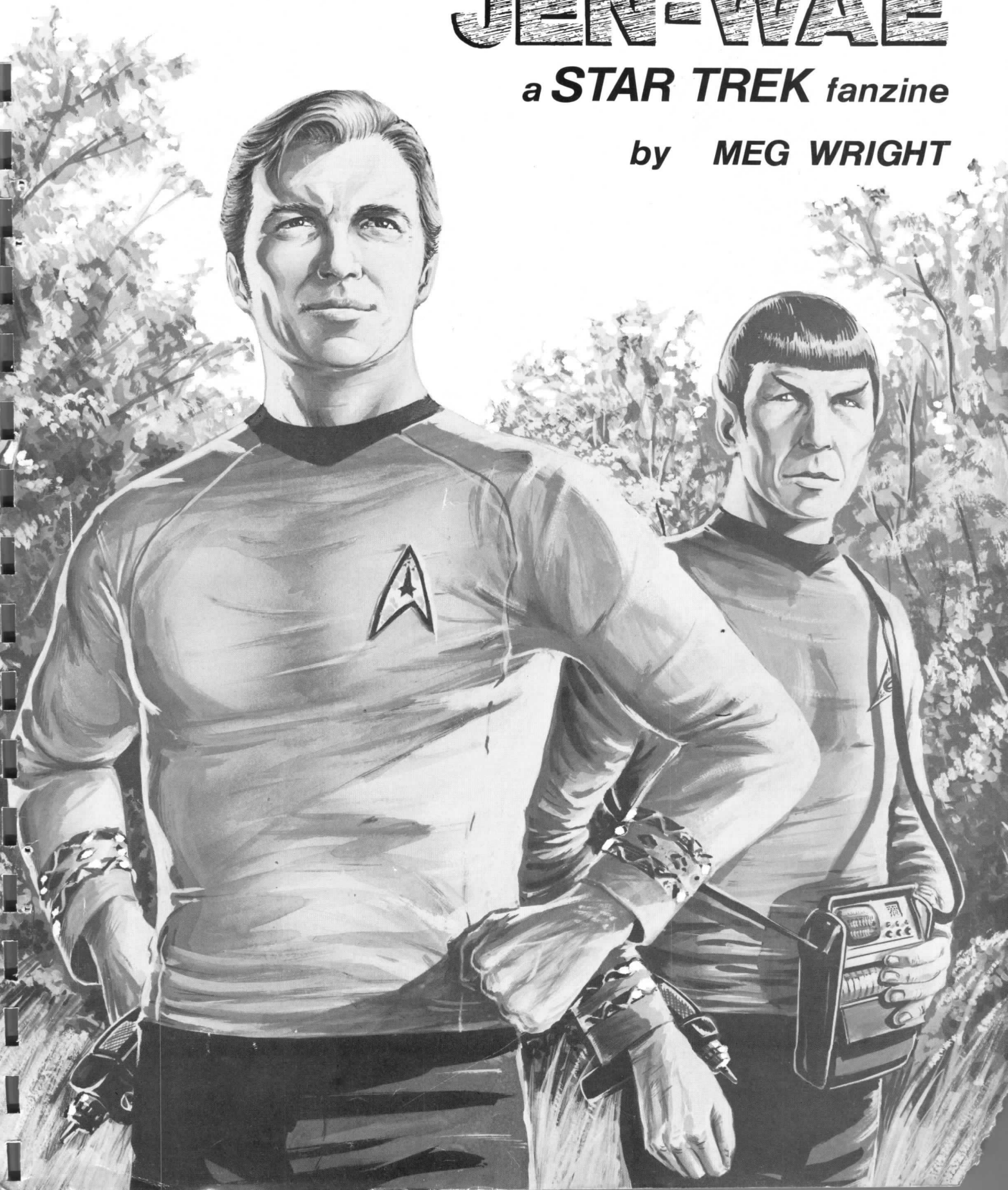


Scotpress

the tribe of JEN-WAE

a **STAR TREK** fanzine

by **MEG WRIGHT**



THE TRIBE OF JEN - WAE

by

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THE TRIBE OF JEN-WAE

"Third planet Class M, sir. Three moons, two small and one larger body. Oxygen/nitrogen atmosphere, surface 5/10 water, three large land masses and many groups of islands almost certainly volcanic in origin. Plentiful life forms, some humanoid, apparently living in loose groups, nomadic. Rated approximately 2 on the industrial scale."

"A comprehensive report. Thank you, Mr. Spock." Kirk looked round the briefing room table. "We only have two hours to spare, gentlemen, before we must be on our way. We'll beam a landing party down to an uninhabited area, make a collection of specimens and so forth. Mr. Spock, you will lead the group. I leave it to you to select those you will take with you." He got up, beckoning Spock to the doorway with him. In the corridor, he said, "Wish I could come with you, but these darn reports have to go off on schedule...and so do we. The slightest sign of trouble, you're to beam up the entire landing party straight away. We have to get on to Gamma Persei, and I don't want to find myself having to go without anyone." He cocked a knowing eye at his second-in-command. "So keep that well-known curiosity of yours down to manageable levels, will you?"

The Vulcan achieved the commendable feat of appearing injured without moving a facial muscle. "I shall comply with your orders, naturally, Captain," he replied stiffly.

Kirk gave him a broad grin, clapping him on the shoulder. "Go to it, then. I'll see you in the rec room this evening - we've got a game of chess to finish, remember? Mate in six moves, I think you said."

"It may be less," Spock challenged.

"Or more." Kirk was not to be intimidated. Spock watched him disappear round the bend in the corridor and returned to the briefing room.

"Lt. Sulu, I believe you would find the planet's varied plant life of interest interest," he said.

The young lieutenant smiled broadly, nodding eagerly. "Very well," Spock continued. "Mr. Chekov, you can gain useful experience on such a landing party also." He pressed the intercom. "Lt. Armitraj to the transporter room for landing party assignment, please." He broke the circuit and looked over at McCoy. "I believe you will be wanted aboard, will you not, Doctor?"

"Yes," McCoy said disgustedly. "I shall be in surgery with young Delgado all afternoon. Just when I could do with a little fresh air and green grass, too. Why is it that you get all the luck? You don't appreciate it."

Spock raised an interrogative eyebrow. "Can you spare me one of your junior staff? We should not go without someone from the medical department."

"Ensign Martin should suit you." McCoy grinned. "She's fairly junior, but a level-headed young lady. She...um...took that splinter out for you the other day, if you recall."

"She is certainly conscientious in her duties," Spock said icily, going to the door.

As it closed, Sulu asked, "Is that the new blonde nurse? What was she doing taking a splinter out for Spock?"

McCoy grinned evilly. "Well, he couldn't reach it for himself, could he?" he replied enigmatically. "Cut along, my boy, or you'll keep Spock waiting, and you wouldn't want to do that."

Sulu left hurriedly.

The air was fresh and green, heavy with the scent of growing things, and Sulu sucked in great lungfuls of it in deep appreciation as he gathered his specimens. Flying creatures, reminiscent of massively overgrown dragonflies, or bats with exotically-coloured, irredescently filmy wings, flittered above his head, emitting

friendly chirrups and calls to each other. The grassy plain extended almost as far as the eye could see, ending in a blue line of hazy hills towards the slowly descending sun. Behind him a higher line of mountains lifted their white caps to the sky. The rolling land bore a few huge, black-trunked, sliver-leaved trees and an abundance of shrubs sagging with heavy blossoms, amongst which the flying creatures dived and hovered, calling excitedly. He gave a sigh of pure content, smiling across at the senior botanist, Lt. Armitraj.

"Like to settle down here, Naznim?" he called.

"It's certainly peaceful," she called back. "Pity there's a resident population here already. It might make an ideal colony otherwise."

She straightened abruptly as the tall, unmistakeable form of the First Officer emerged from the over-hanging branches of a cascading shrub, his once immaculate shoulders smothered in a thick layer of orange pollen, a light cap of it over his neatly-slicked hair, and heavy grains adhering to his eyebrows and lashes. Naznim bit back a laugh; Sulu, however, was not so forbearing. Spock turned a mildly enquiring gaze on him, the tiny movement dislodging a few grains from his head and scattering them over his lean cheeks. Unexpectedly, he gave vent to a massive sneeze, effectively shaking the remaining pollen from his head. Sulu approached him, still smiling broadly.

"Your shoulders are covered in it too, sir," he told him. "Shall I brush them off for you?"

"If you please, Lieutenant..." Spock tried to squint down at himself. "The pollen seems to be...A. Whooshoo...an irritant."

Sulu cleaned him up as best he could, but the pollen was reluctant to shift, sticking not only to the Vulcan's shirt but to Sulu's hands, dying them a brilliant orange. After a while, they admitted defeat, and the First Officer moved off to continue his tricorder readings, his lean frame occasionally shaking under the onslaught of yet another enormous sneeze. Naznim watched his retreating back with a chuckle of amusement.

"How does he manage to maintain that air of total dignity whatever he's doing?" she demanded.

Sulu shrugged. "It must be reassuring to know people aren't going to laugh whatever you do," he suggested. "Vulcans don't think sneezing is funny, so it wouldn't enter his head that it is. Come to think of it, it isn't funny." He grinned. "It's just seeing Spock caught unawares by it."

"I guess you're right." Naznim surveyed the area round them. "Let's walk down to that river over there. There may be different plants growing by the water. We've got at least forty species from this area."

"It's certainly fertile land," Sulu agreed, falling in step with her. "Where are Chekov and Martin? We shouldn't lose sight of them."

"Over there with Spock." Naznim winked at him. "Don't you fancy a stroll in the sunset?"

"Don't tempt me," Sulu begged, laughing. "Any landing party that Spock is with behaves itself...or hadn't you heard?" He gave a swift look over his shoulder; the others were some distance off. He allowed his arm to steal round her waist.

"I'd heard. Besides," she removed the arm carefully, "I've work to do, and so have you. And even if there wasn't a Vulcan First Officer with super-sensitive eyes and ears about, there's a certain Captain Kirk one has to face later. So just continue to behave like an officer and a gentleman."

He grinned. "I'll do my best."

The river was further away and much bigger than they had thought; it took them some twenty minutes to get to it, but it was well worth the effort they had made, for their collection of specimens grew rapidly, Naznim giving frequent cries of pleasure and astonishment at the rich variety of the new species. The water was deep and clean, flowing strongly and fully a quarter of a mile wide.

"I wish I could get some of the water plants," Naznim said regretfully. She eyed Sulu speculatively. "How much do you mind getting your boots wet?"

He tilted his head consideringly. "It's reasonably shallow at the edge here. I'll wade out and get some, provided you'll join me in the rec room tonight!"

She chuckled. "It's a deal." She watched him step carefully into the water, then, noticing a large clump of spiky, lavender-coloured leaves a few yards away, called, "I'm just going to get some of those mauve things over there. I'll be back."

Concentrating on keeping his footing, Sulu did not look up. "All right. I'll be with you in a moment."

As Naznim bent over the leaves, she found their scent almost intoxicating, and bent to inhale it with an exclamation of pleasure, breaking off a small branch to hold it close to her face. A small group of the bat-creatures hovering nearby came diving and calling over her head. Wondering if she was disturbing them somehow, she looked up and stood enchanted by their weaving patterns. After a moment, she began to walk slowly along the bank, surrounded by a cloud of the creatures, the leaves held high, filling the air with fragrance.

(("A goddess comes. She is beautiful. See how her face gleams ebony as the bark of the flutral tree in the sunlight. The liandi lead her. A goddess comes. Join. Join. The minds are calling. Breathe in the hevika. Call to the goddess. Come to us. Come to us."))

Still sneezing hugely from time to time, Spock was attempting to check Chekov's tricorder findings, while Ensign Martin hovered anxiously over him.

"Mr, Spock, I wish you would stand still long enough for me to make a proper check," she sighed eventually. "How am I supposed to get a reading if you keep hopping around?"

The Vulcan gave her a quelling glance. "Miss Martin, the pollen I have inhaled is having a sternutatory effect, I agree. I do not agree that it requires any further action upon your part. I am perfectly capable...A.whooshoo...of dealing with the situation myself."

Sue Martin gave him a rebellious glance. She knew he was never going to forgive her for that splinter, and he was being grossly unfair, pulling rank on her at a time like this. He could say what he liked, but he was clearly not succeeding in suppressing the effects of the pollen as he claimed, and she could see herself on the receiving end of a lecture, first of all from the Chief Surgeon, and secondly from the Head Nurse, if she allowed the Vulcan to return aboard with such a condition untreated. Opening her mouth to protest, she encountered a glare of such freezing dignity, she was thrown into confusion, undecided as to whether the unpleasantness here and now if she persisted was worse than the lectures to come if she gave up. Seizing his advantage, Spock turned to Chekov and immersed himself in facts and figures. Sue held the reader tube up again, only to jump with fright when he rounded on her.

"Miss Martin, my hearing...A.whooshoo...is still quite unimpaired. Kindly do not hover over me. If you can find nothing more useful to do, I suggest you make a check on the whereabouts of Lt. Sulu and Lt. Armitraj."

Diverted, she stared across the plain. "They were together when I saw them last," she said.

Chekov raised his eyebrows in an envious grimace and grinned at her, caught the Vulcan's eye and said hurriedly, "I think they were making for the river, sir."

"Then we will follow...A.whooshoo...them." Spock began to lead the way across the grass, setting a pace with his long legs that soon had Sue trotting slightly in order to keep up. She was fast beginning to experience a feeling of dislike for the First Officer. If only he would co-operate just a little. She knew she

had no chance of giving him any kind of medication against his will, and urgently wanted to present him with a definite reading as evidence of his increasingly affected state. She was sure the sneezing was getting worse.

Spock was sure of it, too. The more he tried to block the reaction, the more the tickling in his nose grew; but he was not going to permit Ensign Martin the satisfaction of getting the better of him twice. He knew he was being illogical, and if he could only...A.whooshoo...stop sneezing long enough, he would be able to reason himself into a more typical frame of mind, but for the moment...A.whooshoo...all his concentration was concerned with maintaining an outward show of indifference to his undignified condition. He lengthened his stride.

Sue gave a muffled wail of protest and broke into an open run. Even Chekov was hard put to it not to do so as well. The two young officers exchanged sympathetic glances. They could see Sulu now, almost up to his knees in the water, balancing precariously as he tugged at the tough stalk of a recalcitrant plant. Even as they watched, the stem parted. Sulu took a step backwards, arms flailing wildly, and went down with an almighty splash. As he surfaced, puffing and chuckling, Spock came to the edge and held out a hand.

"Most unwise, Mr. Sulu," he said soberly. "The water may contain unknown bacteria. You had better check him over, Miss Martin."

Sue controlled her breathing with an effort, and made the check. "I'll give you a general anti-biotic, just in case," she told him. "And when we get back aboard, I want you in sickbay for a complete check."

Sulu submitted his arm to the hypo. "Don't you dare suggest keeping me in there," he muttered. "I've at last managed to arrange a date with Naznim."

"Where is Lt. Armitraj?" Spock asked.

Reddening - trust Spock to overhear - Sulu looked round. "She was here not five minutes ago," he said. "She went to collect some of those mauve plants over there."

Spock looked in the direction of his pointing finger. "I cannot see her."

Sulu went further up the bank and gazed round with a puzzled frown. "She can't have gone far," he protested.

Spock came to his side, holding up his tricorder. "The readings are... A.whooshoo...confused," he frowned, looking up. "I read multiple life forms about two hundred metres in that direction." He narrowed his eyes against the rapidly descending sun. "There seems to be a collection of the flying mammals over that way...A.whooshoo..."

Sulu peeked over his arm at the readings. "That's weird," he agreed. "Let's check it out, shall we?"

"A sensible...A.whooshoo...precaution," Spock concurred, his eyes blurring slightly. He blinked the moisture away hurriedly and moved off.

"Are you sure he's all right?" Chekov muttered to Sue.

"Of course I'm not sure," she whispered fiercely, "but he won't stand still long enough to let me take a proper look at him. I guess he's still sore at me."

"Sore at you?" Chekov asked, bewildered.

"And sore himself!" She giggled.

Suddenly, Sulu recalled McCoy's unexplained comment. "What was that the Doctor said about a splinter?" he enquired, intrigued.

She giggled again. "Well..." she began conspiratorially, but the tall figure had stopped and turned.

"A.whooshoo...Your presence is required, if you please...A.whooshoo..." Spock said, as coldly as he could between sneezes. He knew the story would be all round the ship before too long, had been resigned to it since the unfortunate episode occurred, but he saw no reason why their curiosity should interfere with their

work. They caught him up sheepishly.

"There's a positive cloud of those creatures gathering," Sulu commented. "I wonder why. They don't seem a bit scared of us, do they?"

"No, not a bit," Chekov said nervously as the creatures rose and came flying towards them, diving low over their heads. "I think they're trying to drive us away." He stepped back abruptly, causing Sue to give a yelp of pain and indignation.

"Ouch!" She held her abused foot in one hand. "Careful, Pavel."

"Sorry." He moved off again, arms held up to keep the creatures from his head. More of them were approaching now, calling loudly and skimming low over the landing party, almost touching them, but each time swerving aside at the last moment.

"Look!" Sulu called their attention sharply. "It's Naznim." He broke into a run, followed by Chekov and Sue.

Spock sneezed somewhat dismally, brushed the wetness from his eyes again, and followed them.

((("The goddess is in danger. Protect. Protect. The watchers from the skies approach.. Join. Protect. Call to her. Call to her. Come to us. Come to us us."))

As Sulu drew level with the recumbent figure, she began to stir. He pushed her down again gently.

"Don't try to get up yet, Naznim. Let's see what's wrong with you first."

Sue fell on her knees, the scanner held out. "She's deeply unconscious," she said worriedly, "and I can't see any cause."

"Those...bird-things don't seem to like us much, do they?" Chekov said. "I'm sure they're beginning to get vicious." He sent a pleading look to the First Officer.

Spock bent over the unconscious girl - then drew away sharply. "The plant she is holding," he said hastily. "Take it from her...A.whooshoo...and whatever you do don't inhale too deeply. I believe it to be an hallucinogenic." He lifted Naznim in his arms. "Ensign Chekov, request an immediate beam-up, if you... A.whooshoo...please, and ask Dr. McCoy to come to the transporter room, if he is free now."

"Shall I take her?" Sulu offered.

"A.whooshoo... I believe I shall not lose my grip on her...A.whooshoo..." Spock said coldly. "And at least I ...A.whooshoo...am dry."

Sensibly, Sulu fell silent. The sparkle of the transporter beam took them.

((("GONE. She is gone. Our goddess had gone back to her home in the sky. She would not stay with such unworthy ones. Woe to our kind until she returns. Woe to the silver bird that ~~bears~~ her from us. Do not leave us. Do not leave us."))

The creatures flittered aimlessly now, the large group breaking up and flying away in smaller groups. Gradually, with the coming of night, all grew quiet again.))

Kirk and McCoy surveyed the stabilising group on the transporter stations with disbelieving eyes.

"Shoo..." Spock completed the sneeze that had been frozen in transit and stepped forward sedately to lay Naznim on the waiting trolley. "Lieutenant..."

He turned to Sulu, "you have the plant still?" Sulu held it out. "It should be A.whooshoo...covered, Lieutenant. Doctor, I believe that may be the cause of Miss Armitraj's condition."

"Bring it along," McCoy ordered. "And the sooner you get into a dry uniform the better, Sulu," he scolded. "You're not supposed to take time off to go swimming in untested water, you know." As another enormous sneeze erupted behind him as he swung round. "And I'll want to see you, too, Mr. Spock, as soon as I've dealt with the rest of them."

The Vulcan did consider a token protest, but since his eyes and nose were beginning to stream uncomfortably, he muttered an acknowledgement of the request.

Kirk surveyed his unusually ruffled appearance in some worry.

"Trouble, Spock?"

"No...A.whooshoo...sir, at least, not until Lt.

Armitraj succumbed to the effects of the plant...
A.whooshoo..."

Kirk grinned.

"What happened to you?"

"An irritant pollen," Spock replied succinctly, following Kirk from



the room and falling into step beside him.

"Well, at least it doesn't sound catching," Kirk consoled himself. "Were you the only one affected?"

"I believe...A.whooshoo...so."

"You had Ensign Martin with you, couldn't she give you something to control it?"

Spock shot a quick glance at him from the corner of his eye. "I am reluctant ...A.whooshoo...to resort to drugs for a controll...A.whooshoo...able condition."

"Well, you're not doing too well on controlling it," Kirk pointed out reasonably. "Wouldn't it have been more sensible to succumb to the logic of the situation and accept help?"

"I am about to accept help," Spock replied with dignity.

"Good." Kirk paused outside the sickbay door. "I'll hear your report in my quarters - when you can make it without blasting both of us across the room." He grinned. "Better get it cleared up before we finish that chess game, or we'll have to lash the pieces down."

With another explosive wheeze, Spock entered sickbay.

"Come." Kirk looked up from his desk as his cabin door slid open to reveal a grinning McCoy and a Vulcan, somewhat greener than customary about the eyes and nose, but otherwise his usual placid self.

"Well, they seem to have got you sorted out all right," Kirk said with relief. "How's Lt. Armitraj?"

"Sleeping naturally," McCoy reported. "That plant they found her holding was pretty potent stuff, Jim, but we've dealt with it and now she'll just have to sleep it off. Sulu's none the worse for his ducking either, but I've given him a few words on the subject of taking more care. Spock here's fine, but if he'd let Sue Martin check him over straight away he needn't have suffered as long as he did." Spock gave him a frosty look, and McCoy chuckled. "That'll teach you, won't it?" he demanded. "Never hold grudges, Spock."

"I was not aware I was doing anything of the sort," Spock retorted. "In view of the unpleasant side effects most of your potions seem to have, it is hardly surprising that I avoid them whenever possible."

McCoy gazed at him out of innocent blue eyes. "Oh, I'm sorry, Spock. I thought it was the nurse you were avoiding so assiduously."

Spock ignored him, turning to Kirk. The Captain surveyed them both with an amused glance, deciding to postpone his questions until he had McCoy on his own - for the sake of the Vulcan's peace of mind.

"Right, I'll hear the preliminary report."

"A standard survey," Spock said formally. "The land in the area we surveyed is extremely fertile, the environment non-hostile. The only difficulties encountered were due to the nature of the flora. We encountered none of the inhabitants, the nearest group of them was over forty kilometres from our position. We have a comprehensive collection of specimens for study. All the landing party are on board, and all, with the exception of Lt. Armitraj, in good health."

"She's in good health," McCoy said crossly.

"You cannot be certain of that until she regains consciousness."

"Are you questioning my medical judgement again?"

"It is always unwise to make specific statements on insufficient data."

"All readings show the drug she inhaled is satisfactorily neutralised and eliminated. I call that good health."

"Time will show whether you are correct, Doctor," Spock said blandly.

"That's enough," Kirk said tiredly. "If you want to have an argument, kindly go and have it elsewhere."

"My apologies, Captain," Spock said stiffly.

"An argument?" McCoy smiled disarmingly. "Certainly not, Jim - we wouldn't dream of it, would we, Spock?"

Seeing the glacial expression on his friend's face, Kirk interposed swiftly, "Thank you, Spock. We shall be leaving orbit in twenty minutes, gentlemen."

"With your permission, Captain, I would like to take the opportunity to change my uniform."

Kirk looked at the orange streaked shoulders. "A good idea. I'll see you later." As the door closed, he gestured to a chair. "Sit down, Bones. How's Lt. Delgado?"

"He'll do. It was a nasty burn, but he's taken the surgery well." McCoy sat down with a sigh of tiredness. "I was sorry I couldn't go with the landing party; I could have done with a little fresh air and green grass. I daresay you could too." Kirk nodded ruefully. McCoy gave a chuckle of amusement. "Still, it gave me the opportunity to get one over on Spock."

"What do you mean?"

"Sending Sue Martin with him. She was the only person available with enough experience, but he'll never believe I didn't do it out of sheer evil-mindedness."

Kirk surveyed him blankly. "What has Spock got against Ensign Martin, Bones?"

"You mean you haven't heard?"

"Obviously I haven't, or I wouldn't need to ask."

"He...uh...had a slight accident in the chem lab the other day. Dropped a petri dish and then slipped and sat down rather too hard on the pieces. Nasty place to get a splinter stuck. Sue happened to be passing, heard the crash and stuck her head in to see what was happening, had his pants off before he could say 'logical' and removed the offending object with neat efficiency."

Kirk suppressed a grin. "So that's why he wasn't too keen on allowing her close."

McCoy gave way to laughter. "Serve him right," he said, hard-heartedly. "All he needed was a standard shot and he chose to suffer because of his pride. Maybe next time he'll yield to the logic of the situation a little quicker."

"All the same, Bones," Kirk gave a little frown, "it might have led to something more serious. I'll have a word with him on the quiet. We can't have him avoiding medication for trivial reasons like that, it might have put the whole landing party in danger. You really should have made it clear that she was there for a good reason."

McCoy looked a little ashamed. "You're right, of course, Jim. Still, there's no harm done this time."

"No," Kirk agreed. "But don't do it again, Bones."

