grunted his acknowledgement of his colleague's difficulty. "So how does the Enterprise's being available solve your problem better than any other Starship?"

"She made the first contact with the planet. Commander Kirk, her First Officer, was accidentally stranded there and actually spent several weeks living among the natives; they consider him a god. If we send the Enterprise back there, Kirk will have a head start."

"Can he handle it?"

"If anyone can. Shevas reckons he's the best First Officer in the Fleet. He's refused promotion once already because he prefers to function as Science Officer - it's a pity, for I think he's exactly the sort of man we want for Captain of one of the new ships that are under construction."

"I remember him now," Gerson said. "Spock thinks the world of him too - and you know how difficult he is to please."

"Leaving him on the Enterprise has certainly paid off, when you look at her record," Callison replied. "You'll authorise the assignment, then?"

"I'll send the order at once," Gerson promised, reaching for his intercom. "Ah well, they'll probably find this a lot more interesting than a taxi run. Still leaves me with the problem of finding a ship for the Troyian bridal mission, though."

"Don't worry," Callison comforted. "With any luck they'll be through in time to take that on too."

"That'll please Spock - I don't think!" Gerson grunted.

* * * * *

As the last notes of music died away Kirk drew a deep breath of appreciation and shifted his weight so that he leaned closer against Spock's legs, the movement bringing the one thing lacking to complete his contentment as the Vulcan's hand dropped to rest lightly on his head.

Once, that touch would have filled him with sick horror, signalling as it did his master's satisfaction at the degrading actions Kirk had performed for his pleasure; now it was the gentle, loving touch of his bondmate, his brother, whose watchful care surrounded him, yet who guided his increasingly confident feet on the path of freedom.

With the growth of his confidence had come an increase in Kirk's social life. Often now he was to be found in the rec room in the evenings, the centre of a laughing group as he mingled with the bridge officers, mostly only a few years younger than he, while McCoy, who had originally introduced him to that circle on a social level, thankfully withdrew to sit in quiet conversation with his Captain.

There were no longer any of the slightly embarrassing difficulties that he had found at first. He could join in the light-hearted conversation, and his gentle humour made him popular, for he was never malicious. After some initial surprise his friends had accepted the fact that he was bonded to a Vulcan, and, believing his wife to be a relative of the Captain's, respected his reticence concerning her, and his loyalty to her. If the women in the crew regretted his unusually high moral standards, they did not attempt to persuade him to change them, and he no longer had to contend with hopeful propositions. And since Marlana Moreau's departure - unregretted save for some rare occasions when her expertise was missed - he had not had the embarrassment of knowing that his second in the science lab was hopelessly in love with him.

Yet although he enjoyed the company, Sulu's chatter, Chekov's sometimes outrageous remarks, Uhura's rich laughter, Kirk was most genuinely happy when he could slip away to the warm dimness of Spock's cabin for an evening of music, of quiet conversation, of the steady, undemanding affection his heart craved.

Suddenly needing to express the love he felt for the gentle Vulcan, Kirk looked up, to find the dark eyes fixed on his face.

"I know how it is," Spock said quietly. "I too am happy, Jim."

Kirk nodded. "Before... I often used to hear people say, 'I'm so happy I could burst'. I always wondered...what it would be like. Now...now I know, Spock."

"Indeed." The long fingers brushed lightly against the Human's cheek, then Spock rose to replace the harp on its stand. He paused for a moment to fill two glasses with the light, delicate Vulcan wine both men so appreciated, then sat down again, handing a glass to Kirk as he did so.

For a moment they savoured the wine in silence, but the Vulcan's eyes were thoughtful as they rested on Kirk's expressive face, enjoying the contentment in the serene eyes.

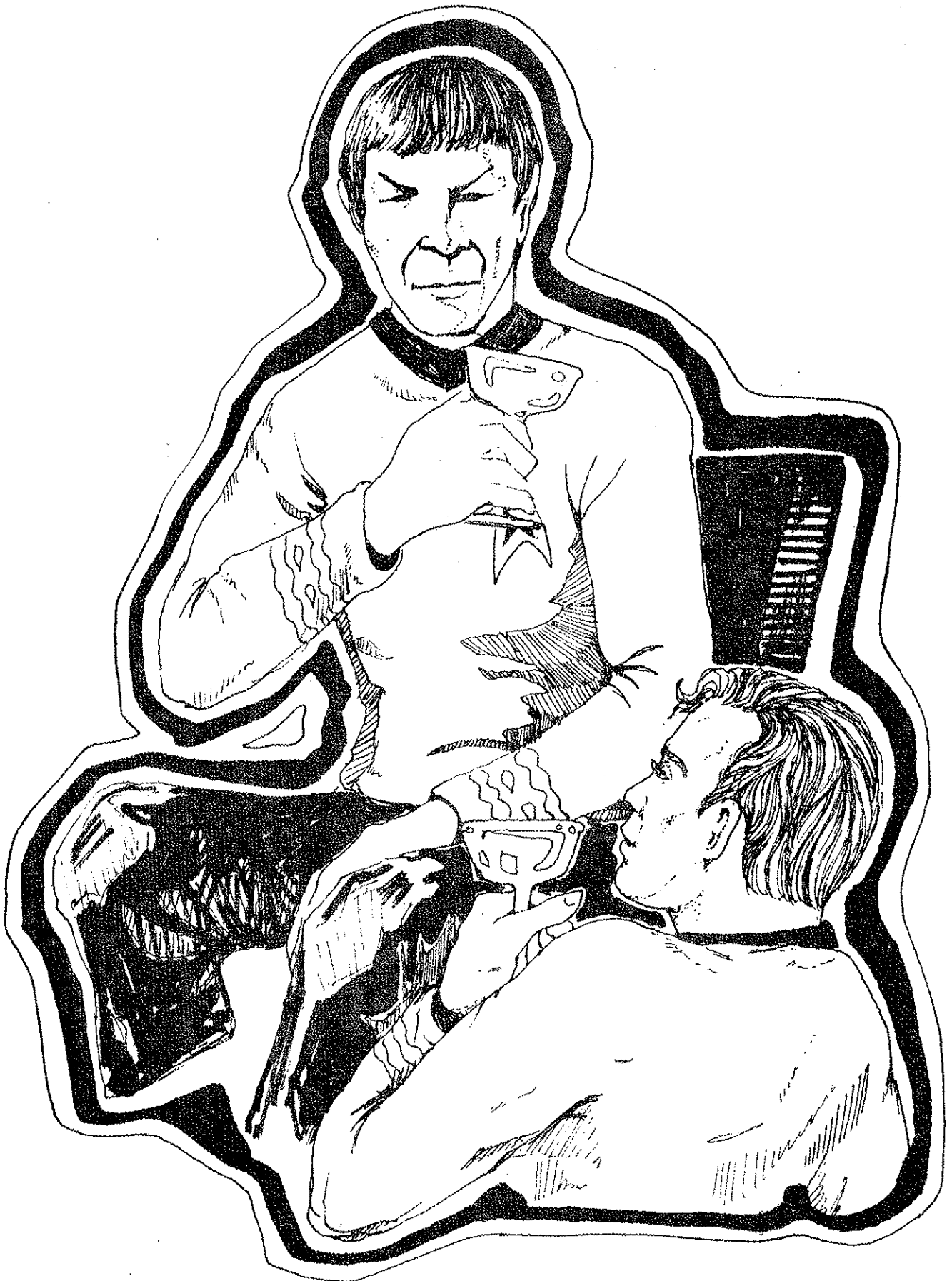
At last he said, "Jim, will you tell me of your experience on the Amerind planet? We arrive there late tomorrow, and it will be safer if I am fully informed."

Kirk sat up straight, hugging his knees, his eyes intent on the flickering flame in its carved holder.

"I've been wanting to tell you ever since the order came," he said quietly. "In fact, I've been reviewing my personal log just to get things clear in my mind. The ship's log... He was very careful what he entered, of course, but afterwards He told me His side of it...and I remembered my own experiences..."

"I regret causing you distress, Jim," Spock murmured, "but I must know. It is clear to me that in this universe events again followed a slightly different course from...from the last time."

Kirk's unwavering gaze remained fixed on the dancing flame. "We were ordered



to investigate the planet because of some unusual long-distance readings. When we assumed orbit we detected an asteroid on collision course - you know about that?"

Spock nodded, and Kirk continued. "The Captain and I beamed down, and I began taking sensor readings. We'd just found the obelisk when Scotty called from the ship, and the Captain had to return. He instructed me to follow within five minutes if we were to reach the deflection point in time. I was just taking some final readings of the obelisk, so I didn't expect to take more than half that time ... Anyway, my voice triggered the opening, and I fell into the underground chamber, somehow activating a beam that wiped my memory.

"It was a couple of minutes before anyone noticed that I'd vanished from the ship's sensors, and by that time the Captain had reported the threat from the asteroid. He was ordered to intercept, because Starfleet had made the connection with the Preservers, and wanted the planet at all costs. There was no time to search for me, but he reasoned that I couldn't have come to much harm; he followed orders, meaning to return for me in a few hours, but the attempt to destroy the asteroid almost crippled the ship - it took weeks to get back."

"Very similar to my own experience," Spock commented. "But what happened to you?"

"I still don't remember leaving the underground chamber - the next thing I knew I was standing on the platform outside, and two of the natives were kneeling at my feet. They were Salish, the Medicine Chief, and Miramane, the Priestess of the Temple - they'd seen me emerge from the obelisk, and thought me one of their gods. They hailed me as Kirok, and I..." Kirk shrugged "...I did not know that I was not. The name seemed familiar to me - not surprising when it is so like my own. I was taken to the village. Salish insisted that I take over as Medicine Chief. There was some opposition - Goro, the tribal chieftain, had been able in the past to overrule the younger Salish, but he feared loss of prestige if I was truly Kirok. He seemed convinced, though, when I revived a child who'd almost drowned - though he did say it seemed strange that a god had no memory.

Salish was generous, though it must have been difficult for him. He was to have married Miramane, and he loved her, but by tribal custom she belonged to the god. She was willing enough, but I sensed that she wished to be the consort of the god, not the wife of the man - it was Salish she loved. Still, I couldn't argue - I believed what they told me."

"And you remembered nothing?"

"Nothing; I had dreams...dreams that terrified me; but Salish said that it was because I was living among mortals. He believed that I had been sent for a reason, that I was to reveal the secret of the Temple to him, and he couldn't understand why I did not.

"For weeks, though, nothing happened. I was...happy...living with the tribe - it began to seem that I had always been Kirok. Miramane planned for our wedding, and I worked with the tribe - I taught them irrigation, found new crops ...I was content.

"What I didn't know was that Goro had been working on Salish, planting doubts in his mind. He asked why I didn't take him into the Temple, why the dark clouds still gathered...and slowly, Salish began to wonder...

"Then one day there was a storm, violent and unexpected. Salish said it was time to go to the Temple. I was afraid - of the storm, mostly; the idea of going out into it was terrifying. He saw my fear, and accused me of being an imposter - he really hated me then. Miramane persuaded them to let me go to the obelisk to see what would happen. I thought - 'I am Kirok - the gods will hear me!', and forced myself to go. But they didn't, of course, and I didn't know what to do.

"Salish urged the tribe to cast me out, but Goro pushed his way up onto the platform and demanded that I be stoned to death for blasphemy; Salish finally agreed, and called to Miramane to leave me. She...she went to him, and I saw

the pleasure in his eyes that he had won her back, although I think he was also a little sorry for me.

"Goro began the stoning...there was no protection for me on the steps of the Temple...I was hurt, bleeding... Then suddenly it stopped, and I wondered why. A shimmering column of gold was forming on the platform beside me - then He stepped from it, his face distorted with hatred and anger. I heard the sound of a phaser, saw them fall...Goro, Salish, Miramanee...so many others...

"The Captain took me in his arms and I felt his touch on my face as his mind possessed mine - and I remembered everything. When I did I wanted to die...

"What he learned from my mind enabled the Captain to enter the obelisk and operate the deflector - then he came back to me. He wouldn't let McCoy beam down - he took me straight back to the ship..."

"Go on, Jim," Spock encouraged as Kirk hesitated.

"Starfleet was very interested in the planet," the Human resumed. "There was an enquiry and the Captain's actions were approved - after all, he had rescued me from death. It was suggested that I go back, establish my 'divinity'; the natives thought me dead, and if I seemed to live again they would believe in me, and it would make things easier in future...like now. The Captain was furious, but he couldn't defy a direct order. He made the arrangements himself, and monitored me closely. I beamed down during the sunrise ceremony at the Temple... Spock, they were terrified of me! Salish was there - he'd escaped the fire, though I don't know how. Poor Salish - he was so guilt-ridden; he said that he knew now that my seeming ignorance was the gods' way of testing his faith, and he had failed. I reassured him as best I could, and told him that he was now tribal leader as well as Medicine Chief. Goro was dead, and fourteen others... Spock, three of them were children!" Kirk's voice was rough with pain as he relived the horror, and Spock reached down to lay a hand on his shoulder. Covering the warm fingers with his own, Kirk continued.

"Miramanee lived too, though she'd been hurt...there were so many injured. Some of the tribesmen were so afraid they asked if they should offer reparation - they meant...Human sacrifice. I forbade it, and told them if they wished to please the gods they should rebuild their lives, and strive to have more faith in the future. I said that I, or one of my people, would return one day to see if they had obeyed my commands. It was at Starfleet's order, but I felt such a hypocrite... The only good thing that came of it was that I had a chance to talk quietly to Salish. He'd always wanted to be my friend - even when he turned against me it was out of loyalty to the tribe, because he thought I'd been proved an imposter. I was glad to be able to reassure him... Then I returned to the ship."

"I can guess what followed," Spock said grimly.

"He was so jealous - of Salish, because I liked him, and of Miramanee because I'd thought myself in love with her. He punished me for each kiss...and tried to make me admit that I'd made love to her. I hadn't, but it took a meld to convince him. And that was... It'd all been so innocent and happy, and he smeared every memory with his insane hatred. Then he told me never to think of that world again - that if I did he'd find a way to destroy everything I cared about there. And he would have done it."

"Jim, I do not think it possible," Spock interrupted gently. "Starfleet Command..."

"He'd have deceived them as he deceived everyone," Kirk said bitterly. "He was clever - he always had an acceptable reason for his actions, no matter how bad they seemed. Remember what he did to Yonada? He was cleared of all blame - he was even congratulated on 'his courage in taking a painful action to avert a serious threat to the Federation'. And when he tricked the Halkans into agreeing to supply dilithium - that was sheer blackmail, but the truth never came out... and again he was commended for his diplomacy."

"I find it unbelievable that he could have done so much harm, and never once been suspected."

Kirk shrugged. "People don't argue with success, Spock - and he was successful. And who am I to blame them? He fooled me too...when I thought he wanted my friendship... Anyway - " the Human straightened his shoulders " - I believed his threats - I knew only too well what he could do - and I never attempted to keep up with the Amerind Project; I made myself forget - until now."

"And now you do wish to go back?" Order or not, Spock would find a logical reason for Kirk not to beam down if his friend was truly reluctant to return.

"Yes, I do. Even if it means becoming Kirok again. I don't like this assignment, Spock, but perhaps I can protect the people if I'm involved." Kirk turned so that he could look up into the Vulcan's face. "And this time...this time, you'll be with me. Oh, I know you'll have to stay on the ship, but you'll be there."

"How long do you expect to remain there?" Spock asked.

Kirk frowned. "I'm not sure. I'll make contact with Salish and re-establish myself with the tribe; then I'll get him to make the first approach to the Valley Tribe. I'm hoping to be able to convince them they've been granted some special favour by the gods, but I'll have to play it by ear - I'm not sure I'd consider it a favour to be told I've got to give up my home because the gods want it! I might need your help at some point - I'll let you know."

"I shall not be idle," Spock commented. "There is still some work to do to complete McCoy's fake research notes. Reports of a 'possible' cure for xenopoly-cythemia have aroused much interest - the Fleet Surgeon is anxious to begin tests."

"Which will be successful, of course." Kirk grinned. "Poor Bones - he still feels horribly guilty about accepting credit for another man's work. Still, I pointed out that it was the only way we could make the treatment available - we certainly couldn't explain how we really obtained it!"

"Indeed. I..." Spock broke off as the intercom buzzed. "Spock here."

"Is Mr. Kirk with you, Captain?"

"A moment, Lieutenant."

Kirk scrambled to his feet and moved to the desk. "Yes, Uhura?"

"Mr. Chekov asked me to inform you that we are now within scanning range of the Amerind planet."

"Thank you - I'm on my way." He snapped the viewer off and turned to Spock. "I want to run a full survey myself before I beam down," he explained. "I'll report to you when I have the results."

"Very well, Jim - I will see you in the morning." Spock touched his fingers to Kirk's. "Don't work too late."

"I won't," Kirk smiled. "Thank you for the music, Spock. Goodnight."

The door closed behind him, and with a sigh of reluctance Spock moved to his desk, eyeing with disfavour the pile of reports awaiting his attention.

The following morning the senior officers gathered in the briefing room to hear the First Officer's report before he beamed down to the planet.

McCoy, who had arrived early, was talking to Uhura and Charlene Masters when the door slid open behind him, and the appreciative glances of the two women made him turn round.

Kirk had just come in. He was wearing the fringed costume of soft leather patterned after the one he had worn as Kirok, and his hair was held back by a beaded headband - the silver badge of the Medicine Chief had been torn away by Goro before the stoning.

"Well, now," McCoy drawled, "that sure is some outfit, Jim."

"It makes you look...different." Charlene wasn't quite sure in what way; she only knew that the friendly but shy young First Officer was also a disturbingly attractive man.

"It suits you," Uhura agreed. "You should get out of uniform more often, Jim," she added with an approving smile.

"Thank you, ladies." Kirk coloured faintly, but smiled. He felt at ease with Uhura and Charlene, knowing that they respected his bonding - their admiration, though sincere, was untouched by desire. "We gods do have to keep up appearances."

They were still laughing when Spock walked into the room, his serene expression hiding the satisfaction he felt at Kirk's completely natural acceptance by, and of, the women. One day, perhaps...

He pushed the thought aside, and inclined his head in greeting. "Ladies, gentlemen - be seated," he murmured. "And Mr. Kirk - you do make a most convincing god."

"Thank you, Captain." Kirk's eyes met Spock's as with a grin he slid into his seat, but at once his expression grew serious. "I have the latest survey reports on the planet," he continued, inserting a tape into the viewer. "This is the area which interests Starfleet, this valley here. Unfortunately, one of the native tribes has made it their home." He knew he was repeating facts known to some of his audience, but everything had to be clear for those who were less well informed.

"Your tribe?" McCoy asked.

"No, they're further to the west. I don't know these people, and it could be difficult to persuade them to move."

"Do you have any plan?" Spock asked, knowing he did not.

"Not really." Kirk shrugged. "I thought I'd go down, talk to Salish, and see what he knows about them - there is regular contact between all the tribes, so he will at least be able to tell me something."

"I don't like it," McCoy frowned. "You'll be on your own down there."

Kirk smiled reassuringly. "I'll be all right, Bones - it'll be safe enough to take my communicator. I hope I won't have to use it if anyone's around, but if I do... Well, gods are supposed to be capable of 'magic' - a talking box might scare them, but they won't be too surprised." He turned to Uhura. "I'll establish a regular contact pattern - probably in the evenings - to report on what's been happening. If you need to contact me urgently you can signal me, otherwise wait for my regular call."

"Yes, Mr. Kirk."

"That's nearly everything, I think, Captain," Kirk concluded. "Miss Masters has tied in an optional sound circuit to the transporter system - it'll operate normally, but if necessary I can make my comings and goings a little more spectacular - I'll use it on my first beam-down."

"Very dramatic," Spock said drily as his officers began to rise. "Miss Masters, instruct the Transporter Chief to maintain a fix on Mr. Kirk's position at all times. He is unlikely to require emergency beam-up, but should it become necessary I do not want any time wasted in locking on to him."

"Yes, Captain." Masters showed no surprise at the order. The Captain's concern for his First Officer's safety had always been marked - she remembered Sulu saying that he didn't understand why Spock didn't just assign Kirk a permanent bodyguard and have done with it. When she had first been assigned to the Enterprise, Masters had wondered if in fact the Captain was not a little too protective, but she'd changed her mind when she saw that Kirk took his fair share of risks.

As the others filed out of the room, McCoy paused, glancing from Spock to Kirk. "Take care, Jim," he said gruffly.

"Stop worrying, Bones - what can happen to me when the ship is within call?"

"More or less anything, knowing you," McCoy retorted, "I'll be in sickbay if you want me, Spock."

The Doctor left, and Spock and Kirk walked together to the turbolift.

"Transporter Room," the Vulcan ordered, then he glanced at his First Officer. "Nevertheless, Jim, McCoy is right. Be careful."

"I will," Kirk promised. With this man it was not necessary to pretend - Spock knew as well as he that no mission, however simple, was guaranteed safe. "Although... I'm sure everything will go well."

"Perhaps." After a moment the Vulcan continued very quietly, "I used to watch him beam down sometimes, knowing he was walking into danger, and wished that I could forbid him to go without me. Now I have that power...and I cannot use it."

"Because there are some things you can't protect me from," Kirk said, recalling Spock's own words. "I think, though, that what we've found is worth the risks...don't you?"

"Yes," Spock agreed simply.

The lift slowed and stopped; the walk to the transporter room was too short. Chief Kyle looked up from the console as they entered.

"Co-ordinates laid in, Captain."

"Thank you, Mr. Kyle. I will operate the controls myself. You may go."

"Sir." With a nod of acknowledgement Kyle left, and Spock turned to Kirk.

"Jim..."

"I know." Kirk rested his hand on Spock's shoulder. "I want to delay too - but it's no use, is it?" He met the dark eyes. "You'll...you'll be there when I call?"

"Of course. And Jim..." For a moment Spock's fingers brushed Kirk's forehead. "If you should need me...if you are in danger...and cannot use the communicator, remember our link. It is stronger now, perhaps strong enough."

Kirk smiled. "I've felt my...my awareness of you increasing steadily since the bonding; it's very reassuring."

And I know all is well with you, Spock thought. Aloud, he said, "I used to wonder, Jim, what it would be like to be bonded. In my former world it was impossible, but when the Commander awakened my mind I absorbed his need for such a link. Now...I know why."

"Thank you, Spock." For a moment their hands touched and lingered, then Kirk moved to his place on the transporter platform. "Is it time?" he asked.

Spock studied a small viewing screen beside the console. "Yes - they are in position. Are you ready?"

Kirk nodded. "Energise," he said quietly.

Charlene Masters' adjustment to the transporter was slight but effective. The chiming musical notes that accompanied the operation of the controls broke into the reverent silence, and the kneeling group looked up, startled by the unfamiliar sound.

There, on the very steps of the Temple, sunlight gathered into a shimmering column of golden fire that swirled and steadied into a familiar shape.

"Kirok!" The exclamation burst from the lips of the Medicine Chief, and with a low moan of fear the worshippers lowered their eyes in dread.

"My people, do not fear me - I do not come in anger." The voice of the god was soft, gentle, "Salish, come here."

Trembling, the Chief rose to his feet and mounted the steps, not daring to lift his gaze. He would have knelt, but firm hands caught his shoulders, preventing him.

"Look at me."