((The small group halted under the midday sun, glad to rest after their swift march of the morning. They set the hurriedly improvised litter down at the edge of the wide river, questioning the old man lying within.

"Jen-wae, is this the place?"

The old man closed his eyes, sighing. "This is the place. Even now the grass is crushed where she lay. Here we will build her temple and carve her likeness in the wood of the flutral tree. There is good food here, and water, and the liandi range widely."

"Sleep now, old man," the taller of the two middle-aged men said gently. "You have led us well and truly." He moved away, gesturing to the other to accompany him. "We will send our cousins to lead the rest of the tribe here, Dah-vee."

His brother looked at him out of his wandering eyes, a glance difficult to interpret. It was never easy to tell whether Dah-vee was looking at you or not, and for that reason he was feared by many of the tribe, who rejoiced that he was the younger of the old chief's sons.

"You're still going along with all this, Har-ky?" he muttered.

"You saw the goddess in the joining," Har-ky replied. "What choice do we have but to lead the tribe here? There is powerful medicine in this place - the tribe will not suffer."

Dah-vee nodded in apparent agreement. "Then we will send the young ones on their way once they have rested," he agreed. "The tribe will be here within two sunsets and can begin this senseless pandering to an old man's whim."

Har-ky drew in a shocked breath. "Dah-vee, you dare to question here, on the very spot where her servants took her from us, her very soul calling to ours?" A sudden suspicion shot through him. "Dah-vee, were you there in the joining?"

"Of course I was there," his brother answered sulkily.

"Tell me the colour of the goddess' tunic," Har-ky demanded.

"What need to tell?" Dah-vee countered. "All the tribe saw the goddess through their own mind-sight." He cast a malevolent look at his brother. "If the young ones are to go, they should go soon. The old man lacks his comforts without the presence of the sisters."

Diverted, Har-ky nodded. "His health grows frail. The journey may have been too much for him and we need his powers yet." He strode back to the younger man, watched keenly by the squint eyes. "Eat well of the garweed," he told them gravely. "We have need of haste. You must bring the sisters on ahead, the old man has need of them. You must be on your way again before the sun has dropped two zens."

The young men nodded eagerly, and fell to eating the preserved meat from their pouches, smothering it with the garweed seeds that would give them strength and speed for their journey. When they had done, they called their liandi and set off swiftly. The two brothers saw to their father's needs and comforts as the day wore on, each of them silently occupied with his own thoughts. Har-ky experienced a sensation of great awe as he acknowledged the extent of his father's sight that had led them so surely, without hesitation, to this holy place. As darkness fell, they settled the old man after his evening meal. He was disposed to talk after his long sleep of the afternoon and detained Har-ky at his side, his pet liandus fluttering nearby. He held out a bony hand to it, and it settled down, folding its wings and chattering quietly to itself as it ordered its ruffled fur with an agile tongue.

"We have been honoured, Har-ky," Jen-wae said weakly. "Which of the tribes has seen a goddess with their own eyes, save that of Jen-wae?"

"We cannot tell," the younger man said gravely. "But the eyes of Jen-wae see far, even though their sight grows dim."

"And your sight, my son?"

"Is not as yours, my father. Stay with us yet, until one of the young ones grows to full power."

"What of Dah-vee?"

His son's brows drew together. "Dah-vee is a law unto himself, as ever," he answered, "but he is faithful to the tribe." He smiled gravely. "My sight may not be as yours, oh my father, but I know men. Dah-vee knows that I watch him."

His father nodded. "You are a wise man, Har-ky. There is still time. With the next birthing there may be one to stretch your powers to the full."

Har-ky shook his head, his eyes bitter. "It is many birthings since I hoped

for such a thing," he said sadly. "Sleep now, old man. There is much work for you ahead." He lifted the liandus from the old man's hand and settled it by his head. The amber eyes blinked at him in the moonlight as the creature nestled into the skins of the litter. Har-ky waited until the even breathing told him his father was asleep, then walked on silent feet to the heap of skins where his brother lay. The largest of the moons was just rising as he lay down, and he saw his brother's eyes were open.

"Sleep, Dah-vee," he cautioned. "The new day will bring long hours of toil for us both."

"I heard a sound," Dah-vee whispered. "Did you not hear it? Down there in the reeds by the water."

"Some night creature, hunting food, doubtless."

Dah-vee sat up. "I am not a fool, Har-ky. I know the night sounds as well as you. This was too large to be any animal. Perhaps she has returned." He got to his feet. "I will awaken the old man."

Har-ky got up swiftly. "No, not for some trifling thing," he protested. "He is bone-weary. I will come with you to see what this thing is before we sleep."

They slipped like shadows through the long grass, until eventually Har-ky stopped. "I still hear nothing and see nothing," he said. "You were deceived by the wind."

"The night is still," Dah-vee growled. He looked across his shoulder to the old man's litter, many yards off, then ahead again, his squint eyes narrowed against the moonlight on the water. "There, down there by the reeds. Did you not see the glint as it moved?"

"I saw nothing."

"Go closer then, or do you fear what you may find?" Dah-vee sneered.

Har-ky looked at him levelly. "There is nothing to fear here, Dah-vee, save the dark spirit that dwells in us all. This is some trick."

Dah-vee shrugged. "As you please. I will go back to the old man, and if there is aught, you will bear the brunt of his rage. I have not the sight, save in the joining. I see yours is also too weak to serve the goddess."

Har-ky sighed. "I would my sight were stronger indeed. Very well, I will go on."

Quiet as shifting mist, they made for the reed bed.

"Out there on the water," Dah-vee breathed close to his brother's ear. "Look, to the right, oh sightless one."

Har-ky paused, all his attention on the silently flowing water. The long knife slid into his side, he gave one choking gasp and fell slowly, helplessly into the dark depths of the water and was gone, borne away by the swift current.

Dah-vee chuckled evilly. "Unwise, oh brother of mine, to send all our kin away." He spat contemptuously into the water. "Oh yes, you watched me and I was all meekness, biding my time. My time has come now; the old man will not live long, and then the tribe of Jen-wae will learn what it is to serve a man, and not a weakling who has the sight. Visions!" He spat again. "If one of you, just one, had shown me what you feigned to see in this joining...but there was never aught to be told of save the same old tired dreams of far-off places, until the goddess came. And still I could not see, though I gave the same cries and tears as those about me. Since she does not choose to show herself to me, I will serve her in my own way, and my own way will serve my ends, not hers."

He turned away.

As the sun rose, drying the night dew and sending the liandi soaring into its growing light with their plaintive morning calls, the old man stirred, calling

weakly for his son.

Dah-vee heard his voice but turned, grunting, on his skins, to bury his head in their warmth and slept again. The sun was high before he stirred once more, yawning and stretching. Then, leaping to his feet in mock amazement, he went to his father. The old man eyed him warily.

"Where is your brother, and why do you sleep so sound you do not hear the cries of those that need you?" he demanded. "Where is Har-ky?"

Dah-vee looked around. "I see no sign of him," he said. "Did he not tell you where he was going?"

"I have not seen him this day." The old man trembled slightly. "I am hungry, Dah-vee."

"Is there nought within thy pouch, old man?"

Jen-wae eyed him thoughtfully. "There is, my son, but my hands grow stiff with age." He turned his head, sending his liandus fluttering to hover just out of reach. Dah-vee looked up at it, his squint eyes narrowed.

"Feed me, my son, or I will call the joining and let the tribe of Jen-wae see the harshness of my youngest-born."

Unwillingly, Dah-vee prepared the meat, smothering it liberally with garweed seeds. "There you are, old man." He handed it to him. "Eat well. The sisters are surely on their way here by now, and will will not have to rely on the rough help of your son to bring you comfort."

"Har-ky's touch is gentle as a sister's." Then old man gobbled at the meat with his almost toothless mouth.

Dah-vee laughed grimly. "Har-ky has clearly found work to do, and does not want to act as nurse-maid."

"Find him," Jen-wae said sharply. "Find him, and bring him here."

Dah-vee looked round again, shading his eyes against the sun. "He has gone that way, my father, towards that grove of flutral trees. Doubtless he seeks to find one worthy to yield the likeness of the goddess. He will be back by evening when he has chosen."

The old man relaxed. "He is a conscientious man," he murmured. "I would he had the sight of his father."

Dah-vee turned aside to hide his smile. "By evening the sisters will be here to tend you," he said, "or if not, by the noon-tide tomorrow. Rest again now. I will join Har-ky if you do not need me."

"No. Stay at my side a while longer." The old man shifted restlessly.

Unwilling, but afraid to argue for fear of raising suspicions, Dah-vee stayed at his side throughout the long day, tending to his needs with impatient hands, disguising the impatience with a show of rough sympathy. As it grew dark, the old man grew restless again.

"Har-ky is long coming," he muttered.

"It is too dark to see him now," Dah-vee said. "Go to sleep and he will speak to you when he returns."

The old man sighed again. "He should not have gone for so long without telling me," he complained.

"He did not speak with me either," Dah-vee reminded him. "The affairs of the goddess must be attended to without thought for the family. Is it not so?"

"You speak truly ." The old man closed his eyes. "I will sleep now."

Dah-vee watched until his breathing slowed, then moved away on soundless feet to stand by the side of the river, watching its endless movement with veiled eyes.

"I am rid of you now, Har-ky, and once this temple has been built, I shall

rid myself of this old fool, sending him to follow the young. If the sight had been given to me, he would not have so long to wait, but to kill him now would be to betray my own ignorance. But the time will come, Jen-wae, when your usefulness will be over. Be sure then, your end will swiftly follow."

He gave a deep, full-bellied laugh, throwing back his head. "So, the despised one, the youngest born, comes to power, and let the tribe beware."

He turned on his heel and went back to the litter, and throwing himself down on the furs, fell instantly asleep.

The first of the sisters arrived about mid-morning, fussing around their tribal leader. Jen-wae was beginning to fret badly over Har-ky's prolonged absence and called Dah-vee to him.

"Now that the sisters are here to tend me, go you and find Har-ky," he told him. "Take one of your cousins with you." He beckoned a young man over. "Hen-ka, go with your cousin and find Har-ky."

Hen-ka nodded his acquiescence, turning an enquiring face to Dah-vee. "Where has Har-ky gone?" he asked in a low voice.

"Towards the flutal grove, early yesterday," Dah-vee replied normally. "He must have gone at the goddess' bidding, for he spoke not to either of us before he left, and it is not like Har-ky to cause his father concern. A most careful and caring son."

"Indeed. An example to us all," Henka agreed as they set off, waving a farewell to the rest of the group.

Dah-vee hid his inner laughter as they searched the grove, calling loudly. Eventually he consented to the belief that Har-ky was not to be found there, and still shaking mirthfully, followed his cousin back towards the encampment.

"Where can he have gone?" Hen-ka asked in bewilderment, turning every so often to scan the rolling plain with unhappy eyes. Dah-vee, too, turned his skew eyes, vainly searching the horizon.

"The ways of the goddess are doubtless not our ways," he murmured at last. "Who knows where she has called him."

Hen-ka nodded gravely, and they returned to the old man.

"You have not found him?" Disappointment filled the voice, making it quiver uncertainly.

Dah-vee dropped on his knees beside the litter. "Not yet, oh my father, but tomorrow all the tribe will come, and we will search the plains for your son, and if he is to be found still, we will return him to your side."

"Why should he not be found?" Jen-wae asked fretfully.

Dah-vee lowered his gaze to the ground. "Father, how did the goddess go?"

"You know, you saw in the joining."

"Yes, father, but speak it aloud all the same."

"In a sparkle of light, borne by her servants..." His voice trailed away. "Think you Har-ky has gone to join her already?"

"He was a good man," Dah-vee said softly. "The goddess must surely wish to gather such about her. If it is to be so, it is an honour to the tribe of Jen-wae."

The old shoulders straightened a little. "You speak true, an honour indeed. Tomorrow, then, if he is not to be found, we will honour his memory."

"It shall be as you order."

On the arrival of the whole tribe, all those without essential work joined in the search, but by evening they had found no sign. The older members gathered

round Jen-wae, the sisters raised him up on pillows and drew back.

"Our son, Har-ky, has joined the goddess," Jen-wae told them, his eyes glittering with unshed tears. "We honour his name and his memory."

"We honour him." The answering cry rang loud.

"We will not forget. Treasure him in our minds."

"We will do so."

As the voices died, a solitary tear slithered down the withered cheek. The sisters came up to him, drying his tears and laying him down again.

"Grieve not," one told him gently. "He was a good man. A man can ask no more."

"No more indeed." He closed his eyes. "Tomorrow we will begin the building of a camp and then begin the temple. We have but a short time to the coming of the rains. The statue must be made while work has to stop."

"Indeed, indeed," the sisters soothed him. One slipped aside to gather hevika leaves from their lavender stems, bruising them and squeezing the juice into a wooden cup of water, taking it to the litter, lifting his head gently.

"Drink, Jen-wae, the hevika will bring peace to your troubled thoughts."

He drank deeply and lay down. "It is well," he said quietly. "I will sleep peacefully now and wake to the new day with eagerness."

He drove them hard, and out of their love for him and their goddess they gave their work willingly, always striving to complete each job as close to perfection as could be achieved. With so many willing hands it was only a few short weeks before the whole area was transformed into a village of some size. Runners were sent out to other tribes and the numbers swelled even further. Jen-wae himself selected the flutral tree from which the statue was to be carved, carried on his litter for many miles over the plain before he was eventually satisfied that he had found the best. Their most skilled carvers set to work, closely watched by the old man, and as the thatched temple rose, so also the statue of the goddess took shape, tall and slim, holding in her outstretched palm the strange silver bird that filled them with such awe.

Dah-vee looked at it with eyes full of hate. It seemed that he alone of the tribe of Jen-wae had not seen these visions, and as he went about his daily tasks, outwardly subject to his father's wishes, his hatred grew. When at last the rains came, he stayed most of the time in his own hide hut, lost in thought. Eventually Jen-wae sent for him.

"My son, why do you avoid your fellows?" he asked harshly. "It is not wise or fitting that the son of Jen-wae should shut himself away from the people he must one day lead."

Dah-vee forced his face to smile. "I do not shut myself away from them in any spirit of pride, my father. Rather I seek to prepare myself for the duties that will one day lie ahead. I ponder deeply on the ways of Jen-wae." He eyed his father consideringly. "Har-ky was always first-born, first favourite. It is right that now I consider my position well, and seek within myself those qualities that made Har-ky your best-loved."

The old man's face softened. "It is well, my son. Even though he had but little sight he would have led the tribe well. And maybe, with the next birthings when the rains cease, a new power may come to the tribe of Jen-wae."

"It may be so," Dah-vee agreed. "Is there one among the young who has caught your eye?"

The old man smiled. "The tribe of Jen-wae produces worthy sons. We can but await the birthing and hope our goddess will send a sign of her favour."

Dah-vee closed his mouth over his exasperation. Trust the old man not to

gave a straight answer. Still, he had never really hoped to learn the names of his potential rivals so easily, and there were other methods when the time of birthing came. Judging by the clouds of liandi that filled the sky each morning, the time was not far off now. The rains were slackening, too; each morning bright with watery sunshine and the later showers less heavy. Soon they would cease altogether and then his vigilance would not slacken. Already his father's gentler attitude towards him was influencing the tribe, and they began slowly to accord him the welcome and the honour they had always shown his elder brother. He showed them a soberly smiling face, moving among them with gentle words of encouragement, saving his bitter laughter and outpourings of hatred for the night hours, solitary in the hut he would once have shared with Har-ky. His time was surely coming and he could be patient.

At long last, the eagerly awaited cry went up. "The liandi rise!"

Dah-vee came hurrying from his hut, eyes on the sky. The swarming cloud of liandi was rising higher and higher, sweeping up in great circles. He watched keenly as those of the tribe that still had last year's pups released them, allowing them to join their wild companions in the last, triumphant flight before the birthing. The sky was black with the circling creatures, the air ringing with their cries. He watched impatiently, his gaze darting hither and thither to see where they would land to bear their young. Soon it began, in twos and threes at first, and then great swarms of them falling to the grass while others continued to soar high into the turquoise sky. The first groups landed not far from the village and Dah-vee was the first to get to them, ruthlessly stepping on the frailer ones in his desire to search out the prize he desired so much.

At last he saw her, a giant of a creature; fully a quarter as large again as Jen-wae's liandus. Kicking aside the wriggling, squirming creatures at his feet, he made for her, lifting her triumphantly from among her companions to hold her aloft. She squealed, snapping at him with needle teeth and he cuffed her exasperatedly, gripping the scruff of her neck until she yowled in pain. He grinned, thin lips drawing back over clenched teeth.

"So, my queen, I have you. Bear a worthy pup and I might let you live." He cast a swift glance towards the village, now a hive of activity as each man found a liandus to be his new companion for the next year. Many of the new pups would die, as his had always done up till now, so that the searching was all to do again, as the birthing continued, the numbers dropping all the time; and many would be weakly creatures of no power, such as had always chosen Har-ky. He gave a bellowing laugh, causing the whimpering liandi at his feet to seek to rise even as they felt the first pangs of birthing. Trust Har-ky to be picked out by the weak ones, his sympathies were always easily aroused. Now, he, Dah-vee, had found a rare queen liandus, and her pup would have the power he sought. He strode across the grass, careless of the creatures beneath his feet. Ducking into the hut, he laid his capture down on the skins of his bed, gloating over her as she panted in her birth-pangs. When the tiny pup appeared, blue and naked, he tried to touch it, but she snapped at him fiercely and he drew back.

"Your usefulness will soon be over," he snarled at her. "Do not think you shall be suffered to live once that day comes." He grinned. "Such a fine skin will serve me well; you will make a new hood for me to keep me warm and dry."

He watched the tiny pup struggle up the short fur of her belly, approving its tenacity and will as the blind, barely-formed thing inched its way into the safe haven of the maternal pouch. When it was safely in he grunted his satisfaction and gave the mother a drink of water. It would not do to mistreat her so that the pup suffered. That done, he left the hut again to stand in the doorway watching the tribe at their labours. This day began a time frenzied with activity, for their year's supply of meat must be gathered up while the liandi lay vulnerable. Over the next week the meat must be preserved with gensu root and the skins cured for their huts and clothing. The owners of new pups would take less part in it, being concerned with the liandi and their mothers, but those with hardy pups could spare

some time to help. His lips curled. It was not fitting for the son of a chief to lower himself to sister's work. Har-ky had always been amongst the first to leave his liandus, hoping to rear the little one by love alone as he toiled with the tribe. Each year the result had been the same, the people loved him more dearly, but his pup had never lasted past the next birthing. The love of men was easily bought when you had power, and the rare queen liandus always produced pups of power. He would devote his time to their welfare, if necessary claiming that they were sickly, then, when the pup first stretched its wings to fly, opening its eyes to see the world for the first time, and the power surged in it, he would bear it out of his hut in triumph and the tribe of Jen-wae would see their new leader.

He bit back his exultance, nodded gravely to the passing tribesmen and went back inside to keep his solitary vigil.))

Christine Chapel tiptoed across the floor, her eyes on the panel above the sleeping girl and her forehead creased into a worried frown. Dr. Armitraj had been asleep for more than eighteen hours now, and still showed no signs of waking, and although the panel displayed no reason for concern, it was more than high time she woke normally. She looked down at the still figure, biting her lip. Unwilling to disturb her without definite orders, she went out again on silent feet and into McCoy's office. He looked up as she entered.

"Still sleeping?"

She nodded. "It looks natural enough, but after all this time, I'm worried."

He laid down his stylus and got up. "You could be right. I'll take another look." He paused by the door, smiling a little. "Keep your fingers crossed, Christine. If there is anything wrong with her I'll owe Spock an apology, and there's nothing so unbearable as a Vulcan who's been proved right, is there?"

She eyed him crossly. "Mr. Spock is always perfectly polite," she told him firmly.

"Oh, perfectly," he agreed, grinning. "That's what makes it so unbearable." He followed her into the sickbay and went up to the bed, looking from the diagnostic panel down to the patient. "There's still no sign of anything wrong," he said slowly, "but I think you're right, it's time we woke her."

He laid a gentle hand on her shoulder, shaking her. She gave a deep sigh, rolling away from him. "Well, at least she responds," he grunted, and shook harder. A tiny frown creased her forehead but she did not open her eyes, so he lifted her hand, slapping the back of it firmly. "Naznim, wake up! Naznim!"

This time there was a definite reaction. Encouraged, he slapped harder. "Naznim, wake up. Come along."

The black eyes opened to study him perplexedly. "Dr. McCoy?"

He smiled down at her teasingly. "I'm afraid so. Come on, it's time you sat up and took some notice."

Her eyes slid round the room, taking in her surroundings. "Why am I in sickbay?"

He laughed. "At least you didn't say 'where am I?'. You inhaled some narcotic down on the planet, remember?"

She frowned. "The last thing I remember is an old man watching me, and then a feeling there were dozens of other people there."

He looked across at Christine, puzzled. "I thought they didn't make any contacts," he said. "After all, it is a Prime Directive planet. Spock would surely have mentioned it if anyone had been around."

Suddenly, Christine looked worried. "Mr. Spock was affected by that pollen, Doctor. It's possible he didn't notice."

An expression of unholy glee crossed the surgeon's face. He went to the

intercom, flicking it open. "Jim, can you and Spock spare a minute to come to sickbay?"

"Yes, Doctor. What's the problem?"

"It's just possible Spock will want to hear what Lt. Armitraj has to say."

"She's awake, then?"

McCoy grinned at Christine. "If I was your First Officer, Jim, I'd point out that that was obvious."

"We'll be there. Kirk out."

Christine shook her head at him reprovingly, but wisely offered no comment. He went back to Naznim. "You'd better tell the Captain and Mr. Spock what you saw," he said.

She looked surprised. "But Mr. Spock was down there as well," she protested.

"All the same, he'll want to hear." The sickbay door slid open to admit Kirk and his First Officer. The Captain walked over to the bed, smiling.

"Glad to see you're awake again, Lieutenant," he said kindly. "Now, what's all this about, Doctor?"

"Naznim claims she was being watched," McCoy said.

"Watched?" Kirk looked down at her. "Who by? Did you see them?"

"I saw an old man," she said slowly. "I saw him very clearly. He had white hair and blue eyes and he was dressed in animal skins...those flying things, I think, Mr. Spock. I didn't really see anyone else, but I'm sure there were others there too."

Kirk swung round. "You didn't see anything, Mr. Spock?"

"Obviously not," the Vulcan said placidly, "or I should have mentioned it in my report."

Kirk nodded and turned back to the bed. "What was he doing, this old man?"

"Watching me." She paused, thinking hard. "He was calling me, too. They all were. They wanted me to stay there."

"Where was he?" Spock asked.

"I don't understand."

"Was he standing near you?" Spock elaborated. "There was quite a profusion of shrubs by the river, were these people hidden there, perhaps?"

She frowned again. "He wasn't standing," she said slowly. "He was lying down somewhere. I didn't see any shrubs, sir."

One eyebrow lifted in mild surprise. "Are you sure you saw him by the river, Lieutenant?"

"No," she said positively. "He was nowhere near the river. He was an old man and he was watching me, but he wasn't by the river."

"We found you not far from the river," Spock said quietly. "You had taken a specimen from a plant which gave off a powerful, hallucinogenic substance. Is it possible that you did not really see the old man?"

"But I did...he was so real." She gave a tiny smile. "He didn't smell very pleasant, either, but he was a nice old man all the same."

"Drugs do strange things to your mind," McCoy told her gently. "They make the weirdest things seem real."

"I suppose it is possible he wasn't real," she agreed reluctantly. "I remember him quite vividly, but all the rest of it, after I left Sulu, is terribly hazy." She looked up at Kirk apologetically. "I'm sorry if I've been a nuisance, Captain."

"Nonsense," he said firmly. "You'd be much more of a nuisance if you didn't make a full report and you'd really seen something. How are you feeling now?"

"I feel fine, Captain. Can I get up, or do I have to stay here?"

McCoy sighed in mock dismay. "Nobody loves us in this sickbay, do they, Nurse? Yes, you can get up, but I want Nurse Chapel to run a few tests on you before you go. And you're not going back on duty for forty-eight hours."

She made a tiny face. "I've so many specimens to catalogue, Doctor."

"They've waited two days already," he said hard-heartedly. "It won't hurt them to wait another two. Nurse, see that Lt. Armitraj gets her clothes, and then come to me for instructions."

"Very well, Doctor."

McCoy led the way into his office.

"What's the matter, Bones?" Kirk demanded as the door slid shut. "Isn't she all right?"

"She seems perfectly healthy," McCoy allowed, "but I'll still make the tests ...for my own satisfaction. Spock, are you quite sure her story isn't true?" Spock turned an enquiring eye his way. "Well," McCoy said apologetically, "you were experiencing some problems yourself at the time, if you remember."

"That is perfectly true," Spock conceded, "but I am not aware of anything in my condition that would make the rest of the landing party ignore the presence of a native inhabitant. Both Mr. Sulu and Mr. Chekov are responsible officers, who would have called my attention had they noticed anyone present." He paused, frowning a little. "There is one thing," he went on slowly. "Just before we found the lieutenant, we noticed very confused tricorder readings, those of multiple life forms, very weak indeed, barely registering."

"But you didn't see anything?" Kirk asked.

"Only the flying creatures. At the time I formed the theory they were of extremely low-grade intelligence."

"I suppose that's perfectly possible," Kirk mused.

"Indeed. However, it was the first time I had noticed any such reading, and there were many thousands of the creatures about. It does not seem likely that some of them should be intelligent and others not, but on the other hand, we cannot rule out the possibility altogether."

"Well," Kirk shrugged, "even if some of them are intelligent, it doesn't explain what Lt. Armitraj thought she saw." He turned to the Doctor. "What's your explanation, Bones?"

"The drug seems the most likely answer," McCoy agreed. "It's powerful, and you can get auditory and sensory hallucinations as well as visual. The only other explanation I can think of is that there is some life form on the planet that can keep itself out of sight when it wants to."

"We've encountered stranger beings before," Kirk commented.

"Indeed, Captain." Spock sounded intrigued. "It seems a pity that we are unlikely to get the opportunity to make a further study."

Kirk smiled at him. "Fascinating, isn't it?"

"I find it so."

"In that case I commiserate with you. It is extremely unlikely, in view of the fact that the planet is populated, that we shall be sent back there on such a nebulous possibility, so your curiosity will have to remain unsatisfied."

He went to the door into the corridor, to find it slide open before he reached it, revealing the helmsman.

"Something wrong, Mr. Sulu?" he asked.

"Uh...no, sir.... At least, I don't think so. Not with me, anyway, sir."

"I see." Kirk gave one of his sudden smiles. "Doctor, here's someone come to enquire after one of your patients."

"She's fine," McCoy called. "I'm releasing her from sickbay in about half an hour, Sulu."

"Well now," Kirk murmured softly, "I wonder how he knew it wasn't Delgado you'd come to ask after?"

Sulu smiled uncertainly. Kirk lifted an eyebrow at him and departed, followed by his second in command.

Sulu carried the two trays to a rec room table and set them down carefully. "Here you are, Naznim, now eat that up like a good girl."



She chuckled. "I've been released from sickbay, Sulu, you don't have to fuss over me." She looked at the loaded plates. "That looks good. I hadn't realised how hungry I am." She picked up her knife and fork and began her meal. "Mmm." she said indistinctly, "this is good." After a little while she glanced up. "I'm sorry, I'm not being much of a conversationalist."

He smiled broadly. "Eat up," he advised. "There's plenty of time to talk later." He started his own meal. When they had both finished, he disposed of the plates and fetched coffee. "Feeling better now?"

"Much better." She made a face. "Unfortunately, Dr. McCoy says I'm to be off work for forty-eight hours. I'm longing to get on with the study of the specimens. I'll get so behindhand with my reports."

"I'd love to give you a hand," he offered eagerly. "Botany's always been a pet hobby of mine, and if you think I'd be any help..."

She laughed at him. "I do have two pretty good assistants," she teased, then, relenting, "but I'd be more than willing to accept help in your spare time. As long as you accept that if I find you more of a hindrance, I'm free to chuck you out."

"Understood. Now drink your coffee and I'll take you back to your quarters."

"At this hour?"

"Dr. McCoy has a nasty habit of finding out if you're not taking it sufficiently easy," he warned.

"You've had experience, I see."

"Yes," he said ruefully. "You're liable to end up in sickbay on complete bedrest."

"I've had enough of that," she agreed. "O.K., I'll be a good girl and go to bed early." She gave a tiny shiver, and he eyed her with concern.

"Are you sure you're feeling all right?"

"I feel fine...Sulu, was I really the only one who saw the old man?"

"What old man?"

"Jen-wae, their leader." She paused. "How do I know that?"

He began to look worried. "Naznim, what are you talking about?"

She stared directly at him then, her face a little frightened. "Dr. McCoy says it's the effect of that plant I inhaled, but it's such a vivid memory."

"You thought you saw someone down by the river?"

"No, that's part of the trouble. He was nowhere near the river, and Commander Spock says I wasn't out of sight long enough to have been anywhere else."

"No, you weren't," he agreed. "I only lost sight of you for about ten or fifteen minutes at the most." He patted her hand gently. "You can see some pretty frightening things when you're drugged, you know."

She drew her hand away crossly. "He wasn't frightening. No-one could have been afraid of such a dear old man. The only thing that frightens me is the way people keep telling me he wasn't real. I know he was!"

He caught the slight edge of hysteria in her voice and said bracingly, "Well, you were the one who saw him, Naznim. You're a trained scientist, what do you think happened?"

She took a deep breath, steadied herself then eyed him dispassionately. "I think he was real, but I know he can't have been, and that's what frightens me."

"Good girl," he grinned approvingly. "If you know you're only afraid of your own thoughts, that's more than half the battle."

She relaxed. "You're right, of course." She got up. "I'm for bed."

"I'll walk you home," he smiled.

Three days later, Sulu found sufficient spare time to join her in the botany lab. "First day back, and you're already working overtime," he said disapprovingly as he entered.

She smiled up at him. "So would you, if you had a collection as good as this to work on. That planet is a medicinal treasure-house, Sulu. I've already noted three new sources of known drugs, and many of the other plants carry substances that are going to take plenty of checking out." She handed him a silver-leafed specimen in its preservative packing. "Describe that for me."

He shot her a quick glance, realising he was being tested. "A grass type," he said, turning it slowly. "Six to eight inches, leaf sheaths glabrous, spikelets not jointed, lemmas hairy; I should think it favours calcareous soils, probably damp."

"You know your grasses," she said approvingly. "O.K., you take that trayful there, and record them. When we're done we'll have a meal."

"A reward for being a good boy?"

"No. I'm hungry...again."

He laughed and picked up the plants indicated. When they'd finished for the evening, they strolled to the rec room chatting companionably.

"I thought I'd ruined the evening we arranged back on the planet," Sulu said, grinning, "but it was you who ended up in sickbay, not me."

"Why, what did you do to yourself?"

"Fell in the river collecting one of your specimens," he said sheepishly. "Unfortunately, just as Mr. Spock arrived on the scene."

She gave a peal of laughter. "Not the best time to choose," she agreed. "But you were all right?"

"Perfectly." He chuckled at the memory. "It wasn't funny at the time, because I was too worried about you, but you should have seen the Captain's face when we beamed up...Spock covered in orange streaks, sneezing fit to bust and carrying you, and me dripping wet. I had a tough lecture from Dr. McCoy, but you saved me one from Captain Kirk, and I'm suitably grateful since you're all right." He studied her enquiringly. "You are quite O.K. now, aren't you?"

"Oh yes. The memory is getting very hazy now, so I guess it really was the drug. It was just at the time it seemed so vivid, so alive. They all wanted me to stay so much I was scared."

"Wanted you to stay?"

Her face clouded. "That bit is very dim now, but yes, I did think there were a lot of people calling me to stay."

"I'm glad they weren't real," he said quietly. "You almost sound as though you wanted to."

She came to a sudden halt. "You're right," she said, surprised. "They did make me want to stay and that's what frightened me so much."

He placed a comforting arm round her shoulders. "It's O.K.," he soothed. "You're here, on board the Enterprise, and you're quite safe. It was only a... hallucination, a dream."

She shivered. "Yes, thank goodness. And soon I don't think I shall remember the feelings at all, they're fading so quickly. Sulu!" She slid out of his grasp. "For goodness sake, you'll have everyone staring at us."

"I wouldn't mind," he grinned.

"Well, I should, and anyway, I'm hungry. Come on, let's go eat!"

Kirk noted their arrival together and grinned over his coffee at McCoy. "Sulu's managing to combine two hobbies, I see," he commented.

"She's a nice kid," McCoy said approvingly.

"A competent worker," Spock agreed.

McCoy looked at him in mock puzzlement. "What's that got to do with it, Spock?" Receiving no reply other than a particularly bland stare, he shrugged, smiling. You're learning, Spock, slowly, but you're learning.

Two weeks later an excited figure shot into the Chief Surgeon's office stammering, "Doctor, you must come and look at this last test I've just run."

"Steady on, Naznim," McCoy said soothingly. "What's the hurry? It's not going to run away, is it?"

"No, but Doctor, I think I've found a naturally occurring source of perikylin in one of the shrubs on Beta Crucis. It's quite incredible, I've never seen anything so rich. Please come and look, if you have the time. Apart from anything else, I'd like you to check my results over. I may have made some monumental mistake."

He got to his feet, smiling. "Do you really think that's likely, now?"

She smiled back. "No, not really, but I would like a second opinion."

"Why didn't you get Spock to check it out? He is the Science Officer around here, after all."

"I...well, he's a bit high ranking," she said shyly. "Besides, I know about perikylin. My sister died from Lyran fever because there just wasn't enough of the drug available. It's always the same."

He nodded. "Yes, it's impossible to synthesize satisfactorily and natural sources are incredibly rare. I'm sorry to hear about your sister."

"It was a long time ago," she told him, "when I was too young to understand, but my mother was terribly bitter about it. Naznia was only six, and my parents had been married for ten years before she was born... she was very precious, even after I arrived, because they'd had to wait so long."

McCoy followed her into the laboratory and checked over the tests she'd made, finally straightening with a beaming smile on his face. "Congratulations, Lieutenant, you've made quite a discovery. We'll pass your findings on to the Surgeon General's office as a matter of urgency. How common was the plant on Beta Crucis?"

"That's the marvellous thing," she said happily. "It was all over the place. And it should be easy enough to reproduce the conditions for culture."

"Well now, don't you think we'd better just share these test results with that high-ranking Vulcan you're so scared of?"

"I'm not scared of him," she protested. "It's just that...oh, I don't know how to explain it...somehow you always want to get things right first time when he's around. If you make a fool of yourself, you feel so much worse."

"That's very interesting. After all, he's the only one you can be sure won't laugh!" McCoy went to the intercom. "Mr. Spock should be off watch at the moment. I expect he's relaxing somewhere in the Science Department. Spock?"

"Spock here."

"Botany Section, Spock, on the double. One of your staff has just hit the jackpot." He broke the circuit, winking at Naznim. "Let's stir him up a little before he arrives. He'll be puzzling over that all the way here."

She looked at him with awe. "I'd never dare say a thing like that to him."

He laughed. "Perhaps that's just as well. I doubt it he'd take it too kindly, but it doesn't hurt for you to realise that even if he isn't only Human,

he isn't as awesome as all that. If you're ever in a real fix he's not a bad person to consult. And he'll turn himself inside out to do you a good turn and then freeze you into an icicle when you try and thank him for it. Ah, that sounds like him. Here you are, Spock, take a look at this."

Spock studied the results with interest. "Congratulations, Lieutenant, a most useful discovery."

"And that particular shrub grows all over the area by the river," she told him.

"Starfleet will be pleased to have a full report on your findings," he said. "Is the work nearly completed?"

"We've classified everything, and we're about three-quarters of the way through the tests."

He raised an eyebrow. "You and your juniors must have been working long hours," he commented. "I trust Lt. Sulu has been helpful also."

She was glad her blush didn't show. "Very helpful, sir."

"Good. Let me have the complete report when it is done." He turned to go. McCoy gave her a wink and a nod of approval and followed him out.

In the corridor, he said, "Well, it looks as though someone will probably have to go back to Beta Crucis Three to get full data on those plants and a good supply of seeds and specimens. You might get your chance to go back there after all, Spock, and find out whatever it was gave you those odd tricorder readings. A pity you were more than a little hors de combat yourself at the time."

Spock looked at him woodenly as they entered the turbo-lift. "I do not know why you should assume...Deck Five...my judgement was impaired simply because I suffered a reaction to some substance in the pollen, but I do know the odds against the Enterprise being the ship sent to Beta Crucis Three are..."

"I really don't want to know," McCoy said hastily. "A man can dream, can't he? It looked a pretty nice place, and next time, if we get to go, I shall hope to be a member of the landing party myself."

Spock raised an experienced eyebrow. "The way you Humans live upon hopes and dreams never fails to amaze me, Doctor."

"Mr. Spock, the number of things that never fail to amaze you never fails to amaze me!"

"You are extraordinarily easily surprised, after all," retorted Spock.

McCoy drew in a deep breath of annoyance and let it out again, laughing despite himself. "Spock, there are times when you can be very irritating, and you darn well know it."

Spock gave the matter a little consideration. "No, not always, Doctor, most frequently I am unable to account for Human reactions to the simplest of logical statements. However, in your case, I will concede I am aware of a certain predictability in your response to some stimuli."

"In other words, you like to watch me rise to the bait," McCoy grinned, following him out of the lift as the doors slid open. "One day I just might take your worm right off the hook." Spock looked bewildered. "Never been fishing, Spock?" Seeing the glacial eye, he added hastily, "No, I don't indulge in blood sports either, Spock. In fact I know next to nothing about them."

"Then how can you be sure your analogy is valid?"

"I can't," McCoy said airily, "but then, you can't be sure it isn't. Where are you off to now?"

"To make a report to Captain Kirk." Spock looked faintly surprised. "I assumed that you were accompanying me, since we were both walking together towards his quarters."

"Oh - yes, I suppose we are. I wasn't really thinking about it. I was enjoying the argument."

"Argument, Doctor? I was unaware we were arguing."

"Spock!" McCoy looked shocked. "Jim says we argue, and you wouldn't argue with the Captain as well, would you?"

"Are you two still at it?" a patient voice enquired from behind them. "Come inside, the pair of you, and don't wrangle in front of the crew. It's bad for discipline."

When the door had shut, McCoy beamed at him happily. "We've come to give you some good news for a change, Jim. Apparently Beta Crucis is a medicinal treasure-house, and Naznim Armitraj has found a shrub among the specimens that is a natural source of perikylin - Lyran fever, Jim. It's the only successful treatment, and it's one of the few drugs that doesn't synthesize satisfactorily. This will have 'em hopping up and down with excitement in the Surgeon General's office."

"Is it a common plant, or will it be tricky to grow?"

"Down there it's very common." McCoy rubbed his hands. "Do you remember seeing it, Spock?"

"Yes, it grew in profusion along the banks of the river. The conditions should be easy to reproduce elsewhere."

"Well, I doubt if we shall be fortunate enough to go back and collect it," said Kirk. "Pity. I liked the sound of Beta Crucis Three and wouldn't have minded joining the landing party."

"Careful, Jim," McCoy said warningly. "Spock's already calculated the odds against the Enterprise drawing the short straw, and before you can say don't, he'll be quoting them in that cheery way he has."

Kirk laughed. "Well, in spite of that, this news calls for a celebration - as long as you're quite sure of the facts, Bones?"

McCoy looked affronted. "Naznim's made the tests; I've checked the results, Spock's checked the checking. With experts like us around, how can you doubt we're sure?"

"O.K., O.K.," Kirk said hastily. He pressed the intercom. "It. Armitraj to the Captain's quarters, please. Sit down, gentlemen." He caught the slight indecision in Spock's face and said quietly, "It's the least you can do, Spock. After all, she's in your Science Section, and she's made quite a discovery. Sit down and present your congratulations along with us. We won't mind if you drink orange juice!"

"It does seem an illogical way to show one's satisfaction," Spock murmured. However he sat down obediently enough as the door buzzer sounded.

Kirk smiled at the apprehensive face that appeared in the doorway. "Come in, Lieutenant. I hear you've been making most gratifying discoveries. We want to give you our congratulations. Sit down and have a drink and tell us about the rest of your findings."

She sat down nervously on the edge of a chair. "I haven't quite finished testing yet, sir, but there's no doubt that very many of the plants are medicinally valuable. I haven't come across anything else quite so spectacular as this one, though." She accepted the glass he offered.

McCoy took his and eyed it appreciatively. "Don't find too many goodies, Lieutenant. Our livers won't be able to take it." He grinned at the disapproving Vulcan. "Here's to Beta Crucis Three, and here's hoping in spite of some people's gloomy predictions, the Enterprise gets the job of going back again."

"Congratulations, Lieutenant." Kirk raised his glass to her.

"An excellent find," Spock added quietly, "and a most careful and swift

subsequent study. You run your section well, Lieutenant."

* * * * *

It was fully six months later before they heard any more, but then they received orders from the Surgeon General's office to proceed to Beta Crucis Three and obtain specimens of their discovery.

"It is a matter of urgency, Captain; there is an outbreak of Lyran fever on Rigel 4," Vice-Admiral Rawlings informed him. "The Potempkin was ordered there a month ago, but had to divert their mission owing to some trouble with the Klingons. We are containing the outbreak at present, but speed is essential. I cannot emphasize that enough."

"Understood, sir," Kirk said. "We will make it as quick as we can. Kirk out."

As Kirk thumbed the circuit closed, McCoy grunted angrily, "Typical! They wait until there's a panic on before they panic. There's no way we can get the plant to them in time to do anything about this outbreak."

"What are you grumbling for, Bones? At least they're sending us there. I thought you were keen to see the place."

"I am." The surgeon shot a triumphant glance across at the library console. "Well, Spock, you were wrong for once."

"I do not believe I ever said it was impossible the Enterprise should be so ordered, Doctor, I merely thought it unlikely."

Intervening hastily, Kirk said, "Lay in a course for Beta Crucis Three, Mr. Chekov."

"Plotted and laid in, sir."

"Ahead, Warp 4, Mr. Sulu." Kirk got to his feet. "You have the con, Mr. Spock."

"Acknowledged."

Six days later they slid into orbit and made a routine preliminary scan of the area. Spock studied the read-out with raised eyebrows as Kirk ordered the landing party to prepare for beam-down.

"Captain," he said unhurriedly. "The area we visited before now seems to be inhabited."

"Inhabited?" Kirk came up the steps to his station. "But there was no-one there last time."

"No, sir. However, sensors now show a large group of the natives in the area. There seems to be a sizeable village by the river."

Kirk groaned. "Hold back the landing party, Uhura. We'll have to go searching elsewhere. You said the shrub was fairly common, Spock?"

"Yes. In that area at least. We have no information about the rest of the planet, of course."

"Well, it may be a big place but if it's that common it shouldn't be too hard to find. Uhura, tell Lt. Armitraj to come to the briefing room." He paused at the turbo-lift door and looked over his shoulder. "Lt. Sulu, your presence may also be useful."

"Yes, sir." Sulu was on his feet as he spoke, and followed the Captain and First Officer into the lift. Kirk smiled at him as the car began to move.

"What are the odds we'll find some straight away?"

Sulu grinned. "I'm not an expert, sir," he protested. "Not in botany,

anyway, and I wouldn't care to calculate odds mentally in front of Mr. Spock."

"Now, I wonder why," Kirk murmured, leading the way out of the lift.

Sulu preferred not to reply. The question was clearly rhetorical.

Naznim took her seat at the briefing room table a little nervously. Kirk gave her a brief, reassuring smile, and explained the problem that had arisen.

"I wonder why they've moved into that area," she said, surprised. "I thought they were nomadic."

"Our surveys last time showed few signs of permanent habitation," Spock agreed. "It could well be that this is only a temporary campsite. We cannot be sure without a more minute examination of the area."

"We haven't time for any secondary work," Kirk said firmly, knowing it was best to scotch any such ideas before Spock's insatiable curiosity took over. "Our primary task is to get this plant and get out again. Lieutenant, this is your department. Where should we start looking first?"

She pondered the problem swiftly. "Since the shrub was growing in damp conditions, it would seem most sensible to start looking by rivers," she pointed out. "Also, that particular river is quite long, and if there is another area without people around, I suggest we start looking there. If that's impossible, then other similar areas are our best bets."

Kirk nodded. "Very well. You and Mr. Spock select two or three likely spots and then we'll begin beaming down landing parties. Mr. Sulu, give them any assistance they want." He got up. "I'll be in my quarters. Let me know when you're ready to begin beam-down. I'd like a look at this place."

"Affirmative."

They were already hard at work as the doors closed behind him. Half an hour later, Kirk's intercom buzzed.

"Captain, we have selected the two most likely areas."

"Very well. Call Dr. McCoy to the transporter room. Sulu and Armitraj can take one area, we'll take the other."

"Understood. Spock out."

When they were gathered in the transporter room, Kirk asked, "Anything you want to mention or suggest before we go, Lieutenant?"

"It's been quite a time since we were last here, but the shrub will still be recognisable. We're lucky this isn't a simple plant we're looking for, or we may have found we'd returned during the dormant period. As it is, we may even be lucky enough to have come back during the seed bearing time...their year is reasonably close to Earth's, about twenty-seven days longer."

"26:294," a voice murmured.

"Yes, sir. We should take full soil samples in the area, young bushes and plenty of seeds. Ensign Batthyany is going with your group, Mr. Spock. She knows exactly what we want."

"Very well. Kyle, beam down the first group."

Naznim took up her station along with Sulu and the other botanist, Ensign Evans. When the last sparkle died, Kirk led his group onto the transporter.

"Energise, Mr. Kyle."

He sniffed the air appreciatively. "A pleasant spot, Mr. Spock." He looked around. "It's certainly a botanist's paradise, but I don't see any of those flying creatures you talked about."

Spock studied his tricorder. "There do not seem to be any of them in the area, Captain. However, we are some hundred kilometres from our original beam-down, and this terrain is different." He looked about him. "The plants in this area are not so diverse as in the plain. This river valley is quite young, geologically speaking. I do not see any new specimens, do you, Ensign Batthyany?"

"No, sir. But I don't see the shrub we're looking for either. Shall I start looking around?"

"Steady on, Ensign," Kirk said reprovingly. "Give Mr. Spock a chance to make a check first, and don't go rushing off too eagerly."

"Sorry, sir."

"We've all been new at this," he nodded. "Anyone around, Spock?"

"No life forms registering, other than insects, Captain."

"Very well. Ensign, you and Dr. McCoy go that way, and you and I will go in this direction, Spock. Keep an eye open for other things than plants, just in case, and if you find anything or get into any trouble, contact us. If not, we'll rendezvous back here in an hour."

As they set off he cast an enquiring look at his friend. "Are the readings all quite straight-forward this time, Spock?"

"Perfectly." He studied the tricorder again. "It seems most likely that, since the vegetation in this area is more limited, the flying creatures find better feeding grounds on the plains."

"Logical." Kirk smiled.

They pushed their way along the river bank for almost half an hour without finding the shrub they sought, and then turned to return to the rendezvous by an alternate route. From the lack of any call from the other two members of the group, it was obvious their search was also non-productive.

"I haven't seen any signs of what we're looking for on the far bank, have you?" Kirk said as they turned.

"No. It is very much less fertile over there, however," Spock pointed out.

"Yes. Nice spot for rock-climbing," Kirk mused. "Pity we can't take a spot of shore leave. It's a lovely place."

"It is certainly peaceful," Spock agreed, following him. Their return journey produced an equally negative result, nor had McCoy and Batthyany anything encouraging to report.

"Let's hope Sulu and ~~Naznim~~ have had more luck," McCoy commented.

Kirk nodded agreement, and took out his communicator. "Never mind, Bones, you've had some fresh air and exercise. It hasn't been completely wasted!"

Two hundred miles away, Naznim, Sulu and Evans were having better luck. After only a short search they found a wide patch of the shrub growing close to the small river they were following. Sulu studied them, frowning slightly.

"They don't look quite the same as the ones we saw last time, Naznim."

"It's the same plant, but these are rather stunted, that's all. Still," she looked round the area consideringly, "it may be that conditions here are not quite so perfect." She looked at the plant more closely. "No, you're right, Sulu. Look at these leaf nodes, how distorted they are. I think this lot may be diseased." She cut off a small branch. "We'll take a specimen back for testing, but I'm afraid they're going to be unsuitable. Evans, you and Sulu scout a around a bit and see if you can find anything better."

"Don't go inhaling anything again," he warned her. "Stay in sight all the time. I don't want to appear back on board with either of you unconscious this time. You be careful too, Ensign."

"Affirmative." The young Helshman nodded his understanding and fell in step with the helmsman. "Are there any of those plants Lt. Armitraj inhaled around, then? I thought they were lavender coloured."

"They were, but you're the botanist! Just because there are more of that particular species here doesn't mean that the ones that *are* around are all safe." They walked in silence for five minutes, then Sulu paused, shading his eyes against the sun. "I don't think we'll have any luck in that direction. The colour of the vegetation is all wrong." He looked over his shoulder and gave a sudden exclamation. "Where's Naznim?"

Evans turned. "She can't have gone far..." he began.

Sulu broke into a run. "Come on!" he called. "She may be in trouble."

Surprised, Evans followed at a somewhat more sedate pace. He couldn't see any reason to panic quite so soon.

"Naznim, where are you?" Sulu called urgently as he neared the patch of shrubs.

"Over here, round the other side of the bush," she called back. "Have you found something?"

He followed her voice, and found her kneeling over a soil sample bag, closing it securely. He let out a long sigh of relief. "I got worried when I couldn't see you," he scolded. "I said to stay in sight!"

She laughed at him, not unkindly. "There's no need to get in a flap!"

He dropped on his knees beside her. "I don't want anything to happen to you," he said seriously.