Nervously, Salish looked up. The golden eyes were smiling, warm with affection and understanding. A vast relief flooded through the young Indian, and he smiled. "My lord, how may we serve you?"

"I have come to walk again among my people, for I have loved this world."

"Lord, what of the Destroyer?"

"The Destroyer?"

"The...the dark one...the dealer of death... He took you..."

"He whom you call The Destroyer is my guardian, Salish - he acts only to avenge any harm done to me. Do not fear - I think he will not be needed again."

"You return in peace? Ah, my lord, you are truly merciful."

"My name is Kirok, Salish - call me that again. I promised I would return to prove that the gods are not angry. Let me walk among you as I did before, in peace and friendship."

"So be it, Kirok. Your Lodge stands empty, for I always hoped that I would live to see your return. Come - the people will rejoice this day, for they bitterly regret that they heeded the words of Goro...as do I."

"We will not speak of it. Let us go."

Little, really, had changed. Kirk recognised many faces he knew as he walked through the village, surrounded at a respectful distance by the people of the tribe. Children, too young to have been at the Temple on what had passed into tribal lore as the Day of the Destroyer, clustered around, their eyes wide as they recognised the figure of their god, familiar to them from their lessons.

Salish halted before one lodge, more elaborate than the rest, and nearest to the one Kirk had been given on his last visit. He beckoned, and two children came forward shyly.

"My son Sanuya, and my daughter Owissa," Salish said, pride in his voice.

Kirk looked down and smiled. The boy returned his gaze with respectful interest, but the girl kept her eyes lowered. He reached out and lifted her chin. Owissa was lovely, a miniature edition of Miramaneé.

"You have fine children, Salish. But where is their mother?"

The Chief hesitated. "She is within the lodge. Since the day of our shame she comes seldom among the people, for she acknowledges her sin."

"Sin? What sin?"

"She was chosen by the god, and doubted...her own father threw the first stone. She knows that she is unworthy of forgiveness, for all the others have healed - only she still bears the mark of her shame."

"I would like to see her." Kirk's voice was gentle, but firm.

"As you command." Salish raised his voice. "Miramaneé, come forth. It is the wish of Kirok."

There was a short pause, then the door curtain was pulled aside and a cloaked form emerged to fall at Kirk's feet, quivering in terror. Kirk reached down and lifted the woman to her feet; she obeyed, but pulled the hood of her cloak closer around her face.

Dreading what he would find, but prepared for it, Kirk pulled the hood back, ignoring the low gasp of fear - if he was right, this cruelty was the kindest answer.

The phaser had caught her left side, its force paralysing the muscles of the arm; her face, unprotected by clothing, was seared with the angry, raised scar tissues of a phaser burn.

Kirk touched the scar gently. "Does it hurt still?"

"Only a little, my lord." Her eyes would not meet his. "It is less than I deserve. Even in anger Kirok is merciful."

"I am not angry, Miramane, and your suffering will soon be ended. Come to the Temple at sunset with the others."

"I have not dared," she whispered, "lest The Destroyer should remember my crime."

"The Destroyer is leashed under my command, and I tell you to come," Kirk said.

"Then I will obey."

Kirk released her, and she drew the hood about her face once more before vanishing back into the lodge; but he was satisfied that she would come. He turned to Salish. "I would rest."

Salish escorted him to the lodge, and Kirk looked round in surprise - he might have stepped out only five minutes previously.

"We keep it always prepared," Salish explained. "We did not know when you would come." He called, and two young women of the tribe entered, bearing trays of food.

"Eat with me," Kirk invited, gesturing the man to sit, "and report on how you have cared for my people."

Over the meal Kirk listened and Salish recounted the history of the tribe since his last visit. As the god had commanded, the offices of Tribal and Medicine Chief had been combined, and on Salish had fallen the responsibility of rebuilding the life of the tribe.

The dead had been buried, the wounded tended; in time, all but Miramane had recovered. She had, however, been replaced as Priestess, for she had rejected the god to whom she had been betrothed. Salish had married her, for he had never ceased to love her, and he knew her repentance was as genuine as his own. Trusting in the gentleness he had seen in Kirok, he had defended her against those who called for her death to appease the Destroyer - had not Kirok himself returned briefly to them with words of peace? A year later his son Sanuya had been born, followed a year later by Owissa; Miramane had found consolation in her children, though she was now largely ignored by the tribe.

The slaying and resurrection of Kirok had been followed by two years of poor harvests and severe winters, proof that the gods were indeed angry at the treatment of their brother. Only trading with neighbouring tribes had averted starvation, but the People of the Valley had been generous.

Kirk pricked up his ears at that, and Salish told him that the Valley dwellers were a peaceful people, farmers and fishermen; although many of their customs were different, there had never been any hostility between the tribes.

"Salish, can you arrange a meeting with the Elders of the People of the Valley?" Kirk asked. "I would speak with them."

"It will be done, Kirok."

"Now, I wish to rest. Go to Miramane, and reassure her. Bring her to the Temple at sunset - let the whole tribe witness my forgiveness."

Salish bowed respectfully, and left. As soon as he was alone, Kirk took out

his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Enterprise - Spock here. Is anything wrong?"

"No - all's going well so far, Captain." Mindful that Uhura would be monitoring communications, Kirk maintained a degree of formality. "Could you have McCoy patch in, please."

Seconds later, McCoy's voice sounded. "Here, Jim."

"Listen in, will you, Bones - this concerns you. Spock, I've made contact with Salish. The tribe still revere Kirok, and they've accepted me. The trouble is, they still fear me too, and I'd like to correct that."

"What do you propose?"

"Miramane - Salish's wife - was injured when 'you' rescued me last time. She's partially paralysed, and her face is badly phaser-burned. I'd like your permission to bring her up to the ship, have McCoy operate...if I can show them she's been healed, it should convince them that as she's been forgiven, there's nothing to fear."

"Dr. McCoy?"

"I'd have to see her, of course, but it should be possible. Phaser injuries look serious, but we have enough practice in treating them. When do you want to bring her up?"

"There's a ceremony at the Temple at sunset. I thought we'd beam up from there."

"Hmmm. Well, if I have everything ready, and operate as soon as you arrive, she should be able to go back in the morning. I suggest you sedate her just before you beam up, though - it's better she doesn't see anything of the ship."

"Do you agree, Captain?"

"I see no objection. Report to me when you arrive, Mr. Kirk."

"I will. Kirk out."

It seemed that the entire population of the village had assembled before the Temple when Kirk mounted the steps, Salish at his side. With them walked Miramane, the hood drawn close around her ruined face. Behind them the villagers knelt, half fearful lest the avenging demon might again leap from the golden fire to claim his charge.

"My people, do not fear." Kirk put all the reassurance he could muster into his voice. "You failed the first test, but you have been given a second chance. I cannot restore those already slain, for they are in my brother's hand, but in token that the gods have forgiven you, I will remove the brand of shame from the woman Miramane. I take her now to my home - we will return at sunrise. Salish, stand clear."

The Chief moved aside, and Kirk placed his hand on Miramane's shoulder, concealing the hypo he pressed into her arm. She slumped against him, and he quickly activated the emergency beam-up signal on his communicator. At once the musical chiming signalled the golden shimmer of the transporter, and before the awe-struck eyes of the tribesmen the two figures faded and vanished.

McCoy was waiting with a medical trolley in the transporter room; Kirk placed Miramane's unconscious body on it, and watched as the doctor made a brief examination; then the orderly wheeled it away.

"Do what you can for her, Bones; I was...fond of her."

"I will, Jim. You'll be with Spock?"

Kirk nodded. "There's no point in going down again until morning."

The two men parted at the turbolift, McCoy heading for Sickbay, Kirk for Spock's quarters. The door slid aside as he reached it, and he stepped inside, aware of the warmth that always filled him in his bondmate's presence.

"Jim."

They touched hands for a moment in ritual greeting, then Spock stepped back and looked at Kirk.

"Relax - I've only been away a few hours."

"Is it so obvious?" Spock said ruefully. "Is everything going well?"

"Fine. Salish told me he's expecting a trading party from the Valley tribe in a few days. He's going to talk to them about arranging a meeting with their Council of Elders. I'll visit their settlement, and try to win their confidence; after that..." He shrugged. "Somehow, I've got to persuade them to leave the valley. I don't think it'll be easy."

"Have you any plan in mind?"

"Not yet. I'll probably have to take advantage of my 'divinity', but other than that, I don't know. It all depends on the situation, on how they react to me...on so many things. I'll take it as it comes."

"That seems best. Is the woman on board?"

"She's in surgery now. Bones thinks it'll be simple enough. Poor Miramane... But she escaped lightly in a way. If...if He had known at the time that I was supposed to marry her, he'd have killed her. As it was, when he did find out...he punished me instead..."

"Barbarian!"

"He was very possessive... He wouldn't believe I hadn't slept with her... He kept on and on about it until I begged him to link with me and see for himself. That was what she wanted, of course - he could have forced the link if he'd wanted to. Even then...knowing I was fond of her, he accused me of treachery."

"You? My t'hy'la, how could he have been so blind?"

"Perhaps, if we had bonded, he'd have felt surer of me. He was insecure, jealous... Spock - you don't resent Miramane, do you?"

The Vulcan smiled, and touched Kirk's face lightly. "I know my bondmate. Since you do not plan to return to the planet until morning, how would you like to spend the evening, Jim?"

Kirk glanced at the chessboard. "Well...there's a new strategy I've been preparing..."

As the first rays of the sun touched the tip of the obelisk the men and women of the tribe sank expectantly to their knees. Salish, as the servant of Kirok, stood at the top of the steps holding - as the god had commanded - a disc of brightly-polished metal. Hope and fear warred in his heart - would Kirok do as he had promised, or was there further punishment to come? No, the god was gentle, truthful...

Exactly as full sunlight struck the Temple the musical tones chimed softly, and the glowing brightness formed into the shape of Kirok, accompanied by Miramane's cloaked figure. Kirok stepped forward, his arms raised in greeting.

"Behold my promise, and my forgiveness," he said. Stepping back he pulled the cloak from Miramane, and drew her forward to face the people.

The drab clothes she had worn were gone; she had been dressed by Tamura in a rich ceremonial costume produced by the fabricators, as Kirk's had been. Uhura had arranged her hair in the traditional fashion, revealing her smooth, unmarred face. With disbelieving joy Salish gazed at the Miramane he had known before the coming of the Destroyer.

"Salish? What is wrong, Husband? What has happened?" Miramaneé looked at Salish, at Kirk, at the reverent tribespeople.

In response to the signal from Kirk Salish held up the metal disc, of the type that served the tribe as a mirror. Miramaneé peered into it, then lifted her hand to touch her smooth cheek.

"How can this be?" she whispered wonderingly. "I was here, there was darkness for a moment...and I am healed. My arm...even my arm is whole again."

"Look at the sun, Miramaneé," Kirk said gently. "It was sunset when you last stood here - now it is morning. My servants have healed you in token of my forgiveness."

"I remember nothing," the woman whispered.

"It is better so. The home of the gods is not for mortals, and I do not wish you to be troubled by memories you cannot understand."

"Truly, the mercy of Kirok is great." Miramaneé sank down to kneel at Kirk's feet. "How may I repay such kindness?"

"There is no need." Kirk lifted her to her feet, slightly uncomfortable with the reverence she and the tribe were showing him; but it was the only way to satisfy Starfleet's orders without upsetting the harmony of this world. He pushed aside the question that occasionally had troubled him since the order came through - how would the Captain have handled this situation? "Salish," he continued, "you seem troubled. Are you not pleased?"

"Forgive me, Kirok." The Chief lowered his head. Unable to suppress the slight quiver in his voice he asked, "Is it your wish to claim the woman Miramaneé? It is your right..."

Kirk smiled. "I wish to bring only happiness, not sorrow. Miramaneé is your wife, Salish, the mother of your children, and I do not claim her." He added hastily, as he saw the doubt mixed with the joy in his friend's eyes, "She is in all ways worthy, but I am now...bound...to another of my own kind, and that joining cannot be broken by any mortal. Go to your children, Miramaneé, and be happy."

The miraculous healing of Miramaneé had dispelled the last of the tribe's fear that Kirok had not truly forgiven them. Kirk moved among them, recording, studying, filling in time as he waited for the meeting to be arranged with the Elders of the Valley tribe. Nothing could be done until the trading party arrived, but Kirk could not consider the time wasted as he enjoyed the tranquillity of the life he remembered.

There was little to report or to discuss, but each evening Spock took Kirk's call himself; of, if his duties permitted, he would beam down to the lodge to spend an hour or two with his friend. Kirk awaited that time eagerly; although Salish and the others revered him, and he felt a deep affection for these people, only Spock could fill the emptiness within him - the lonely child he had been had bequeathed to the man a craving for companionship and understanding that was almost a physical need.

And Spock understood. He listened with genuine interest to Kirk's account of his time, never deriding the simple life of the tribe, a life that Kirk enjoyed and that the Captain had mocked; he could appreciate their culture for the richness it held, and for the fulfilment it gave its people.

One evening Spock did not beam down until very late, for the Lodge, normally occupied only by Kirk, had held visitors that day - the trading party from the Valley tribe had come to visit the god.

"How did they react to you, Jim?" Spock asked when they had exchanged greetings.

Kirk shrugged. "Very respectfully, but a little wary. They've heard of me -

of Kirok - of course, but they're not quite sure that I'm really a god; at the same time, they don't want to offend me in case I am. Miramane's appearance startled them. They'd seen her before, when they visited Salish, and her healing seems miraculous to them. Anyway, they've agreed to invite me to their village, and they'll allow me to address their Council of Elders, so that's the first hurdle over. Salish left with them to make the arrangements - he'll return in a day or two to escort me to their village. He says that they've decided to treat me as a god until they can prove I'm not - he was quite apologetic about their lack of faith. But they didn't get the lesson that this tribe did... They're being sensible, really, when you think about it."

"Then all we can do is wait," Spock commented.

"Yes." Kirk rose and poured wine. "This isn't as good as Vulcan wine, but it isn't bad. You look tired, Spock."

"I have been much occupied - McCoy and I have finished faking the research notes for the xenopolycythemia cure. I'd like you to check them over when you get back just in case there's something we've missed."

"I shouldn't think there will be, but I'll check." They drank the wine slowly.

Spock savoured the flavour. "I agree, Jim - a good wine, but not of the standard of our wines." He put down his glass with a barely concealed sigh of weariness.

Kirk caught it. "Go on back to the ship, Spock, and get some rest. I'll see you tomorrow."

"I do require sleep." The Vulcan rose and touched Kirk's shoulder. "Good-night, Jim."

Kirk spent the following day in the fields studying the crops, noting how the improvements he had suggested on his last visit had increased the prospective harvest. The wild grain he had introduced was growing strongly, and Wenona, who was in charge of the crops, told him proudly that each year gave the tribe a greater reserve against the hardships of winter - indeed, last season she had been able to supply seed grain to one of the smaller tribes whose supply had been attacked by disease. The tribe had seen it as a sign that Kirok might have forgiven them at least in part for their treatment of him, and as a sign of their continued repentance had given the seed grain freely, as a gift. Kirk nodded his approval; he had seen too many planets torn by internal strife and if it took fear of the gods to encourage co-operation between the tribes, then fear of the gods was not necessarily a bad thing.

The herd of cattle was flourishing, the tribe's horses were strong and sound, and following another suggestion of Kirk's, the herdsmen had begun keeping a small flock of goats; their hair, milk and meat had further enriched the tribe, although again fear of seeming to take advantage of the generosity of the god they had treated so badly had restrained greed.

Content with all he saw, Kirk returned wearily in the evening to the lodge, and to the meal that was waiting for him. He had just finished eating when Nahtanha, one of the girls chosen to serve him, entered and bowed respectfully.

"Kirok, Sakima begs to speak with you."

"Sakima? I'm afraid I don't..."

"The boy to whom you gave life, Kirok. He is greatly distressed."

"Ask him to come in." Kirk remembered the child; and remembered too that Lumo, the young warrior who had pulled him from the water, had been one of those to die under the Captain's phaser.

The boy entered nervously, carrying a large basket which he set down



carefully before kneeling with deliberate care at Kirk's feet.

"Kirok, I plead for your aid."

Crouching down, Kirk lifted the boy to his feet; the dark eyes were full of tears, the small chin trembled, but Sakima returned Kirk's gaze fearlessly.

"How may I help you, Sakima?"

Taking courage, from Kirk's smile, the child raised the lid of the basket. Within lay a half-grown puppy, a beautiful animal, but the bright eyes were filmed over, the coat was harsh and staring, the thin sides laboured with the difficulty of breathing.

"His name is Stormwind," the child said proudly. "My father gave him to me. But he is sick, Kirok - can you make him well?"

"Sit down, and I'll see what I can do."

Quickly Kirk examined the animal, biting his lip as even his gentle touch produced a whimper of pain. At last he sat back on his heels, wondering how to say what must be said, how to soften the harsh truth.

A small hand was laid on his arm. "Kirok? You will help him?"

Sighing, Kirk sat down and gestured the child to his side. "Sakima, you must be very brave. Stormwind is too sick - I cannot help him."

"But you are a god!" The child gazed at him trustfully.

"Even I cannot give life," Kirk said gently. "That is only for the Great Spirit."

"But my father said... He told me...that I was dead...and you gave me life again."

"A mistake was made, and it was given to me to correct it," Kirk explained carefully. "The Great Spirit gives to each living thing a span of days, and not the greatest of us can extend that span by one heartbeat."

"Then he must die?"

"Yes, child," Kirk looked down at the animal, wishing fervently that he need say no more, but the creature's suffering tore at his heart. "But Sakima...it is for you to say when."

"I do not understand, Kirok."

"Stormwind is in great pain, and it will grow worse. This illness kills slowly. Soon he will be unable to move, then unable to eat. He will be very much afraid. But...if you wish it, I can give him peace now. He will sleep, and not wake. There will be no more pain."

"Must I decide?"

"He is your pet - your friend. It is for you to say the word."

The child reached out and touched the puppy's head. Kirk looked away as with a frantic effort the little animal turned his head to lick his master's hand.

"There is nothing else you can do?"

"Nothing," Kirk said gently.

"Then...do it quickly, Kirok. His pain is great."

"If you will hold him he will not know what is happening." Kirk reached for the hypo McCoy had given him in case of emergencies, and set the maximum dose of sedative, then pressed it to the animal's side. In a few moments the difficult breathing quietened, and Stormwind lay still. Sakima sobbed once, and hugged his pet tightly.

"Do you wish me to...?"

"I will bury him." Sakima rose to his feet and bowed with awkward dignity. "I thank you, Kirok."

"Sakima, listen to me." Kirk could see the effort the boy was making to restrain tears. "It hurts, I know, but in time you will remember the joy; and then you will be glad that you had the courage to spare him pain."

"Kirok, you are crying!" The boy's voice was touched with wonder.

"It hurts me too, little one." Kirk smiled reassuringly. "Now go in peace."

Kirk watched him go, then raised his hand to rub the tears from his eyes, glad for the child's sake that they had fallen. He had sensed that Sakima had wanted to cry, but was afraid that it might appear cowardly. If a god could weep, however, so might a man - Sakima would sob out his grief, and find healing in the tears.

Turning back into the lodge Kirk dismissed Nahtanha with a smile, needing to be alone. Soon it would be time to call Spock...but first he must deal with the memories that rose up in his mind...

On the Enterprise McCoy buzzed at Spock's door, and entered as soon as

permission was given. Spock looked up from the pile of reports that littered his desk. "Yes, McCoy?"

"Sorry to bother you, Spock - I'm probably jumping at shadows..."

"Most unlikely. What is wrong?"

"I'm not sure. Since I knew you'd be tied up with those reports, I took Jim's call myself - thought he'd be glad of someone to talk to..."

"And?" the Vulcan prompted when McCoy hesitated.

"I got the feeling he's...upset about something. He denied it, but...well, you know how Jim is. He told me not to worry you - so, of course, here I am - worrying you."

"Hmm." Spock tapped his stylus on the desk. "If he was ill or injured, he would have the sense to report it." He pushed the reports aside decisively and rose. "These can wait - I will beam down at once. Is he in the lodge?"

"Yes, and he's alone." McCoy grinned in relief. "I thought you might want to go down, so I asked Kyle to lay in the co-ordinates."

"Thank you, Doctor." Spock nodded reassuringly, and turned to go.

Kirk was sitting hunched up on the floor gazing into the fire when Spock materialised in the dimly-lit lodge. He looked round and smiled, holding out his hand.

"I can't fool McCoy," he said wryly. "I know you'd come."

Spock took the outstretched hand, noting as he did so that Kirk seemed unusually cold, and sank down to join him.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" he asked.

"Yes, please." Kirk looked at Spock, smiling as the Vulcan began to chafe warmth back into his frozen fingers.

"Something happened today," he began abruptly. "I had to tell Sakima - one of the children - that his pet was dying. I knew there was nothing to be done - there was a dog at the orphanage that contracted the same illness, and when it's that far advanced there's no hope. All that could be done was to end the creature's pain. Poor child - he was so brave..."

"It is always distressing to bring grief to a child," Spock said quietly.

"No, it's not that - it's something far more selfish. A...a memory. May I tell you?"

"Of course." Spock tightened his grip, then drew Kirk close to his side, pulling a blanket around his shivering body. Kirk rested his head against the Vulcan's shoulder, finding comfort and reassurance in the contact.

"I told you that...that He never allowed me any friends - I was totally dependent on him for companionship, such as it was. Once, though, he made an exception..."

Contact with the planet Vanla had aroused great interest in the Federation, not least on Vulcan. Investigations seemed to indicate that the vulcanoid Vanlans were, in fact, true Vulcans, their ancestors transported to the planet by the Preservers at some point during the nomadic stage of their history. Their civilisation had developed along unusual and interesting lines - while still retaining much of their nomadic tribal culture, the Vanlans had advanced rapidly in science and technology. It was their achievement of interplanetary flight that had brought them to the notice of the Federation.

First Contact established that the Vanlans were willing to discuss membership

of the Federation; to smooth out any possible problems it was decided that the diplomatic mission would be composed mainly of Vulcans, and Captain Spock of the Enterprise was ordered to Vanla to make arrangements for the delegation, as it was felt that he would be in the best position to learn of any possible cultural differences that should be taken into account. Not only was Spock, since the loss of the Intrepid, the only Vulcan Captain in Starfleet, he was also the nephew of the leader of the delegation, Ambassador Selek.

Kirk felt a sudden thrill of hope when the official orders came from Starfleet. The Enterprise was to take Spock to Vanla, but while he began talks with the leaders, she was to return to Starbase 16 to allow the crew a short period of shore leave; she would then return to Vanla to pick up the Captain.

The prospect of a few weeks' freedom from his master was exciting enough, but there was more. Once on the Starbase he could request transfer to another ship - and if he took his accumulated leave there would be no risk of his being on the Enterprise when she returned to Vanla. He would be free at last.

Kirk made plans as he went quietly about his duties, careful not to betray himself to the Captain. He would be sorry to leave McCoy and Scotty, of course, but perhaps they would serve together again one day... It was a small price to pay for freedom, and the hope of a normal life at last.

Schooling his face to an expression of calm, Kirk leaned down. "Sir, it's time," he murmured. "We've reached Vanla, and you're due to beam down in an hour."

The dark eyes opened and gazed into his mockingly. "Then you had better get ready, James. Your dress uniform is laid out in your cabin, and my yeoman packed for you last night."