She looked up, found his face close to hers, and before she had time to think, melted into his arms. He held her tightly for a moment, then put a hand under her chin to tilt her face up to his, kissing her gently, without passion, and drew back slightly, smiling lovingly at her.

"You must take care of yourself, for my sake," he said softly. "You mean a lot to me."

She gave a little, inarticulate murmur and tightened her arms around him. "You, too," she whispered.

He kissed her again, this time hungrily, and she clung tightly. Coming round the bush, took the situation in swiftly, and tactfully tiptoed away again. Absorbed in each other, they did not hear him.

At last they drew apart, and she laughed shakily. "I don't know about you, but my knees are begging wet. This ground is very damp."

"I haven't had time to notice," he grinned, and got up, putting a hand down to help her up. "I love you, Naznim."

She shook her head gently. "Don't go too fast, Sulu. I like you a lot, but don't let's get serious yet. We've a lot to think about."

"I won't try and hurry you., as long as you're not turning me down completely."

"No. Not that. But don't let's rush into anything without thinking. I'm not the sort who changes her mind a lot, and I'd rather take things slowly."

"I know." He leaned forward and kissed her tenderly. "That's why I like you."

"Sulu!" She pushed him away gently. "It's just as well that Commander Spock isn't with us - and where's Evans?"

"He was right behind me."

"Have you no sense of timing?" she demanded, embarrassed. He smiled at her wickedly.

"Well, either he didn't see or he's being very tactful," he pointed out. "Either way, there's no need to worry."

"I do worry." She bent and picked up the sample bag. "So start behaving properly, there a dear. Come one, I've got all we need from here, we'll collect Evans and get back aboard and start testing. But

I'm not too hopeful these are sufficiently healthy."

They walked round the shrub and found the Ensign some distance off, examining another type of shrub with keen interest. Sulu gave a cheery yell and he turned round, face carefully neutral. He walked over to them.

"I can't see any other likely patches in the area," he said. "That way the vegetation is obviously the wrong colour, and behind us the ground is much dried, so I don't think we'll find anything that way either."

Naznim studied the tricorder. "You're right. Well, there are other places we can search. Or maybe Mr Spock and Ensign Batthyany will find something. We're all finished here, Sulu, so we'll beam up now."

Sulu nodded and took out his communicator.

Back on board, Naznim bore the specimens off to the lab for testing. She was busily engaged when Spock walked in.

"I see your party was more successful than ours, Miss Armitraj." He picked up a branch and studied it carefully, then looked over at her. "Are you sure this is the correct plant, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, it's the right plant, but it's diseased." She got up and came round the bench. "See, here and here, the leaf nodes are affected. I'm not very hopeful of its usefulness, I'm afraid."

"You may be right. Our group found no specimens at all. When you have completed the tests we shall need to make further decisions as to where to send the next landing parties. It seems this is not going to be the simple matter we originally envisages. Please come to the briefing room as soon as you are ready."

"I'll be another ten minutes," she said worriedly.

"That will be quite satisfactory," he nodded. "There is no necessity for undue haste."

"I won't mess up the tests."

"No. I do not believe you will," he answered quietly, and left her looking after him in bewilderment, uncertain whether she had been complimented or reprimanded. She gave a brief shrug and returned to her task.

Ten minutes later she joined the group in the briefing room, her face gloomy.

"No trace of perikylin at all in those specimens, I'm afraid," she told them. "We'd better try river valleys on the other two land masses, I think.."

"I have one or two areas to suggest," Spock said, "if you will study these reading, Lieutenant... "

She went to join him, and Kirk gave a grimace of annoyance at McCoy. "Why does nothing ever turn out to be straightforward, Bones?" he complained.

McCoy grinned. "It does, Jim, sometimes, and being the ungrateful sort you are, you promptly forget about it, or else complain of boredom."

An appreciative gleam acknowledged the truth of the accusation, but Kirk made no verbal response. He got to his feet. "I'll be in my quarters if I'm needed, gentlemen," he told them. "Spock, I'll leave this in your hands. Select four landing parties and send them to the most likely areas. Dr. McCoy and I will both be available."

"Very well." Spock looked up briefly.

"I don't need to remind you that time is of the essence," Kirk continued.

"No, sir."

"I thought not." Kirk gave him a tiny smile and left them to their work.

Twenty minutes later he joined Spock's group in the transporter room.

"The other groups have beamed down already," Spock said as he took his station.

"Well, we must hope for better luck this time, then," Kirk said. "Energise, Mr. Kyle."

He looked round appreciatively at the landing area. "This is very attractive, Spock. It's almost as lush as Gamma Trianguli 6. Let's hope it doesn't have as many hazards." He gave a tiny grimace at the memory. A movement in the branches above him caught his eye. "Look, Spock. Is that one of the flying creatures you saw before? In that tallest tree over there, the one with the silver foliage."

Spock's eyes followed his pointing finger. "Yes, sir. There is a whole group of them up there - at least a dozen."

"Yes, I see them now. They're keeping very still."

Spock studied his tricorder. "Mammalian and warm blooded," he said slowly. "No sign of intelligence, however, not even a minimal reading, and all quite straightforward, not confused as they were before."

"Well," Kirk gave a shrug, "I don't like unexplained mysteries any more than you do, Spock. Knowing you as well as I do, I'm quite sure you can do two things at once efficiently. Keep an eye out for anything unusual while we search, but don't lose sight of our main objective."

"Affirmative."

"Ensign Batthyany, you take Mr. Chekov in that direction, Mr. Spock and I will go this way. We'll rendezvous back here in an hour. If you find anything, contact us at once. I don't need to remind either of you to keep an eye open for dangers as well, do I?"

"No, sir."

Kirk watched as the two younger crew members set out then led the way off through the trees. The going was not particularly easy through the lush undergrowth by the river, but at least it was dry enough underfoot. It was something that the foliage was dry, too, Kirk thought as he delicately removed the leaf that was making its unerring way down the back of his neck. However, the temperature in this latitude was noticeably higher than at their previous landing site and he was soon sweating profusely. He cast an envious glance over his shoulder at Spock, and drew his sleeve crossly over his face, realising from the resulting streaks on the yellow material that his face was dusty as well as damp. He paused momentarily.

"I haven't seen any sign of this shrub yet, have you, Spock?"

"No. I am rather dubious about this terrain also," Spock replied. "It is very different from the plains where we originally found it." He peered ahead. "The trees do seem to be thinning out, however, and the area ahead may be more profitable."

"You could be right." Kirk moved off again, carefully holding the branches aside so that they would not spring back on the Vulcan. Ten or so minutes walking brought them into a much more open area and he sighed with relief as they stepped out a little more speedily, scanning the area around them with watchful eyes.

Simultaneously they said, "Over there," and both pointed to a clump of shrubs away to their left. Kirk grinned.

"Snap," he commented, grinning even more broadly at Spock's blank look. "You did have a deprived childhood, didn't you?" he said. "I'll bet you never played tag either. Come one."

The ground was considerably damper here, and by the shrub they sought it was

positively buddy. "Watch your footing," Kirk advised, sliding a little precariously. "McCoy will laugh himself sick if we get back smothered in mud."

"Quite possibly," Spock agreed drily. "Yes, this is the plant we are looking for, Captain." He laid a sudden warning hand on Kirk's arm. "There are several of the flying creatures in its branches, Jim," he whispered.

"We'll get one for study." Kirk drew his phaser, slowly, setting it to stun, and took careful aim. To his surprise, before he could fire the creatures took fright and were gone in a flash of iridescent colours. He swung his arm up, following their flight, and fired.

"Missed," he said in exasperation. "I must be losing my touch. They're out of range now." He tucked the phaser back in his belt and turned to find his friend eyeing him oddly. "Something the matter, Spock?"

The Vulcan shook his head a little confusedly. "Quite illogical," he said slowly.

"What is?"

Spock paused and then said, "For a moment I was quite convinced you were about to fire at me."

"But I wasn't aiming anywhere near you."

"I know. Utterly illogical." He looked round thoughtfully. "Unfortunately, there are none of the creatures in the vicinity now, so we have lost the opportunity to capture one for study."

"A pity," Kirk agreed, "but our main objective is to get samples of this shrub, and at least we have achieved that." He took out his communicator. "Mr. Chekov."

"Chekov here, sir."

"We have found the plant we're looking for. How are you getting on?"

"Ensign Batthyany believes there are some bushes about a quarter of a mile away that look promising, sir."

"Good. We'll get sample bags beamed down to us and then go back aboard. If Batthyany's right, get some samples from your area and beam back. If not, continue your search for another half hour. Oh, and Mr. Chekov, if you see any of those flying creatures, try and capture one for study and take it back with you. Kirk out."

Chekov tucked his communicator away, saying, "The Captain and Mr. Spock have found some samples."

Batthyany nodded. "I wonder why they want one of the flying creatures," she mused.

"Ours not to reason why..." Chekov quoted.

Batthyany did her best Vulcan imitation. "Don't let Spock hear you say that," she commented. "You're a better shot than I am, Pavel. I'll let you do the fancy shooting. There are plenty of the creatures about."

"All right." Chekov removed his phaser and held it ready while they walked on towards the promising-looking group of shrubs. It was not long before a small flock of the creatures flew close to them and he took careful aim.

Batthyany laughed. "Missed by a mile," she said scathingly. "I can do better than that!"

"You do it, then," Chekov said, irritated. "I've never seen creatures move so fast."

The botanist raised her phaser as another group flew over. "Bother," she said. "They veered off just as I was aiming."

They wasted ten valuable minutes before they finally abandoned their efforts.

"The plant is more important after all," Batthyany consoled herself, "and the closer we get the more sure I am that those are the right ones."

"Good," Chekov said with satisfaction.

There was less self-congratulation in the air once the plants found by three out of the four landing parties had been tested. All proved perikylin negative.

Kirk frowned. "Explanations, Lieutenant?"

"I can only assume it must be something in the soil at the original landing site," she said slowly.

Kirk groaned inaudibly, foreseeing problems ahead. He got to his feet. "Carry on with the samples we have got, Lieutenant," he ordered. "See if you can find out precisely why some contain the drug. If it's necessary we'll have to beam down to the original site and get some there." He quirked an eyebrow at Spock. "Prepare to equip yourself, Dr. McCoy and me for contact with the inhabitants, Mr. Spock. Prime Directive or not, we have to have those plants. I fancy we can manage to pass ourselves off as strangers from another area."

"Very well, sir," Spock replied imperturbably.

The following day, decision had to be made to risk contact.

"We'll be in and out as swiftly as we can," Kirk said. "The Prime Directive is fully operational here, no extenuating circumstances at all. We go down as natives and stay that way."

"Understood, Captain," Spock nodded.

Naznim bit back her disappointment at not being one of the landing party, hoping the Captain would not see how much she wanted to go, how deeply she longed to reassure herself that her original tests had neither been false nor some solitary, unrepeatable fluke of nature. Kirk patted her shoulder softly, turning her dark face round to his.

"I'd take you if I could," he said quietly, "but the sensor reports show all these people as fair-skinned; I'm afraid you'd give us away at once."

"I know," she said gravely. "I only hope..."

He shook her very, very gently to and fro, a smile crinkling the corners of his eyes. "You're afraid you've got it all wrong, and you're sending us on a fool's errand, aren't you? Well, just remember this, neither I nor my First Officer fool that easily, and if you think you can slip anything past our Chief Medical Officer you're an optimist. They have faith in your work, you have faith in it too, and stop worrying. We'll get samples to you just as soon as we can." He let her go and turned to the Engineer. "We'll report in every twelve hours, Scotty. Keep on with the search over the rest of the planet. Lt. Armitraj will continue to select landing areas for you to choose from. If you have any luck, let us know at the next report time, so we can get back aboard as soon as possible."

"Aye, sir," Scott said comfortably. "Leave it ~~tae~~ us, sir. We'll continue searching. Stores report they have everything ready for the three o' ye."

"Very well. We'll beam down about five kilometers away from the inhabited area in half an hour."

The skins supplied for their clothing were a marvel of apparent authenticity, right down to the appalling aroma of primitive curing. Kirk shifted his ~~his~~ uncomfortably on his shoulders as he trudged along the dusty track towards the village.

"Offhand, I'd say this track is not all that old, wouldn't you, Spock?"

The Vulcan nodded assent. "I would estimate it has been in constant use for less

than a complete growing cycle, possibly even for less than six months."

"Since we were last here, in fact," Kirk mused. "just like the new village at the original landing site. I wonder just what it was suddenly made a nomadic people decide to settle down."

"Could be any of a number of things," McCoy pointed out.

Spock suddenly held up a warning hand. "There are other travellers on the road behind us," he said softly. "A group of five or six."

Kirk paused, looking over his shoulder. "Yes, you're right. I can see them through the trees. We'll slow down and let them catch us up."

They kept a wary eye behind them as they went on and eventually came to a halt at the roadside when the second group drew close and stopped. Kirk stepped forward as one of them came on, left hand held out palm up. He imitated the gesture and found himself drawn into a bear hug greeting; if his own skins smelt obnoxious, his new acquaintance's were unbelievably nasty. The rest stepped forward to greet them also and he was subjected to a series of embraces, each as malodorous as the first, while Spock and McCoy underwent the same ordeal in their turn. Spock, not unexpectedly, emerged as unruffled and sober as ever, but McCoy's eyes held a faintly hunted expression. Kirk gave him the tiniest flicker of an eyelid.

"You are of the tribe of Jen-wae?" their new acquaintance asked, "or are you strangers like us?"

"We are strangers," Kirk replied.

"So you too make the journey to worship the goddess at the holy place of Krandu?"

"Yes." Kirk fell into step beside him. "Which tribe are you from?"

"From Denner-al in the north, three days journey away. I am Drib-or, eldest son, and this is my brother Fes-wa. Where are you from?"

"Beyond the mountains in the east," Kirk told him. "More than thirty days journeying. I am Jim Kirk, and these are Spock and McCoy."

"Jim-ka, Spo-ka and Mah-coy." Drib-or nodded gravely. "We will walk on our way together."

"Tell me of your tribe," Kirk suggested. "We are strangers in this area and find many of the customs strange to us."

Drib-or laughed, displaying a magnificent set of teeth. "The ways of the tribe of Jen-wae are strange to us all, but we have heard of the goddess, and the likeness they have built, and the fertility of the land she has led Jen-wae's tribe into. Many come to worship her and find herbs and medicines to carry back to their own tribes. It is a blessed place."

"We, too, seek out herbs," Kirk said. "Mah-coy is a healer, and we have been searching long for a bush we call pilfillic - "

("Why pilfillic?" McCoy asked later. "Why not?" Kirk retorted, reasonably enough.)

"- and hearing of the goddess on our travels we have turned aside to worship also."

"There are many blessings to be gained," Drib-or said gravely. "Ah, I see the huts of Jen-wae in sight. Our journey is over."

"Will the tribe of Jen-wae welcome strangers?" Kirk asked. "We come from so far away..."

"The tribe will be pleased the good news has spread so far," Drib-or answered. "They are pleased and proud to be the first witnesses of the goddess, a privilege they wish to share with all."



Kirk breathed an inward sigh of relief, which he took back when he saw Drib-or's brow darken. "You seem unsure of this, Drib-or," he said, soberly. "Please share your worries with me."

"We have heard that Jen-wae is ill," Drib-or answered. "If he has died since we last had word, then the tribe will have a new leader, of whom little is known. He is the younger son, the eldest was taken by the goddess soon after she came. There are those that mutter, the tribe of Dah-vee will not welcome strangers as readily as the tribe of Jen-wae."

"I see. Then let's hope Jen-wae has made a good recovery."

"He is an old man," Drib-or said heavily, "and a good man; the gods love such as he."

Kirk gave a swift look up at the impassive face at his left shoulder, wondering whether Spock had so far noticed anything he'd missed, but there was no warning to be seen in the dark eyes and he relaxed again.

At the outskirts of the hutted village, Drib-or paused, set his hands to his mouth and gave a great shout. Figures appeared in the doorways of the hide huts, eyeing the strangers incuriously. Some slipped back inside again, while others left their huts and gathered around the group. They were oddly quiet, Kirk thought, summing each other up warily like strange animals meeting, not staring eye to eye but taking swift, penetrating glances at each other. He imitated the movements, and noted with approval that his companions were meticulously following his example. After a minute or two, the villagers parted to let the strangest looking man he'd yet seen here approach, a villainous-looking character, so squint-eyed it was impossible to tell where his prime attention lay, but the uneasiness of those he passed was plain to see. Several at the back of the crowd slid silently and unostentatiously away after he passed. Obviously a presence to be feared and treated carefully, whatever one's personal reaction.

"What tribe?" the man demanded curtly.

"Of Denner-al. We come to join in worship with the tribe of Jen-wae. I am Drib-or, eldest son."

"Jen-wae lies sick. It is I, Dah-vee, youngest son now eldest, who welcomes you."

"Peace to the tribe of your father." Drib-or inclined his head. "We claim shelter amongst you and pledge obedience to your laws while we remain."

"It is well." Dah-vee nodded. "Are you all of one tribe?"

"No." Kirk stepped forward. "We are from far away towards the rising sun, of the tribe of Raw-ling and we have journeyed more than thirty days, searching for a plant we have need of."

"Thirty days journey?" The squint eyes widened unappealingly. "Truly the fame of the tribe of Jen-wae spreads far. You are welcome, strangers." He swung round on the villagers. "Prepare huts for our guests and let the sisters prepare food."

As the villagers scurried away, he led the way towards the large thatched hut in the centre of the village. Waving his hand towards it he said, "Behold the temple of the goddess. When we are convinced of your obedience we will welcome you within its walls. Until then, you will stay close to your huts that we may study your ways and judge your inner thoughts."

Kirk stopped abruptly and Dah-vee swung round to study him insolently. Kirk dropped his eyes. "We seek a herb, Dah-vee, a plant my people prize. May we not search for it before we visit your temple?"

Spock's warning hand touched him as he spoke, but he realised for himself as he watched Dah-vee's brows draw together, that he had blundered badly.

"The goddess must be served," Dah-vee said angrily. "Already she hides her countenance from her people because they displease her. The ways of your tribe

must be strange indeed, if you will seek out your own desires before you seek to please your gods."

"We come from very far indeed," Kirk said as humbly as he dared, "and our gods are different, but we have a great desire to learn from the tribe of Jen- wae."

Dah-vee still glared for a second, then dropped his eyes and turned away contemptuously. "Huts will be shown you," he said indifferently. "I will send for you when the time is right."

Kirk eyed his retreating back ruefully, and a sudden reflected gleam from his thrown-back hood attracted his attention. Two dark eyes peered out from the matted fur, and as the creature moved restlessly there was a sudden flash of iridescent colour from its folded wings. Kirk grinned, it looked very snug in its resting spot. He caught McCoy's eye looking at him in surprise.

"Didn't you see the creature in his hood, Bones?" he muttered.

"What creature?" McCoy asked, bewildered.

"Several of the villagers have them, Doctor," Spock said. "But that was by far the largest of all that I have noticed. The others were barely half the size. They carry them in their hoods."

"I didn't notice any of them," McCoy admitted. "Look, someone's coming this way."

A tall native came up, smiling widely and holding out his left hand in the gesture of peace. "I am Hen-ka. If you will follow me I will show you a hut where you may rest. The sisters will bring food for you."

They entered the hide hut indicated, Drib-or and his fellow tribesmen entering the one next to it. McCoy was wrinkling a fastidious nose as he stepped through the low doorway.

"Mind your head, Spock," he said warningly.

The Vulcan nodded imperturbably and followed him in. Kirk looked round and gave a small shrug. "Well, it keeps the wind and the rain off, I suppose," he said drily.

"But it doesn't exactly smell of roses," McCoy grinned. He flung himself down on the pile of skins in one corner. "Bed, I suppose. Well, I've met better, but I've met worse." He slapped a vigorous hand on a suspicious movement. "Odd how such species as fleas and lice are as common throughout the Galaxy as humanoids. Still, I suppose they help to provide a sensation of internal springs."

Kirk hunkered down, grinning. "I'll sleep better without your picturesque comments," he said, patting the skins beside him. Spock folded his long, lean shape up neatly and squatted beside him. Kirk raised a rueful eyebrow. "I blew it earlier," he said. "I get the feeling Dah-vee is the sort who bears grudges. I should have known better than to be too impatient, but I'd hoped we'd be able to wander round fairly freely once we got here; I guess we'll have to pass their tests before they'll accept us, now."

Spock nodded. "I believe you are right, Captain. Your request did prove unwise, but it was worth the risk."

"Keep an eye on the entrance," Kirk said softly. "I'll make our first report while we're alone." He pulled his communicator from the hidden pocket inside the artificial skins of his clothing. "Enterprise."

"Scott here, sir."

"This may take longer than we thought, Scotty. We're not going to be free to wander round, today at least. Keep those other landing parties beaming down. I suppose you've had no luck yet?"

"No, sir. One specimen only, and Lt. Armirraj says it's negative."

"Keep searching. We'll report again tomorrow. Kirk out."

He snapped the tiny instrument shut and tucked it away again as Spock signalled someone's approach. The door opened and two of the villagers entered carrying woven rush baskets of food, which they placed on the dirt floor, and backed out again without speaking or acknowledging the hearty thanks Kirk gave them. McCoy frowned after them.

"If those two were women, I'll eat my hat," he said flatly.

"They certainly didn't look like women," Kirk agreed, squatting down by the food. "What makes you think they might be, Bones?"

"I don't." McCoy gave a chuckle as he sat down. "But...Hen-ka, was it?... said the sisters would bring us food."

Kirk shrugged. "I shouldn't think it's of any particular significance," he said, "but you're right, Hen-ka did mention the sisters. Spock, this is mostly dried meat but there are a few berries here. You'd better test those for you and we'll have the meat if it's safe."

Spock delved for his hidden tricorder. "None of these should harm any of us," he said, studying the readings. "Neither will it harm me to go without food for a day or so, Captain. Please partake of the vegetable food as well."

Kirk sighed exaggeratedly. "One day, Bones, I'll get a First Officer who doesn't argue every order he's given. Spock, eat the berries!"

McCoy gave a tiny chuckle and picked up a strip of meat to inspect it closely. "This is smothered in seeds of some kind, Spock. We're not going to be exclusively carnivorous, if you were worried."

They chewed for a while in silence, finding the dried meat tough but reasonably pleasant tasting. Kirk swallowed another mouthful and cupped his aching jaw. "You can see why they have such good teeth," he commented. "I wonder what meat it is."

"Probably the flying creatures," Spock said. "It is by far the most numerous and the largest of the local animals. All the skins they wear and the hides of the huts are from this creature."

Kirk was surprised. "But they must have used thousands of the creatures building this village," he protested. "There are not all that many of them around."

"Could well be why," McCoy grunted, pulling off a long strip of meat with his teeth, and none too daintily stuffing it into his mouth with tongue and fingers. "Sorry, both of you. There's no way you can eat this elegantly."

"So I observe," Spock commented coldly. "The sun will be going down soon, Captain. I believe we are unlikely to get the opportunity to leave the hut tonight."

"I'll take first watch," Kirk said. "You two stretch out and get some sleep ...if the creepy-crawlies will leave you alone long enough."

He set his eye to a gap in the hide covering. "I can't see any sign of movement in the hut where they put Drib-or and his group. I guess they've settled down for the night too."

The hours passed uneventfully, save for the frenzied scratching indulged in by the two Human members of the group. Neither of them was sorry when increasing light heralded a new day. More food was brought them as the first rays of the sun were touching the tops of the few tall, black-trunked trees - dried meat and berries once again - and they chewed it slowly, each keeping a lookout through a different gap in the primitive walls for signs of activity in the village. At last Spock, on the side nearest the neighbouring hut, held up a finger.

"They are coming to fetch Drib-or, Captain."

Kirk joined him, peering out into the bright sunlight. "Yes, I think you're

right. I wonder where they're taking them."

He swung round to look out of the opposite wall and his head impacted painfully with his First Officer's, bringing tears to his eyes. He clutched his temples, biting back a wowl of anguish, Spock blinked twice, rapidly.

"Are you all right, Jim?"

"I...think so." Kirk drew the back of his hand across his watering eyes. "Spock, you have the hardest head I've ever encountered."

"I would not precisely describe yours as soft, Captain."

"Ssh." McCoy waved an irritated hand. "If you two've quite finished fooling around, come and look over here. They're taking Drib-or and the rest of 'em into the temple."

His two companions found gaps to peer through. Kirk groaned as the doors of the temple swung shut behind the last villager.

"I did blow it," he said apologetically. "It looks as though Dah-vee is going to make us wait."

Spock gave him a bland stare. "It will give us an extra opportunity to study the inhabitants, however, Captain."

"Not what we're ordered to do, and you know it." Kirk stirred restlessly; he hated inaction. "Still, you're right, of course," he added with one of his sudden smiles. "Always providing they let us out of here. The view is a little limited, to say the least." He twisted his neck, attempting to see round the corner of the next hut. "Have all the villagers gone into the temple? I can't see anyone moving in this direction."

"There is no-one outside the huts at present," Spock said slowly, "but I believe there are still people inside them."

"I think you're right," McCoy agreed. "I can see movement inside that third one along there...the door is slightly open. I wonder why they haven't all gone into the temple."

"Men only," Kirk said succinctly. "At least, I didn't notice any women going in there, did you?"

"No. They seem oddly elusive in this tribe," McCoy commented.

"It's not that uncommon," Kirk pointed out. "There are plenty of cultures about where they keep the women hidden away."

"Yes," McCoy said doubtfully, "but they wouldn't tell you they'll send the women to serve you if they kept them hidden. I mean, Hen-ka's unlikely to forget such a basic thing as that, is he?"

"Hardly," Kirk agreed. "We're discussing in a vacuum though. I wonder if we dare slip out for a moment."

"Most unwise," Spock said firmly. "It may well set us back even further, Captain."

Kirk sighed. "You're right, of course." He resigned himself to waiting. Another movement caught his eye, a figure leaving a hut. "Look, Bones, Spock, there's someone." He gave a tiny chuckle. "So much for our theory it's the women who're not in the temple. There's no debate that that's not female, is there?"

McCoy studied the bared, slightly hairy expanse of chest with a professional eye. "I wish I could get a closer look," he said interestedly. "These people seem to have some subtle physiological differences I'd like to study more closely."

Out of deference to his Vulcan friend, Kirk refrained from ribald comment. "They're coming out of the temple," he said at last, "and I think they're coming this way."

Hen-ka beckoned them from their hut, smiling apologetically. "Dah-vee fears

the goddess does not wish more strangers at her feet today," he said softly. "Perhaps tomorrow we will take you to worship her."

Kirk schooled his face to patient anticipation and nodded. "We await the goddess' pleasure," he said humbly. A movement in Hen-ka's hood caught his eye. Hen-la followed his gaze, smiling.

"My liandus is restless," he said apologetically, putting back his hand to grasp the creature. "I will let him fly." He held up his hand and the tiny furry creature perched on his finger, chirruping softly to itself and spreading its glorious wings to the bright sun.

"Why, it's beautiful," McCoy said softly. "May I touch it?"

"I would not recommend it," Her-ka said hastily, and McCoy drew back his tentatively held out hand. "Do you not tame the liandi in your tribe, that you do not know their fierceness to all save their masters?"

"No," Kirk said. "There are...very few of them in our lands."

Hen-ka stared in obvious wonder and non-comprehension. "Here they fly in vaster numbers each year," he said. "All the year through the numbers swell. Maybe they leave your lands to come to ours." He threw up his hand and watched the liandus launch itself into the sky. "Also, of course, the ways of all tribes are different." He gave a questioning glance at Kirk, who ducked the issue as neatly as he could, having no idea what Hen-ka was asking him.

"It is very possible they fly here," Kirk said. He looked about him at the grassy, rolling plains. "Our land grows less fertile. This land is good, and kind to the tribe of Jen-wae."

"The goddess led us here," Hen-ka said proudly. "Stepping through the long grasses in her robe of shining blue." His face fell again. "But since Jen-wae fell ill, she hides her face; none see her save Dah-vee, and no joining has come to gladden us." He gave himself a shake, smiling. "But you have not come to hear the woes of Hen-ka. The goddess will smile upon us once again, in time. Come, we will share the fragrance of the finta-leaf together, and talk of the lands you have seen in your travels."

He sat them down outside his own hut, and fetched black wooden bowls and a hollowed out log full of water. "I have finta in my pouch," he said. "Is that to your choice, or do you bear anything that pleases you more?"

"Finta will please us," Kirk said swiftly.

Hen-ka reached inside his coverings and drew out a handful of dried leaves. He put them into one bowl, crushed them with a flat stone, divided the powder between the four bowls, added water and handed them out. They accepted, sipping tentatively. The taste was fresh and tangy, not unlike the juice of citrus fruit, and they drank with enjoyment.

"Hen-ka, the tribe of Jen-wae has not always lived in this place, has it?" Kirk asked.

Hen-ka laughed. "Indeed, no. We wandered far away towards the setting sun, the mountains always close, but in the joining the goddess called us and showed us this place where the hevika grows, and the flutral trees. We followed her willingly and carved her likeness from the flutral tree, and built a temple to do her honour. Now we will stay here, in this fruitful place where she has led us, and be her faithful servants." He looked up, over their heads, and held up his hand, whistling softly. There was a loud chirruping call, a flutter of wings, and the liandus lighted on his outstretched hand, scolding a little. "Wicked one," Hen-ka said lovingly, "you will tire your tiny wings, my pup. Conserve your strength and do not fly so far."

The liandus put its head on one side, consideringly, then chirruped again. Hen-ka laughed. "In then, my lazy one. Hide away." He pushed the hood back from his head, and the liandus fluttered into its folds and nestled down.

Kirk remembered that nestling movement later, as he settled for the night, Spock standing first watch by the door.

"Remember that liandus?" he asked sleepily. "You could almost swear it understood every word Hen-ka said."

McCoy laughed sardonically. "That's dogs, Jim!" He yawned. "And I never believed it of that size of brain, either."

Kirk laughed.

Kirk's unvoiced hopes that another landing party would come up with something useful were not rewarded, and each report to the Enterprise was negative on both sides. To his chagrin, it was three full days before Dah-vee showed any sign of relenting and permitting them to visit the temple, by which time the landing party was beginning to get edgy and tempers were fraying.

"It's all very well descending to the primitive level so's not to break the damned Prime Directive," McCoy grumbled on the fourth morning, "but after a few days it begins not to be funny." He inserted a hand under the malodorous skins draping his shoulders and scratched vigorously.

Spock eyed him coldly. "Is it really necessary for you to descend to their level of behaviour as well, Doctor?"

McCoy glared. "Yes it is, you supercilious, pointed-eared pixie, you. Just because the local bugs took one taste of that green rubbish you call blood and keeled over with their boots in the air..."

Kirk had to laugh at the ridiculous mental picture, and the Doctor rounded on him. "I suppose you're thoroughly enjoying yourself, Captain," he said disgustedly. "It's your idea of fun to live in a flea-ridden hut that stinks of god-knows-what, scratching yourself raw...and that's another thing - if we don't all go down with some sort of infection, I shall be surprised."

"So shall I, Doctor," Spock said in freezing accents. "I have always been dubious about the efficacy of your medical precautions."

"Why, you..."

"That'll do, both of you." Kirk put enough of his command tone into the order to stop the two of them in their tracks. "We're all uncomfortable and none of us exactly smells like a floral bouquet by now, but so far we're doing just fine here, and with any luck we'll soon have convinced Dah-vee that we're harmless and he'll let us into the temple. Drib-or and the rest of his group have been wandering around freely enough since their visit."

"The darn plant would have to be growing right here," McCoy grumbled, fingers busily working in the small of his back.

"STOP SCRATCHING, BONES!" Kirk yelled, feeling his own skin begin to crawl in sympathy. It was no good; he applied his nails with relish.

Spock's eyebrows touched the matted fringe of his normally impeccable hairline. "Captain, Dah-vee is approaching," he warned.

Itching chest forgotten, Kirk peered out of the crack in the wall. Yes, he was coming their way, perhaps today they would attend the daily ceremony in the temple and at last get on with the job they had come to do. He schooled his mind into its humblest gear and prepared to grovel if necessary.

The hut door swung open and Dah-vee's ungainly form blocked out the light. "Have the tribe of Raw-lin learned patience yet?" he sneered.

Kirk bowed his head. "The tribe of Raw-lin seeks only to serve the goddess," he said meekly. "We listen well to the words of Dah-vee, her spokesman."

Dah-vee laughed. "Her spokesman, indeed," he said triumphantly. "She speaks only to me, since Jen-wae lies sick. What favours would you seek from her?"

"Only her goodwill, no special favours. We are the humblest of her worshippers."

Dah-vee seemed to view this attitude with approval, for he nodded slowly and with satisfaction. "Come then, today, to do her honour. Hen-ka will lead you when it is time."

The door swung shut. McCoy let out the quietest of whispered war-whoops and slapped Kirk fervently on the shoulders. "Well done, Jim. The best bit of boot-licking I've seen in a long time."

"Indeed." Spock added his sober touch. "That was expertly done, Captain."

"You can bet your Sunday shirt on that," McCoy grinned. "We could even be beaming out of here before the day's over, Jim."

"And equally we could get no opportunity to search out the specific area for several more days," Spock said quellingly.

McCoy heaved a dramatic sigh. "Spock, this constant looking on the sunny side might get you sunburned," he said happily.

Kirk turned his involuntary giggle into a cough.

They waited barely another half hour before they saw Hen-ka coming towards their hut. Kirk got to his feet, a tingle of anticipation warming him the period of inaction was over. He followed Hen-ka, head sedately bowed, across the worn grass in the centre of the tiny village and in through the low doorway of the temple.

It was dark inside, and the odours rising from the bodies and garments of the packed villagers caught at the back of their nostrils, making them choke. Fighting down nausea, Kirk stumbled his way through the throng behind Hen-ka and took up the place indicated at the very front of the crowd, immediately below a pedestal of some kind, draped with a mat of woven grasses. The coarse weaves effectively hid the shape underneath in the dim light, but a gleam of bright, light blue caught his eye before the outer door swung shut. He felt McCoy and Spock settle themselves back on their heels, one each side of him, and waited patiently for something to happen. He felt the push of bodies behind him as the crowd began to sway, and let himself go with them, smiling to himself and wishing it was not so dark. He'd love to be able to see his dignified First Officer swaying from side to side in adoration of this alien goddess. On one side a single voice began to chant, the unmistakable tones of Dah-vee, raised in a song of worship and praise - mostly of himself, as far as Kirk could piece the wailing noise together. Other voices took it up, and the chanting became more rhythmical, the swaying hypnotic. Kirk lifted his arm and gave it a healthy pinch to distract himself from the stupifying effects. He could see movement beside the pedestal, figures lifting the coarse cloth and laying it aside, the chanting grew louder and higher until with a triumphant shout, one area of the wall was pushed aside, letting a sudden flood of sunlight straight on the watchers' faces, dazzling their vision. Blinking hard, Kirk screwed up his watering eyes in an effort to see. The shape on top of the pedestal now stood revealed, and Kirk could only stare at it in disbelief and dismay, hearing McCoy's sharply indrawn breath as he, too, assimilated the sight.

The pedestal of black wood was carved into the distinctive likeness of the black-trunked tree of its origin, and from its dividing trunk, instead of branches, grew the tall, slim shape of a young woman, draped in a short robe woven of bright blue flowers and holding aloft in her hand a crude but unmistakable representation of a constitution class starship.

Kirk felt a sharp elbow touch his ribs and leaned towards the Doctor.

"Jim, that's Naznim," McCoy hissed.

"Yes," Kirk said slowly. "I see it is." He turned a querying eye on Spock, and found him eyeing the statue in his own inimitable way, as though it was some particularly distasteful object laid at his feet by his pet sehlat. He caught

Kirk's glance and shook his head slightly. The three men suddenly became conscious of the fact that theirs were the only bodies still upright and hastily prostrated themselves along with the rest.

The remainder of the ceremony passed in a haze for Kirk, manfully copying the motions the rest of the villagers were performing, with his mind less than half on what he was doing. How was it possible these people had got close enough to the Enterprise landing party to carve such a remarkable likeness of one of its members? And, even more puzzling, how did they know what a starship looked like? Just as soon as he got out of this stifling, overcrowded hole, he was going to have a few words to say to both his First Officer and his Chief Medical Officer. The chanting voices rose and fell interminably, and he gritted his teeth against impatience until, at long last, the opened wall was pulled shut again, the coarsely woven covering replaced and the voices died away. Then, one by one, the villagers began to make their way out of the thatched temple.

Kirk got to his feet, surreptitiously rubbing his numbed calves, and managed not to limp as he went out behind the rest. Hen-ka met them at the doorway, eyes shining with pride.

"Our goddess is beautiful, is she not?"

"Very beautiful," Kirk acknowledged. "The tribe of Jen-wae is privileged indeed."

"We know it," Hen-ka smiled. "We give thanks and praise daily." His face fell a little. "But still she hardens her heart against her people. Come, share a meal with us today."

Kirk gave a nod of thanks, unwilling to risk demanding a free stroll round the surrounding area, but he'd give it one more day at the most before he took some kind of drastic action to get at the darn shrub. The three of them followed Hen-ka into his hut, a slightly larger but no less noisome dwelling than their own. A crouching figure rose from the corner and bowed a welcome. Kirk bowed in return, wondering who it was, but Hen-ka made no move to tell them.

He squatted down, signalled to them to do likewise and prepared the finta-leaf drink they had had before. They sipped it slowly, while Hen-ka and his companion whispered quietly together in a corner of the hut. Kirk strained his ears, wishing he had the same acute hearing as Spock, and hoping his First Officer would be able to pick up something useful from the low-voiced conversation. Eventually, the other man crept quietly out, and Hen-ka came to sit beside them, his eyes worried.

"The sisters fear for the life of Jen-wae," he said sadly. "The old man is sinking fast. Maybe the goddess will claim him for her own before many days have passed."

"It is always sad when an ending comes," Kirk said softly, "but the old man has served his tribe well, has he not?"

"Very well. We honour him." Hen-ka's brows drew together. "Would that Har-ky had lived to follow his father, but he is gone and Dah-vee youngest son takes his brother's place." He sighed, then smiled. "But it is not fitting to burden strangers with our worries. Let us share food together in peace."

He laid out the now-familiar meal of dried meat, berries and herbs, and as they ate, they listened to Hen-ka's descriptions of the lands the tribe had once wandered through, and in return described the land to the east that was their supposed homeland - in fact, the area in which Kirk and Spock had caught sight of the liandus. As they finished, the other occupant of the hut returned and Kirk was surprised to see he was now carrying a child in his arms, peacefully asleep. It was the first tiny child they had seen since their arrival and he eyed it curiously. The man caught his glance and swung defensively away, tucking the child into the folds of his fur garments as he did so. Kirk fully expected a wail of protest from the maltreated infant, but it made no sound. Kirk gave him an apologetic smile and turned away to concentrate on what Hen-ka was saying.

The young man was clearly in a loquacious mood, and told them long and rambling tales of past hardships the tribe had undergone, and how Jen-wae had always led them well, and brought them safely through dangers and times of trouble. Kirk listened, shifting uneasily with impatiences but outwardly attentive, until the shadows lengthened and the end of the day drew near. At long, long last, Hen ka rose, smiling at them.

"The men of the tribe of Raw-lin are patient folk," he said. "You have been kind to listen to the tales I have to tell."

"It is always interesting to hear of the lives of others," Kirk assured him, and looking at his First Officer with a mischievous twinkle in his eye he added, "A fascinating day, would you not agree, Spo-ka, Mah-coy?"

"Fascinating," they echoed together. McCoy gave his Captain a most insubordinate glare as he joined him outside the hut.

They took their time strolling back to their own hut, pausing to absorb the pattern of life in the village. Now that they were free to see the tribe properly, none of them was prepared to miss an opportunity for as much study as possible. The end of the day was clearly a time for social gathering, and many groups were squatting together outside their huts, and some small boys were wrestling together under one of the black-trunked trees. Kirk noted with increasing surprise that all those he could see were male; as far as he could recall, they had seen no females at all since they'd been there. He puzzled over it, coming to no conclusion save that the women might be kept in some harem-like place, apart from the rest. His eye lit on a chattering group outside one hut and widened considerably when he realised all of them were holding infants in their arms. Careful only to use his peripheral vision, he watched them as he passed.

"I guess it was their night for baby-sitting," he grinned as he described the scene to McCoy in the privacy of their hut.

"I'm not sure," McCoy said slowly. "Jim, those might just have been females in that group."

"Females? Those?" Kirk stared at him in amazement. "Bones, several of them were not completely bundled up in fur, and they were as flat-chested as that chap we saw the other morning. How can you suggest they're female?"

"Yes, I know," McCoy agreed, "but you didn't look closely enough, Jim. Didn't you notice anything out of the ordinary, Spock?"

"I did not see the group you are discussing," Spock admitted. "My attention was on the liandi they all seem to carry."

"They are cute," Kirk agreed, grinning at him affectionately. "Come on, Bones, put us out of our misery."

"I think these people are possibly not mammalian," McCoy said.

Spock turned his head to stare at him. "Doctor, tricorder readings showed..."

"I know all that," McCoy said impatiently, "but humanoid mammals all have one thing in common, the females have breasts to suckle the young."

"Doctor, you have made a most illogical deduction," Spock said blandly. "First you state a particular group of people are female, then you agree they are flat-chested, then you give it as your opinion they are not mammalian. To me, these facts add up to the conclusion they are male."

McCoy sighed, hiding a grin with difficulty. "I hadn't finished, Spock. It's not like you to make deductions without all the facts." He held up his hand, counting off on his fingers. "One, the group were all holding infants. Two, the group were all flat-chested. Three, none of them that I could see had any sign of the secondary sexual characteristics of the humanoid male - in other words, they had no nipples. Therefore, I conclude that the group was non-mammalian

female."

"Your argument might be valid if those were all the facts we have to go on," Spock answered. "However, when you add to them the fact that general tricorder readings show this to be a mammalian species, I submit the evidence of your eyes may be at fault, or that the organs in question are located differently in this species."

"You could be right there," McCoy concluded, "but my eyes are certainly not at fault. I'm a doctor; I don't make mistakes over details like that."

"I am relieved to hear it," Spock murmured provocatively. "I have sometimes had reason to doubt it, though."

"Once and for all, you two, will you stop this senseless bickering," Kirk said shortly. "McCoy, if it hadn't been for you trying to put one over on Spock, we probably wouldn't be in this position at all."

McCoy stared at him open-mouthed. "What on earth do you mean, Jim?" he asked at last.

"I mean that if you had taken the trouble to explain to Spock that Miss Martin was the only nurse available with sufficient experience to be sent with the original landing party, instead of allowing him to believe you were deliberately trying to embarrass him, then he would have accepted medication when he first needed it, and would not have overlooked the fact the landing party was being closely observed."

Two faces stared at him, one reddening slightly, the other bearing the affronted look which indicated the Vulcan considered himself to have been insulted.

"Captain..." They both spoke together, then paused, looking at each other.

"I'll go first," McCoy mumbled. "Jim, I'm sorry, you're quite right. I should've explained at the time. Spock, I guess my sense of humour got the better of me. Sue really was the only person I could send with you. I apologise."

"Why should you apologise?" Spock's eyebrows were rising in surprise. "The young lady is intelligent and efficient, as I had good cause to know."

"Come off it, Spock," McCoy said, annoyed. "I know you better than that. Your precious dignity had been assaulted and you weren't going to let it happen twice."

"McCoy, must you continue to aggravate Spock like that?" Kirk demanded. "If you don't know by now that you'll never get him to admit to being bothered by such trivial feelings then you never will learn it."

It was Spock's turn to look a little humble. "Captain, the Doctor is right. I was acutely conscious of my previous encounter with Miss Martin, and although I was genuinely reluctant to accept medication for quite valid reasons, I should have permitted her to examine me at the time."

Kirk's face did not even show a flicker of the inward satisfaction he felt at this successful needling of his friend. He was well aware Spock would not wish McCoy to take the blame if some of it were legitimately his. He nodded quietly.

"Just so long as you both remember for the future, we'll not delve into past motives any more. But just how did they get that close?"

"They did not," Spock said firmly. "Captain, my ability to study tricorder readings was not impaired. If there had been any of these people close enough to see us, I should have been able to pick up their readings. I was not alone there, Captain, and even if my temporary problem had been sufficiently acute to incapacitate me, Mr. Chekov and Mr. Sulu were also present, both competent young men. Neither of them reported any signs of life readings in the area."

Kirk sighed. "Then how do you explain the fact this goddess of theirs is very clearly Naznim Armi traj?"

"Not by close personal observation of the landing party, Captain. It would not explain how they also know the appearance of the Enterprise."

"You're right there." He studied his friend intently. "There's only one possible explanation, isn't there, Spock?"

Spock frowned. "You are thinking of telepathy, Captain?"

"Yes. Naznim did say she'd seen an old man - could it have been this Jen-wae of theirs?"

"It is possible, of course," Spock conceded. "But none of the tribesmen I have so far encountered are strong telepaths, Captain. My limited physical contacts with them - Hen-Ka, Dah-vee and one or two others have brushed against me in passing - have not given any indication that they are touch telepaths, as I am. If their abilities were greater than that, I would be able to pick them up at this moment."

"And you can't sense anything?"

"Nothing. I will lower my shields completely for a moment."

"Careful," McCoy said hurriedly. "You never know what might..." His voice trailed into silence. As he spoke, Spock's eyes had glazed temporarily and then refocussed.

"You were saying, Doctor?"

"Spock, don't do that. It's incredibly dangerous when you don't know what's out there," McCoy said heatedly.

"This time no harm is done. I can sense nothing, Captain. If there is a strong telepath among these people, he is quite inactive at the present time."

"Bones is right," Kirk said sternly. "You are not to lay yourself open to trouble like that unless it's absolutely vital that you should. Don't do it again, do you hear me?"

"Yes, sir."

Kirk held his gaze firmly, finally breaking into a slow smile. "Yes, sir," he mocked. "Until the next time! Spock, you're a fraud. Bones, could that drug Lt. Armitraj inhaled have any bearing on all this?"

McCoy considered it slowly. "It's possible, yes. It might increase any latent telepathic abilities she has, but if these people were forty or more kilometres away it couldn't have affected them."

"Coincidences happen," Kirk said slowly. "It just might be that Jen-wae was also under the influence of the same drug at the same time, and that's why Lt. Armitraj saw him." Spock's eyebrows hit his hairline. "You don't agree, Spock?"

"I am always dubious about coincidence," Spock said, "but in this case I concede I can see no other logical explanation. However, there are various factors which can be checked out. If Lt. Armitraj is psi-null then we can abandon this line of reasoning completely." He looked at McCoy questioningly.

McCoy gave a wry grin. "I'm only a simple Human doctor, Spock, I don't carry everyone's medical records in my head. I'd have to look it up. Plenty of people do have a small, latent ability, so small as not to be memorable."

"It's time for our next report soon," Kirk said. "You must beam aboard, Bones, and interview Naznim after you've looked up her records. See just what she does remember. I can't see any way they can know what the Enterprise looks like unless they took the image from someone's mind."

"Apparently innocent planets have held surprises before," Spock reminded him.

Kirk shuddered. "I said this place reminded me of Gamma Trianguli 6," he said bitterly. "I lost too many crewmen there through dropping my guard."

"This time there are only the three of us here," Spock said calmly.

Kirk gazed at him. "You don't think that's any consolation, do you, Spock? Or do you think I could view the death of either of you two with equanimity?"

The Vulcan looked away. "We have been in orbit here long enough for any anomalies to be evident," he said. "When we next report in we should instruct the Science Section to study all sensor readings over the last few days."

"Yes." Kirk nodded, delving for his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Enterprise. Scott here."

"Scotty, Dr. McCoy is beaming aboard. Instruct Kyle to lock on and transport on his signal. Scotty, I want you to organise a comprehensive study of all sensor readings taken in orbit round this planet, both this time and on our last visit. I want every minutest detail checked out, and if there is anything at all, no matter how trivial, that doesn't make sense, I want to know. Clear?"

"Quite clear." The Scotsman sounded concerned. "Are ye having problems, sir?"

"No, we're not. But I have an uneasy feeling we ought to be."

The Engineer laughed. "Goin' as smoothly as that, is it?"

"No, it isn't going that smoothly either," Kirk admitted. "We should be quite alone for the next eight hours, so you can risk a communicator call."

"Aye, sir. We'll get on tae it right away."

"Good man. Kirk out." He closed the communicator and lay back on the heaped furs. "Well, I suppose we can sleep if we can't do anything else." He closed his eyes firmly, shutting out worries.

McCoy studied the screen, frowning a little. Lt. Armitraj was certainly not psi-null, but there was little enough latent ability shown to give him any hope the drug could have increased her powers sufficiently for her to contact anyone forty kilometres away. Even Spock's formicable aptitude was not that good, and he doubted whether any but a true telepath could project over such a distance. He pressed his intercom.

"Lt. Armitraj to Sickbay, please."

There was a brief pause before a surprised voice replied, "I'm on my way, Doctor."

"You didn't have to run," he said reprovingly when she appeared in the doorway.

"Oh, I thought something had happened at last," she said in disappointment, "but it hasn't, has it?"

"We haven't got the plant," he said, "if that's what you were hoping, but we have come across an interesting development, and we think we owe you an apology."

"An apology?" Her dark eyes opened wide. "Whatever for, Doctor?"

"Telling you your impression you were being watched was purely an effect of the drug," he told her. "Ever fancied being a goddess, Naznim?"

"A goddess?" she echoed. "Doctor, what are you talking about?"

He laughed. "We were allowed into that thatched temple at last today," he said, "to see this goddess they all spend their time talking about. The reason why they've moved into this area in the first place! It's a beautiful statue they've carved - out of one of those glorious black-wood trees. Couldn't have been a better choice of wood because their goddess is black, and very beautiful, wearing a lovely robe of blue flowers, holding the Enterprise in her hand and looking very like a certain lovely young lady called Naznim Armitraj!"