"Packed for me? What do you mean?"

"You are coming with me, of course. A Vulcan Captain cannot arrive for such an important meeting unattended." Spock gripped his wrist, twisting it viciously. "You little fool, did you think you had deceived me? I had no intention of leaving you behind. It amused me to permit you to play your game, but this is reality. You will not escape me, James - I will kill you rather than lose you."

"Why?" Kirk demanded, too shocked by the failure of his hopes to employ his usual caution in dealing with his unpredictable master. "You don't really want me - anyone would do."

"Ah, but you are so deliciously responsive, James. You loathe my touch, and yet you respond... I do not as yet know why, or why I am drawn to you, but I will solve your mystery one day." He reached out and traced the brand on Kirk's shoulder. "Besides, it pleases me to own such a beautiful possession, and I do appreciate beauty - in all its forms. Now go and dress."

With a shudder, Kirk obeyed. His customary control was back in place when he stood with Spock in the transporter room bidding farewell to the unsuspecting McCoy. He longed to tell the doctor the truth, but dared not; Spock's control of his mind forbade it, and even if he did manage to break the conditioning, his story would sound so improbable that McCoy would surely believe him deranged. He knew already that Spock's skill at self control could deceive even the computer's lie detector skills, and there was no proof he could offer in support of his charges.

Even worse was his dread of the Captain's reaction if he even suspected that he had confided in McCoy. The Vulcan had made it very clear that his property was to be permitted no friends - he had successfully isolated him, forcing him to discourage every friendly approach, and transferring everyone who persisted, to the extent that the young First Officer was considered aloof and withdrawn by the crew.

McCoy was in a slightly different category. It was not possible to prevent

the Medical Officer from carrying out his duties without arousing suspicion, and McCoy would certainly be curious if Kirk shunned all social contact. Reluctantly, the Captain permitted the association, but supervised it closely, usually finding an excuse to be present during Kirk's medical examinations. When he could not, he questioned the Human closely afterwards, employing the mind link to assure himself that Kirk concealed nothing of what had taken place; and he used the same method to monitor Kirk's personal association with the doctor. Kirk therefore ensured that it was kept as superficial as possible.

Knowing nothing of all this, McCoy merely assumed that Kirk was a shy, withdrawn type of person who made friends only with difficulty. It was a pity, but not all that unusual; and, McCoy reasoned, it was not that Kirk was totally friendless - he did spend a lot of his free time with the Captain. Probably suited him down to the ground - they were both the quiet, reserved type.

Knowing Spock's possessiveness, and afraid of it, Kirk knew that he could not take the slightest risk; for McCoy's sake he must remain silent. The prospect of the coming weeks, however, when he would effectively be alone with the Captain in a vulcanoid society where there would be no restraint on his behaviour, gave Kirk a pallor that the doctor could not help but notice.

"Jim, are you all right? You look terrible!"

"I'm fine, Bones - just didn't sleep too well last night." Kirk produced a smile that did nothing to convince the doctor.

"Is something wrong, McCoy?" The Captain had approached silently, his attitude one of concern.

"I'm not sure Commander Kirk should beam down," McCoy answered. "He doesn't look well." His scanner hummed busily. "Hmm, nothing's showing up... Still, Vanla's a trying climate for a Human - I really think..."

"We will leave the decision to Commander Kirk, since you can produce no medical evidence," Spock interrupted smoothly. "Do you feel you can cope, Mr. Kirk? Or shall I assign another aide?"

"I'm fine, honestly, Bones." Kirk knew the Vulcan had no intention of allowing him to remain behind. "I want to go."

"If you're sure," McCoy said doubtfully. "Try to stay out of the sun at least, and remember to take your salt tablets."

"Just stop fussing." Kirk grinned, a more convincing effort this time, and McCoy relaxed slightly.

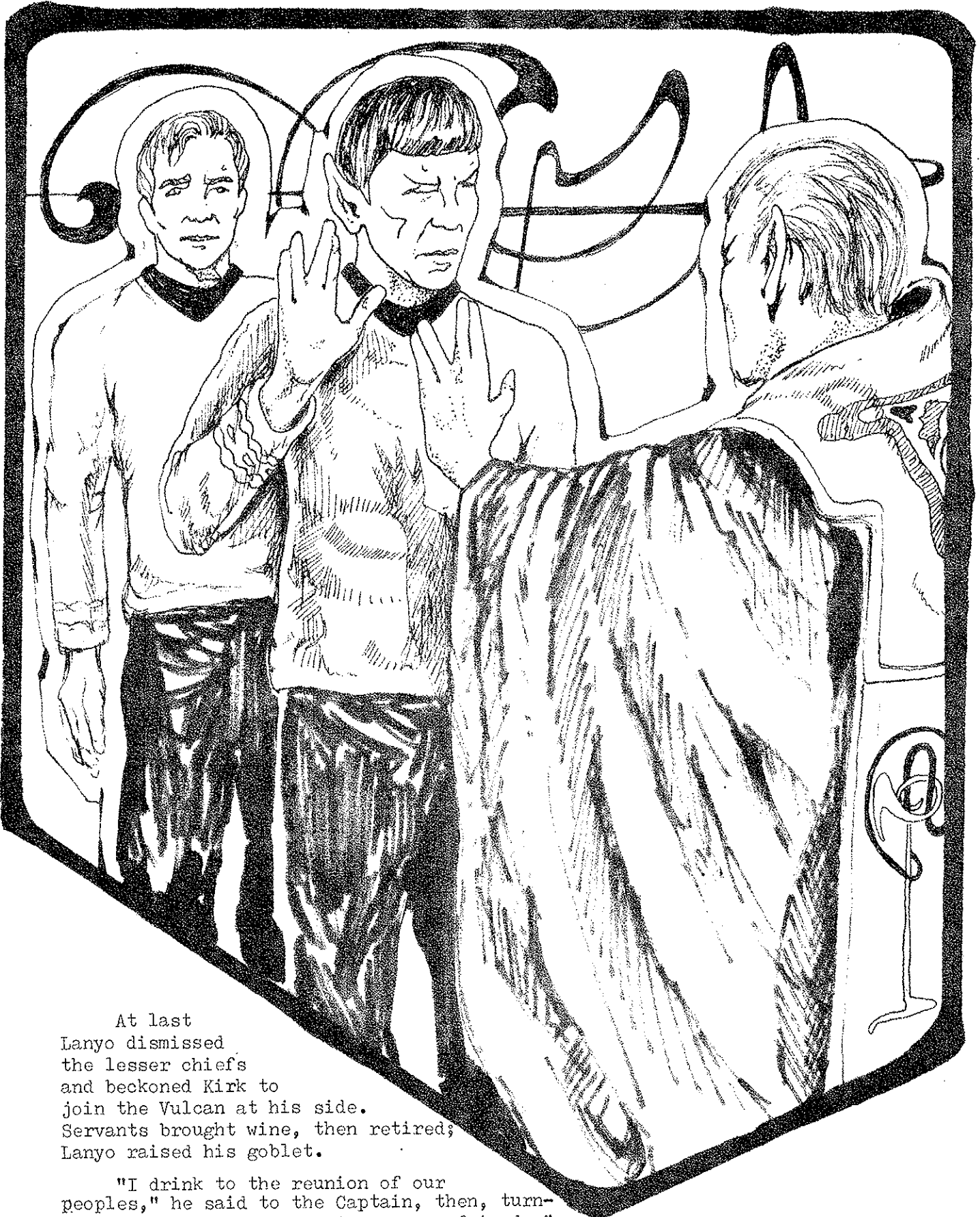
"See you in a few weeks, then."

"So long, Bones." Kirk joined Captain Spock on the transporter platform, and the Vulcan nodded to Kyle.

"Energise!"

They were met by Lanyo, paramount chief of the tribes of Vanla, a powerful warrior whose physical strength was matched by his brilliant mind. He was accompanied by the tribal chiefs, who served as a planetary council, each the overlord of his own tribe, but subject to Lanyo:

The first meeting was purely formal, an introductory session for both sides, but the visitors were received with great courtesy. While the Captain talked with Lanyo, Kirk, who had expected to be largely ignored, found himself the centre of the attention of most of the younger warriors. Although there was no sign of it in his outward manner, Kirk knew that the Vulcan was displeased; he remained as close as he could, nervously hoping that the Captain would realise that he could not ignore them without causing offence, yet very much aware that his master's reaction was totally unpredictable. It was his Human appearance that intrigued them - surely the Captain would concede that?



At last Lanyo dismissed the lesser chiefs and beckoned Kirk to join the Vulcan at his side. Servants brought wine, then retired; Lanyo raised his goblet.

"I drink to the reunion of our peoples," he said to the Captain, then, turning to Kirk, added, "and to our new friends."

The two echoed the toast, then Lanyo continued. "You will be quartered in the guest wing of my palace, Captain, and my servants will attend you. Ask for anything you require, and it will be provided."

"My thanks - you are a most generous host." The Captain inclined his head.

"If you wish, a bedmate will be provided."

The Captain smiled, and reached out to touch Kirk's cheek. "That will not be necessary," he answered. "I am adequately served in that area."

"I suspected, but was not certain." Lanyo eyed Kirk appraisingly. "Are all his race as beautiful?"

The Captain stiffened. "Chief Lanyo, you are too free with your comments," he said coldly.

"You are handfast?"

"Yes," the Captain answered without hesitation.

"Then I ask your pardon, Captain."

"No offence was intended," the Vulcan conceded. "His people do not regard these matters as we do, Chief, but I have won him - and I keep him close." His voice held a note of warning.

"I understand you, my friend," Lanyo chuckled. "My own companion is as jealously guarded. Have no fear - he will not be approached, I pledge my word."

The Captain nodded his thanks, and shortly afterwards Lanyo summoned a servant to show them to their quarters, suggesting that they settle in, then join the chiefs at dinner that evening.

Knowing that the servant could not understand them, Kirk glanced curiously at the Captain as they walked through the palace. "What did the Chief mean when he asked if you were handfast?" he asked.

"Handfast is the Vanlan term for bonded," the Vulcan explained. "Male matings are common here, but as on Vulcan, no-one would dream of violating a bond. I will not have you pawed by these barbarians."

"I couldn't help it, sir," Kirk whispered. "I didn't know how to stop them without..."

"It does not matter." The Captain dismissed it impatiently, and Kirk relaxed slightly. "You will, however, inform me if such a thing occurs again."

"Of course," Kirk promised quietly. "Sir...you've never...acknowledged me before. Why now?"

"On this world you must be bondmate, slave or free man. If you are known to be free and unbonded, I cannot prevent any of the warriors approaching you, and you are foolish enough to get yourself into a situation you cannot handle. As a slave, any free man who finds you alone may force you, and you belong only to me. It is best that you are believed to be my companion - that gives you all the protection you need." He glanced mockingly at Kirk. "Unless, of course, you would welcome a little...variety? I could easily arrange..." He broke off, laughing at the anguished appeal in Kirk's eyes.

As so often, Kirk was left wondering if his master was serious. He knew that Captain Spock hated anyone else to touch him, and yet he had often made similar references - there was the night he had wagered with Tal, Kirk's body the stake... He had won, but he might have lost... Kirk was never certain that one day the Vulcan might not really decide to amuse himself by watching Kirk with another man.

"Sir..." he began, then fell silent as their guide ushered them into the guest quarters. A high-ranking palace servant came forward to greet them.

"I am Salva, your attendant. Chief Lanyo has ordered that you are not to be disturbed, so I have given instructions that the servants come only at your command. The intercom connects you to me - if there is anything you require, summon me. You have but to order. Is there anything I can do now?"

"I think not," the Captain answered. "You may go."

With a respectful bow Salva withdrew, and the Captain began to explore their quarters, tossing idle comments to Kirk as he did so.

"This planet suits me well," he declared at last, throwing himself into a chair and beckoning Kirk to sit at his feet. "If it were not for Starfleet. I could enjoy this life, a warrior as my ancestors were. Do you know that the tribes often fight among themselves? That would be something to see! These Vanlans have a spirit my people have lost. It is curious, though - the telepathic ability is almost latent in them. A natural meld is only possible between a mated couple; for all others, drugs are necessary to enhance the ability."

"I do know that the Vanlans are a strange blend of civilised and barbaric," Kirk commented quietly, knowing that a reply was expected. "These servants... they're little better than slaves."

"As you are, James?" The Captain laughed and slid his hand down Kirk's neck, seeking the fastening of his shirt. "We have several hours before we need change for dinner - how do you propose to entertain me?"

Kirk dropped his eyes, resignedly aware of what his master wanted.

For the first two days Kirk sat in on the talks between the Captain and the chiefs, following the discussion via his translator. He understood and could speak a little Vulcan, but the Vanlan dialect defeated him, although the Captain seemed to have little difficulty. He had told Kirk that it was in fact an archaic form of Vulcan, little used now on the mother planet, but taught as a matter of tradition to members of the ruling families.

On the third day, however, the Captain told him that he was no longer needed. He would be expected to attend the entertainments laid on by the Vanlans, but during the remainder of the talks he was to remain in their quarters. Kirk suspected that the Captain had reasons of his own for not wanting another witness to what was said, but his master's plans were no concern of his.

Used to restrictions, Kirk accepted his confinement without complaint, with the weary, hopeless resignation that filled so much of his life. He explored their quarters thoroughly, listening to the music tapes that had been supplied to them, puzzling over the books he found, but was unable to decipher much of the language. There was a pool in the garden where he could swim, and he set out to make a detained study of the many unfamiliar plants that grew there...anything to fill the long empty days.

The servants appeared briefly each morning to clean the rooms, but they seemed to be afraid of the alien guest, responding to his tentative greetings with monosyllables, so that, seeing their fear, Kirk did not persist. Salva was a little more communicative, and would occasionally tell him something of the history of the planet, but he had little time for conversation.

Loneliness had been Kirk's existence for so long that he scarcely noticed it, but on the ship he had at least had his work and his books to fill in the hours; here, he almost began to look forward to the evenings and the Captain's return as a welcome break in the monotony - and this, he knew, was what his master had intended.

One morning Kirk decided to explore the furthest reaches of the garden, a semi-wild area where he had never ventured before. Shady trees lined the high wall, and thick tangled undergrowth rioted between them; it was difficult to walk, there was nothing much to see, and he soon lost interest in his surroundings. Just as he was turning back towards the pool, intending to cool off with a swim, a weak, tremulous cry caught his attention. He followed the sound, forcing his way through the bushes until he came to a small natural clearing hard up against the boundary wall.

Curled in the shelter of a bush lay a half-grown hunting cat; the creature lifted its head at Kirk's approach and called plaintively. She - for it was a



female - was held fast in a tangle of creepers.

"Steady, girl," Kirk murmured, moving slowly with hand outstretched. The cat sniffed at his fingers, reached a tentative tongue to lick the salty sweat in the palm of his hand, and gave a faint purr.

"Poor lady - what have you done to yourself?" Kirk kept his voice low and reassuring as he scratched behind her ears, assessing the cat's position. When he was certain she was calm, he disentangled the creepers, freeing the trapped body.

"Poor girl," he repeated soothingly as he ran his hands over the tawny coat.

She was a beautiful animal, but pitifully thin; one front paw was badly twisted, clearly an old injury.

Kirk's face tightened in pity. The cat must have sustained some crippling injury and had been thrown out as useless by her master, left to forage as best she could. Somehow she had found her way into the garden, and had become entangled in the creepers - he wondered how long she had lain there before he found her.

"You must be hungry!" Kirk exclaimed. "Come on, let's see what we can find for you to eat." He bent and picked her up, half afraid that she would struggle, but the cat relaxed trustingly in his arms.

Back indoors he summoned Salva and ordered food and milk for the cat. She ate hungrily, licked his hand in a grateful caress, and fell asleep on the rug, her contented purring gradually rumbling into silence.

Kirk lightly stroked the pricked-ears. "I'll call you Sheba," he decided, remembering the dark, liquid eyes that had gazed at him. "Whatever am I going to do with you, though? And oh lord... What will He say?"

The Captain was contemptuously amused. "A useless cripple, James - how like you! Do you propose to keep the brute here?"

Kirk's hand rested defensively on the velvet-soft head. As though sensing the Human's fear of the newcomer, Sheba lay still, watching warily.

"She won't be any trouble to you," Kirk said. "I'll keep her out of your way - and Salva said it'd be no trouble to get food for her. Please, let me look after her."

"And when you leave?" Spock demanded. "You cannot take a hunting cat aboard a Starship, and none of the warriors would want her. You are merely postponing her death - she will starve with no-one to feed her."

"I thought..." Kirk looked up pleadingly. "I thought perhaps McCoy could do something, fix her leg. She'd be valuable then, wouldn't she, and I could find someone to take care of her? I'm sure he wouldn't mind..."

"He is as soft-hearted as you are!" the Vulcan sneered. He paused for a moment, then touched Kirk's face lightly. "Does it mean so much to you, James?"

Kirk hesitated. It had been a mistake to show the Captain he cared, but it would have been even more dangerous to attempt to deceive him. He lowered his eyes, accepting defeat. "I know I can't keep her if you forbid it," he whispered. "It's just...I'm lonely..."

Firm fingers lifted his chin, and the mocking eyes gazed into his. "If I ordered you to kill her now you'd do it, wouldn't you?" the Vulcan demanded.

"Yes..."

"Very well, you may keep her," the Captain said unexpectedly. He slid his hands to Kirk's hips, drawing the Human close. "You will, of course, wish to express your gratitude?" he suggested. "And to prove to me that your new interest will not interfere with your other...duties?"

Kirk nodded in understanding. Sheba was merely another hold the Captain had over him. Obediently he pressed himself closer to the powerful body, raising his parted lips to the Vulcan's mouth.

As the days passed Sheba's thin frame filled out, and the harsh coat became smooth and glossy. She was devoted to Kirk, following him constantly, resting her chin on his knee when he sat down. The crippled paw made her ungainly in movement, but she showed no sign of pain when she walked on it, although she clearly could not run far or fast. Somehow, the cat seemed to sense that the Vulcan was different; when he appeared she would leave Kirk, and retire to the bed he had made for her, watching the pair through slitted eyes.

Somewhat to Kirk's surprise, the Captain showed a detached interest in the cat. He examined the damaged paw, and told the Human that it appeared to be the result of a badly-set break; he was sure that McCoy could correct the damage. In addition, he advised Kirk on training Sheba - the great hunting cats of Vanla were more intelligent than Terran dogs, willing and eager to please, and both man and cat enjoyed the lessons.

One afternoon Kirk was in the garden taking Sheba through an exercise which involved locating and retrieving a specific object from a selection offered; she had just done so successfully for the first time, and Kirk was kneeling to praise her, when a patter of applause from the terrace made him jump to his feet guiltily.

"I...I'm sorry, sir," he stammered. "I didn't realise..."

"It does not matter." The Captain descended the steps and came towards him. At his approach Sheba crouched submissively and crept away.

"It appears that your decision to save the animal was a wise one, James. If the paw can be healed she will be a valuable addition to any hunting pack. You are to be congratulated."

"Thank you." Kirk coloured at the unexpected and unusual praise from his master.

"In fact," the Vulcan continued, "even if the damage cannot be repaired, it would be a waste to lose such intelligence. If it pleases you, I will suggest to Lanyo that he keep her and breed from her."

"Would you, really?" Kirk smiled at the Vulcan with undisguised pleasure. "It would be wonderful to know that she'll be cared for when we leave. Thank you, sir."

The Vulcan stood motionless, fixing the sight in his memory. Kirk stood, smiling openly and naturally for the first time since their first night together. The fair hair tumbled over his forehead, his eyes glowed with happiness, his lips were upturned in a sweetly-seductive curve...

And all this for a mere cat! The alien eyes narrowed coldly as the Vulcan ruthlessly subdued a treacherous regret that he had not brought that look to the Human's face.

"Come here!" he said harshly. "Lanyo commands our presence at an entertainment tonight. I wish to bathe, then I think there is time for you to...serve me...before we need dress. Come - I hunger for you."

With grim satisfaction he watched the happiness fade from Kirk's face. The Human closed his eyes, swallowed, then lowered his head in submission.

"How may I please you?" he asked quietly.

Lanyo had arranged a visit to the encampment of one of the semi-nomadic tribes. The party flew most of the way by aircar, then landed and switched to horses for the last few miles - "To experience the atmosphere of the place," Lanyo explained.

Although temporary, the camp was elaborate, the tents large and ornate as befitted a wealthy tribe. Here, for the first time, Kirk saw Vanlan freewomen, dark, beautiful women whose dignity equalled that of their menfolk. In this tribe, the Remora, women were trained as rigorously as the men, although in slightly different ways; they did not fight in battle, but were skilled with the knife and the bow, and were expected to defend their camp from attack. As was common on Vanla, some of the Remoran warriors took male mates, but those who took wives were not, as was the case in some other tribes, considered inferior. Tama, the Remoran chief, had married twice, each time to a woman; his son and heir Malor, on the other hand, had chosen a male as his consort. Kirk was interested to learn that, as on Vulcan, the two men each had a secondary wife to

bear their children, and from what he could see the women seemed to be respected and happy - of course, he reflected, it might simply be that they knew no other way. The married women were permitted to mix freely with the visitors, but - another echo of Vulcan - the single girls could not meet men not of the tribe unless they had first been welcomed to the tented city of the Remora, which lay some days' journey into the desert; Tama told the Captain that his daughter Tavara had been most anxious to meet the off-worlders, but even for her the custom could not be relaxed.

As he wandered through the camp at the Captain's side, Kirk was fascinated by the simple yet complex life of these nomads. Aircars existed side by side with horses, the finest craftsmanship punctuated mass production of basic items, intelligent, sophisticated people lived by a semi-barbaric code under which slaves were commonplace, and yet a slave could be freed and welcomed into the tribe if he or she displayed signs of superior intelligence, skill at a craft or artistic talent, although it was not regarded as proper for a freeborn woman to work even with crafts except to decorate her home - and the children of slaves were educated to bring to fulfilment whatever aptitude they did possess. Kirk could only shake his head, wondering what the Federation would make of this society - and what the tribesmen would think of the Federation.

A meal had been prepared for them; a traditional banquet cooked and eaten in the open, under the stars. The food was well prepared and served, the wines subtle; in all, a meal such as he might have expected in the most sophisticated surroundings.

As the evening passed it became clear that Kirk's unusual appearance intrigued and attracted the Remorans; women as well as men gazed at him with pleasure, calling laughing invitations and compliments. Kirk took care to keep close to the Captain's side, afraid that an incautious response might arouse the Vulcan's anger, but it seemed that his master was amused rather than annoyed - although he kept a watchful eye on his property.

It was late into the evening when Lanyo turned to the Captain. "A storm is brewing, my friend, and we cannot return to the city tonight. Tama has arranged accomodation for us."

"I am honoured." The Vulcan inclined his head to the tall Remoran.

"It is we who are honoured, guest." Tama led them towards a tent. "The wind will scream tonight, but our tents can withstand its breath - these storms are common in our desert. Sleep well within my camp, my friends."

As Tama had said, it was a wild night. Kirk, securely held in the Captain's arms, found himself pressing closer to the warm body, instinctively seeking protection - the one thing he had learned to count on in his wretched existence was the certainty that the Vulcan would allow nothing else to harm him. He shuddered as the violent blasts of wind shrieked around the tent, visualising how it would be to be unprotected in such a storm; at the movement the powerful arms tightened around him, and the Captain murmured a few words in his own language.