Open-mouthed, she sank down onto the chair at his desk, staring at him speechlessly.

"So I didn't dream it," she said at last. "They were there."

"Whether they were actually there or not, we're still not quite sure," he said, "but somehow or other they saw you, and somehow or other they know what the Enterprise looks like. Have you any experience at all of telepathy, Naznim?"

She shook her head. "Is that what you think happened, then?"

He shrugged. "There again, we're not really sure. If you'd had some experience of it you might have been able to judge whether or not that's how they saw you. The fact you also apparently saw them seems to point to it, but Spock can't detect any telepaths there now." He pointed to her record card on the screen. "You're not psi-null, so it is possible for a telepath to get through to you. We can't rule it out as a theory. Tell me as much as you can remember about the incident."

She frowned, concentrating hard. "Very little, actually," she confessed. "It was incredibly vivid at first, I do remember that, but it very quickly went hazy, within two or three days as I recall, and now I can't remember any details at all." She wrinkled her nose and laughed. "Except the way the old man smelled, Doctor, and I remembered that as soon as I came through the door just now."

"That bad, am I?" He laughed sympathetically. "That certainly sounds as though it could be a telepathic memory. Vivid as anything at the time, completely real, but fades nearly as quickly as a dream. Well," he got to his feet, "I suppose I'd better be on my way again."

"Doctor." She got up too and came round the desk. "The Captain couldn't include me in the landing party, but if they already know what I look like, and if I can be any help, do you think he'd let me beam down?"

"It's frustrating not being able to get on with a job yourself, isn't it," he agreed. "I'll certainly tell him what you've said, but don't be too optimistic."

Her shoulders drooped again, and he gave them a tiny pat on his way out.

"So there we are, Jim," he finished explaining. "We can't rule out the possibility of telepathy by any means."

Kirk drummed impatient fingers, then flicked open his communicator.

"Enterprise."

"Uhura here, sir."

"Lieutenant, has anything at all shown up in the sensor study yet?"

"No, sir. Mr. Scott has the Science Section working full time on it. Sir," her voice sharpened, "I'm getting an emergency beam signal from Starfleet."

"Pass it on as soon as you can, Lieutenant."

There was a momentary pause before she spoke again. "Lyran fever now spread to Deltan Sector. Containing it at present, but extreme urgency on our mission."

"Deltan Sector," McCoy whispered, horrified. "That's one of the most highly populated sectors of the Galaxy. We've got to get out of here and get at that shrub, Jim. Somehow. Anyhow."

"I know, Bones. Any suggestions, gentlemen?"

"Yes," McCoy said slowly. "Jim, Naznim told me she'd like to help. After all, it was her discovery in the first place, I can understand how she feels. These people already know what she looks like - why can't we get her to appear and order them to let us take this shrub and go?"

"Doctor!" Spock was clearly not in agreement. "That is in direct contravention of the Prime Directive."

"It's already been violated," McCoy pointed out. "We shouldn't be letting 'em see anything they shouldn't - or learning anything, if it comes to that."

You're with us and can monitor in case there is a powerful telepath present." He turned to Kirk. "The decision has to be yours, Jim."

Kirk looked at his second-in-command. "Any better ideas, Spock?"

"No, sir, but I must remind you of your Earth proverb, 'two wrongs do not make a right', Captain."

Kirk smiled wryly. "No, Spock, but we also have a saying about the lesser of two evils. We can only hope to find the right balance, or at best, not to tip the scales too far the wrong way." He flipped open his communicator. "Uhura, have Lt. Armitraj come to the bridge. I want to talk to her." He paused to let her make the call, then added, "And while we're waiting for her, have Stores prepare a short blue robe for her to wear, details are unimportant, but I don't want it to resemble Starfleet uniform in anything except the colour, is that clear?"

"Perfectly, Captain. Here's Lt. Armitraj now, sir."

"Good. Put her on. Lieutenant, Dr. McCoy tells me you're willing to come down and help."

"Yes, sir." He could hear the eagerness in her voice.

"Has he explained your somewhat special position here?"

"Uh...yes, sir." The reply held more than a touch of embarrassment.

"Do you think you could act like a goddess and get them to let us go searching these plains for that shrub?"

"I'll do my best, sir," she said nervously.

"Good girl. Stores will give you a robe to wear. Wait in the transporter room until you hear me give the signal. I'll let you know exactly what to do in a little while."

"Very well, sir."

"Uhura? I'll keep the communicator open once we start work. It's nearly dawn now, we'll be off in about an hour or so. When you hear me, don't make any response. A goddess from the sky is enough, we don't want any female voices out of my pockets as well!"

"No, sir. Understood."

"Good. Kirk out. Now, Bones. Do we tell 'em she's coming, or do we just let her arrive? What the best psychological approach?"

"For her to beam down among us three out there in full view of everyone," McCoy said emphatically. "Let them see we're under her protection. It's not a good idea to give them any notion it's anything to do with us in the first place, though. They might just start treating us as gods, and I'm not sure Starfleet will approve of that. Besides," he looked innocently across at the First Officer, "some of us don't even look god-like, do we?"

"That all depends on your point of view, Bones," Kirk said gravely. "I'm not sure Starfleet would approve of any of this, but we have to work with the tools we have." He flipped open his communicator. "Transporter room?"

"Kyle here, sir."

"Put Lt. Armitraj on."

"Sir?"

"Kyle will beam you down into the middle of the three of us when I give the signal. You demand to see Dah-vee, got that? In case he's already present, you can't miss him. He's got the worst squint I've ever seen anywhere. Make straight for him and tell him we're under your special protection and must look for the plant we want. Understood?"

"Affirmative, sir."

"Very well. Kyle, stand by. We'll all three have our communicators open so you can pick the beam down point when I tell you. Complete radio silence in the transporter room, please. I don't want any voices coming over the communicators."

"Right, sir."

"Good. Stand by." Tucking the open communicator back in his vile-smelling garments, Kirk led the way outside the hut into the early morning sunshine. Quite a few villagers were on the move already, a few of their tame liandi making lazy circles in the sky overhead, calling cheerfully to each other. He selected a spot, reasonably close to the thatched temple, but sufficiently out in the open to be in view of the maximum possible number of villagers. They squatted down in a small circle, each facing inwards. As more and more villagers came into his line of view, Kirk cast a questioning look at his two friends and received confirmatory nods. "Kyle," he said quietly but clearly, "energise now."

The sparkle formed precisely in the centre of their group, formed and solidified into the slim shape of the botanist. Swiftly, Kirk prostrated himself, followed almost instantaneously by Spock and McCoy. There were wild cries of delight from all the villagers around, and looking up as soon as he dared, Kirk could see more of them coming out of their huts and gathering round them.

Naznim turned to look about her, the short blue robe swirling charmingly about her figure. "I do not see Dah-vee," she said clearly. "Fetch him for me."

Several went running into the temple, and the unmistakeable figure of Dah-vee appeared in the doorway, staring across the open space. An expression of terror crossed his face, and gripping the doorpost, he slipped to his knees and cowered down, visibly shaking.

"Go to him," Kirk whispered urgently. "We'll be right behind you."

She moved away in a lovely, stately glide, her bare black feet, pink-soled and dainty, scarcely seeming to brush the grass as she moved. It was a beautiful performance, and Kirk appreciated every little detail of it as he followed her to the temple. He paused some five metres from the doorway, signalling to the other villagers to draw back as well. Just as well not to have anyone too close, in case she made some unexpected slip.

As she drew close, Dah-vee emitted a single, high-pitched squeal of terror and scrambled to his feet, panic-stricken, to dive inside the temple. Before Kirk could make a move to stop her, she had followed him in and the door closed behind them both.

"Jim, this could be dangerous," McCoy muttered at his side.

"I know," Kirk answered curtly. "We'll just have to hope she keeps her head. I think they'll lynch us if we follow her in."

"A not unreasonable suggestion," Spock said softly, his eyes flicking a warning, directional glance at the closing-in groups.

"So...we wait." Kirk fell on his knees, closely followed by McCoy, then Spock, then the closest groups of villagers, until eventually the whole area was full of kneeling figures, eyes fixed on the thatched temple, waiting...waiting, the only sounds the chirruping of the liandi and the rustle of growing things tossed by the wind.

It was dark and cool in the temple, and Naznim's heart was pounding pitifully as she followed the ugly little man into its dim depth.

"Dah-vee," she called out. "Do not flee from me. Stay and hear the words I have for you."

He gave another wailing moan of fright, and scuttled like a crawling spider behind the coarsely woven drapes that hung behind the statue. She went up closer

to it, lifting its covering cloth, eager and curious to see what she would look like as a goddess. The sheer, simple beauty of the carving made her catch her breath in wonder. I'm not that lovely, she thought shyly. Not that elegant or composed...or regal! But she is lovely.

She heard a sound of voices behind the drapes, and remembering the reason for her presence, she lifted them and started in. Startled to see a litter bed bearing the figure of a frail, white-haired old man, she gave a sudden gasp of recognition.

"Jen-wae!"

A strong hand grasped her wrist. "You know the old man?"

"I have seen him before. Dah-vee, let me go!" She pulled away, but found his strength too much for her.

He grinned at that, eyeing her up and down. "A goddess, eh? Why have you let me live so long?"

She tried to regain her slipping image. "I do not seek to punish unless you have done aught to deserve it," she said haughtily. "If you wish to let me go, there will be no harm done."

"Strike me dead now, then," he whispered, and drawing a knife with his free hand, held it to her breast. Terrified, she pulled away as he lunged, and the point caught in the blue robe, ripping it open. She gathered her remaining dignity and faced the questing eyes with pride. His face came up to hers again, triumphant.

"It will be the worse for you if you do not set me free!"

"Or for you, false one," he grunted, and held the knife poised. She gave a gasping cry of terror as the blade came down.

The scream brought Kirk to his feet, dashing towards the temple, but fast thought his reactions were, those of the villagers were faster and before he reached the door he was grabbed, held ungently, then brutally overpowered as he struggled. In despair he saw Spock and McCoy pitched against overwhelming odds, until at last even Vulcan strength was insufficient.

"Fool!" a voice hissed in his ear. "Do not seek to intervene in the justice of the goddess. No hand shall be raised to thwart the desires of the tribe of Jen-wae." He was yanked to his feet, and held firmly, his eyes still on the closed door. After that first, cut-off scream, he did not think there had been any sound from the primitive building. He strained his ears, but could hear only the harsh breathing of his captors. He forced his muscles to relax, reminding himself sharply that there was little logic in exhausting himself now, when his present futile effort might be reserved until some more suitable moment came.

Silence was growing again, as their breathing slowed after the short, decisive fight, the wind shaking the branches of the shrubs, making a hollow mocking whisper of sound. He eyed his First Officer, knowing those acute ears would pick up the slightest noise long before he could, but there was not a flicker to show Spock could hear anything. Acutely conscious of the open communicators they all held, Kirk could only hope Uhura would maintain radio silence until they were out of trouble - he didn't want to worsen Naznim's situation by a hairsbreadth. He gave a tiny, soundless sigh of impatience as the minutes wore away, and at last saw a tiny movement of Spock's eyebrows some six seconds before the door of the temple swung slowly open.

Dah-vee stood alone in the doorway, his squint eyes gleaming malevolently, an ugly sneer twisting his mouth into a bitter parody of laughter.

"False goddess," he hissed. "A demon twisted by the dark ones in the cauldron of night. False. False!" His voice rose to a scream of rage and triumph. "I, Dah-vee, youngest son, have saved the tribe of Jen-wae from the toils of



a demon come to trap us. Give me your thanks, tribesmen, give me your thanks!"

The tribe seemed to take one vast, shuddering breath and Hen-ka stepped forward.

"I will see the truth of this," he said quietly, and went into the temple. Kirk's fists clenched into whitened balls.

The door opened again. Hen-ka held Naznim's limp body in his arms, her blood smearing his furs with crimson tears. The sky blue robe trailed, bloodstained, over his arm. Tears stood in his eyes.

"It is true," he said. "The goddess is false. Behold!"

He turned her body round, and a wail of fear went up, spiralling towards the mute heavens. The hands holding Kirk loosened as the terrified tribesmen drew back. Seizing his chance, he moved forward.

"False she may be," he said clearly, "but she shall be mourned."

He took her from Hen-ka, praying that they might still be in time, and muttering a prayer for Kyle's attentiveness and comprehension, cried, "Take her back into the sky she came from, false ones."

He laid her on the grass and slipped his open communicator into her hand. As he stepped back the sparkle took her. Then a sharp pain exploded in his skull, fierce stars flared in his sight and he pitched forward to lie on the spot she had barely left.

Spock ran to his side, interposing his body between the threatened hail of stones and its intended victim.

"Take them!" Dah-vee shrieked wildly. "Take the demons and hide them from our sight!"

The Vulcan scooped his Captain up in one smooth economical movement, and obediently led the way across the grassy open space towards the hut they seemed to have occupied so interminably, laying him gently on the noxious furs that formed their bed. McCoy dropped on his knees beside him, anxiously studying the ugly bruise already showing on his temple. Unable to see properly, he looked up crossly, to find the expressionless face looking over his shoulder.

"I might be able to tell you if you'd get out of the light," he snapped.

"My apologies." Spock stood up stiffly.

McCoy's fingers probed the area carefully. "It's all right," he said reassuringly. "It's only bruised. He'll be coming round in a minute."

Behind his back, the Vulcan permitted himself a tiny sigh of relief and turned away to study the scene outside the hut through the now all-too-familiar cracks.

"We are under strict surveillance, Doctor," he warned. "There are thirty-two tribesmen gathered round this hut, and I would gauge their more negative emotions are not under their control at present."

McCoy gave a sardonic laugh. "They must be feeling mad if even you can see it," he said sarcastically. "Jim! Come on, wake up!"

Kirk gave a grunt of pain as he opened his eyes. "Naznim?"

"They got her on board," McCoy said quietly. "Jim, she couldn't possibly be alive."

Kirk closed his eyes again. "No," he said flatly. "Such hideous mutilation. Why, Bones?"

McCoy shook his head. "Only guesses, Jim. No facts."

Spock left his post at the wall and came to squat by them soberly. "It may have been unwise to have intervened, Captain," he said. "We are now being watched by a considerable number of villagers. We shall get no opportunity to search out the plant we need."

"You're right, of course," Kirk said numbly. "But there might have been a chance..."

"Indeed," Spock nodded. "I, too, would have wished to place Lt. Armitraj in safe, medical hands as swiftly as possible."

"I shouldn't have brought her down in the first place," He began to haul himself to his feet and Spock held out a helping hand to pull him upright. "I'm beaming aboard," he went on curtly. "I'll be gone not longer than an hour. If they try and get in here, keep 'em out as long as you can and get me back down."

"May I enquire if you have some kind of plan in mind, Captain?" Spock asked.

Kirk shook his head, his guts a solid twist of misery. "I guess I owe Lt. Sulu a few words," he said flatly. "Ask Kyle to beam me up, please, Spock."

Not daring to risk the time for a shower, he stumped along the corridor in his evil-smelling furs, unconscious of either looks of amusement or sudden grimaces of disgust. He'd already sent the message to Uhura to relieve the helmsman from the bridge, and knew he had gone straight to his quarters. He leaned his hand on the wall outside for a few seconds marshalling his thoughts, before he pressed the buzzer.

The door slid open and he paused in the entry. "May I come in, Lieutenant?"

"Captain?" Sulu looked up, surprised. "Uh...yes, of course." He'd been sitting on the bed, head bowed to clenched fists.

"Don't get up," Kirk said, coming into the room. "I'm sorry, I'm afraid I probably don't smell too pleasant at the moment."

Sulu gave a tiny, gusting laugh. "No, sir."

"You know why I've come?"

"About Naznim?" Very quietly. "Captain, Dr. M'Benga won't let me see her."

"No. I don't suppose he will." Kirk sat down on the end of the bed. "Sulu, I made a grave miscalculation and sent Naznim into a situation that was too dangerous."

Sulu looked up sharply, eyes narrowing. Kirk met the look, his own eyes bleak. "I was getting impatient, clutching at straws. She was a brave girl, and did what I asked without showing any fear. I still don't know why they killed her, but I will know. I can only hope, for both our sakes, it was...at least a valid reason for them."

Sulu nodded, and Kirk got to his feet, laying a swift hand on his shoulder. The gentle touch was too much, and the helmsman turned away, fighting tears.

"Let it out," Kirk said gently. "It helps."

"Later." Sulu brought himself under control. "Captain, thank you for coming."

Kirk gave a tiny, wry smile. "Don't be a fool, Mr. Sulu."

Sulu looked straight at Kirk. "One day I hope I'll have a ship of my own, sir," he said quietly. "I'd be proud to be as good a Captain as you are."

Surprised, touched and humbled, Kirk blinked hard. "I believe you just might be that," he said, smiling over the accepted compliment. "Come to me if you have any problems," he added, "or go to Dr. McCoy. Once we're away from this hellish place." He went to the door. "Take care, Mr. Sulu."

"Thank you, Captain."

Sulu watched the door slide shut behind the lonely figure, and hot tears filled his eyes. The strong, pole-cattish smell caught at his nostrils, making him gag. He turned back to his bunk, throwing himself down hard and letting the tears come, both crying and laughing, tears for Naznim and the future that was not to be, tears for the sheer guts that had brought Kirk to him without pretence,

laughter for the everyday disgust that intruded so commonplacely into the stuff of tragedy. Unashamed, he relaxed into the grief, allowing it to claim him.

On his way back to the transporter room, Kirk encountered Ensign Batthyany, looking hot, tired and distinctly dispirited. Her double take on assimilating his appearance and the miasma that clung about his person, was classic in its way.

"Still no luck, Ensign?"

"No, sir. It must be a property of the soil in that one area. It's an old alluvial plain, rich in deposits. The further away from the area we go, the fewer specimens we find too, sir."

"I see. Carry on, Ensign."

He slowed his pace, diverting his path from transporter room to bridge while he tried to come to a decision. The bridge crew looked up with varying expressions of welcome and dismay as the turbo-lift deposited its gamy occupant in their midst. He sent an apologetic glance around them and went down into the well to stand by the command chair.

The engineer gave him a side-long look, grinning a little. "Captain, ye're no' my idea o' flower-like."

"Sorry, Scotty. I'll bet McCoy and Spock are even worse."

Scotty leaned closer. "I'm sorry to hear about the wee lassie," he said. "Is Sulu taking it hard?"

Kirk shook his head. "I don't know, Scotty. How can you tell? He's all right at the moment, I think."

"I'll see he's not forgotten," Scott said softly.

Kirk nodded his thanks. "Messy," he said sourly. "And unnecessary."

Scott eyed him sympathetically, knowing how hard he took the death of a crewman. There were few words of comfort anyone could offer one who set his own standards so high.

"I hear from Ensign Batthyany the landing parties aren't having any luck."

Scott gave an exclamation of disgust. "No, and the further away we search, the less we find. It's beginning to look as though the original find was pure luck."

"Yes, dammit." Kirk slammed an impatient fist on the arm of the command chair. "We've got to get those plants, Scotty. I can't let that girl have died doe nothing. She was so proud of her find..." He stopped, willing himself back under control. "If only I knew why they killed her." He turned away, squaring his shoulders.

"Sir," Uhura's voice claimed his attention. "There was a further message from the Surgeon General's Office just before you came on the bridge. The fever is now out of control on one planet. If they don't get the perikylin in ten days, it will have to be total isolation."

White-lipped, he absorbed the full implications. Total isolation. The abandoning of hope for millions. To watch helplessly as a whole planet died save for the few, the very few immunes. It was un contemplateable.

"Sir." He found Uhura standing up, her face set. "Sir, I'd like to volunteer to take Lt. Armitraj's place, if you'll let me."

"No." Kirk shook his head. "I'll not have two crewmen die! No, Lieutenant, don't argue. Your offer is noted and commended, but not accepted, unless we become desperate - and we're not that desperate yet." He turned back to Scott. "See if Mr. Sulu and Mr. Chekov can help you pinpoint the precise co-ordinates of the first specimens. They must have covered a good few miles while they were down there, but it's worth seeing if we can get a fix on the spot we need to get at."

We shan't have time to go searching about, even if we get the opportunity, so if we can get an exact location, we'll be better off."

"Aye, sir," Scott said comfortably. "Leave it tae me."

As Kirk went towards the lift, Scott pressed the intercom. "Mr. Sulu, Mr. Chekov, meet me in the briefing room, if you please." He came up the steps eyeing his politely waiting Captain ruefully. "Unless ye've matters tae discuss, sir," he said bluntly, "I'd as soon tak' the next car, if ye don't mind."

"Bad as that, am I?" Kirk said, surprised.

"Worse!"

Kirk laughed and entered the lift alone.

Beaming back to the small hut, he was surprised how unpleasantly the smell seemed to have increased since he'd been gone. He began to feel some sympathy for the glazing eyes he'd recently encountered.

"Phew," he muttered. "It smeels as though something had died in here."

McCoy looked surprised. "It's no worse than it's ever been, Jim."

"No? It is to me," Kirk retorted. "Gentlemen, we have to make some kind of move. The situation is worsening - a planet in the Deltan Sector is on the verge of total isolation."

"No..." McCoy's voice shook. "Jim, that's living death for millions, watching, waiting, knowing your time will come. You pray to go first, pray not to live, pray not to be immune and be left alone..."

"I know, Bones," Kirk said wearily. "You tell me - how do we get that drug?" He looked hopefully at his second-in-command, but there was no help to be seen there, either. "Well." He looked from one to the other. "That's that. To hell with General Order No. 1, we'll go out and get it." He grinned tiredly. "I don't know about you, but I shan't be sorry to have a shower and get into clothes that don't stroll around on me. We'll take time for that and then beam down and get the stuff, and never mind who sees us." He took out his communicator and opened it. "Ki - "

"Jim!" McCoy grabbed his arm. "Something's wrong with Spock."

"Enterprise, stand by." Kirk snapped the communicator shut and swung round. The Vulcan was tearing an invisible something from his throat, fighting for breath.

"Spock!" Kirk yelled, grabbing his shoulders and shaking him hard. "Spock, snap out of it. Spock!"

There was no response, the dreadful, rasping breaths were weakening. In desperation, Kirk drew back his hand and gave his friend one massive, open-handed slap across his face, rocking him on his feet. The eyes slowly refocussed, widened, closed in terror, as to Kirk's horror the Vulcan shrank down at his feet, cowering, shivering, his arms protectively raised about his head.

Kirk crouched in front of him, calling soothingly, whispered words of comfort and love that seemed at last to penetrate the clouded mind. He put out his hand to take the blue-clad arms, lowering them gently to reveal a face visibly recomposing itself into familiar lines. With a massive sigh of relief, he hauled the Vulcan to his feet.

"What happened, Science Officer?" he asked over the fierce pounding in his chest.

"I am...not sure." Spock's voice was just not under control. He took a long, deep breath. "Something is wrong."

"Well, I'd kinda guessed that," Kirk said, attempting lightness. "What, and where?"



"I regret I have no information," Spock replied. "The impression was vivid, but I have no idea at all who was in danger."

Kirk hardened his heart. "As long as you're all right, we haven't time to look for trouble."

"Jim," McCoy protested, "if there's a telepath that powerful around, we could all be in trouble." He eyed the Vulcan carefully. "You mean you got nothing at all from that, Spock?"

The eyebrows performed their familiar pavane of surprise. "I would not say that precisely, Doctor, but I received no information of value or interest, if that is what you mean."

Kirk opened his communicator again. "Kirk to Enterprise. We'll be beaming up shortly, stand by." He looked round the stuffy, odorous little hut. "This is where we admit failure," he said quietly. "Are you ready, gentle...?"

The sentence was never completed.

Uttering a feral cry that chilled their blood, Spock tore at the hide coverings of the hut with massive strength, ripping the skins and wooden framework with savage hands, then slipping through the gap he had opened, he was gone, out into the late afternoon sunshine.

With a sigh, Kirk raised the communicator. "Belay that last order, Enterprise. We shall not be beaming up yet - we seem to have lost Mr. Spock temporarily." He stepped to the freshly made opening beside McCoy and stared out.

"He went towards the temple," McCoy said. "About half the villagers crowded in after him, the other half collected round here."

"I see them," Kirk said grimly. "Well, it looks as though you and I are stuck here, Bones."

He sank down on their primitive bed, putting his head in his hands. McCoy raised exasperated fists towards the uninterested sky.

Hen-ka faced Dah-vee across the space that had so recently held the body that betrayed their hopes. A smile tugged and pulled at Dah-vee's mouth, threatening to shatter his composure into wild, exultant mirth.

"Once more Dah-vee gives service to the tribe of Jen-wae," he said. "Does my cousin Hen-ka have aught to say?"

"I wish to see Jen-wae," Hen-ka said firmly.

"The old man is dying," Dah-vee snarled. "Would you disturb his rest?"

"The sisters speak of limka-root," Hen-ka said accusingly. "I wish to see Jen-wae."

"You think I feed my father limka-root?" Dah-vee bellowed with laughter. "The old man dies, I tell you, Hen-ka. I have no need to haste him on his way. Go to your hut, cousin, and ponder on the strength of Dah-vee and the weakness of his father."

Contemptuously, Hen-ka turned aside, walking with firm footsteps to his own hut, his demeanour not revealing the inner turmoil he felt. He opened his door and went inside.

"Dah-vee denies it, Per-nal. Are you sure of what you told me?"

His partner shifted the child in his arms. "I found the limka-root, Hen-ka. I am sure. The other sisters feared to speak. Dah-vee is powerful. He has the queen liandus pup."

"But he has not called the joining," Hen-ka said slowly. "Why not, Per-nal, why not?"

Per-nal shook his head. "I cannot say, Hen-ka. This...goddess, this demon that came to us today, why should Dah-vee claim she is false?"

Hen-ka stared at his partner in surprise. "You saw for yourself, Per-nal. You were there when I held her up."

"I saw she was not formed as man is, but who is to say that is not the way of a goddess," Pernal said slowly. "We knew that she was female only, we knew that in the joining."

A sick fear grew in Hen-ka's eyes. "Per-nal, you see clearly," he admitted. "I would you had spoken then - we have given Dah-vee yet more power by giving him more time."

"Then we should move swiftly now," Per-nal said harshly.

"Not you," Hen-ka said swiftly. "The child..."

"Is safe," Per-nal said impatiently but not unkindly. "My time is nearly over, no harm will come to him if he is left here." He rose to his feet. "Come, Hen-ka, the time to move is now."

Hen-ka gripped his arm. "You will stay," he hissed. "We will not risk the child." His eyes contested a battle of wits with his partner and won. Per-nal sat down again. "My apologies, my sister," Hen-ka said. "Your time will come again."

Per-nal nodded. "Take care. The man is devious, you are open. Search out Jen-wae and make him listen if you can - if he is indeed too ill, then call the joining yourself. Your liandus is strong."

"I have no right..."

"Soon the tribe of Jen-wae will be the tribe of Dah-vee, then none will have rights save Dah-vee himself. Be strong, Hen-ka. Or I will come in your stead."

Hen-ka touched his partner's arm. "I will be strong."

He slipped out of his hut and went with purposeful stride towards the temple, pushing the door open wide and letting the sun stream into the dim interior.

The large chamber was empty, and he paused to let his eyes get used to the gloom before he went further in, passing the wooden statue with a pang of terror. Should Per-nal's suggestion be correct, then the tribe of Jen-wae was in the direst of straits and there was little hope that Dah-vee's action would not affect them all. The ways of gods were not for the tribe to understand. He took a deep breath, steadying himself, then drew aside the drapes behind the statue and entered the inner chamber. It was dark and windowless, lit only by a tiny rushlight hung over the wooden bed where Jen-wae lay. A figure got up at his approach to the litter, scuttering away into the greater dimness of a corner.

"It is I, Hen-ka," he said calmly. "Do not fear, sister. How is the old man?"

"He sleeps." The figure crept forward again. "Hen-ka, is Dah-vee within the temple?"

Hen-ka shook his head. "Not in the outer room. I thought he was here. Why?"

"Per-nal told you of the limka-root?"

"Indeed, Kal-la, but Dah-vee denies it."

"He lies. It is there, hidden within the frame of the litter. He feeds it to his father each night, so the old man does not waken properly by day."

Hen-ka was shocked to his innermost being. "Why have the sisters not spoken?" he said severely.

"Is it so long since your own time?" Kal-la asked bitterly. "Do you not remember the lassitude, the fear, the shrinking of your own sisterhood?"

Hen-ka bowed his head. "You are right," he admitted. "We do not dare to recall, afterwards. You will see when your own time comes again." He dropped to his knees, rummaging within the framework of the litter, until his fingers grasped what he sought and brought it forth. "You are right," he said levelly. "There is evil at work here and it must be countered."

"What will you do? Wait till the old man wakens?"

"I do not believe it is safe to wait at all," Hen-ka replied, getting to his feet. "I will call the joining."

Ignoring the cry of fright from Kal-la, he reached into his hood and took out his liandus pup, soothing its sleepy/angry chittering with gentle words. "Peace, little one, cease thy anger. The tribe have need of thee. Come, stretch thy wings and waken, little one."

He coaxed the irridescent, filmy wings with gentle fingers, until the creature spread them, its mouth opening in a wide, sharp-toothed yawn. It folded the wings again, settling them daintily into place and gazed at its master with wise, golden eyes. He brought it close to his face, meeting the eyes full on and gazing into their glowing depths.

"Call, call to the tribe. Call to the minds. Join. Join. Breathe in the hevika."

He slipped his hand into the slackened, wrinkled belly-pouch, swollen from his time of child-carrying, and now containing the herbs and meats all carried in case of need. The lavender-coloured leaves were held up to his sensitive nostrils and the liandus bent its furry snout to inhale the tangy, spicy scent of the dried herb.

"Join. Join. Call to the minds."

He felt the first, joyous, answering calls as the most powerful of the liandi wakened their masters and the collective mind slowly began to assemble. The surge of power gave him hope that he might succeed, and he searched for the mind of Dah-vee; swiftly and eagerly he penetrated each new arrival, discarded it as he recognised its distinctive traits. Where was the mind of Dah-vee? Could it be that his was closed to the joining? A cold fear struck his heart and he slipped away, back to the familiar confines of his own mind to ponder the significance of his discovery. Could he ever recall seeing Dah-vee in the joining? His mind searched back into his childhood, when he and Far-ky had found such pleasure when the minds were shared. Even then they had been surprised, but pleased, that the tormenting Dah-vee, who plagued them with his whining demands, did not seem to want to compound his faults in the joining, but had assumed he'd found his own, comfortable place to slip, while the adult minds, joined on a deeper level, surged about them in a comforting but uncomprehensible susurrous. Throwing caution aside, he opened his mind again.

"Dah-vee, the mind calls you. Come, come to the mind."

There was a shocking sensation of utter stillness about him as the other minds drew back to let the one mind called be free to answer. The silence stretched and pulled. Hen-ka let go, releasing them from the joining, his conscious mind once more seeing the golden, sleepy eyes of the liandus on his hand. He was still reeling from the shock of what he had learned. Dah-vee was not in the joining, had never been there, could not be called to account for any action. How had he slipped unseen all these years? How had he ever crept amongst them, sliding his devious way unnoticed, into such a position of power? They had been blind, careless fools. Too soft and tender to seek out the evil in their midst and see it did no harm. What harm had he already done?

There was only one solution. Resolutely he faced the liandus once more, clearing his mind. He was sinking into the golden glory of its eyes, when he heard a scream of rage cut through the dim quietness of the room. Wrenching his mind back, he saw the powerful form of Dah-vee, crouched for the spring. Not understanding what he should have feared, he held his ground, believing Dah-vee would not harm him under the watching eyes of a sister.

"You!" Dah-vee was shaking. "You, the sister of Far-ky. Must you thwart me all my life?" His voice rose to a scream, uncontrolled and horrifying. "You took my brother from me, you shall not take my tribe."

He leaped, lashing out at Hen-ka's hands, knocking the liandus to the crumpled



bedding on the litter. Hen-ka gave a cry of anger, reaching for it; but Dah-vee was too swift for him and had his hands on it. Snatching it high, he set one hand about its throat.

"You will not have long to live," he snarled, squeezing his fingers tightly, and giving a bellowing yell of mirth as its wings fluttered madly, vainly.

"NO!" Hen-ka shrieked. "NO!" Tearing at Dah-vee's hands, ignoring blood and pain alike.

There was a cry of terror from the bed, and Jen-wae's eyes opened. Calling on all the strength at his feeble command, he cried his own compelling order to his son. Startled, Dah-vee let the tiny creature drop, and it fell to the ground, cowering and panting its terror. Hen-ka dropped beside it, soothing it with loving words.

"Hush, little one. Peace, little one. There is nothing to fear now. I have you safe now." He took the quivering creature in gentle hands, calming its heaving flanks with soft fingertips. He stood to face Dah-vee and his father. "Never shall the tribe of Jen-wae be led by one who cannot call the joining," he said steadily. "Jen-wae, I am your brother's son. I claim my right in this matter."

The old man's eyes were gazing in startled realisation at his younger son. "But he has the queen pup," he quavered unsteadily. "It sought him out."

"Did it?" Hen-ka demanded. "Or did he seek it, against all our laws?"

There was a frozen silence, both men out-staring the squint eyes that dropped, slowly, before their gaze.

Weakly, Jen-wae lifted his liandus. "Jen-wae calls the minds," he told it. "Come. Come to me. Come to your leader. I have need of the strongest among you. Come to me. Breathe in the hevika."

The tall figure made its ruthless path through the villagers, carelessly tossing aside those that tried to hold him. The panicked tribesmen drew back at last to let him pass unmolested, and he reached the door of the temple without further hindrance. Slamming it open with one massive thrust, he strode in, avenging fury in every line of his body. Drawn unerringly to the room behind the curtains, he ripped them down and entered.

The four occupants stared up at him in surprise. Hen-ka was the first to find his tongue. "You are not of the tribe of Jen-wae!"

"You called for the strongest one," Spock replied harshly. "I am here. What can I do for the mind?"

Jen-wae laid a shaking hand on Hen-ka's arm. "Release him, Hen-ka. It is not fitting to call those of other tribes."

Hen-ka nodded, reluctant to lose such an obviously powerful ally, but conceding the justice of Jen-wae's protest. He gazed into the golden eyes of the liandus, releasing the Vulcan from the compulsive call.

Spock's vision cleared abruptly, revealing not the dim interior of the hide hut, and the faces of his two friends, but the dimmer interior of a rushlit, wooden building, and four villagers; the villainous, unmistakable face of Dah-vee, Hen-ka, a shrinking, timid figure crouched away in a corner, and a white-haired, frail old man with the remains of power still written in deep-etched lines. His eyebrows flared in visible surprise. He'd no idea at all how, or why, he was here, but doubtless he would discover it in due course. He searched his mind for the memories, and discovered a compulsion set there by some outside agency, a compulsion it was all too easy to agree to. Faintly surprised at himself, he reached out to haul Dah-vee to him by the filthy skins that covered him. Taking one of his arms in a firm grip, he twisted it up and backwards, holding it pressed against the centre of its owner's back, and surveyed the company blandly.

"My apologies," Hen-ka said ruefully. "We did not seek to call you in the joining. The tribe of Raw-lin must be powerful to hear the minds of those they have not learned in childhood."

Not wanting to betray his ignorance, Spock merely nodded. Hen-ka turned back to his leader. "You called the strongest, Jen-wae, and the strongest came. Since we cannot use his strength against Dah-vee, what can we do?"

"Bind him," Jen-wae ordered. "Bind him while we consider what must be done."

"No!" Dah-vee screamed suddenly, lashing backwards at Spock with a vicious foot. The Vulcan jumped back swiftly to avoid the blow, and instinctively set his fingers to the bull-neck. As Dah-vee crumpled, there was a wail of fright from the corner.

"Peace, Kal-la," Hen-ka looked over his shoulder. "A sister should not be here at the counsel of the tribe. Go to Per-nal in my hut, and take refuge there until this is resolved."

Spock eyed the retreating figure with interest. So that was a female! He was forced to admit he would never have been able to guess that from her appearance. She was totally indistinguishable from all the males he had seen. It seemed more than possible that McCoy was right, and the infant-carrying tribesmen were the females. Clearly these people were an interesting race psychologically, and would be fascinating to study. He set one side of his mind to consider the matter and turned his main attention back to events around him. He found Hen-ka looking from him to Dah-vee with puzzled and frightened eyes.

"He is only sleeping," Spock said with calculated indifference. "It is a technique used by my tribe."

"We thank you," Hen-ka told him. "We fear he has sought to harm his father, if not to shorten his life." Seeing Jen-wae's distress he added, "It is best if we are open, old man. I have found the limka-root myself, hidden within the framework of the bed. What other purpose can that have had than evil to you, his father?"

Jen-wae dropped his head, a tear coursing down his cheek. "Would that my son Har-ky had not been taken from us," he moaned.

Hen-ka dropped to his knees beside the litter, covering the frail hands with his younger, warmer ones. "I, too, miss Har-ky," he said softly. "He was my partner in my sisterhood, and we were very close."

Spock's mobile brows crawled to his hairline and remained there as he assimilated the possible significance of the remark. The life forms in the Galaxy were many and varied, it was not beyond the bounds of possibility for a form so different to have emerged on this planet. But the occurrence of a simple sexual change did not answer all the questions still remaining unanswered. Intrigued, he mentally settled back to listen to their talk, withdrawing sleekly and unobtrusively into the shadows.

He studied Jen-wae carefully, wondering whether he was the old man with white hair and blue eyes Lt. Armitraj had seen. What was the other fact she had mentioned? He delved into his mind, recalling the conversation... Yes, that he did not smell very pleasant. His nostrils flared as he cautiously inhaled, testing the atmosphere with scientific detachment. He could not honestly say he found the scene unpleasant, but remembering Jim's comments on the condition of their hut when he'd returned from the ship earlier, he appreciated that his own sensitivity might have become dulled through over-long exposure. He pondered the second problem of his own arrival here - in the temple? - and wondered once more how he had been called. He could still sense no telepathic mind hear him, but decided that to risk dropping his shields was potentially too dangerous.

Jen-wae looked at Hen-ka with troubled eyes. "You say Dah-vee cannot call the joining. Why do you say so?"

Hen-ka looked sadly down, squatting beside the old man's litter. "All the

time you have been ill, since the statue of the goddess was completed, he has not called the joining. There has been much sadness in the tribe."

"But the tribe need the joining," Jen-wae cried piteously. "It was his right to do so, and his duty."

"Indeed," Hen-ka agreed. "And so we told him, but he told us the goddess was displeased with us, and would only show herself to him. There has been much unhappiness, Jen-wae."

His leader reached out a trembling hand to touch his head. "Hen-ka has the good of the tribe at heart," he said gently. "It was even so with Har-ky. He did not trust Dah-vee either. But since his going my younger son has sought to fill his place, or so I thought."

Hen-ka bravely raised his head to look the old man directly in the eyes. "Has he sought to fill the place of Har-ky, or the place of Jen-wae?" he challenged.

For a while, blue eyes looked with grey until the faded blue ones wavered and dropped. "It grieves me to agree," Jen-wae said softly, "but I believe you are right. My son is evil. We will call the joining. Maybe the minds together can call the goddess to our aid."

Hen-ka gave a gasp of mingled fright and horror. "Old man, old man, do you not know what took place within this temple after this day's sunrise?"

Jen-wae's brows drew together. "I have been sleeping, sleeping over-much. What happened?"

"The goddess came to us again," Hen-ka said unhappily. "Came to us in the sparkle of light that took her away. She called to Dah-vee and followed him into her temple. None know what took place, save that Dah-vee slew her with his knife and told us she was a false goddess formed by demons." He paused, seeing the old man's great distress. "Jen-wae, I fear greatly that Dah-vee was wrong - the goddess was not false. She was not formed as we are, but we knew in the joining she was a sister and only a sister, that she had never known another state. I fear Dah-vee has slain our goddess."

Jen-wae gave a wail of fear and grief, throwing his furs over his head. "Is there no end to the wickedness of my son?" he wailed, rocking to and fro in his pain. "We will hunt him down in the joining, cast him out of the tribe of Jen-wae."

He struggled to sit up, and Hen-ka hastily put his arms about him, lifting him. "Indeed, Jen-wae," he said sadly, "I do not believe Dah-vee has ever been there in the joining."

Jen-wae gazed at him out of shocked eyes. "How can that be, Hen-ka?" he whispered. "All men come to the joining."

"I know. I do not understand it either," Hen-ka agreed. "It is impossible to resist the call. All children try, for often one has more amusing things to do, but always one is drawn."

"We will call him," Jen-wae said firmly. "He will come. Come, my pretty one."

Spock watched in fascination as the old man coaxed his liandus from its perch on the framework of his litter. It was sleepy and reluctant, scolding softly and nipping gently on the old man's fingers.

"Wicked one," Jen-wae scolded lovingly, tapping its sharp little nose with one gnarled finger. "Cease your chatter and come to me. We have need of you." He gazed deeply into its glowing eyes and began to chant. "Call to the minds. Come to the joining. Breathe in the hevika..."

For a second, Spock felt his mind slip from his control, spiralling him into the warm darkness of loving minds that welcomed, called, sang their joy at meeting. Instantaneously recognising his danger, he slammed his shields up firmly, wrenching free. It was like a sudden drenching in ice-cold mountain water, and it took him another second or two to regain his breath enough to look about him. Both Jen-wae and Hen-ka were holding dried branches of the plant Lt. Armitraj had inhaled,

their liandi held up to their faces, their eyes locked with their pets in a fierce, unblinking stare. Suddenly Spock understood. The tribesmen were not telepaths, it was the low-level minds of the liandi that were telepathic, passing on the messages from their own uncomprehending minds to those of their masters. Probably the more telepathically strong the liandus, the more will the owner could exert, which would account for the extra size of Jen-wae's and Dah-vee's pups. And if Dah-vee were totally psi-null, it would account for the inability of his pup to call him to this collective mind.

Deep, deep inside the unemotional Vulcan, a certain pity for the loneliness of Dah-vee stirred. No mind to reach to his, to say 'I see you, understand you.' Loneliness indeed, and such as he had understood himself until a certain pair of hazel eyes had locked with his and silently acknowledged their understanding.

Hen-ka and Jen-wae were silent now, gazing in rapt attention at their liandi. The silence swelled, lengthened. Spock could feel the beating of the joined mind against his shields, like the beat of some gigantic heart that throbbed and murmured words of welcome. He closed his eyes, withdrawing his own mind further from the insidious, yearning pounding. When he felt it lessen, he opened his eyes again. The liandi were beginning to ruffle up their wings, tucking their tiny snouts comfortably into the filmy folds. Hen-ka was standing by the litter, gazing down at his leader with an expression of determination.

"The mind of Dah-vee is not to be found," he said firmly. "Who knows what dark secrets it may contain to harm the tribe of Jen-wae? He must be dealt with, old man. You know our laws."

The old man nodded, tears in his eyes. "It is hard to lose both sons," he quavered, "but what must be, must be."

Hen-ka knelt by his side. "I will be as a son to you, Jen-wae," he promised. Rising to his feet, he looked about him with a sudden dawning of horror. "Where is Dah-vee?"

Two pairs of eyes followed his gaze. The recumbant form of Dah-vee was no longer on the floor. Hen-ka looked at the Vulcan. "Did you let him go, Spo-ka?" he asked harshly.

"I did not see him leave," Spock replied calmly. "The joining called my mind, and as I am not of the tribe of Jen-wae, I resisted the call and closed my mind to everything about me."

Hen-ka nodded ruefully. "An honourable act," he said, "but one which may have cost us dearly. Stay here with the old man, I will go seek Dah-vee."

Spock moved forward to take his place at the old man's side.

McCoy looked patiently up at the pacing, relentless figure and grinned in spite of his worry. "You two," he said. "You're each as bad as the other!"

Kirk paused in his pacing. "What are you rabbiting on about, McCoy?" he demanded.

"Can't sit still when the other one's out of sight," McCoy teased. "That time when Claudius Marcus had you, and we couldn't get out to do anything - I thought I was going to have a crazy Vulcan on my hands any minute."

"He's in trouble," Kirk said angrily. "This isn't the time for jokes."

"I'm not joking, Jim. He was nearly frantic with worry, same as you are. And it doesn't help, so calm down and start thinking constructively!"

For a long moment, Kirk glared at him furiously, McCoy continued to meet his eye calmly, a little quizzically, and at last the angry stare melted to a rueful grin. "I don't know how either of us puts up with you," Kirk complained, coming to sit beside him on the makeshift bed.

"Because you know, if you don't, you might get someone worse," McCoy grinned.

Kirk laughed. "Could there be anyone worse? You needle us both, aggravate us until we're screaming, then smile disarmingly and tell us it's all for our own good."

"Well, it is," McCoy said innocently.

"Start thinking constructively," Kirk retaliated, firmly. "Do we go after him?"

McCoy got up to peer out of the hut at the collecting crowd. "There's more of them than ever out there," he said. "They all came pouring out of the temple again."

"So what the hell is Spock doing in there?" Kirk beat one clenched fist on his knee. "If we go dashing in like the cavalry coming over the hill, I suppose we run a grave risk of putting him in even greater danger." He stood up and rejoined McCoy by the gap in the wall.

McCoy's eyebrows shot up. "We'd run a grave risk of putting ourselves in danger as well," he said pointedly. "Jim, we'd never even ~~got~~ there. We aren't blessed with Vulcan muscles that toss all opposition ~~aside~~ as though it doesn't exist."

Kirk laughed in spite of himself. "He did look a bit like an avenging angel, didn't he?"

"Hmm. If you say so," McCoy answered unenthusiastically.

"Some...telepath?...has control of him, d'you think?" Kirk spoke the words that had been filling his mind. Somehow, giving the nebulous worry the fleshing of words, lessened it.

"It could be. I only wish I understood one half of it," McCoy grumbled. "It's obvious that something took over, but what or who or why or how are all beyond me."

"No answers. Always questions with no answers," Kirk mumbled.

McCoy shrugged. "Would you ~~prefer~~ the answers without the questions? If only we had the Enterprise sensors..."

They stared at each other in disbelief. "Am I going crazy?" Kirk demanded, pulling out his communicator.

"Well, I did tell you to stop worrying about Spock," McCoy said pointedly.

Finger poised to open the grid, Kirk turned a steady eye on him. "Well, why didn't you think of it, then?" he demanded.

McCoy grinned shamefacedly.

"Kirk to Enterprise. Scotty, any news on those readings I asked you to check?"

"We've checked out every single blessed one up to about twenty minutes ago, and we're still checking the incoming readings. Everything shows up normal, normal, normal, and then some. We canna find anything that doesna' tally with what we'd expect tae find." He laughed on hearing Kirk's groan. "First time I've ever known you want anything to go wrong, Captain."

"We've got a problem down here," Kirk said soberly, "and no way to account for it. Mr. Spock has gone tearing off to join the natives, without a by-your-leave or thank you, and we've no idea of where he is or what he's doing. Can you give us a check on exactly where he is. One solitary Vulcan should shine out on the sensors like 'a good deed in a naughty world'!" He paused while the engineer relayed the order, then added, "Oh, and what results with the site of the original shrub?"

"Not too helpful," Scott said gloomily. "The main group of shrubs is about a mile from the river. As far as I can estimate, you can probably see it from where ye are now."

An impolite expletive came through the speaker, causing Uhura to chuckle throatily and hastily cough.

"Mr. Spock is no' verra far away from ye, Captain," Scott reported. "About a hundred metres away to the south-west."

"That's something," Kirk said, relieved. "He's still in the temple at least. Thanks, Scotty. If there's anything you think I ought to know, risk a contact. At the moment, we're quite isolated. Kirk out." He snapped the communicator shut and shrugged wearily. "We don't seem to be much further forward than we were before."

"I don't know," McCoy said reflectively. "We do at least know there isn't some powerful alien about to pop up and shout 'Boo!' at us."

"Do we?" Kirk spoke a little dispiritedly, and McCoy gave him a long, professional stare.

"Jim, shielding of any sort shows up eventually in the readings, you know that. You've got a good science section - should have, with Spock breathing down their necks. They're not going to overlook the least little anomaly. If there's anything there to see, they'll pick it up."

"You're right, of course. Oh, to hell with doing nothing!" Kirk slammed a fist into the piled skins of the bed. "If we can beam up now we can have Spock hauled out of that temple before anyone can blink." He dragged his communicator out once more. McCoy grabbed his arm hard.

"No, Jim. That could be incredibly dangerous."

"What d'you mean?"

"We don't know what kind of state he's in," McCoy explained. "If he's in his right mind again, it'd be O.K., but when he went charging out of here, he wasn't...wasn't Spock, if you see what I mean."

"I'd go along with that," Kirk agreed.

"Well, if he's still under ~~the~~ same influence, whatever it is, taking him away without resolving it, when we have no way of knowing what it was...we could destroy his mind."

Kirk slumped again. "Bones, if I don't make a move soon, I'll go crazy!"

McCoy sat down again. "No-one's ever gone crazy from waiting twenty minutes for something to happen," he remarked.

"Twenty minutes?"

"Look at the shadows."

McCoy was right. The seeming eternity had been a mere twenty minutes of enforced idleness. He gritted his teeth, prepared to sit it out for another half hour at most. After a minute or so's stillness, he peered over at McCoy and caught him edgily picking at the fur of the bed, pulling the tiny shreds off with meticulous care, flicking the fluff into the air and moodily watching it float down to the dirt floor. On an impulse, he took a quick, deep breath and blew hard, sending the fluff skittering away into the corner. McCoy looked round, annoyed, then laughed.

"I've got to do something, Jim."

"I know. Just what is it about that darn Vulcan that gets to you this way?"

McCoy lay back. "If you don't know, Jim, I'm not going to spell it out for you."