Oddly comforted, although he did not understand their meaning, Kirk slept at last.

Morning dawned clear and fresh in the aftermath of the storm. The seemingly frail tents had indeed survived the fury of the night, but the sand was still blowing in the fast-dying wind. Lanyo ordered the aircars to collect the party at the campsite, and the return flight was smooth and uneventful.

Salva met them as they entered their quarters. The man was clearly nervous, refusing to meet Kirk's eyes as he bowed respectfully.

"Is something wrong?" Kirk asked gently.

"Commander Kirk...I regret... Sheba..." Salva stammered.



Apprehension gripped Kirk as he realised that the cat had not come to greet him as she usually did. "What's wrong? Has something happened?" It was the First Officer of the Enterprise who spoke, not the Captain's uncertain slave.

"The cat sensed the approach of the storm last night, Commander. She was restless - I think she was looking for you. We tried to call her, but she refused to come in from the garden, and she ran when we tried to catch her..."

"Go on," Kirk said quietly when the man faltered.

"It was an accident...a tree uprooted by the wind. We did not find her until this morning... I fear she is badly hurt."

With a faint cry Kirk ran into the room, falling on his knees beside Sheba's bed. The great cat raised her head, her lustrous eyes glazed with pain, but a purr kindled in her throat at the touch of the beloved hand, and she reached a rough tongue to lick his fingers.

"Sheba..." The smooth coat was scarcely marked, but the cat made no attempt to get up, and Kirk's gentle touch on her hindquarters produced a soft whimper of pain.

"Let me see." The Captain joined him, and began to run careful hands over Sheba's body, noting each reaction. At last he looked at Kirk.

"There is nothing to be done. Her spine has been crushed."

"No!" Kirk shook his head in frantic denial. "Perhaps McCoy..."

"The injuries are too severe."

"But she can't..." Kirk reached out to touch the beautiful head.

After a moment the Captain's fingers covered his, lingering for a moment before they left and slid down to the base of the skull. Before Kirk could realise what the Vulcan intended he tightened his grip; there was a faint snap, and Sheba's eyes filmed over as her head fell limply onto the Human's knee.

"You've killed her! How could you!" Overwhelmed by grief and anger he could not control, Kirk turned and struck out blindly at the Vulcan. He parried the attack easily, and catching Kirk's wrists hauled him to his feet.

"James, listen to me!" The Vulcan held him tightly. "I understand - believe me, I understand. Thus it was with I-Chaya..."

Kirk struggled frantically, refusing to listen. "You took your chance, didn't you? I loved her, so you destroyed her - are you so jealous that you see even a pet as a rival? Let me go! Don't touch me!"

"That is not how it was." The Captain shook him. "I thought only to give a merciful end to her pain."

"Merciful? You?" Kirk choked, too angry to consider how his master would react to his defiance. "You enjoy pain!"

The Vulcan's eyes narrowed. "Only yours, my slave. Forget yourself for a moment, and think of Sheba. Would you have had her linger for hours, days, in pain? She did not deserve that."

Kirk gazed at him through tear-blinded eyes, his head drooping in resignation. "You killed her," he whispered brokenly. "She was mine, and you destroyed her..."

"...I really believed that for a long time," Kirk said tonelessly, shifting in the circle of Spock's arm. "I thought he'd done it because he couldn't bear that I should have something to love, and the belief broke my spirit just a little more... Now, today, I realised... He knew what had to be done, and he did it. I can even understand now why he didn't warn me - he was taking the choice upon himself, sparing me from having to make the decision. Oh, in the end I'd have realised it was necessary and let him do it, but I'd have felt guilty, wondering

if perhaps there was something I could have done. As it was, I just...blamed him. He was merciful, in his own way - to Sheba and to me."

"I think perhaps he was," Spock answered quietly.

After a moment, Kirk looked up. "Spock...who was I-Chaya?"

"For me - and perhaps for him - a much-loved pet. When I was seven, just before my Kahs-wan, he fought a le-matya in my defence. He was badly hurt... By the time a healer reached him, all that could be done was to give him an easy death. He was my pet, the decision was mine..."

Kirk said nothing; he pressed silently closer, burying his head against Spock's shoulder, and felt the Vulcan's arm tighten around him.

"Jim, I have loved only a few times in my life, and each time I lost the one I cared for. Don't let me lose you as well. Stay with me..." He stopped abruptly, suddenly realising what he was saying. "Forgive me - I have no right..."

"I'm glad you said it," Kirk whispered without raising his head. "It reminds me that I can give you something too, instead of always taking. To be needed - really needed...you don't know how much it means to me. He would never admit to any weakness, but you're not ashamed of showing what you feel...and so in turn I've learned not to be ashamed of feeling lonely, or tired, or afraid. You give me such peace, Spock."

They sat quietly for a few moments, then Kirk pulled back slightly. "You and he had so much in common," he said quietly, "and yet you are so different."

"You must remember that I knew my mother, Jim. She taught me to understand Human emotions, my father taught me to control them. Later, on the Enterprise, I was accepted, I found friends..."

"And all He had was I-Chaya," Kirk murmured. "Spock, I can't hate him any more. Oh, I still hate the things he did...but I'm beginning to understand, emotionally as well as intellectually, why he did them. Even Sheba..."

Spock's arm tightened again as he fought the rage that filled him at the thought of Kirk, alone and helpless, shedding tears for an animal that had given him the love he craved. "Jim, why was I not born into this universe? You would have been spared so much sorrow."

"Yes." Kirk touched the Vulcan's face lightly. "But I wonder... You'd have been kind to me, and we'd have been friends...but would I really have appreciated you? I might have taken you for granted... I think, sometimes, that my...my counterpart didn't know how lucky he was."

"He did not have the same need of me," Spock admitted. "Although we were close, I did not know with him the fulfilment that you give me."

Kirk smiled, his sleepy eyes fixed on Spock's face. "Do you know the best of it?" he murmured. "It's knowing that you love me...and that I can love you, my brother."

Spock rested his cheek on Kirk's hair for a moment, then drew back. "You are tired, Jim. Can you sleep now?"

"Mmm. I'd better get some rest; we leave tomorrow for the Valley." Kirk chuckled. "I can't let Salish down - a half-asleep god wouldn't make a very good impression."

"Remember that I will be monitoring you all the time, Jim. You will be perfectly safe."

"Oh, I don't think they'll harm me - it's just that I've got to be convincing. You know Starfleet is determined to have that base - if I fail, who knows what they'll do to convince the villagers to move."

"Contact me tomorrow night, and report fully." Spock began to disentangle himself. "Goodnight, Jim."

Kirk's eyes flew open at the movement, and he caught Spock's arm. "Don't go," he whispered, looking down in confusion. "I...I don't want to be alone."

Spock smoothed the bright hair, then lifted Kirk's chin; the wide eyes met his, candid and affectionate as a child's, but with shadows in their expressive depths.

"Dreams?" the Vulcan murmured.

"Not often, and usually I can control them, thanks to you. But tonight, I feel...lost..."

"Then I will stay." Spock settled down, leaving his arm around Kirk as he pulled a blanket over them both. The Human's head felt pleasantly heavy on his shoulder, and his trust, as always, warmed the Vulcan - he knew that Kirk could not have borne this contact from any other. "Goodnight, Jim."

Kirk snuggled closer, draping his arm across Spock's chest. "Sleep well," he whispered.

When he woke in the morning Kirk was alone, but the imprint of Spock's body was still there, and the warmth of his touch still lingered. He started suddenly as he realised that Nahtanha was sitting beside the bed waiting for him to wake up. She was staring at that betraying imprint, and his mind raced frantically - the lodge was guarded, and she would be aware that no-one had entered during the night. Then he relaxed as he remembered his supposed divine origins - it would be another tale to add to the growing legend of Kirok, that his Companion had visited him in the night, and departed without trace.

He smiled at the girl. "Good morning."

"Good morning, Kirok," Nahtanha echoed. "Food is waiting, and your festival clothes are ready. Salish waits to attend you."

"Greet him for me, and ask him to wait a little longer. I will call when I am ready."

When the girl had gone Kirk rose and washed hastily in the water she had brought, then dressed in the rich costume the women of the tribe had prepared as a gift for Kirok on the day of his return. Going to the door he called Salish and gestured him to a seat, pouring two cups of coffee - he had introduced the drink on his last visit, showing the people how to prepare the berries, and it had quickly proved popular; it seemed that the Preservers, as well as taking a spread of cultures to the stars, had also taken certain animals and plants on which these cultures showed a possible dependence.

"May I ask a question, Kirok?" Salish asked hesitantly.

"Of course."

"Why do the gods wish the Valley land? If there was a reason the tribe could understand, that I could explain in Council..."

"I can only tell you, Salish, that the gods have their own reasons, and they have chosen this place. The Valley tribe must decide if they will submit. I hope that they will."

"If not..." Salish hesitated again, then continued at Kirk's nod of encouragement. "Will the gods drive the people from the Valley if they refuse?"

"I fear they may. I hope to convince the people to go peacefully, but the gods will not be refused, and as you know, some of my brothers are... impatient with the weakness of mortals. You must persuade them to listen to me, Salish - you who know the price of resisting the gods."

"They will listen, Kirok, but it will be a hard thing for them to leave their homes. They are wary of you - it is not that they doubt what we have told them of your powers, but they may ask to see your power for themselves."

"Then I'll have to show them, won't I?" Kirk said calmly. "I'm ready, Salish - let's go."

Whatever their private reservations, the people of the Valley Tribe were evidently taking not the slightest risk of offending someone who might be a god. Kirk was welcomed with the dignified simplicity characteristic of this world, and was treated with the innate courtesy offered to a distinguished guest. The Strangers' Lodge had been prepared for them, but Salish asked for quarters elsewhere, since it was not fitting that he should intrude upon the god.

Despite their politeness, however, it quickly became clear that some of the younger men were suspicious

"Why is it," their spokesman Songan demanded, "that so mighty a god comes among us alone and unattended?"

"Salish attends me," Kirk corrected gently, "and why should I need a guard among friends? The People of the Valley have invited me into their village - do you say, then, Songan, that a guest here may not trust his hosts?"

"Well countered, Kirok," the chief Saponda applauded. "A gentle answer to an impertinent question."

"The young are impatient, Shaponda," Kirk replied. "Wisdom comes with years."

"The young? But you are..." The old man's voice tailed off and he nodded. "The appearance of the gods is deceptive, is it not? To us you seem a youthful warrior, but who knows what form you wear in the Star Lodge. I will remember that. What do you want of us, Kirok?"

"I wish to speak to the Council of the Tribe."

"They will gather at sundown. Until then our village is your home. Walk among us freely."

The invitation gave Kirk the opportunity he wanted to explore the valley at first hand. His tricorder readings confirmed the opinion he had already formed from the ship's sensors - the underground complex underlay most of the valley, and the whole area would be needed for the base.

In a way it was quite neat, he mused as he looked around. If he claimed the Valley in the name of the gods, the whole area would automatically become taboo, and the mountains would form an effective boundary - the pass by which he and Salish had entered could easily be guarded, and Security could take care of any native rash enough to attempt to enter the forbidden area by crossing the mountains.

The main difficulty lay in persuading the tribe to leave its home. He suspected that he would need a convincing display of his divine powers - it would be unreasonable to expect the tribe simply to accept his word, even backed by Salish's account of what had happened to his tribe. As he rode through the valley on one of the native ponies Kirk was thinking how best to mount a demonstration that would be convincing but harmless.

His thoughts could not entirely distract him from the autumnal beauty of the valley. The harvest was over, and the stubble in the fields shone golden in the sunlight, alive with the birds that searched out fallen grain. Smoke rose lazily into the still air from the cooking fires of the village, and small fishing boats drifted slowly across the mirror-smooth lake.

As he watched Kirk's eyes narrowed in concentration. At the far end of the lake, steep forbidding cliffs soared high into the air. Directly opposite the village, a massive overhang bulged grotesquely from the vertical surface, a curiously menacing natural formation.

Indeed, a possibility. Kirk raised his communicator.

"Kirk to Enterprise - beam me up, Mr. Kyle."

The sun was just beginning to set and the village Elders were gathering for the Council when Kirk rode back into the village. He smiled his thanks to the youth who took the reins of his pony, and joined Salish, who had been watching for him anxiously.

The Elders were seated in a wide circle, with Shaponda in the place of honour. Kirk saw with interest that Songan represented the young warriors, and that two women were also included in the Council.

Shaponda beckoned him to the centre of the circle. "The People of the Valley hear your words, Kirok," the Chief said gravely.

"My friends, the gods send me to you because of their love and care for their children. A gift freely given is more highly valued than that which is taken by force."

"What do the...the gods demand of us?" Songan asked.

"Your valley." Ignoring the gasps of astonishment, Kirk continued, "The gods love this world, and wish to dwell here; but they cannot live long among mortals. We take your form to walk among you for a brief space, but we dwell in the light, and you could not long endure our unshielded presence. Here, in this valley which is separated from the rest of the world by the natural barrier of the mountains, we may walk freely with no harm to our children."

"This I must ask." Shaponda glanced at Kirk nervously. "If we do not agree to leave our homes, what will the gods do?"

"They will take the valley, and cast you out," Kirk said seriously. "I beg you, believe that - and there is nothing that I, Kirok the Builder, can do to save you. The power of the gods is great - you cannot defy it."

"People of the Valley, I ask to be heard," Salish called from outside the circle, where he waited in his capacity as Kirok's attendant.

"We will hear you, Salish," Shaponda replied.

"Because of the friendship between our tribes, I beg you to heed Kirok. We did not, when last he walked among us - in our pride and foolishness we dared to harm him. Even I doubted him, heeding the words of Goro, and would have slain him as a false god. Even as we struck him was the Destroyer unleashed upon us, and his vengeance was terrible. Do not, I beg you, bring down his anger upon yourselves. Give the gods freely what is asked. This land is fair, and has room for all - I pledge that my tribe will aid you until you have settled on a new home."

"Remember," Kirk added softly, "that the gods wish to deal kindly with you, but they will not forgive defiance. They have sent me to speak with you, but they will not ask a second time."

"You have spoken, Kirok, and we have listened," Shaponda said slowly. "Will you permit the Elders to consider your words?"

"Of course." Kirk stepped out of the circle, beckoning Salish to his side. "I will walk through the village - summon me when you have reached a decision."

Deeply troubled, Salish maintained a respectful distance as he followed Kirk's aimless wandering through the village. The god was troubled, that much was evident. It might have been better, Salish thought, if Kirok had come in his shimmering glory to the Valley people, but he had chosen again to wear the guise of mortal flesh. Well, the ways of the gods were not to be questioned, as he had learned so painfully...

Kirk was indeed troubled. Starfleet wanted this base, needed it - and

would not be diverted by the wishes of a few hundred natives. Oh, they would take over peacefully if they could, but it was not impossible that if the natives resisted there would be bloodshed, perhaps even death - a legacy of fear for the tranquil world he had come to love.

His greatest hope lay with Shaponda. The old Chief believed in him he was certain, but could he persuade the Elders, especially the suspicious Songan?

"Kirok, the Elders have decided," Salish said quietly, interrupting his thoughts.

Kirk looked round to see that one of the Valley people, obviously not daring to approach the god directly, was waiting nearby. One of the younger men, he noted; that looked promising.

He smiled at Salish. "Let's go."

Shaponda was waiting for him in the centre of the circle. "Kirok, I speak for my people, not as my heart would have me do," the old man said nervously.

Kirk's expression remained calm, but his hopes sank. "How have you decided?"

"It is... My people fear to anger the gods, and yet they are sad that they must leave their homes. Some have doubts - this I admit freely - and they would ask..." His voice faltered as his courage failed, and Kirk smiled in reassurance.

"I am not angry. What would they have me do?"

"Kirok, they ask for proof that you are a messenger from the gods. Will you not demonstrate your power to us? They say that if they are to leave their homes, they must know that it is for the gods...that it is not just a...a trick by another tribe living beyond our knowledge who want our land."

"I see." Kirk looked around, his face stern. "Very well, Shaponda, but such proof is not bought cheaply. You ask me to demonstrate my powers, but you are ignorant of what you ask. Are you not aware that with one word I can lay waste this land so that not even the grass will grow for ten generations? The Tribe of the Obelisk knows... However, you are but children, and so I will give you a proof that you can believe, but that will cause no harm to any of you. Hear the command of Kirok. Tomorrow you must gather your belongings, everything you value, and carry it to the high ground above the lake. No-one must remain in the village - all animals, food stores, and supplies must be transported. There you will remain during the hours of darkness; at sunrise I will give you the proof that you demand."

"But..."

"Heed my warning!" Kirk said sharply. "Any who doubt and remain behind will surely perish."

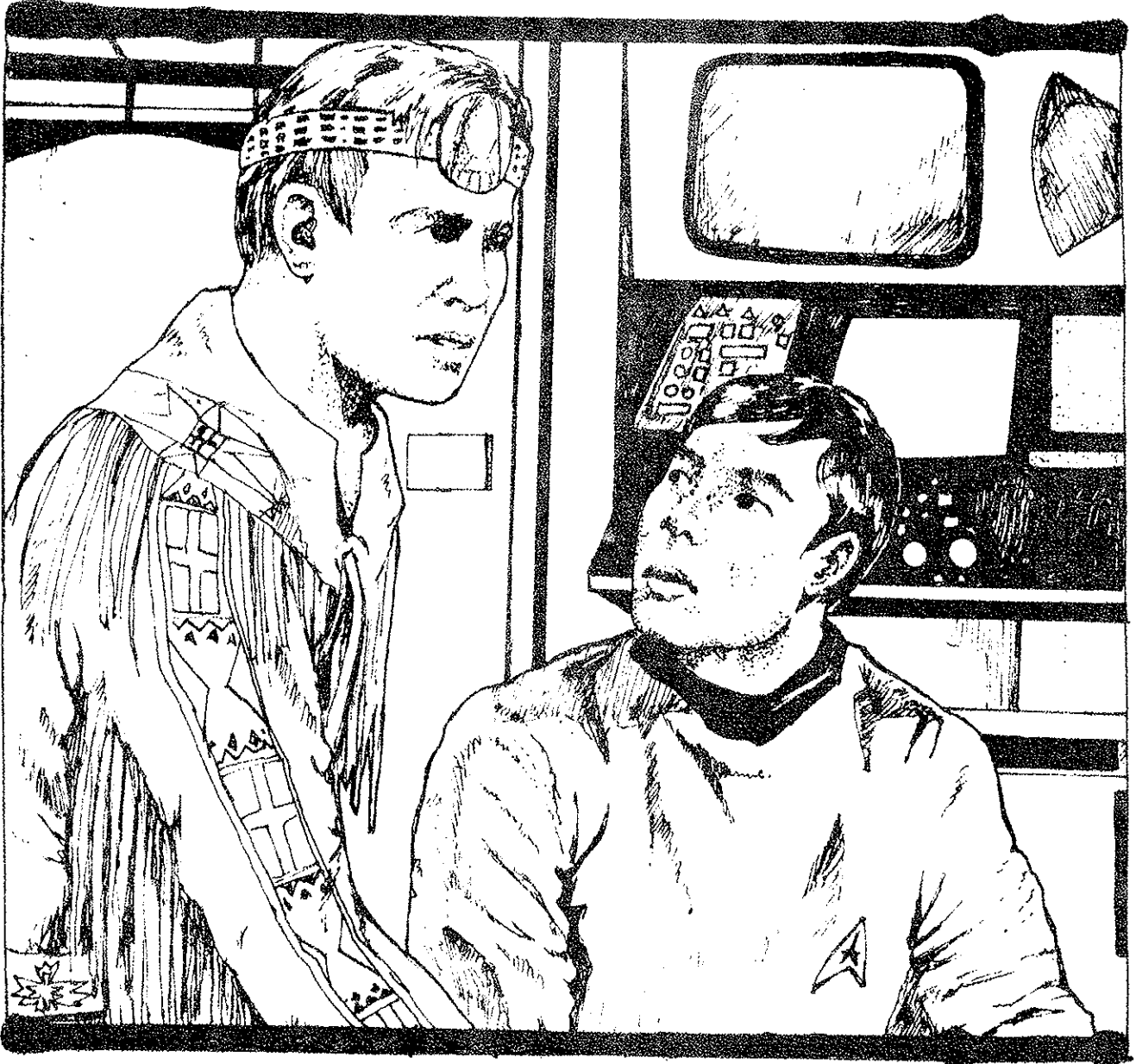
"And if you fail to provide this proof you speak of?" Songan sneered.

Kirk turned to face him. "I will be among you," he pointed out. "Either I am a god or I am not. If I am, you will know it - if I am not, you will be able to take the vengeance you seem to think you need. Will you gamble your life on that, Songan? Would it not be wiser to assume that I am what I claim to be until it is proved otherwise?"

"You speak truly," Songan nodded grudgingly. "Very well, Kirok - we will wait."

"I will rest now. In the morning I will select a campsite for you. Bid the people begin to pack - and remember, nothing must be left behind."

He studied the Elders for a moment, then made his way from the circle towards the Strangers' Lodge. He had not really expected that the tribe would agree to his demand; but at least they were prepared to await proof. Tomorrow he must find an opportunity to beam back to the ship and consult Spock and Masters -



his demonstration had to be perfect!

Spock, on his regular evening tour of the ship, paused at the door of the auxiliary control room, debated with himself for a moment, then stepped inside. Kirk and Sulu, bent over the helm console, were too deep in concentration to notice his arrival. He watched them for a moment, appreciating the incongruity of an Indian warrior clad in fringed and beaded buckskin at the helm of a Starship.

"That's it, then," Kirk said at last, straightening with a sigh. "I'm going to be relying on you, Sulu - gods don't get a second chance."

"Don't worry, Mr. Kirk." Sulu grinned confidently. "It's a tricky shot, but your co-ordinates are spot-on, and thanks to this dummy run I can be certain of hitting the target."

"Just be ready for my signal, then give it everything you've got. All phasers, full power. Well, I think that's all for now. You'd better go and eat - I've kept you 'way past the end of your shift."

"My pleasure, Mr. Kirk."

The two men turned, seeing the Captain for the first time. Sulu continued on his way with a polite "Good evening, Captain," but Kirk, after a quick smile of greeting, dropped his gaze again to the console.

"Is something wrong, Jim?"

"No - I've just been going over things with Sulu. He's really good with the phasers, but I wanted to make certain he understands exactly what he's got to do tomorrow. Now, if only I've calculated the stresses correctly..."

"Jim, to my certain knowledge you have run that computer scan four times, and your figures tallied on each occasion." Spock reached over and took his friend's arm, pulling him gently to his feet. "Come with me."

"Where to?"

"To my quarters. I have ordered a meal there for us, then I insist that you sleep for a few hours - you can beam down well before sunrise."

"I'm fine, Spock - honestly."

"And you will be a lot better for some food and sleep," Spock replied sternly, steering the Human out into the corridor. "Must I make it an order?"

"All right, I give in. You're worse than Bones," Kirk grumbled.

Spock had been right, Kirk admitted later as he pushed away his empty plate; he hadn't realised how hungry he was. He had been so busy all day, checking the final details of his plan, finding a safe campsite for the tribe, seeing them installed and settled for the night, that there had been no time to eat.

Accepting the small glass of brandy the Vulcan handed him, Kirk sank down thankfully into a soft chair; as he sipped his drink he glanced at Spock over the rim of his glass, his eyes sparkling with mischief.

"About your part in tomorrow's demonstration..." he began.

"My part?" Spock looked at him uneasily. "What am I to do?"

"Oh, quite a lot," Kirk assured him. "You're already a legend on this world - the vengeful Destroyer breathing destruction and death." He leaned forward in his chair. "Seriously, Spock - I think it necessary that you appear. The tribes who acknowledge me don't really fear me, you know - to them I'm Kirok, the Healer, the Builder."

"Why is it necessary that they fear?" Spock asked, puzzled.

"If they're afraid, they'll be careful. I don't want them wandering around a top secret Starfleet base, however innocently. If they're reminded of the destruction the gods can inflict they'll give the valley a wide berth. I don't want to risk a child blundering into a forcefield, for instance, just because someone decided that the restriction could be disregarded. We represent the two faces of the gods, Spock, the gentle and the destructive. If they know only the good, they may be tempted to disobey, trusting in my - Kirok's - forgiveness; I want them to know, as Salish knows, that once the power of the Destroyer is unleashed, nothing can repair the damage." He smiled appealingly. "Please do it, Spock. I'm...fond of these people - I'd like to leave them with every possible safeguard."

Spock had never been able to resist a direct appeal from this man - in either universe. He sighed in not unwilling resignation.

"Very well, Jim. What do you wish me to do?"

The People of the Valley were already gathered expectantly when Kirk emerged from his tent on the following morning. He greeted Salish and Shaponda, and was careful too to salute Songan with his usual courtesy - the man's doubts were genuine, after all, and he did not intend to make an enemy needlessly.

Kirk looked around carefully, noting with approval that the tribe had gathered as he had asked on the high ground overlooking the lake. Below lay the deserted village - the lodges had been impossible to move, and only the tents

which formed the nucleus of the camp behind them had been carried away. A few canoes lay at the water's edge... Well, he had warned them to move everything of value...

Drawing a deep breath he turned to Shaponda and spoke clearly, so that he could be heard by all the people.

"Is everyone here? There is no-one left in the village?"

"All are here, as you commanded, Kirok. Our animals too, and our stores - everything."

"Good. Shaponda, Songan, you will speak for the tribe. Look out upon the waters and tell me what you see."

"I see the lake, as I have always seen it," Songan replied with a hint of contempt. "The water is calm - we lose a good day's fishing with this foolishness."

"What else?" Kirk asked calmly.

"I see the village, the home of my people," Shaponda said, in the tone of one who strives to understand.

"The home to which you will never return," Kirk said, and the listening natives gasped in unison.

"What is to prevent us, Kirok?" Songan sounded angry now.

"I will. Songan, there is one thing that has not yet been mentioned. What do you see, there at the end of the lake?"

Songan followed the line of Kirk's pointing finger. "I see the Hanging Rock. What of it?"

"What if the rock should fall?" Kirk suggested.

"Impossible, Kirok!" Shaponda broke in. "It has stood so since my father's father was a child - and in the days of his father..."

"Yet it will fall, if the gods wish it so," Kirk countered. "If I call down the fire, and am answered, will you believe my words?"

"If you can do this thing, Kirok, you are indeed a god, and we will heed your words," Shaponda promised.

"And you, Songan?" Kirk turned to the young warrior. "Will you agree?"

"If the fire answers your call, I will no longer deny you," Songan said; for the first time there was a hint of uncertainty in his tone.

Kirk suppressed a smile of relief, his expression one of solemn concentration. Unseen by the others he reached to press the signal on his communicator. His gaze swept the crowd.

"Watch and learn," he said solemnly, then raised his voice in a cry of appeal. "Brother, I have need of you. Attend me."

For a moment nothing happened, then the musical chiming of Masters' adaptation to the transporter filled the still air. Shaponda and Songan moved back nervously as a shimmering column of golden light began to sparkle close to Kirk. Salish, who had seen Kirk's appearances in such a manner before, stood proudly erect as befitted the servant of the god, but as the shape within the light took recognisable form his face convulsed with terror.

"It is the Destroyer!" he shrieked, turning to flee. "Accursed ones - you have offended Kirok - surely you are lost!"

"Salish, stand still!" Kirk snapped. "The rest of you - there is nothing to fear. The Destroyer will not act without my command."

Trembling, but trusting in his god, Salish stood firm as Spock stepped forward, his hand raised in greeting.

"How may I serve you, Kirok?" he asked, his eyes smiling a secret greeting as Kirk stepped forward and touched his hand in the ritual Vulcan gesture the Human had adopted as their private welcome.

"Show these children our power, Brother. Tear the Hanging Rock from its roots for me."

"A trifling matter, Kirok, but it will be done." Spock raised his arm, pointing at the lowering overhang, and snapped a few words in Vulcan, knowing that as arranged Kirk's open communicator would relay the signal to Sulu.

There was a heart-stopping moment of utter stillness, then the tribesmen wailed in terror as twin beams of light pierced the cloudless sky to strike the cliff at the base of the overhang. Instantly rock melted and ran like water; there was a deep menacing rumble, the ground under them quivered, and the whole mass of rock tumbled slowly into the lake.

For a moment a cloud of steam veiled the far shore, then as it lifted Salish pointed, crying out, "See - the water rises!"

A towering wall of water was rushing down the placid surface of the lake; in seconds it broke on the shore, engulfing the village and the low-lying fields beyond in a raging, seething deluge. When it retreated, only a sea of mud remained; lodges, fields, trees, everything had been overwhelmed.

In the silence that followed Kirk turned to Songan. "What do you say now?" he challenged.

Pale and shaking, the warrior dropped to his knees, followed by the rest of the tribe. "You are Kirok," Songan whispered. "We hear and obey."

"From this day the Valley is taboo," Shaponda confirmed. "The warnings will be set, and heeded by all. This is the home of the gods - no mortal will defile its soil." He raised his head to glance at Kirk, with a nervous, sidelong glance at Spock. "Will you forgive our doubts, Kiro?"

"You are forgiven," Kirk assured him, "but remember this day well. Should the Destroyer walk this land unrestrained, there will be weeping in the lodges."

Shaponda lowered his head. "We will remember, Kirok."

"Kirok..." Salish edged forward hopefully. "Will you remain with us?"

"I cannot, Salish. It may be that I will return one day...until then, remember me, my children - and remember my commands." He turned to Spock, and extended his hand. "Come, my brother - take me home."

Spock took his outstretched hand and drew him to his side, calling a sharp command in his own language. On the Enterprise, Masters, who had been taught the words, engaged the transporter controls, beaming them home; while on the planet the tribesmen gazed in awe and regret as the two gods dissolved into the dancing beams of singing sunlight.

Over dinner that evening Spock was aware of an aura of tension, almost a suppressed anger, radiating from his bondmate. McCoy noticed nothing wrong as Kirk recounted his visit to the Valley Tribe - Kirk was laughing, teasing the Doctor with shy affection, but Spock was vividly aware that something was preying on the Human's mind.

At Kirk's invitation they were dining in the First Officer's quarters; Spock looked around with interest, mentally comparing the difference in the rooms from the first time he had seen them.

Then, they had been bare, sterile - a place to work, to keep his few belongings, nothing more. Their emptiness had been a pitiful reflection of their owner's wretched existence.

Now, although they were still simply furnished, Kirk's love of beauty had

found expression in the choice and arrangement of the decorations. Spock smiled as his eyes rested on the occasional small luxuries, gifts from T'Pol, who would happily have lavished even more on this much-cherished son had he permitted it.

The curtained-off sleeping cabin, to which only Spock was admitted - even McCoy had never seen it - was a careful blend of Terran and Vulcan comfort, he knew, visualising it as his eyes rested on the curtains. The firepot which shed its comforting glow was a treasured family heirloom, presented by Sarek with awkward affection; books lined the walls, for he now had the time to read that had long been denied him. On the shelf closest to the bed stood three framed photographs - two, the faded images of a young man and woman, Kirk's long-dead parents, which had been among Sam's effects, carefully packed away - and which Kirk had immediately taken, although he had kept little else that had belonged to his brother; the third, a portrait of Spock. The Vulcan had teased him about that, but gently, remembering the leather case in his safe that he never opened now. The Human had looked at him, and said simply, "I feel safe when I wake in the night and look at it."

It was only recently that Kirk had begun inviting his friends into his quarters. Spock had always been welcome, but it had taken the Human a long time to learn to take his privacy enough for granted that he could admit others to what had become his refuge. Still a little shy - and it was McCoy's stated opinion that he always would be - he was now able to give a little of himself as he found others beside Spock and McCoy valued his friendship - and sought nothing in return except his trust.

Tonight, however, McCoy was the only guest other than Spock. Seeing that his glass was empty, Kirk rose to fill it, and Spock joined him. Unseen by the Doctor he brushed his fingers against Kirk's temple, and an unspoken message passed between them.

//Later, Jim.//

Kirk smiled, ruefully acknowledging Spock's recognition of his mood; when he sat down again the air of tension about him had eased slightly.

At last McCoy set down his glass and took his departure, leaving the two friends alone. Kirk walked over to the processor, ordered two mugs of coffee, then handing one to Spock, sipped his own as he paced the room. At last he threw himself into a chair and sighed.

Spock cocked an eyebrow at him enquiringly. "Do you wish to discuss it, Jim?"

Kirk set his cup down on the table at his elbow. "Starfleet!" he said bitterly.

Spock was puzzled. "Specify."

"It's the hypocrisy that gets me, Spock. We have the Prime Directive - a fine, high-sounding ideal...until it gets in the way of whatever Starfleet wants. That base... We have no business there. It's a peaceful, unspoiled planet now... but what will happen to it once the Base is established? We've interfered enough, playing at gods. I don't want them hurt any more - Salish, Miramanee and the others. What happens if Starfleet decides they need to investigate further? Or that they want to set up a proper Starbase there now that they have a foothold? The Indians will be swamped by a way of life they can never understand. I'm afraid for them."

"Then do something about it," Spock remarked practically. "I suggest that you contact Uncle Selek. He can keep an eye on things for you, and he has influence enough to veto any further interference with the tribes." He broke off, aware that Kirk was staring at him in bewilderment. "Jim? Did you hear what I said?"

"Yes, of course. But Spock - " Kirk gestured helplessly. "What makes you think Selek would take a blind bit of notice of anything I have to say?"

Spock shook his head in wonder. "Jim, your naivety continues to astound me! You are my bondmate, Sarek's adopted son, and so a kinsman of Selek's. Vulcans have a strong sense of family obligation. It will be enough for him that you ask this service - he will oblige you, and never even ask why."

"Oh... I hadn't realised..."

"And you do not realise, either, how much power you now wield. You are a person of some importance, Jim. In this universe even more than the other, Vulcan is vital to the Federation; as a member of one of its leading families, you have great influence behind the scenes. Why do you think Starfleet accepted your refusal of promotion so readily? They do not know that we are bonded, after all. It was because at my request Selek made it known in the appropriate quarters that I - and so the clan, and the Vulcan Council itself - would be displeased if my First Officer was removed against his wishes. That does not, of course, mean that they will not try to persuade you to change your mind at some future date - but we will deal with that situation when - if - it arises."

Spock smiled openly at his friend as he stood up. "Selek will keep you fully aware of the progress of the Amerind Project," he promised. "Now, if you will excuse me, Jim, I will retire. Sleep well."

Kirk rose too, and accompanied his bondmate to the door. "I think I'll start drafting that message to Selek tonight," he mused. "By tomorrow we should have our new orders, and lord alone knows where they'll take us. Something peaceful and uncomplicated, I hope."

Spock paused at the door. "That seems unlikely, Jim."

"You're right," Kirk sighed. He touched the Vulcan's shoulder lightly. "Goodnight, Spock. And...thank you."

"I did nothing, Jim. The success of this mission was yours."

"You were there," Kirk answered softly. "Whenever I need you, you're there."

"And I always will be," the Vulcan promised as the door slid open.

* * * * *

I, Salish, Medicine Chief of the People of the Obelisk, the People of Kirok, here commit to the tribal records an account of the second visitation of the God. Let His children remember.

...and the People of the Valley settled in a new home, as the God commanded.

Truly, the compassion of Kirok is unbounded! Such is His power, He might have destroyed the People with a word, and yet He stayed His hand, treating them as foolish children. In His love, He showed them His might, and they obeyed Him. The Valley is taboo now, for not even the most foolhardy of our braves will willingly cross the path of the Destroyer, who guards jealously the privacy of His brother.

I had hoped that Kirok would remain with us, but He has returned again to the Star Lodge, where His father, the Great Spirit, welcomes home His beloved son

With the Tribe, Kirok left his blessing. Miramaneé laughs now with the women, who no longer look at her askance, for her restored beauty is a sign of Kirok's love and forgiveness. This was the least of His mercies, but I thank Him for it each time I look into the face of my wife, and she does not shrink from me in her shame. Such a little thing to one so powerful...and yet because of it a woman's life once more holds richness and meaning. Indeed, the God well understands the joys and sorrows of His children.

Nahtanha has spoken of the nameless Companion who came unseen to lie with Kirok in His guarded lodge, and vanished like dew from the grass. The maidens whisper together, and blush, as they speak enviously of the one who is His Chosen, for the God is indeed fair. Even the Destroyer looked upon Him with eyes of love.

The harvest has been rich this season, and as Kirok commanded we will assist the People of the Valley until their new village is completed and the crops ripen in their fields..

The hunters report that strange sounds have been heard from the Forbidden Valley, but I am pleased that they closed their ears and moved away, for it is not good for mortals to look upon the Gods when they walk clothed in flame.

Kirok has promised that He will watch over His people. Each sunrise and sunset we pray that He will return to us. The lodge stands ready to receive Him, and the longing in our hearts to look upon Him again is the measure of our love for Him.

Kirok, your people await you. Return to us, most beloved of the Gods.

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KIRK'S LOG

Today I received a tape from Selek promising his protection for Salish's people. He was very gracious - in fact, affable for a Vulcan - and complimented me on my sense of loyalty. I think he really likes me now, and I'm glad of that, as much for Spock's sake as my own.

Somehow, I feel that I've atoned a little for all the harm...He did. The Tribes are happy, convinced that the Gods smile on them; and on a more personal level, Miramanee no longer bears the scars of His vengeance.

I can feel reasonably confident about their future - Selek has a powerful voice on the Federation Council, and he'll make sure that Starfleet keeps strictly to the terms of the Project, with no further disturbance to the lives of the Tribes.

It grieves me that I could not help Sakima as he wished me to do. Poor child - my own memories were so painful that I shrank away from any further involvement in his sorrow.

Sheba... Some people would no doubt say that it was stupid to grieve so for the death of a pet. Perhaps. All I know is that she gave me the only unselfish, devoted love I'd ever known until Spock came to me. To save her, and then to lose her like that...

I understand now what He was trying to tell me when He spoke of I-Chaya. Strange... The one time we might have shared a genuine moment of understanding - even though it was in sorrow - I turned from Him. Now I can see that He was trying to comfort me in the only way He knew - my rejection must only have made Him even more certain that He could never win me...my affection, my trust...

If I were given to superstition, I might almost begin to believe that Spock is some sort of guardian angel (though I can just hear Bones snort with laughter at the thought of a devil-eared angel!) Still, it's true that slowly but surely all my ghosts are being laid, thanks to him. Even Scotty's tortured, disbelieving eyes no longer haunt me, asking why he had to die.

Spock... I wonder sometimes if I can ever repay him - and yet the only thing he asks is to be allowed to love me. Even after all this time I know that he sometimes finds it difficult to believe - really believe - that he has my love in return. Yet he has - and he always will.

I wonder... On the day of our Bonding I offered to share with him the full Bonding link. He sensed my fear, and refused me, but I could tell how much he longed for it. 'One day, perhaps,' he said. Yes, one day, my brother...

Spock has just called me to his quarters - our new orders have arrived. I must go.

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ELAAN

Spock tossed the tape onto his desk with an almost exasperated expression of disgust. "It's another diplomatic mission," he said resignedly. "If I had wanted to be a diplomat, I'd have taken my father's advice and followed 'in his footsteps'."

Kirk chuckled. "Sometimes I wonder what they have a diplomatic service for," he agreed. It amused him to see his so-controlled friend relax that control - and, a little, he was pleased that Spock could relax with him, did not feel that he had to maintain the pose of imperturbable Vulcan.

"To prolong crises," Spock replied, almost viciously.

"Scotty used to say that the best diplomat he knew was a fully charged phaser," Kirk commented.

Spock glanced at him quickly. There had been nothing but affectionate amusement in Kirk's voice, and the Vulcan knew that at last Kirk had accepted Scotty's death, no longer blaming himself for it. "Indeed. That surely depends on the circumstances for which the diplomacy is required. In this case..." He sighed. "In this case, I am afraid that he would be wrong. We are to be the bridal carriage in a diplomatic wedding. Again."

"Oh." Kirk's mind went back to Karen Gallard. He no longer felt any bitterness towards her; he knew now that if she had accepted his hesitant proposal and married him, they would have been very unhappy. She was too much the social success, as she had said; he, although able to hold his own at those formal dinners that they occasionally had to attend, did not enjoy them. If he had not entered Starfleet, if he had remained on Earth, he would probably have married the first girl he went out with, and been content to stay at home in his free time, devoting his life to his family. Karen would never have understood that. The interests that they had seemed to share Kirk had come to realise had been superficial. Of course he had felt at ease with her from the start - as her father's hostess, she was accustomed to making shy or over-formal guests feel at ease. He found himself wondering if indeed she had shared any of the interests they had seemed to have in common, or if she had merely pretended to an interest that she did not feel; if she had a superficial knowledge of many things, gleaned from casual reading - or perhaps from an intensive study - in order to be able to talk apparently knowledgeably to any of her father's guests on any subject. It did not seem unlikely.

Spock watched, realising where his friend's mind had gone, waiting until Kirk's attention returned. After a few moments, Kirk said, "Who is it?"

"Actually, it's a double trip. First of all we've to go to Troyius, to pick up Ambassador Petri; we then go to Elas, to pick up the Dohlman Elaan who is to marry Arris, the heir to the Troyian throne. The two planets have been in some contention for several years, and it is hoped that this marriage will cool things off somewhat. Apparently the Ambassador is to instruct the Dohlman in Troyian customs during the trip - the Troyians consider the Elasiens effete and decadent, and..." He shrugged expressively.

"And Elas considers Troyius barbaric and backward?" Kirk asked.

"It would not surprise me."

Kirk thought about it. "Did something like this happen in your past?"

Spock shook his head. "Not to me, although the event did occur. If I remember correctly, the Yorktown was the unfortunate ship that was landed with the task. There was almost a scandal."

"Almost a scandal?" Kirk asked curiously.

Spock thought back, recalling the events clearly now that his attention was fixed on them. "First of all, the Dohlman tried to kill the Ambassador. Her people were very warlike, and she considered Troyians to be soft. Then, somehow, she managed to persuade the ship's Captain to marry her before they reached

Troyius. Fortunately, there was nobody aboard who was authorised to perform such a ceremony, though Captain Hart did try to convince the First Officer that he could do it. Commander Thelin refused, and enlisted the aid of the ship's doctor; they sedated Captain Hart and kept him in sickbay under restraints until the ship reached Troyius, then Thelin personally beamed Elaan down with a guard - ostensibly in her honour - to make sure she didn't try anything else. Captain Hart never did recover," he added regretfully. "He had to be hospitalised - permanently - to keep him from going off in search of her. It was later discovered that Elasian women had a chemical in their tears that reacted with male hormones in such a way that if their tears as much as touched a man's skin, he became addicted to her. The Elasian men had searched for centuries for a cure to this addiction, but without result."

"And she'd used them deliberately to trap Hart?" Kirk asked.

"Yes. Perhaps she felt he was a better bargain than a Troyian. Perhaps she'd simply wanted an affair, Hart wouldn't oblige, so she trapped him to get what she wanted. Who can tell? At all events, she was married to her Troyian prince, and Hart was...destroyed."

"I see." Kirk thought about it. "Not a very nice person."

"No - she wasn't. She was assassinated a couple of years later, but she'd had a son by then, and it looked as if the purpose of the marriage had at least been accomplished. From what Thelin told me about her, I would suspect that she had asked for what happened to her."

"Have you any idea why the two planets are at each other's throats?"

"No - in either universe. I do know that Troyius was originally colonised from Elas in their early days of space travel - they could easily have used a ship from either fleet for this taxi service, but I suspect that both parties wanted a neutral vessel used to minimise trouble during the trip. Environmental difference has caused some slight genetic divergence, mainly in temperament and mental attitudes. Possible the colonists even shared a common type of mentality, which was different from that of those who stayed."

"And each lot considers that they're closer to the original type?"

"It is possible. Yet both have been evolving, their cultures altering to adapt to new technological discoveries..."

"At least we're forewarned about the effect of Elasian women's tears," Kirk commented.

"Yes. Be careful, though, Jim. I doubt that they would affect me - my blood is very different from Elasian, and in addition I do not think I possess the requisite hormones to react with the agent in the tears, whatever that is. You, however, are Human, and fully functional as a male; you would be vulnerable, and the highest ranking officer on the ship, should this Elaan also be seeking to avoid her destiny."

Kirk shook his head. "I'm not functional, Spock - I can't respond..."

"Jim, your problem is psychological, and you know it as well as I do. Physically you are a fully developed male. Your body produces the hormones necessary for addiction to be possible. If you did become addicted...it would be no fault of your own, and our family council would have to accept the evidence of Elasian doctors, but it could cause problems."

"Once of that kind of problem was enough, Spock. One thing I don't intend to do is get involved in another diplomatic marriage."

Captain Spock took an instant dislike to Ambassador Petri.

The Troyian beamed aboard with an entourage of four, and alone of the party was not burdened with luggage. The others, it appeared, were carrying his as well as their own. He looked round on materialising with a disdainful

expression. "As if," Kirk commented later to an irate Spock who was just beginning to regain his equilibrium, "he was slumming it instead of beaming aboard a Starship."

Spock introduced himself and Kirk to the pale-blue-skinned alien. Petri barely acknowledged the introduction as far as Spock was concerned, ignoring Kirk completely and entirely overlooking the courtesy of introducing his men. "You will make your way directly to Elas at top speed," he ordered harshly. "After you have collected the Dohlman - " he made the title sound insignificant " - you will return to Troyius at the slowest possible speed. The Elasiens have many decadent customs, and it would not do for the First Lady of Troyius to exhibit such effete behaviour. I will instruct her in civilised usage as we go."

"Very well, sir," Spock agreed with forced calmness. "My First Officer will show you to your quarters, while I attend to leaving Troyius,"

Petri barely glanced at Kirk. "I am not accustomed to dealing with underlings."

Kirk was aware of an unaccustomed anger. "Mr. Ambassador," he said evenly, but with steel in his voice. "I am second in command of the Enterprise. Should anything happen to Captain Spock, I will automatically take command. On those terms, I am hardly an 'underling'."

Petri stiffened and glanced at Spock, obviously waiting for him to reprimand presumption. Instead, Spock said quietly, "Commander Kirk is correct, Mr. Ambassador. He is my right hand, and subordinate only to me on the Enterprise. Hardly an 'underling'. I am delegating this duty to him so that I can go direct to the bridge and set course for Elas - in accordance with your instructions to me."

Petri's lips tightened. Then he said, "Very well. But I wish it to be clearly understood that I will not deal with inferiors."

Kirk drew a deep breath, the control learned during the years of the Captain's rule coming to his aid. "If you will come this way, sir."

Spock watched them go, aware of some pity for the hapless aides, then headed for the turbolift. He was just entering it when he remembered the temperament of the Elaan of his original universe, and could not control a shudder. If this Elaan had even half of the high spirited nature of her counterpart, this ship would soon become a battlefield, for he could not expect her to co-operate with Petri - indeed, she could probably be counted on to do the exact opposite of what he suggested/ordered/advised/recommended - Spock was not sure which word best suited Petri's role as teacher of etiquette, considering Elaan's position as prospective Princess of Troyius; her position might place her above Petri, or, as a woman, her position might hold little if any importance. He wished there was some way they could find out beforehand...

"Your quarters, sir."

Kirk stood outside the door of the main guest cabin as it slid open. Petri marched in, stopped, and stared around.

"It is not what I am accustomed to." The Troyian's expression was again that of a man demeaning himself by associating with inferiors.

"I am sorry if the cabin is not to your liking, Ambassador," Kirk said quietly, once again calling on the control so hard-learned in the past. "This is the best of the guest cabins. There is very little space to spare on board a Starship; even the senior officers' quarters are no larger than this."

"Hmmm." The scorn in the Ambassador's snort was barely concealed. He marched in, followed by his aides, who hurried to take his extensive luggage to him, their own small cases left in the corridor. Kirk hesitated, half wanting to retreat, half aware that he had to direct these four unfortunates to their quarters. At least he was not under Petri's authority... Diplomacy and courtesy i

to a visiting dignitary might compel them to obey his orders, but when it came to the crunch, he had no real authority on board.

Petri noticed Kirk waiting, and waved a condescending hand. "Oh, you may go, Officer."

Now did Petri really not remember his name - he had paid little enough attention to it during the introduction - or was this a piece of calculated insult? "What about your men, Ambassador? They do not yet know their rooms."

"You can wait outside until I have finished with them."

Enough was enough. "I'm afraid I can't, Ambassador. I have my own duties to attend to. If you could spare one of them for a minute I can show him the rooms." Besides, it doesn't need four nursemaids to attend to one spoiled and self-important man. Kirk spoke with a firmness that clearly surprised Petri, in spite of the Human's previous 'defiance'.

"Oh, very well. Cyon, go with him, and return as soon as you know the rooms."

"Yes, your honour."

The man followed Kirk out. Kirk smiled at him, but remained silent until the door hissed shut. "Is he always like this?"

Cyon glanced nervously at the door, and swallowed. He seemed to be torn between fear of the Ambassador and instilled respect for a superior. "All high Troyians are...are..."

"Arrogant bastards?" Kirk suggested.

The Troyian looked away. "Do not say that! If he were to hear you... They are very proud men, your honour. Is it not so with your people?"

"Well, there are a few in love with their own importance, but not on this ship," Kirk said cheerfully. He went along the corridor to the next room. "This is one of the rooms - the other one is that one across the corridor. I'm afraid you'll have to double up - we don't have many guest cabins, and we have to keep some for the Dohlman's party." He opened the door and went in; Cyon followed him.

"But this is... Your honour, this is too good for men such as we..."

"You don't have to call me 'your honour', Cyon," Kirk said gently. "My name is Kirk."

Cyon shook his head. "You are gracious, honour Kirk. But Lord Petri would be angered if any of us were to be presumptuous."

"All right - if you feel you have to be formal, my rank is Commander. It is fully acceptable to address any Starfleet officer by his rank, and nobody could accuse you of presumption."

Cyon gave an odd little bow, then scurried back to Petri's room. Kirk watched him go, a slight frown wrinkling his forehead; he was irresistably reminded of his own attitude towards the Captain. But...four of them? What sort of man was Petri, that all four of his aides should so fear him? What sort of hold had he over them? For surely with four aides, they could give each other courage to seek for help. He had been alone, with no-one to turn to, enslaved by the Captain's mental hold. But there was no report that Troyians were telepathic in any way.

Kirk decided that he definitely did not like Petri.

The customary formal dinner for Petri and his men was a dismal failure, although the Ambassador clearly was not aware of it. The aides ate almost nothing, waiting until Petri was clearly finished each course before starting, apparently alert should he require any of them; as soon as Petri indicated

that he was ready for the next course, they immediately stopped eating, and indicated their own readiness. Kirk tried stalling tactics at the second course, and found that they waited until he was finished too before starting to eat, and Petri gave them only a few seconds' grace before looking for whatever was next. Spock seemed to notice nothing, but Kirk knew that his friend was becoming increasingly angry.

Conversation was minimal, with Petri holding the floor almost single-handedly. Every attempt to introduce a new topic of conversation was sidetracked by the Ambassador's voice holding forth again. He spoke incessantly, and said nothing.

Almost as soon as the meal was over, Petri departed, his aides scuttling at his heels. The Enterprise officers watched them go, relieved that this evening, at least, was over.

Captain and First Officer made their way along the corridor and paused at Spock's door. "Would you care for a game of chess, Jim?"

Kirk grinned. "Please. I need something to help me relax after...that."

"Are you finding him too overpowering?" Spock asked.

"I keep having to remind myself that he has no actual authority on this ship," Kirk admitted. "But actually, he makes me angry. The way he treats those poor devils..."

"Yes. His aides they may be, but he treats them more like slaves. They do seem to behave as if he has unlimited power over them."

"As for his arrogance... He knows virtually nothing, that showed clearly with every word he said, but the way he carried on, he'd make any expert feel ignorant - at least while he was talking."

Spock allowed himself to smile slightly. "Indeed. I found myself hoping to find a subject - any subject - that would leave him at a complete loss, but I doubt that there is one. Don't underrate his intelligence, Jim. He said nothing...in a great many words...but that does not mean that he is a fool. I would suspect that he has a surface knowledge of a great many subjects. Certainly enough to let him talk at length without making any mistakes."

Kirk looked suddenly thoughtful. "No, he didn't, did he." He began to set out the chess board.

"I think Mr. Petri is a typical politician, Jim. A man with a devious mind, who is incapable of dealing simply with anything. A very naive approach might leave him at a loss; he would be so busy looking for the underlying threat that he would miss the simple facts."

"I feel sorry for Elaan," Kirk commented. "Of course, she might be like Karen, and enjoy the position, being prepared to put up with the...the inconveniences. But to be forced to live in any sort of proximity to Petri... and from what Cyon - one of his men - let slip when I showed him their rooms, all high Troyians are 'very proud'. Could you imagine living in a world populated by Petris?"

Spock moved a pawn, opening the game. "A feudal system?"

Kirk made his move, then said slowly, "It could be. I hadn't thought that far. Is there any way we could find out?"

"Short of asking Petri or one of his men, I wouldn't think so. The Federation clearly doesn't know about it if it is."

"There's one thing - whatever sort of culture the Elans of this universe has, there isn't much chance of Elaan thinking this Petri is weak or soft."

"No," Spock said. "There isn't."

There was little contact between Petri and his men and the Enterprise crew for the rest of the trip to Elas. The four aides seemed to have no free time; all their - or rather, all Petri's - waking hours saw them on duty in his cabin, where he remained almost constantly. When they were dismissed, they crept to their quarters, almost as if afraid of disturbing their master by walking normally.

On the second day, a thought struck Kirk, and he went along to the room he had showed to Cyon, and buzzed, just after the four men had returned to their cabins.

The door was opened almost guiltily fast, and he went in. As he had hoped, Cyon was one of the occupants.

"Honour Kirk!" Cyon exclaimed. "How may we serve you?"

"How much have you had to eat since you came aboard?"

"Enough, honour Kirk," Cyon assured him. "The Ambassador...after he has eaten, we..."

"Get the scraps he has left?" Kirk demanded, more harshly than he had intended.

"It...it is the custom," Cyon whispered. It was with a distinct feeling of guilt that Kirk realised that the man was probably as afraid of him as he was of his master.

"Not on this ship, Cyon," Kirk said, more gently. "On this ship, everyone eats properly. After this, you will all go to the mess once you've come off duty, and get yourselves a proper meal."

"Will...will your Captain not be angered with you for letting us do this?" Cyon asked, his voice uncertain. "We would not want to get you into trouble, honour Kirk."

"Angry?" Kirk asked, startled. "He's more likely to be angry if I didn't let you go. Cyon, I'm second in command on the Enterprise, the Captain's immediate subordinate. It's my duty to see to things like this, to keep the Captain from being troubled with all the little things that can happen on a ship. But even if it wasn't, common humanity would dictate that I tell you this. Even the most junior ensign has the authority to tell passengers on the ship where to eat, and nobody would get into trouble for doing it."

"Honour Kirk...the Ambassador will be angry..."

Kirk felt the unaccustomed rage building in him again. He forced himself to speak quietly. "Why?"

"We are...servants. Of low birth, though not, it is true, of the lowest birth. Those of the lowest birth tend the fields, work in the factories... We are of the middle caste, honour Kirk; we work in offices, act as aides to the high born..."

"And all the time you're terrified in case your work is unsatisfactory and the highborn demote you and pack you off to work in a factory?" Kirk guessed.

The two men glanced at each other. "It...it has been known. Not only the guilty man, but his entire family..."

How had the Federation missed this? Kirk wondered. Hard on the heels of that thought came another. Perhaps they hadn't. Perhaps they knew of it, but had chosen as yet to do nothing; the non-interference directive affected Federation members as well as newly-discovered planets. Such a system was subject to much abuse, but trying to overset it in a day would cause even more suffering than the system itself.

"All right, I'll see to it that food is brought here, to your quarters. The Ambassador need never know. As far as he is concerned, the ordinary crew is as much beneath his notice as...as the lowest born on your planet would be,

if I read him correctly. He'll never ask any of them what they're doing in this corridor - and they've every right to be here anyway - and I certainly won't tell him anything about this conversation. And Cyon - don't give up hope. Troyius is a member of the Federation; and the Federation will bring about changes in your status. Maybe not for a generation...but it will happen. Perhaps not for you - but for your children there may be hope for a better life than running to obey someone like your Ambassador."

"I hope that you are right, honour Kirk."

As Kirk left to give the necessary orders, he reflected that Cyon did have courage to say as much as he had in the hearing of the other man. If his fellow chose to repeat that conversation to Petri, Cyon could be in severe trouble. On the other hand, he probably wouldn't repeat it unless there was some definite benefit to be gained; and Kirk strongly doubted that Petri would give any benefits to his underlings under any circumstances.

The party assembled in the transporter room to meet the Elasian Dohlman consisted of Petri and the usual Enterprise group of Spock, Kirk, McCoy, Masters and an honour guard. Two of Petri's 'aides' were also present, and Kirk found himself wondering where the other two were. Were they doing something for Petri in his quarters, or was the Troyian simply and in a subtle fashion insulting Elaan by not having his entire entourage present? The two who were present seemed to be the ones lacking in any intelligence or initiative, Kirk also noted; Cyon and his roommate definitely appeared to be the most intelligent of the four.

The Elasian party materialised; four men, clearly guards, and two women. At first sight it was not clear which of them was Elaan; then the assembled group realised that the younger of the two wore by far the finer clothes.

There was a momentary pause before Elaan seemed to gather herself together and stepped forward. Kirk was aware of an instant sympathy; the young Elasian was clearly desperately shy, and he was conscious of anger at the inconsiderate officials who had sent her, not, he was sure, of her own choice, away from everything she knew to spend the rest of her life among strangers - and such strangers! Her maid followed close, looking almost as terrified; even the four guards looked unsure, as if they had been given inadequate instructions.

Kirk knew he could do nothing to help her at this moment; even Spock did not have the right to speak. Protocol demanded that she must be greeted by Petri, the official representative of his government, and Petri was in no hurry to terminate the ordeal of someone he clearly despised.

Then Petri bowed; little more than a nod of his head, the gesture was insulting by its very superficiality. Elaan flushed, and Kirk realised that, unsure and shy though she was, she fully realised the contempt with which Petri regarded her. Indeed, Kirk could almost sense the thought that must be in her mind - is it only this man, or will it be all the Troyians who despise me?

"You are welcome, Lady Elaan." The formal greeting completely lacked warmth, and for a moment the young Elasian looked as if she would willingly turn and flee back to the planet that she would never see again, to the home that no longer gave her security against the harsh realities of being a woman of high family.

She had courage, however; she raised her head resolutely, to give the formal reply quietly. "I am impatient to reach my new home, my lord." Her voice had a slight accent which made it sound more musical than the Troyian's harshly accurate, unaccented speech; but the the Enterprise officers had no difficulty in realising that to Petri, this would be another fault; another sign of the inferiority of her race; another trait that would have to be 'educated' out of her.

Helpless to assist her, Spock stepped forward, Kirk at his heels. Their

respectful bows made her flush again, clearly embarrassing her even more than Petri's rudeness had done. Spock introduced his officers, fully aware that in this situation Petri should have performed this office but knowing that the Troyian considered it beneath his dignity, and assigned Masters, as senior woman on the ship, to escort the Dohlman to her quarters; all the while conscious that Petri would consider it a sign that the Captain also despised the Elasian since the duty was given, not to the second in command, but to someone of even less rank. But Spock also knew that Masters would be able to give the young Dohlman the reassurance she so desperately needed that not all the universe was hostile.

The formal dinner that night was extremely uncomfortable. Deprived of even the illusory support of her servants, Elaan found herself the target for the first of Petri's 'instruction2'.

She knew that she must learn new customs, and had clearly decided that rather than make any glaring mistakes at table, she would watch and see what the others did before she made a move. Kirk, sensitive to Petri's evident wish to humiliate Elaan at every possible opportunity, glanced at Spock and saw that he also was aware of their guest's problem. Fortunately, both Charlene Masters and Uhura were present; which made it easier for the Vulcan to disguise his quiet order to the yeoman serving them that she should serve one of the Enterprise crew first before Elaan, who, as a visiting female dignitary, would normally have been served first.

Elaan watched closely, following the other women's lead, and made no mistake over the service; and the soup course passed easily. Conversation was spasmodic, and consisted mainly of quiet conversation among the Enterprise officers. Petri was watching Elaan like a cat ready to pounce on an unsuspecting bird; Elaan watched Masters and Uhura as closely, with an occasional glance at the other Humans, clearly intelligent enough to realise that some slight variety in manners was inevitable, and probably acceptable.

The meat course was served.

As Elaan picked up her fork, Kirk realised her complete unfamiliarity with the utensil. Petri's attention was fully attracted. He waited for a moment until Elaan made her first unskilled attempt to use the fork, then said formally,

"My lady, I think it would be advisable if you were to practice using a fork for at least an hour each day. Such clumsiness would not be condoned at the Royal table."

"Ambassador, I believe that your advice is unnecessary," Spock said coldly. "The Lady Elaan is clearly fully aware that differences in table manners exist between her culture and yours. I consider that she is making an admirable attempt at using an unfamiliar utensil, and indeed you should be grateful that she is willing to try. There are many who would insist on retaining the manners to which they are accustomed."

Elaan flushed, almost more embarrassed by Spock's defence than by Petri's attack. The Troyian's colour deepened slightly too, and Kirk realised that Spock had just made a bad enemy. Are all Troyians like this? he wondered even as he remembered Cyon's words - 'All high Troyians are...' But if they're not, what-
ever possessed them to send this one on such a mission?

Now that Petri had spoken, however, making his disapproval felt, the Enterprise officers began to advise Elaan openly. Uhura showed her the most efficient way to hold a fork; McCoy openly cut up a lot of what was on her plate, so that she need concentrate only on handling the fork, though they all insisted that she should use it left-handed. They praised her efforts, and under the influence of their approval she began to relax and gain confidence.

Petri, finding himself completely ignored, scowled angrily as he applied

himself to his meal. He already felt that this trip was beneath his dignity; to be neglected while everyone paid attention to a stupid little barbarian who clearly failed to appreciate the signal honour done to her and her race by the Troyians was an insult for which, on Troyius, he would demand instant reparation in blood. But these effeminate Starfleet officers did not duel; so emasculated were they that they didn't seem even to recognise an insult. He almost respected the Vulcan who had dared to disagree with him, but until he could wipe out the shame of that disagreement in blood, he was disgraced. It was fortunate that his underlings had not been present...

The rest of the meal as without incident. Elaan sipped the after-dinner brandy, and made a slight face.

"You do not need to drink it if you dislike it, Lady Elaan," Spock said quietly.

"It is unfamiliar to me," Elaan replied shyly. "My people do not have such beverages."

"You must become accustomed to them," Petri said flatly. "They are served at all banquets on Troyius." His tone said 'barbarian'.

"I hardly think it necessary," Spock said innocently. "Not all of the races in the Federation imbibe intoxicants; my own race does not. And I have never heard that Vulcans are despised because they choose not to dull their wits with alcohol." There was a subtle challenge in his voice. He turned to Elaan as the challenge went unanswered. "All you need say, my Lady, is that, like the Vulcans, your race does not drink alcohol, and ask for fruit juice instead. There may be some surprise shown the first time, but thereafter you should find your hosts respecting your views."

"And if they press you, saying that you should try it, just tell them that you have tried it and didn't like the stuff," Kirk added. "That's why I don't drink anything except brandy, occasionally, or Vulcan wine, which has almost no alcoholic content. Those are the only drinks I enjoy." A slight shadow passed over his face as he remembered one horrible night when the Captain had forced him to drink a mixture of a dozen or more liquors; the increased unsteadiness and mental confusion, and the sickness and the terrible hangover that followed. The only good thing about it was that he was completely unable to remember any details of how he got the many bruises that he had found covering his body the next day.

She smiled gratefully and pushed the glass away. "Indeed, I do not like it," she murmured.

"You haven't tried it properly!" snapped Petri.



Kirk glared at him. "Ambassador, have you ever been compelled to consume alcohol against your will? Especially drinks you were unused to?" he asked with icy politeness. "I was, once, years ago; a 'friend' who thought it amusing to get me hopelessly, incapably drunk... I can assure you, it was most unpleasant. Given time, the Lady Elaan may indeed discover some beverage that she enjoys, but if she does not, it is wanton cruelty to force her to drink."

Petri flushed angrily. The accusation of cruelty had shaken him - thoughtless and inconsiderate he might be - those were the prerogatives of his position - but he was not, to his way of thinking, deliberately cruel. His anger at Kirk for making such an accusation knew no bounds. Barbarians - the Humans and the Vulcan! Offering insult which they were not prepared to support with their blood!

Since Elaan was obviously unhappy about her periods of 'tuition' from Petri, on the second day Spock suggested that she might respond more readily if she received additional instruction from one of the Humans. "I can delegate Mr. Kirk for the task," he said, knowing that Petri would not lower himself to operate through anyone of lower rank, although he was reluctant to expose Kirk to the Troyian's rudeness and arrogance. "If you tell Mr. Kirk what the Dohlman must know, he can supplement your instruction with additional tuition; this would avoid encroaching to any extent on your own valuable free time."

Tact, he thought bitterly. The man has nothing to do but teach the poor child. But the job is an affront to his dignity.

It seemed that the suggestion was also an affront to his dignity. "No Human could instruct the Dohlman adequately in Troyian custom!"

Spock could sense the hate that filled the Ambassador's heart. So. Their dislike of the Troyian was reciprocated, full measure. The Vulcan was not surprised. Petri, in all of his arrogant highborn life, had probably never before had to accept people he regarded as his inferiors, because they were alien, as being even close to being equal to him. His father - and other highborn Troyians of his father's and grandfather's generations - were probably the only people he had ever had to obey, apart from the King. And at the same time, Spock was mildly amused by the thought that his own family, one of the most influential on Vulcan, was probably wealthier and of longer lineage than Petri's. And although his own direct line would end with him - he felt a momentary guilt, quickly reasoned away, that his impotence, which the Captain had not shared, was depriving Sarek and T'Pau of grandchildren. But then it was the Captain who had caused Jim's impotence, and there was no guarantee that his sadistic counterpart would have taken a secondary wife to bed except during the pon farr triggered by the bonding required by the family council. Perhaps not even then, either, unwillingly obsessed by Kirk as he had been. No - the only chance of giving Sarek a direct heir lay with Kirk. Perhaps one day he might recover sufficiently to take a Vulcan woman - who would understand the situation - as secondary wife and sleep with her long enough to father a child. Indeed, once he did that, the psychological bar would be gone, and Jim could continue to experience a full - and hopefully satisfying - sex life.

Meanwhile, Spock simply said, "As you wish, Ambassador," inclined his head gracefully, and left the Troyian without waiting for even a token dismissal.

Petri stared at the closed door. Insolent barbarian! he thought angrily, while his aides hovered near, nervously awaiting the explosion.

Spock headed back to the bridge, his face wearing the extra-expressionless look that his friends knew disguised considerable emotional turmoil. His overwhelming reaction was anger - a helpless anger directed at the politicians of two worlds, but in particular those of Elas, who could without apparent compunction sacrifice a shy, introverted girl, hardly more than a child, in the name of interplanetary peace that might be of very short duration. If Elaan's

proposed husband was anything at all like Petri - and the indications were that he would be - he would find the girl useless; and she would rapidly be driven to a nervous breakdown. Jim had been in much the same position; and Spock knew that if he had not come into this universe when he did, Jim - if he had survived - would by now be a nervous wreck. The Captain had been far sighted enough to get what he wanted; but he had failed to recognise what the long-term cumulative effect of his behaviour would be.

Kirk rose from the command chair as Spock entered the bridge, noted the expression on the Vulcan's face, interpreted its cause correctly and said quietly, "All normal, Captain."

Spock nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Kirk." He settled into the command chair; Kirk hesitated for a moment before turning away, then realising that here, on the bridge, was not the place to offer reassurance, he moved back to the science console.

The rec room was almost completely empty. In one corner, Kirk noticed - with some surprise - Petri and two of his aides - Cyon's roommate and one of the two that Kirk mentally identified as halfwits. Even as Kirk watched, this man dropped something. Instantly, Petri swung his hand, striking the hapless aide and sending him staggering backwards.

Kirk moved instantly, in instinctive sympathy for the bullied man. He reached the fallen Troyian an instant before Petri, and stood between them, his eyes daring Petri to complete the threatened kick.

"I don't know what your customs are on Troyius," he said coldly, "but on the Enterprise, civilised men do not strike - or kick - their subordinates."

Petri's pale-blue-tinted face flushed to an apoplectic ultramarine. "Civilised? You are cowardly barbarians! Afraid to punish your inferiors, you crawling insignificances!"

"You forget yourself, Ambassador!"

The handful of crewmembers in the room froze at the crack in Kirk's voice. None of them had ever realised that their shy, quietly competent superior possessed this forceful authority, though Gary Mitchell had heard a shadow of it. At the time, he had wondered when Kirk had developed that forcefulness - now he realised that he had been let off far more lightly than he had thought.

Even Petri was halted, his mouth open to deliver another insult. He stared at Kirk, unwilling respect mingled with the uncompromising hatred in his eyes. Then -

"You dare to challenge me? I have heard that the Federation agrees to all member planets retaining their own laws, their own customs. Yet you challenge my right to punish my servant?"

"I do not challenge your right to do so, Ambassador. I challenge the method of punishment." Kirk's voice was inflexible.

"No man understands punishment unless it is inflicted on his body," snarled Petri. "And your interference in my affairs is an affront to my honour. I challenge you to duel - now - in this place. Since you are alien, I will permit myself to be appeased by first blood. Andros - fetch my duelling swords!"

"Yes, your honour." Cyon's roommate threw Kirk a glance that might have been called apologetic and scurried out.

Kirk clamped a tight control on his thoughts. Petri had clearly been spoiling for a fight ever since he came on board, although Kirk had not realised until now that duelling was part of the Troyian ethos; now he was surprised that he had not realised it earlier - it fit with a feudal background. Well, he was happy to oblige - especially since Petri clearly considered him easy meat. But he must allow no inkling of this to impinge on Spock's mind through their

bond - if Spock realised, and came down, he would only be able to intervene by taking Kirk's place - which would not encourage Petri to respect them - and Kirk knew himself to be the better fencer.

The door slid open again. Kirk glanced anxiously towards it - had Spock realised something was wrong? But it was only Andros, breathless and clutching a long bundle which he took to Petri.

The Troyian touched a catch and the lid of the long case opened gracefully. Andros put the container down.

Petri gestured condescendingly. "Give the Human first choice of weapons."

Carefully, Andros picked up the swords, placing them across his arm so that the hilts projected. He approached Kirk, his eyes fixed on the Human's face. Then, deliberately, he lowered his eyes.

Kirk looked down at the swords. The hilt of one was projecting fractionally further than the other...was Andros looking at the other, the one less invitingly presented?

Deliberately, Kirk reached out and, ignoring the hilt projecting nearer to him on the right, grasped the other. Andros glanced quickly up as he turned away, and Kirk knew then that he had chosen correctly. The swords might look identical; Andros clearly knew that they were not, and had tried to indicate this - successfully.

Kirk swung the sword experimentally. It balanced well, and although it was heavier than the foils he was accustomed to, he knew that it would be an easy weapon to fight with.

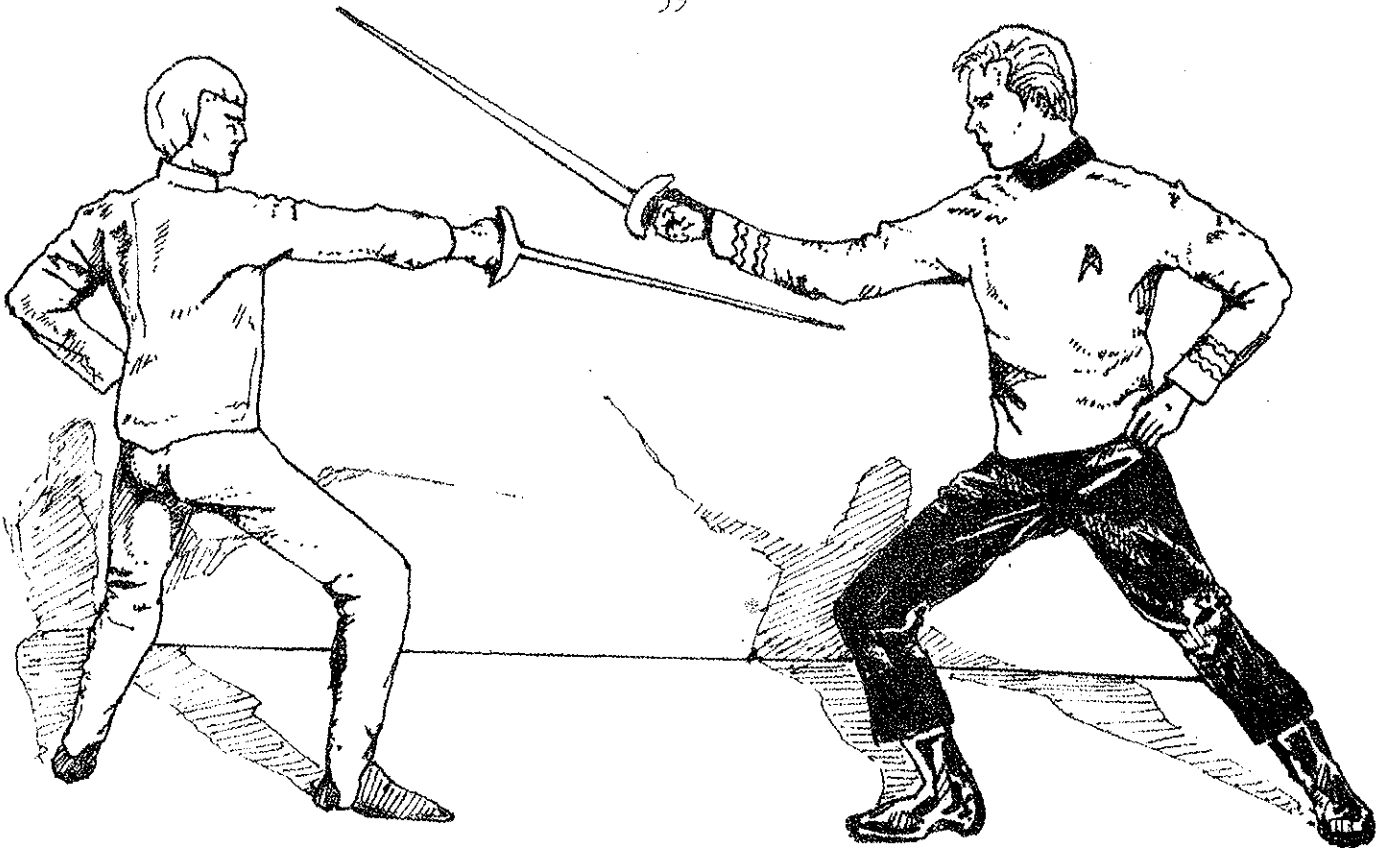
Petri took his sword, and drew in his breath with a soft hiss. Anxiety to get at his enemy - or frustration because Kirk had not taken the more obvious sword, had not fallen into the trap Petri clearly prepared for all those he challenged?

Kirk watched Petri as they approached each other. The Troyian was still angry; that was plain. But he had himself well in hand. Kirk's own indignation at Petri's behaviour had cooled to an icy determination to teach the boorish Troyian a lesson. But he did not lose sight of reality; Petri must be a good fighter, and it would do the Federation little good if Petri defeated him ignominiously. If he was defeated, it must be only barely; whatever the outcome, he must put up a good enough fight to force Petri to regard him as a worthy opponent.

Their swords touched in brief salute, and Petri attacked instantly, forcing Kirk into a defensive posture. The Human parried easily, relaxed and graceful in his movements, willing to let the older man tire himself. There was an odd clumsiness in the Troyian's swordplay, Kirk noticed; he was expending far more energy in his attack than necessary...and he was an experienced dueller; with his background, he had to be an experienced dueller. Unless...

The trap Petri clearly prepared for all those he challenged. Andros must have orders - probably a standing order - to present one of the swords in a manner designed to encourage an unwary opponent to take it. But Kirk had treated Petri's servants with a courtesy they had never received from Petri; this one had therefore done all he could to let Kirk know which sword was the better one. The other, which Petri had been forced to take, was probably poorly balanced compared to the one Kirk had taken. Petri could not accuse Andros of anything - the warning had been subtle - and must accept that the odds were that someone he challenged might pick the 'wrong' sword; the one intended for Petri himself. That being so, Petri had probably worked out a method of attack for any time he did get the wrong weapon. This instant and unrelenting attack was possibly his way of ensuring a rapid victory before his opponent had time to think.

Kirk knew he had to be careful. Even a poorly balanced sword was



dangerous in the hands of a master. In addition, it could not be handled with the precision one would expect of a skilled swordsman; a feint or thrust might well be mistimed so that a standard parry would be ineffective.

The thoughts passed through his mind almost instantaneously. He smiled to himself, grimly determined that he must win.

He remained on the defensive, deliberately letting Petri continue to attack while he waited for the Troyian to become over confident. He could see already in Petri's eye the belief that Kirk was, at best, a middling fencer, unsure of how best to attack a more forceful and aggressive opponent.

Petri attacked again, in a fierce flurry of feints and thrusts. Kirk met them all easily; he was beginning to anticipate Petri's moves, seeing in the Troyian an unimaginative swordsman, technically excellent but lacking that vital spark that made the difference between a good fighter and an almost unbeatable one. Then, seeing for the first time a fractional hesitation in his opponent, Kirk exploded into action. Two quick thrusts sent Petri a step backwards, the second one only barely parried; then the Troyian was fighting desperately to defend himself. Kirk could have wounded Petri severely during that onslaught; he restrained himself, however, content to wait until he could cause a less serious injury. It would not do to injure the Troyian Ambassador too severely; the Federation would not be too pleased if he did, even although Petri had challenged and it was a facet of Troyian life.

Ah...there!

Kirk thrust, deflected the frantic parry easily, and pierced his opponent's shoulder. Petri dropped his sword, his other hand moving to cover the wound, muttering a harsh word in Troyian that the translators failed to identify.

His two aides moved to assist him. Almost petulantly he thrust them away and glared at Kirk, seemingly about to attack the Human with his bare hands. Kirk raised the sword again defensively.

"First blood, I think you said, Ambassador?" It must have been even more galling for the Troyian to realize that Kirk was barely out of breath.

"I concede." The Troyian glared at him for a moment longer then turned on his heel and marched out. One aide scurried at his heels; Andros delayed to retrieve the swords.

Nothing must be said aloud; but Kirk smiled warmly at the Troyian as he relinquished the sword, and knew that the unspoken thanks was understood. Then Andros hurried away.

"What caused that, Jim?"

Kirk glanced round with a rueful smile. "Spock. I tried not to let you know - but I had to concentrate so completely on defending myself, at first, that my shield must have slipped."

"Only barely," Spock assured him. "I knew only that something was wrong. Then when I came in I was afraid that my presence would distract you, but - as you said - you were concentrating too completely even to be aware of me. What caused it?"

Kirk sighed. "Petri was bullying one of his men. I interfered. He grabbed at the excuse to challenge me."

"You've made a bad enemy, Jim."

"He was that already, I think. But what else could I have done?"

"Nothing," Spock admitted.

The rec room had by now shrugged off the excitement, although both men were quite sure that those present would spread the story very quickly. They left together; Kirk said softly, "I'll give you ten credits that the whole ship knows about this by bedtime."

Spock shook his head. "Faster than that," he said.

In the privacy of Spock's quarters, Kirk sat back and consciously relaxed. As Spock had said, he had made a bad enemy; but at least he knew it now. From the speed of the challenge, he could be sure that Petri had only been seeking an excuse.

The Troyian's hatred was now out in the open, however; and Kirk considered that open enmity was less dangerous than the hidden variety.

The lesson was even more abortive than usual, with Petri even more short-tempered than before, little though Elaan had believed that possible. Of course, she had heard of the Ambassador's duel with the First Officer; it was already the talk of the ship, hastily broken off whenever Petri appeared - and the tale had lost nothing in the telling, she was sure. As recounted to her by her maid, Kirk had chased Petri all round the rec room before finally ending the fight; Elaan was certain that the details were exaggerated, but it had been a sop to her wounded pride that the Troyian had been defeated at his own game.

Even if she had not heard about it, however, Elaan would have known that something had happened, for the Ambassador's right arm was in a sling and clearly pained him.

Unfortunately, he was now intent on salvaging some of his pride by humiliating her, making her look more of a fool than necessary.

Knowing his motives did not make it easier to bear the Troyian's calculated insults, however; his sarcastic and pointed comments on her shortcomings grew more and more barbed, while in her attempts to master the lesson she grew more and more clumsy.

Finally, with an angry snarl, he dismissed her.

With her maid at her heels, Elaan hurried along the corridor towards her cabin, conscious only of the need to reach the privacy of her quarters before she broke down. Yet mixed with her sense of humiliation was a dawning anger.

The door slid safely shut; she submitted silently to the maid's attentions, then nodded dismissal.

Even now, alone at last, she dared not risk her rigid self control. She was Dohlman of Elas; a Dohlman did not, could not, permit herself the luxury of crying as if she were still a baby, even when she was treated as if she was still an infant too young to understand anything.

She nursed her sense of outrage, using it as a shield against the threatening tears. How dared that Troyian boor criticise Elasian manners! If their manners were different, it was the Troyians who had the less civilised customs - after all, Elas was the original home of both races and in their fight to colonise the new world the Troyians had clearly become more barbaric - despite apparent cultural advances. A race which gave full attention to hygienic principles would not need to avoid touching food with the fingers... Granted, a 'fork' was quite a useful object and eating with one kept the fingers from becoming greasy, but greasy or sticky fingers were a minor and short-lived inconvenience.

As for their social structure...that was utterly barbaric! Her own servants obeyed her unquestioningly, but without fear, knowing that along with the privileges of being nobly born (and these privileges were fewer than anyone could dream who was not nobly born) the Elasian aristocracy recognised their responsibilities to their people. But Troyian aristocrats, it seemed, recognised only privilege. Yet...how secure were they?

The door buzzer sounded, making her jump, even though it was not entirely unexpected. Gathering her dignity, she called, "Come."

Cyon hurried in, throwing a hasty glance along the corridor as he did. Imperceptibly, she relaxed.

Kirk moved among the plants of the ship's 'garden', clipboard in hand, checking the various experiments that were in progress. Here, rare seeds of some of Vulcan's desert cacti were growing, still too small for survival to be certain but looking promising. This was his own experiment, from seeds gathered after one of the Vulcan desert's rare downpours. He checked the record. Hmmm... A little water would not go amiss. Carefully, he allowed water to trickle onto the edge of the growing area. Some of it ran freely over the dry surface to lie for some moments before sinking into the sand. He noted the date on the record along with the progress of the growing seedlings, then moved on. He paused for a moment to greet Gertrude/Beauregard, the sensitive plant that was regarded by the scientific staff as a cross between a pet and the ship's mascot. The plant chirruped happily. Kirk moved on, wondering yet again if the plant really did possess intelligence, no matter how rudimentary. There seemed to be no way of finding out.

He had sown some of the cactus seed in fertile soil, and now compared their growth to that of the others, planted in some of Vulcan's desert sand. Their growth had been fast, after the initial germination; now, however, they were looking unhappy, their growth straggly and unhealthily yellow.

Hmmm.

He quickly prepared another tray with some of the Vulcan soil that he had



collected, and carefully transplanted half of the seedlings, moistening the tray just enough to allow the roots to settle, noted it in his record, and moved on.

He came round a clump of the permanent plants of the 'garden' - and found Elaan.

She was sitting in what had to be the most secluded part of the ship's 'garden', and Kirk thought he had never seen anyone more woebegone.

As she saw him, she made a pathetic attempt at a smile; Kirk was irresistibly reminded of the day he had stumbled along a corridor, humiliated, desperate, and the overwhelming relief of bumping into Scotty and being forced to confide in him. He had no doubt that he had looked, that day, much as Elaan did now.

Sheer fellow-feeling, coupled with the realisation that here he could perhaps in some way repay his debt to the dead Scotty, took him forward to sit beside her.

"Tell me."

She shook her head. "It's...it's nothing, really..."

"Let me be the judge of that. Is Ambassador Petri getting back at you for everything?"

"I...I don't know what that means. But...according to him, I can't do anything right. He won't tell me properly what he wants, then he shouts at me for getting it wrong. Cyon - one of his men - has been trying to help me, but he's only middle-born - he can't know properly all of the things that Petri is supposed to teach me, but without him I'd be even worse. And I know I'm going to make a fool of myself when we reach Troyius..."

Having to say it broke her fragile control. She sobbed bitterly, trying, even so, to choke back the tears.

Kirk slipped a brotherly arm round her shoulders and steadied her. She leaned against him gratefully and abandoned the unsuccessful attempt to control herself.

Finally the desperate sobbing eased; she pulled herself out of his comforting grasp. Gently, he wiped away a last tear as it trickled down her damp cheek. "Better?"

"Thank you."

"Don't worry too much. I know Petri is a right bastard, but there's no reason to think your prospective husband is." It was surprisingly difficult to vocalise the lie.

"You don't really believe that, do you?"

Kirk sighed. "No, I don't suppose I do. But I am sure he'll fall in love with you. You're very brave, Lady Elaan." Moved by an impulse he could not define, he leaned over and kissed her forehead lightly. "Come now; I'll escort you back to your cabin."

As he resumed his position on the bridge, Kirk found it increasingly difficult to keep his mind on his work.

Elaan...poor child, travelling so courageously to a fate she clearly dreaded. So similar to Karen Gallard, yet so very different. He could see the difference with heart-breaking clarity; Karen, self-assured and confident, motivated by the lure of social success; Elaan, shy and withdrawn, motivated by duty. She needed to be rescued from her situation as Karen had not; but Kirk now had the insight to realise that she also would probably refuse any such offer, not for selfish reasons but because her sense of duty would not permit it.

His heart ached for her.

Spock realised his First Officer's abstraction almost immediately, but respected it. Whatever was troubling Jim, he knew would be confided to him quite soon. But as the shift wore on, Spock grew more and more concerned. Kirk showed none of the signs of a man who, faced with a problem, was thinking of ways of solving it, but rather appeared to be growing more and more troubled. The Vulcan was glad when the shift ended.

"Take over, Mr. Sulu."

"Aye, sir."

He hesitated for a moment, watching Kirk as he made his routine report to his relief, then decided not to force a confidence. He headed for the turbolift, moving more slowly than normal, and was not surprised, on entering the car, to discover that Kirk was right behind him. Even so, he hesitated over asking Kirk what was wrong. He was proud, now, of Kirk's self-confidence;

if his friend wanted to work the problem out for himself, he must allow him to do so, no matter how much he wanted to help, advise...

Kirk remained silent as the car rode down to level five, glad of Spock's reticence. They walked along the corridor; at Spock's door, Kirk stopped.

"Coming in?" Spock invited.

Kirk nodded and followed his friend in. As they settled in their accustomed chairs, Kirk said, "I'd like to tell the Elasian High Council a thing or two."

Spock waited, knowing now what was disturbing his friend.

"Sending that child to Troyius! Spock, I found her in the 'garden' - she was trying so hard not to cry, but when I spoke to her she broke down - cried her eyes out."

Spock stiffened in sudden alarm. "Jim - her tears - did her tears touch you?"

"Her tears? Yes."

Spock went pale. "Jim, don't you remember? Elasian tears... Captain Hart, in the other universe..."

Kirk, too, had paled. "Oh God... I'd forgotten. She was so unhappy, trying so hard to be brave... Right enough, I've found it hard to stop thinking about her since then - but Spock, I just feel sorry for her. I'd like to help her, but it's not like it was with Karen Gallard. I don't... I don't want to marry her, or anything like that. And from what you said, in the other universe, Captain Hart did want to marry that Elaan, to the exclusion of every other consideration."

"That's true."

"So maybe I'm immune after all? Because I'm impotent?"

"Jim, I am forced to remind you yet again that your condition is psychological, not physical. You are a scientist; you know that a chemical reaction, once set in motion, is unstoppable without a negative catalyst - and even that only slows it down rather than halting it. Elasian tears react on male hormones. That as an established fact."

"Perhaps a catalyst is needed to start it off," Kirk suggested hopefully.

"I think that unlikely, Jim. It may simply be that the progress of the reaction is slower in this universe."

They looked at each other unhappily.

Kirk found himself restless that night. Sleep proved impossible; after tossing uneasily for a couple of hours he sat up, put on the light and tried to read; only to discover himself unable to concentrate. After a while he abandoned the pursuit as useless, and lay back, deliberately gathering his thoughts as Spock had taught him so long ago, now, it seemed. It was a discipline he had not needed for some time, and attaining the correct mental attitude proved surprisingly difficult. Then, his thoughts gathered, he deliberately examined his feelings about Elaan.

Pity. Admiration for her courage. Anger for the way she was being used. Liking for the gentle nature of her.

Nothing else.

No love, no desire; no overwhelming urge to rescue her such as Captain Hart of the Yorktown, in the other universe, appeared to have experienced.

Yet surely the chemistry of Elasian tears must have had time to work? Spock was right; his body did produce the correct hormones and he should have

reacted to her...her spells.

He was quite sure that Elaan had not set out to trap him. She was too honest, he was certain, to resort to such subterfuge. She had simply broken under the strain, forgetting, as he had done, the effect her tears should have had. And if he did respond, even now, he thought that she would be as appalled as he.

Well. He was still, it seemed, unaffected. He could only wait, and see if he felt the same way in the morning.

If he did, he must try to discover why the 'magic' of Elasian tears had not been effective. His mind somewhat more at ease, he lay back again, and almost immediately fell asleep.

They had reached Troyius safely; Kirk appeared to have his unwanted obsession for Elaan under control. That being so, Spock included him in the landing party accompanying Elaan, Petri and their entourage. The three security guards assigned to the task were resigned; this sort of spit and polish job might be safe, but it was little to their liking.

They were greeted by a party led by Prince Arris himself. Arris was young - if anything, younger than Elaan - but already bearing himself with the arrogant self-assurance that so characterised Petri. He was barely civil to any of his guests, even Elaan, and half involuntarily she shrank closer to Kirk as if for reassurance.

That was when Spock began to worry.

The marriage ceremony would, it appeared, take place immediately. The reason for this unseemly haste was not apparent; Spock wondered if some sort of political intrigue was at the root of it.

The landing party was escorted - with some obviously grudging ceremony - a short distance to a sort of temple. There was no-one present but the landing party, Arris's attendants, and a priest.

As the ceremony began, Kirk moved. "No! The woman is mine!"

He snatched a sword from one of the attendants as Arris drew his weapon with a smooth, practised gesture.

"No, Jim!" Desperately, Spock tried to reach Kirk through their incomplete mind link, and failed. Then he controlled himself. As in the fight with Petri, he must do nothing that might weaken Kirk's concentration.

The fight was quickly over. Arris lay dead at Kirk's feet, his blood soaking into the dusty ground.

An angry murmur arose from Arris's attendants. If their master had been slain by another Troyian they would have accepted it, but this was an Outworlder, an alien. Spock realised their mood instantly; he grabbed his communicator.

"Beam up the landing party!"

They shimmered back into existence in the transporter room - Kirk, Elaan, Spock, the three guards.

Kyle gaped at the bloodstained sword. Spock, his lips set, beckoned Kirk and Elaan to accompany him.

In the privacy of his cabin, the Vulcan turned to them.

"Why?" But he knew.

"I have selected Jim to be mine," Elaan said quietly.

Only once before had Spock felt so helpless, and the reason had been much the same. Then, he had lost a Kirk to Death; now he was losing Jim, not yet to death, but death must follow close. The Troyians would surely want revenge

for Arris's death; Starfleet would probably courtmartial Kirk; the best he could hope for would be a dishonourable discharge, and he would be treated that leniently only because it could be proved that no man could resist the chemistry of Elasian tears. But more than that; no matter what he, Spock, said, the Family Council would be displeased; Jim would certainly be regarded as an unfaithful bondmate, for Selek would never accept that Spock could condone this action, though what he was supposed to do about it, he couldn't think. And an unfaithful bondmate was always executed...eventually.

Even if he went into hiding, changed his identity, Kirk would be a marked man, pursued by Troyius and Vulcan, with no job, no prospects...and Spock could not even stay with him, for a Vulcan with a Human would be too conspicuous.

"NO!!!"

The cry was in protest at the future he saw, but neither of his companions could know that.

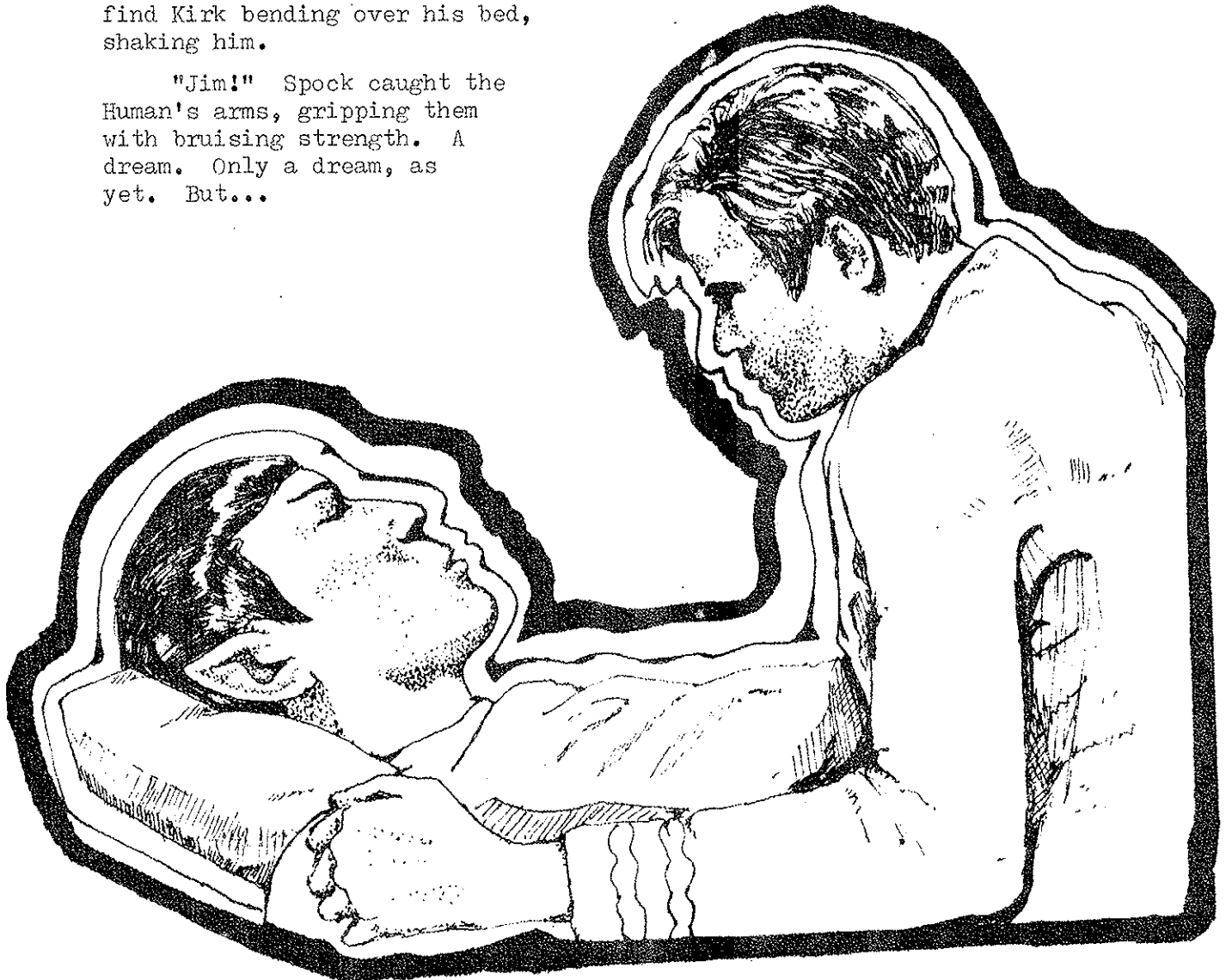
"I'm sorry, Spock - really sorry," Kirk said unhappily.

The look Spock gave Elaan was filled with a hatred the Vulcan had not believed himself capable of experiencing. "I know, Jim."

"Spock! Spock!"

The Vulcan opened his eyes to find Kirk bending over his bed, shaking him.

"Jim!" Spock caught the Human's arms, gripping them with bruising strength. A dream. Only a dream, as yet. But...



"I sensed your mind," Kirk said. "You were trying to contact me, and I woke knowing you were troubled. What is it, Spock?" He sat on the edge of the bed.

"A nightmare." He drew a deep breath. "I dreamed you challenged Elaan's prospective husband and killed him."

"God, if that happened, we would be in trouble!" Kirk agreed. "But I doubt you need worry, Spock - until you mentioned her just now, I'd forgotten all about her. Either I am immune after all, or Elasian tears are harmless in this universe."

"They are not. Last night, after you left me, I checked the records in the computer." He managed a wry smile. "They are listed as 'toxic'."

Despite his concern that Spock was worried, Kirk chuckled. "I bet that entry was made by a man with a roving eye," he said. "No woman would call any substance that guaranteed a man's fidelity 'toxic'." He touched Spock's shoulder. "Try not to worry, Spock. When I woke just now, she never entered my head; all I could think about was you, that you wanted me..."

"Needed you," Spock said quietly. "And you came." He looked up at his friend, his bondmate. "When I first came here, Jim, I was aware that I wanted to find another Jim Kirk...and you needed me. I did not realise until recently that I need you...as much as you needed me."

Impulsively, Kirk pulled the Vulcan into a tight embrace.

"Come."

Elaan looked up in some surprise as the Captain and First Officer entered her cabin. Although she had seen a fair amount of Kirk, she had encountered Spock but rarely, and for a moment she knew worry, there was so much recognisable tension on the Vulcan's face.

She gathered her dignity about her - these men, after all, had always treated her with courtesy and the respect that was due to her rank. She dismissed her maid, then -

"Is something wrong, Captain?"

"Perhaps." Spock drew a deep, steadying breath. "Lady Elaan, in our records it states that Elasian women have a chemical in their tears which reacts with male hormones; that Elasian women use their tears to ensure the fidelity of their husbands."

"That is correct. In ancient times our race nearly became extinct because the males considered women to be unimportant. Girl babies were slaughtered at birth; only after a man had several sons were his daughters allowed to live; and it was considered a disgrace for any man younger than forty to associate in any way with women - the young and strong were expected to be explorers, adventurers; to expend their excess energy in mock combat. There was great unrest among the women...and then..." She hesitated.

"Evolution took a hand?" Kirk offered.

"No. Not exactly..."

"What, then?"

"I must not say. Even today, our men do not - must not - know, for there are those among them who would gladly see a return to the ways of the past."

The two men glanced at each other. Then Kirk said quietly, "Lady Elaan, yesterday...your tears touched me."

She looked at him, understanding and some anger in her eyes. "Did you think I would seek to entrap you? Yes, you have been kind to me - I would prefer you as husband rather than Prince Arris. But I have my duty to consider."

"I did not think you had done it deliberately, Lady Elaan; but you were unhappy, and could have forgotten the...the damage your tears could do," Kirk pointed out gently.

"No, Commander. You were in no danger," Elaan replied quietly.

"So your tears are not always...potent?" Spock asked.

"No."

The double confirmation sent relief surging through both men. Then Kirk said slowly, "But...how can you switch a chemical reaction on and off?"

"I must not say," she repeated. "Please - do not press me; and do not tell anyone that the women of Elas do not always cry mantic tears."

"We promise," Kirk said. Spock nodded his agreement, then said abruptly,

"The Elasiens and the Troyians are of the same ancestry - yet the women of Troyius do not have the ability."

"No. I cannot explain why - and I have already told you more than any man should know."

"Don't force her to say any more, Spock," Kirk said. "All that matters is that I'm not affected. We should respect the lady's privacy."

"Of course. My apologies, Lady Elaan - I can only plead concern for my First Officer - my friend - in extenuation."

She smiled a little nervously. "Thank you, Captain."

Outside, they looked at each other. "You think they use a drug of some sort?" Kirk asked quietly. They headed for the turbolift.

"It would appear so. A drug, possibly vegetable in origin, that does not, or cannot, grow on Troyius...and that the Elasian women fear their men would destroy if they learned of it. The women consume it...it affects their tears..."

"It would be safer for the women than pure chance," Kirk commented. "If the substance was in their tears all the time, they would have to be very careful not to cry except when they were with the man of their choice."

"It also explains much of the attitude of the Troyians," Spock said. "If the Elasiens have a history of warfare...but the Elasian women were able to 'civilise' their men, which the Troyian women could not do."

"I suppose Elaan has enough of the drug - if we're right - to 'infect' Arris."

"I would expect so."

"I hope she does," Kirk said. "At least if he's besotted with her, she stands a chance of a reasonable life - no matter how much of a bastard he is."

The turbolift doors opened; they moved in.

The ship entered orbit around Troyius; regulation formalities over, Spock called the landing party to the transporter.

Of necessity, Elaan and Petri had to beam down together; Kirk and Spock accompanied them, and two guards. The rest of Elaan's and Petri's parties followed, then some more guards from the Enterprise to make up Spock's entourage; they had realised that it would be necessary to make some show.

They materialised in an open space in front of the ornate private dwelling - as opposed to the Palace - of the Troyian King. A reception committee was already in place; a dignified, elderly man who had to be the King; at his shoulder, another man of about the same age, almost as richly dressed. Behind

them were other dignified courtiers of varying ages, and gathered on the outskirts of the party were several obvious servants.

Petri moved forward self-importantly and bowed, even before the second group from the ship materialised. The King nodded with casual courtesy.

"Welcome, Sir Petri."

Petri beckoned Elaan forward with a careless gesture. "This is the Dohlman Elaan, Your Majesty." His tone expressed fully his low opinion of the Elasiens.

She gave the curious bobbing curtsey of her race, her eyes lowered modestly - and nervously. "Your Majesty."

"You are welcome, Lady Elaan." The King looked back at Petri, who continued with almost studied insolence.

"The Captain of the vessel which brought us here." He indicated Spock contemptuously.

Calmly, Spock took a pace forward and bowed. "Captain Spock, Your Majesty. And may I present my First Officer, Commander Kirk."

Inwardly smiling at Spock's masterly parry of Petri's rudeness, Kirk stepped forward to join his friend, and also bowed.

"You are welcome, Captain - Commander." The King indicated the man who stood by his shoulder. "Lord Thetus will see to your comfort, My Lady, gentlemen. Sir Petri, attend me." He turned away, followed by several of his party. Petri accompanied him, arrogant pride in every swaggering step. For a moment Kirk wondered what Petri would tell the King about his journey here; then Cyon caught his eye as he turned with the other aides to hurry after Petri; smiled - and winked.

Kirk stared after him for a moment. The Troyian's behaviour was strangely out of character for what he had come to expect of Troyian servants, yet somehow it matched the traces of initiative Cyon had shown; and it was clearly meant to reassure.

"My Lady." Thetus offered Elaan his arm; she laid her hand on it, slightly awkwardly, and Kirk knew instantly that it was not a custom of her own people but one recently acquired. Thetus smiled over at the Enterprise men.

"If you will accompany me, gentlemen. Your guards will be shown their quarters by my men." He indicated three servants standing near.

He certainly sounded more cultured than the boorish Petri, but Spock found himself wondering if the courtesy was innate or acquired - and if the latter, how superficial it was.

The Troyian took them into the palace - it was impossible to think of it as anything else. The first room he showed them was Elaan's; they left her to the attentions of the several women who waited there, and who were obviously looking to her personal maid to direct them. As they left her, they saw that she - and her maid - were both looking slightly more cheerful. This treatment was obviously not what Petri had led them to believe they would receive.

There was a sitting room with adjoining bedrooms for the Enterprise officers - rooms of almost barbaric splendour which, even so, gave an impression of elegant good taste. Indeed, Troyius was a planet of contradictory contrast.

"I hope these rooms will be comfortable," Thetus said politely.

Spock allowed a half smile to warm his eyes. "I am sure they will," he replied easily, irrationally glad that his own home was large enough, and his family wealthy enough and important enough, that neither he nor Kirk was overwhelmed by this as some Starfleet personnel might be. There was, of course, the difference between a merely wealthy and influential ruling family and a royal family, but it was only one of degree.

"We know that Starfleet officers are accustomed to managing for themselves, and frequently prefer to," Thetus went on. "And so we did not assign servants for your personal use. However, if you wish for them, it will take but a minute to send for them."

"Even at home on Vulcan we do not have personal servants," Spock replied gravely.

"And on Earth, Commander?" Thetus enquired politely.

"My home also is on Vulcan," Kirk answered. "I am the adopted son of Ambassador Sarek of Vulcan - Spock's father."

"And your brother's right hand?" Thetus sounded approving.

"His second in command, at any rate," Kirk said.

"Is such a partnership common in the Federation, with fosterkin serving together?"

Human and Vulcan glanced at each other. "No," Spock replied. "We were assigned to serve together, neither of us knowing the other; became friends; then Jim visited my home, as my guest, several times. My parents became fond of him, and he of them; and in due course, my father adopted him. Starfleet keeps us together because we are a good team."

"I see... But what of your own family on Earth, Commander? What relationship do they have with your adopted family? - Forgive my curiosity, gentlemen; it is the natural result of becoming aware, so recently, of so many other races and discovering how different all their customs are."

"No offence taken, sir," Kirk answered. "I have no relatives on Earth; my parents died when I was a child; neither had any brothers or sisters. My only brother, who was also in Starfleet, was killed in the line of duty some time ago. Any relatives I may have are too distant even to know of my existence." He looked at Spock. "But no-one could give me more love than my adopted parents and brother do."

Thetus nodded; and there was complete approval in the gesture. "That is an attitude we share with you, Commander. On Troyius, we practice fostering, and fosterbrothers frequently become very close; if one is of the rulers, and the other merely highborn, it is customary for him to accompany his fosterbrother as friend and adviser. I am King Ektor's fosterbrother; I in turn fostered his son Arris, and my son Andros goes with Arris as friend in his turn. There is a close bond of affection between our families."

"Er...Lord Thetus," Kirk said, "I know it's none of my business, but... well, as part of my duties on the Enterprise, I saw enough of the Lady Elaan to feel concern for her welfare. She's very shy, and I know she's terrified about everything - Lord Petri was not a patient teacher, I'm afraid. Will... Is Prince Arris likely to be understanding of her situation?"

Thetus smiled broadly. "I don't think you need worry, Commander. However, your question does relieve my mind. If the Dohlman can arouse such loyalty in one who has known her for so short a time, and who has no reason to be interested in her future welfare, she will indeed be the sort of queen that Troyius needs. And now, I will leave you to refresh yourselves. King Ektor wishes to speak with you within the hour; a servant will come for you when it is time."

"Thank you, sir," Spock managed before the Troyian reached the door. Thetus bowed very slightly in acknowledgement, and left.

King Ektor received them in a relatively small and simply furnished room.

"Come in, gentlemen," he invited. "Sit down. Would you care for a drink? I have a selection of the most popular Federation beverages available - you need not fear to be offered something inimical to your metabolism."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Spock replied. "I would prefer fruit juice - Vulcans rarely drink alcohol."

"Of course, Captain. Commander?"

"I'd prefer fruit juice too, Your Majesty."

King Ektor looked faintly surprised. "I understood Humans had no taboo on the alcoholic beverages." He contrived to make the comment sound slightly accusing.

"That's true, sir, but when I was adopted into Spock's family I accepted Vulcan custom." Thetus had seemed to approve of that relationship; what would the King's reaction be? "Not that I ever cared much for alcohol," he added truthfully.

Ektor merely clapped his hands; moments later a servant appeared, carrying a tray with three glasses - all containing fruit juice, to judge from their appearance.

"I appreciate temperate men," Ektor then said bluntly. "There are too many who, to appear sociable, drink alcohol when they do not really want it, or who drink too much of it. Such, alas, is the failing of too many of my subjects." He raised his glass. "Your health, gentlemen."

"And yours, Your Majesty," Spock replied. They sipped, and savoured the taste. "This is most palatable, sir."

Behind them they heard the door open, then close again, then the sound of footsteps approaching. Ektor looked past them, smiling.

"Gentlemen, may I present my son Arris."

Both men stood, turned...and stared, politeness momentarily forgotten.

"Cyon?"

The young Troyian laughed. "Yes, friend Kirk. My apologies for fooling you...and you, Captain. And this - " he indicated his companion, his roommate from the Enterprise " - is my fosterbrother Andros, son of Lord Thetus."

"Does the Lady Elaan know?"

"Not yet."

"She's been really worried, you know."

"I know. I tried to let her realise it would be all right when I gave her the lessons that Sir Petri did not, but I dared not confide too far lest, in her innocence, she betrayed me."

"My son Arris is young and romantic," King Ektor put in. He sounded disparaging, but there was pride in his eyes. "He conceived the idea of travelling with the Ambassador's party disguised as a servant so that he could meet, and assess the character of, his future wife without her knowing who he was. In addition - although Sir Petri was chosen for his position as Ambassador in this matter by my Councillors, I did not altogether trust his possible behaviour. It has always seemed to me that he is too conservative in his attitude. I therefore agreed with my son's suggestion. He and Andros were brought up in Thetus' country house, and Sir Petri had never met them. I therefore 'lent' two servants to Sir Petri for the duration of his mission - it was unthinkable to Andros that Arris should go without him." He looked approvingly at the young man. "Well, Arris has told me what transpired; he also informed me of your kindness to a mere servant, Commander - and of Sir Petri's challenge and his possession of an unbalanced sword."

Kirk smiled, glancing at the Prince's silent companion. "I owe Andros a debt; he let me know, most subtly, which sword I should take."

"Andros merely repaid a little of the debt we owed to you, friend Kirk. Not only did you treat us with courtesy, you went out of your way to do so. You showed the same kindness to the Lady Elaan, and by doing so made her journey

here more bearable," Arris said. He turned to Spock. "I was also most impressed by your men, Captain. We of Troyius have known little of the Federation in the past, save what we have learned from the various diplomats who visited; I was unsure how much to believe of what they said. But your crew had no reason to lie to a mere servant. Yes, I was most impressed."

"Your people behaved with honour throughout," Ektor said. "Mine, alas, did not. True, duelling, even to the death - though he did not demand that - is still a common method of settling an argument among our people; but there is no honour in forcing a duel upon one whose customs are different - especially with uneven weapons. He is disgraced. But you - by acceding to his demands when you did not need to do so, you showed the full extent of your honour and your courage."

"He does not love me for it," Kirk said ruefully.

"No," Arris agreed. "But at least he now respects you - and through you, your people."

The wedding was a lavish affair at which Spock and Kirk, as representatives of the Federation, had been honoured guests, though only a handful of people knew why they were the recipients of such marked attention from the King...or why McCoy, Uhura and Charlene Masters were also included among the dignitaries. Their instinctive sympathy for, and encouragement of, the bullied little Dohlman had won them powerful friends, and Spock suspected that any member of the Enterprise crew would in future be treated with extreme courtesy on Troyius. Petri, on the other hand, although present - as the Ambassador who accompanied Elaan to Troyius he could not be excluded - was practically ignored by the royal host.

Finally, back aboard the Enterprise, they relaxed gratefully, exhausted after several days and nights of feasting and dancing and entertainment...

"Poor Elaan," sighed Uhura as she sank into a chair in her quarters.

"She is used to it," Masters, who had accompanied her, pointed out, as she also sat relaxing, glad to be back in the relative austerity of the ship after the overwhelming opulence of the Palace.

"Used to it or not, if she's as tired as I am - and she must be - all she must want to do is sleep for a week. But she's got some more official introductions to live through tomorrow."

"In a way it's her work," Masters said thoughtfully. "And we're back to work tomorrow too."

"Yes," said Uhura. "But I can't help thinking that a Klingon attack would be almost a rest cure compared to living like that all the time."

Masters laughed. "Tell me that again after our next crisis," she requested.

"Poor Elaan," Kirk said as he curled up on the floor at Spock's feet and leaned back against his friend's legs.

"She's been trained to accept it," Spock said, memory of his youth in an Ambassador's household stirring. "You get to know ways of relaxing even during the most demanding moments."

"Well, that's something denied to us lesser mortals," McCoy growled. "I don't think I could have stayed on my feet for another five minutes."

"The Troyians certainly know how to entertain," Kirk said. "But I kept noticing Cyon - Arris, I mean. He looked as if he would have preferred to dispense with all that ceremony and just have a quiet wedding with a few of his friends as guests..."

Spock nodded. "The price of his position. The one I noticed was Petri."

"Yes," McCoy agreed. "He won't forget this in a hurry."

Petri - virtually ignored by the King, whose favour he had hoped this mission would gain him - was not likely to place the blame for his disgrace where it belonged, for that would mean taking a long, hard and critical look at himself. Spock had seen the hatred in his eyes every time Petri noticed one of the Humans; hatred half-masked, but hatred nonetheless. The other Troyian guests had noticed that Petri had not been given the position of honour at the wedding feast that he should have had; that that position had been given to the Vulcan and the Human. Petri had found himself virtually ignored by his fellows too - courtiers were quick to follow where the King led - and Spock guessed that only the knowledge that it would never be forgiven if he left early had kept the Ambassador there.

"I feel almost sorry for Petri," Kirk commented. "He's his own worst enemy, and he can't see it. King Ektor seems to be trying to discourage feudalism, and Arris seems sure to follow the same policies - and a lot of highborn Troyians seem willing to go along with it, too. It's just Petri and one or two like him who are hanging on to all their outmoded privileges. Most of the servants at the Palace seemed happy and contented enough - not terrified out of their wits when someone looked at the."

"I noticed that the King called Petri 'Sir', not 'Lord'," McCoy said. "I wonder if that has anything to do with it?"

"As if the big landowners were confident enough to accept new ways, but Petri is a lesser one and hangs on to the old familiar ways to prove to himself how important he is?" Kirk asked.

"It could be," Spock answered. "However, we can forget Petri now. We're not likely to meet him again. Our new orders are due tomorrow and we'll get away from here."

"Good," Kirk said happily.

* * * * *

SPOCK'S LOG

Vulcans do not dream, the Commander told me one day as he worked with me to awaken my telepathic powers. In his universe, perhaps not; but this Vulcan has certainly ridden the nightmare!

It seemed so real... Yet I think that nothing could lead Jim to betray his bonding vow to me, incomplete though our relationship is.

I am pleased that in this universe there is the prospect for happiness for Elaan; she understands her duty, and will be of value to her adopted people - and I think that Arris knows it.

It seems, however, that I was too sanguine when I expressed my belief that we had seen the last of Petri; today I was informed that King Ektor has appointed him as the Troyian delegate to the Babel Conference. I must take steps to ensure that Jim has as little as possible to do with him.

Today I received a personal message from Selek in his capacity as Chief of the Clan. He points out that although being bonded to a male I do not have the usual need for a secondary wife, it is desirable that Jim and I take a female marriage partner in order to provide Sarek with heirs. Selek assures me the matter is not urgent, and indeed there is no compulsion on us to do so, but now that he has raised the subject he will not be diverted until we have complied; it is, he points out, our duty to our father to ensure the continuation of the direct line. True, I might convince him that as a hybrid I am sterile, but he is unlikely to accept the coincidence that Jim should be too without medical evidence that we cannot supply; he will argue that a child fathered by Jim on a Vulcan woman would be an acceptable heir.

Perhaps McCoy's devious mind can answer this riddle for us too. Yes, I will ask him if Selek becomes too insistent...