Kirk looked at him, almost shyly. "I wouldn't say it to anyone else, Bones, but I'm...very fond of Spock."

"I know," McCoy replied matter-of-factly. "Two lonely people who're both afraid that one day they might turn out to be only Human!"

"At least with each other we don't have to pretend," Kirk agreed. "I know Spock doesn't think any the less of me when he knows I'm shivering in my shoes."

"Why should he?" McCoy asked. "Does it ever occur to you he might be shivering in his?"

"Spock!?"

"Why not? The fear reflex is essential for survival. Vulcans can't have managed to eliminate it, or there wouldn't be any around."

Kirk pondered the idea. "If he is, I doubt if it's the same things that panic me."

"Probably not - but it doesn't mean he can't respect you for facing the things you fear."

Kirk was about to reply when there was a sudden flurry of noise outside the hut. They were on their feet and at the gaping hole in the wall before either of them was conscious of movement.

"By the temple," McCoy cried.

"Yes. It's not Spock, not tall enough."

"No," the Doctor agreed regretfully. "It's Dah-vee. Here, if he carries on like that he's going to hurt someone. Oh my God..."

His medical instincts took him from the hut at a swift run. Kirk followed at a sedate, but still urgent, pace, arriving as McCoy slipped to his knees beside the writhing, screaming body.

Gripping with skilful fingers he searched for the pumping artery. The bright scarlet stream dipped and slowed. "Some kind of strapping," he said quietly. "Anything that'll hold." Kirk grabbed at his fur garments, ripping a long strip off with ruthless fingers. "Never mind about trying to find something clean, you'll search for ever." He gave a glance up out of the corner of his eye: "First chance I get I'll give him a shot of broad-spectrum antibiotic."

The gaping wound was covered now, and the man was quieter, his panic-stricken screaming turning to quiet sobs.

"Get some of our bedding, cover him up lightly, and then stay with him. Keep him cheerful. There are several others hurt too."

Kirk ran to the hut, brought out the skins, and dropping them onto the unfortunate victim, knelt down beside him, one gentle hand on his arm. He murmured soothing words, paying little attention to their sense, trying to work out just what was going on, and at the same time, to quench his increasing pessimism over the fate of his First Officer.

McCoy moved among the group who had been standing by the temple door when the attack had begun, soothing their fright and inspecting bumps, cuts and bruises. Dah-vee had emerged like a Klingon berserker, gleaming knife upraised, face contorted with rage, lashing out at those who stood in his way. A good many of the hurts were caused by those who'd tried to leap back out of the way falling on those who were straining to see what was happening. Generally, they were minor cuts and bruises, save for the one serious stab wound he'd already treated. The villagers were dazedly assisting each other, a hum and murmur of anger and shock rising and falling. When they finally finished picking themselves up, there was one stiff figure remaining, oddly contorted and motionless. McCoy slipped his hands under the covering furs, probing firmly but gently, suspecting a badly dislocated hip joint. The skins were hampering, so impatiently tearing them aside, he bent further over the unconscious man. His eyes widened in stunned surprise at the revealed anatomy, anomalies and perplexities suddenly falling into coherent place. Swiftly covering his instinctive surprise, he took the leg in careful hands.



Looking up, he saw a face he recognised and ordered, "Drib-or, hold his upper body firmly and don't let go." With one skilful pull and twist, the bone was back in place. McCoy nodded his thanks, covered the man once more and got up. "Get him back to his hut," he instructed, "and someone stay with him there until he wakes up. He'll be all right." He walked back to Kirk, absent-mindedly nodding to those who praised and thanked him. Sinking to his knees, he made a slight, unnecessary adjustment to the bandage and murmured, "Jim, for God's sake, whatever you do, DON'T take your clothes off in front of these people, for any reason at all."

Kirk's startled eyes studied his Chief Medical Officer in blank amazement, wondering if his friend had gone completely crazy.

"I mean it," McCoy hissed. "I'll explain later."

"O.K. O.K." Kirk reassured him. "What happened, Bones? Was it Dah-vee?"

"Yes. Bit too quick with a knife for my liking," McCoy said.

Kirk took a long breath. "You don't think Spock...?"

"How should I know what to think?" McCoy countered crossly. "This whole tribe seems to have gone crazy."

"Where is Dah-vee now?"

"I wasn't looking. Too busy wondering what damage he'd done."

Kirk got to his feet, gazing round him. The normally quiet village was awash with activity, mostly centred round those who had been hurt in the unexpected fracas. Voices were raised in strident tones, angry faces confronting each other. He saw the tall figure of Hen-ka moving with a group of men, down towards the river. He touched McCoy's shoulder, pointing. "I guess they're going after Dah-vee."

McCoy narrowed his eyes against the swiftly-setting sun. "Could be. I'd like to get this chap moved back into his hut. Help me lift him."

Kirk bent and picked the wounded man up carefully.

"That's right." McCoy guided him carefully forwards. "Hey, you there. Which is his hut?"

They carried him in, laying him down on his bed of furs. The other occupant of the hut was crouching in the corner, moaning with fear. McCoy went over to him, his voice gentle and soothing.

"It's all right. He'll be quite all right. Can you go and get him some water?"

The shaking figure rose, slipping out of the hut on silent feet. Kirk's eyebrows lifted in surprised enquiry.

"He seems pretty scared, Bones."

McCoy was quickly drawing a hypo from his hidden medikit. Pressuring the dose in, he said, "I've got a theory about that. I'll tell you later. There, that should do it." He looked up as the hut door opened. "Oh, there you are. That's right, lift his head gently. Don't jerk him or you'll set the wound bleeding again. Now, make him lie still. He should sleep a good long time, but if he's restless..."

"I have hevika in my pouch."

"Hevika?"

The shaking fingers pulled out the lavender-leafed plant.

"Oh, that hevika! Yes. That'll make him sleep properly. Keep him covered, but not too warm. I'll come in and see him in the morning, if I can."

He smiled kindly and went to the door. The tribesman slipped to his side, looking up at him shyly. "The healers of the tribe of Raw-lin are wise men," he said softly.

"Yes, well, we do our best," McCoy said lamely.

Kirk gave him a tiny pat as they walked out into the twilight. "You can't do any more, Bones, not here."

"I know," McCoy said fiercely. "You don't think that makes it any easier, do you?"

"No." Kirk looked around. The village seemed to be settling down into some semblance of normality again. "Perhaps we should take the opportunity to slip into the temple now, while there's not too many folk around. Come on."

McCoy followed.

The door of the temple was partially open, and Kirk quietly pushed it further, watchfully searching the almost lightless interior. As his eyes grew used to the dark, he could see many tribesmen within, prostrated before the statue. Beckoning McCoy to follow, he slipped inside, only to be grabbed firmly by several villagers standing half behind the open door.

"You are not of the tribe of Jen-wae," he was told, and he was ignominiously hustled through the entrance and deposited outside. He put out a hand to steady the tripped-up McCoy.

"We don't seem exactly welcome," he said ruefully.

"Did you see Spock?"

"No. But then it was so dark I could hardly see anything."

McCoy gave a swift look around in the gathering darkness. "We can wait until they're all asleep," he said hopefully. "Make some kind of a raid then. Maybe beam down a few security guards..."

He broke off under Kirk's severe gaze. "Doctor, this predilection of yours for ignoring General Order No. 1 is becoming a habit."

"That's Spock in there."

"I know," Kirk answered curtly.

"But Jim, you don't understand. If they find out he's not one of them... I mean, that he's an alien... Jim, that's why Dah-vee killed Naznim, I think."

Kirk gripped his shoulders fiercely. "What do you mean?"

"Come back inside our hut and I'll explain."

They stumbled their way back in the darkness, McCoy cursing testily under his breath as he tripped over an unexpected tree root. "You'd think a planet with three moons could manage to let you see your way at night," he complained, nursing the sore toe.

Kirk was not in the mood for irrelevancies. "Come on," he ordered hauling McCoy ungently to his feet. "I want to know just what you're talking about. Is this our hut?" He felt around the sides of it gingerly, encountering splintered wood and torn skins. "Yes, this is it. Come on."

McCoy sank to the dirt floor, slipping the inelegant soft fur boot off his foot to massage the ~~abused~~ toe.

"Now!" Kirk sank down beside him. "Precisely what have you found out?"

McCoy looked up from his foot. "These people may be humanoids, and look not unlike us superficially, but that's as far as it goes. I had to strip one of 'em off to deal with an injury. Jim, they're almost certainly hermaphrodites, and definitely marsupial."

"What?"

McCoy's eyes gleamed with professional fascination. "Yes. I was right when I said that the group holding the children were probably female, but wrong when I suggested they were not mammalian, of course. Spock was right when he said they might have the organs arranged differently. By jiminy, I wish I had the opportunity to study them properly. I've never met a species like this before."

"I see," Kirk said slowly. "When you say the group with children are fem..."

"I don't actually mean female as such," McCoy explained, "but going through the stage at which their bodies work as females. If you look at them carefully, you'll see they're all very much of an age. I would guess that at a certain stage of their lives, they undergo drastic hormonal changes that alter their whole personalities, as well as bringing their female halves into a fertile stage. If

you think about it, all the ones with babies are pretty timid."

"Yes," Kirk agreed. A sudden memory struck him. "And when that partner of Hen-ka's tucked that kid inside his clothes, I suppose he...uh, she...uh, it?... was slipping it into his...her, pouch. I wondered why the kid didn't cry."

"I should stick to 'him'," McCoy advised. "They all seem to use the male pronoun."

"Why 'sisters'?" Kirk frowned. "Why not just females, or women?"

McCoy frowned too. "At a rough guess, I'd say it was the closest concept the universal translator could come up with. After all, we may think of the stage as turning into a woman, but I don't see any reason why they should look at it like that. After all, they don't change their outward appearance, they just... have babies." He gave a chuckle. "This report'll go winging its way round H.Q. all right, make half of 'em sit up and take notice in the Surgeon-General's Offices even." He rubbed his hands enthusiastically. "Boy, I'd love the job of observation here. I've never encountered anything so...so..."

"Fascinating?" Kirk teased.

The word sobered them both.

"It could well be why Dah-vee killed Naznim," McCoy said quietly. "Seeing her close to...well, she didn't look like any of their females, did she?"

"No. Nothing like. But Bones, they do have the concept of femininity, they always referred to the goddess as 'she'. How do you explain that?"

"Their pets, these...liandi?...may be male and female, I don't know. I haven't been close enough to one to see. But how did they know right from the start that Naznim was female?"

Thoughts began to tie tiny, interlacing knots in Kirk's mind. "Stop a minute, Bones, I think I may be getting an idea." He paused, gathering all the threads in his mind and weaving them into one coherent picture. "Yes, I think I may have got it, Bones. Listen. These liandi they all carry, they must be more than just pets."

"What do you mean? Why shouldn't they be just pets?"

"Everyone has one, Bones. Everyone. No exceptions. With pets, there'd be bound to be someone who'd choose not to have one for some reason. And if it isn't a matter of choice, there must be a reason why they all have them. Now, an observed fact. It's just about impossible to kill, or even stun, a liandus. You aim, and they're gone, just before you press the trigger. Why?"

"Scared?" McCoy hazarded.

"It's more than scared. Birds are scared, but both of us have hit them when we've needed them for food, or study. These liandi just...aren't there. They move before you do."

"Telepathic?"

"It's possible, isn't it? If they're telepathic, but unintelligent, Spock wouldn't pick them up, would he?"

"He'd notice something," McCoy protested. "Even if it was only an urge for food, or a strong desire to snuggle up in your hood for the night." He gave a vulgar snicker.

"All right. Maybe they're only powerful enough to broadcast anything when their masters are linked with them. Another fact, there were liandi flying around over Naznim when they found her unconscious down by the river. And she 'saw' an old man. It could have been this Jen-wae, they say he's old. The liandi were acting as a link between the two of them."

"More than two," McCoy remembered. "She said there were dozens of them there. How do you account for that?"

"They all have liandi...they...link minds somehow." A final, vital memory clicked into place. "Hen-ka said... 'No joining has come to make us happy since Jen-wae fell ill'. He must be the...instigator of these...joinings!" He looked across at the doctor. "Does it all make sense?"

"It makes sense," McCoy conceded. "A logical set of deductions. Spock'd be proud of you. It doesn't mean you're necessarily right, though."

"You come up with a better theory, then," Kirk said crisply.

McCoy grinned. "I'll go along with yours." His eyes widened suddenly. "Jim, it would also account for why they knew Naznim was female. If they'd been in telepathic contact with her, they'd have seen her own awareness of herself...as feminine."

"And they could pick out a picture of the Enterprise from her mind as well," Kirk said. "Doctor, suddenly a lot of pieces are slipping into the jigsaw puzzle."

"Well, what happened to Spock, then?"

Kirk scratched his head. "Jen-wae recovered," he suggested. "Judging by the way Dah-vee came hurtling out of that temple, it looks as though he's persona non grata at the moment. The old chief got better, gave out some sort of mental distress signal, and poor old Spock went haring off like a knight errant to rescue his lady love."

McCoy smothered a grin. "It's not funny, Jim," he said severely. "He could be in serious trouble. Remember what happened when they saw Naznim's body."

"Well, Spock isn't going to strip off just for the hell of it," Kirk commented.

"I don't suppose Naznim did either," McCoy said quietly. "Jim, we've got to get to him, warn him."

"Yes." Kirk crawled cautiously to the hole in the wall and peered out. "There doesn't seem to be anyone about now." He slipped his head back in again, preparatory to standing up, when his body froze into stillness. "McCOY. BEHIND YOU!"

The Doctor swung round, off balance because of his bare foot, slipped, reeled ...and took the knife high on his shoulder instead of in the back it had originally been aimed at. He gave a grunt of pain/surprise, and fell to his knees, one hand grasping the wound.

The figure behind him uncoiled for a second attack, the knife held menacingly out towards McCoy. "One move and your friend here dies," he hissed.

Kirk hesitated, uncertain in the dim light whether Dah-vee was alone or not. "How did you get in here?"

Dah-vee laughed sneeringly. "It was not difficult, oh ignorant one who knows not the ways of the tribe. Many, many days marches away your lands must be, from the lands of the goddess, no less. Well, she bled like any of the tribe of Jen-wae. She bled and she died - not I. I live, to teach all how to endure under the wrath of Dah-vee." He saw McCoy attempt to rise and lashed out with his foot. "Be still. I will not be thwarted. The tribe of Dah-vee will learn to cower at their master's feet."

Kirk caught McCoy as he fell, a gasp of agony escaping the Doctor's lips as his shoulder wound wrenched and pulled. He held him gently, folding back the filthy skins to reveal a deep, narrow lesion with dark blood slowly welling up. He laid the surgeon back down, tearing at his furs to remove a strip and a pad for binding it, cursing Dah-vee's presence under his breath, and praying the standard precautionary shots they'd all had before beam-down would be sufficient to prevent infection.

"Leave him," Dah-vee screamed at him wildly.

"Go to hell," Kirk replied mildly.

"LEAVE HIM!"

Kirk pulled the bandage tighter, pressing the pad firmly into place, blessing the practical demonstration he'd had earlier in the day, and also that this time the knife had not touched an artery. Even in this dim light he could see the difference between the thrusting, pumping gush of an arterial wound, and this slower, subtler, but eventually equally lethal flow. At least it gave more time for his clumsily shaking, inexperienced hands to get the bandage right. He pulled the knots tight, looked up impatiently.

"Well, I've done my best to undo your stupidity, Dah-vee. Why did you knife him?"

"You are not of the tribe of Jen-wae."

"You've known that all along. We're from lands far to the south, of the tribe of Raw-lin."

"You are not as men are..."

"Not as the tribe of Jen-wae, no. But there are other lands."

The squint eyes glinted, gleamed, as a shaft of moonlight began to shine in through the gaping wall. "Maybe, maybe. But your words are strange to the ears of Dah-vee. You speak in riddles of male and female, as though they are a separate thing, when all know this is part of growth, of change."

"Your goddess was a female..."

"Goddess! I have seen no goddess. Only a thing of madness, a demon," Dah-vee screamed. "The tribe prate of the goddess and the word means nothing. Female is growth, is fear, is shrinking. Male is emerging, daring, power. Adult. That is male and female, not goddess."

Wary of the sudden, hysterical outburst, Kirk replied, "You saw her in the joining, Dah-vee. She was female."

"The joining!" Dah-vee spat, vehemently and repulsively, onto the dirt floor. "The tribe prate of that, too, and it means nothing. Nothing but the sickly smile of love they wear, and the vomit-sweet smell of hevika. I, Dah-vee, youngest son, do not need the joining to wield my power."

Wondering whether his carefully constructed, logical argument was about to fall in ruins about him, Kirk probed further. "But the rest of your tribe, they experience the joining?"

"So they say. Who can tell?" Dah-vee's sly smile glinted in the pale moonbeams. "How can I tell whether they do not lie as cleverly as Dah-vee does?" He gave a sudden shriek of mirth. "Do you believe these half-witted children can be the match to Dah-vee?" He stopped laughing as suddenly as he'd begun, staring at Kirk intently. "You ask too many questions, Jim-ka, of the tribe of Raw-lin, from the lands to the south..." His tone changed, becoming silky, threatening, "...or was it the lands to the east you said, my friend?"

Kirk's heart gave a sudden wild thump as he realised his earlier slip. Desperately, he sought to retrieve it. "To the south, south-east, what does it matter?"

"It does not. It is sufficient you come from the same place of demons as that black demon you sent to us." Dah-vee hissed the words, menace in his body.

Kirk tensed himself, met the attack as it came, grabbed at the knife arm and pulled in the direction of the lunge, throwing his attacker over his shoulder and through the damaged hut wall. Dah-vee picked himself up, clenched the knife even tighter and came on again. This time Kirk dodged aside, allowing Dah-vee to rush by, unable to pull himself up and avoid the side of the hut. Dazed, but not beaten, Dah-vee got up again, shaking his head to clear it, and lifted the knife, coming directly at Kirk's stomach. Kirk dodged again, stumbled over McCoy, felt the knife catch his clothing, tear it, pierce his skin in a long, searing scratch. Rolling, he grabbed the arm, pulled, wrenched, and heard bone crack. Dah-vee gave a long, wailing scream and stumbled to his feet. Aiming a last, malevolent kick

at Kirk's head, he was gone.

Half sobbing in an effort to get his breath, Kirk hauled himself upright, his hand lighting on the abandoned knife. His fingers clenched round it automatically as he stood up. There was a murmuring of voices outside. In less than no time, he would have company, and McCoy's injury needed tending. He pulled out his communicator with his free hand.

"Sorry, my Vulcan friend," he whispered. "I will be back." He flipped the tiny instrument open. "Scotty? Two to beam up, and quickly."

Spock stood a little awkwardly by the old man's bed, staring down at the lined face. It showed the passage of many years in the wrinkled seaming, a peaceful, wise face, calm with a life-time's experience even under the present strain. However, the gnarled hands moved in restless, searching patterns over the covering furs. Wishing he had Kirk's easy ability to reassure and calm, he paused, irresolute, undertain what to do for the best. There was little logic in offering soothing formulae to one who was presently absorbing cheerless and unwelcome facts about his younger son. He found the faded blue eyes meeting his in a penetrating stare. Their glance held, Jen-wae's challenging, Spock's questioning, until Spock politely looked away. Jen-wae smiled, patting the side of the litter.

"Sit down, stranger, and tell me of yourself."

"There is little to tell," Spock answered, sitting down and gazing at the floor.

"Will you not tell me your name, at least?"

"I am called Spo-ka, of the tribe of Raw-lin." Inwardly, Spock half admired Kirk's ready wit that had produced a satisfactory tribal name, and half deprecated the use of the Vice-Admiral's name under such dubious circumstances. "I and my companions come from the lands towards the rising sun, more than forty days march from here. We have come in search of a herb much desired by my tribe."

"And have you found the herb you seek?"

"Not yet."

"Is it so hard to find?" Jen-wae sounded surprised.

"We have not had the opportunity to search as yet," Spock replied diplomatically.

Jen-wae seemed even more surprised. "I know I am an old man, maybe my wits have fled before their time, but do I not recall Kal-la telling me of strangers in our midst five suns ago?"

"That is so," Spock acknowledged.

"Then why have you had no opportunity to seek out your herb?" Jen-wae asked sharply. Seeing the slight hesitation on Spock's well-nigh immobile face, he sighed wearily. "It is good of a stranger to spare an old man. My son Dah-vee set obstacles in your path, did he not?"

"He wished us to worship the goddess," Spock explained placidly.

"Each worships in his own way," Jen-wae said fretfully. "You are not of the tribe of Jen-wae, you are not subject to our laws." He looked up at Spock a little fiercely. "You will forgive?"

"We will forgive," Spock nodded.

The blue eyes suddenly sharpened, eyes narrowing, excitement beginning to gleam. "You are no stranger," Jen-wae cried, his voice quavering in his eagerness. "You, you are..." He faltered, paused, straining out a hand, gripping at Spock's shoulder, pulling at the fur of his hood. Afraid of hurting the old man, Spock attempted to pull back gently, but the hood slipped slowly, softly, inexorably off his head.

"The servant of the goddess." Jen-wae barely breathed the words. "You bore her back to her silver bird in the sky." He cowered down into his bedding. "You have come to punish us for what my son did to the goddess."

Spock shook his head firmly, replacing his hood. "I am no god," he said quietly, "and I do not serve your goddess. You and your tribe have nothing to fear from me or my two companions."

"You bore her," Jen-wae said again. "You bore her, and you were clad in the same sky blue that covered her." His gaze slipped, unfocussed, as he searched his mind. "You are not her servant, no. She is yours. She serves you, as you serve the golden god whom all men love. Faster than the eye can see, you speed on the silver bird, through the stars to strange earths, where white and silver temples gleam and point upwards to the skies." His eyes focussed again, staring fixedly at Spock. "And you, you are powerful and different, and men find you awesome. You are hard to please, and they fear you. You are cold and they seek to warm you with their own fire."

Startled, Spock held out a hand to the old man, laying a finger on his lips in a universal gesture demanding silence. Just how much had this primitive tribal leader gleaned from his one short telepathic link with Lt. Armitraj? More than he should be permitted to retain for the sake of his people's future development. For everyone's sake, he must take some kind of action in the matter.

Gently removing his finger, he said, "Jen-wae, as you have seen, I knew the goddess. Will you permit the joining of our minds?"

"The joining is always welcome, it brings such joy," Jen-wae replied gladly. He reached up to his pillow to take his liandus in his hand, but Spock caught his wrist just in time. The last thing he wanted was to broadcast what he was about to do to the minds of all the tribesmen. He knew from past experience that it was difficult to resist their combined minds, and he could not complete the tricky task he had set himself to attempt if there was anything at all to distract him.

"There is no need for the liandus," he said quietly. "This joining is of our two minds alone, Jen-wae. It is the way of my people."

"The golden god is powerful indeed," Jen-wae answered in open admiration. He accepted the touch of Spock's fingers without fear, and the Vulcan found a bright, singing welcome within the mind that surprised and humbled him. He let their thoughts flow gently, appreciating the primitive's order and common sense, skimming over the memories of carefree childhood, shrinking sisterhood, lingering a little over the mature adult, growing in stature, experience and wisdom. He saw the memories of Jen-wae's two sons, the gentle Har-ky, truly the son of his father, and the dark subtlety of Dah-vee. Searching on, he found the first glimpse of the landing party as the liandi swooped and dived, the sense of wonder at the strange dark beauty of the blue-clad figure, the joy as she plucked the hevika plant and came to them in the joining, surrendering herself to their call.

He centred on the memory, sliding about it, pulling it free, and exised it cleanly, delicately. Then, concentrating all his ability, he built a firm compulsion to obliterate any such memory in other minds touching Jen-wae's. He'd never undertaken such a arastic, multiple-intended alteration previously, and was uncertain of its ultimate efficacy, but for the good of this race, he knew it was his duty at least to make the attempt. Slowly, almost sensuously, he released their minds, gently soothing Jen-wae until his eyelids drooped in sleep as they each returned to consciousness of the surrounding world.

He eyed the old man for a moment, and then rose purposefully. If the selective amnesia he had attempted to induce was to be successful, the first thing he must do was to organise the removal of any reminders. He went to the curtained doorway and peeked into the large room of the temple. Darkness had come so gradually he had scarcely noted its coming as his eyes had accustomed themselves to the darkening gloom of the rush-lit room. The temple seemed empty. He listened carefully, but could pick out not the slightest rustle or breath of movement. Advancing to the statue, he pulled out his communicator.

"Spock to Enterprise."

"Mr. Spock! The Captain said he'd lost ye!"

"I am not with the Captain at present, Mr. Scott. Will you locate and lock on to a wooden statue, one point three five metres from my present position, and beam it aboard if you please. It should be carefully put to one side, pending my instructions for its permanent destruction."

"Aye, we have it, Mr. Spock."

"Very well. Energise, if you please." He watched the statue shimmer away, and returned to the inner room. Now he must encourage Jen-wae to call the joining, of there would be awkward questions asked when the tribesmen found their statue gone. As he stepped forward, intending to shake the old man awake, his eye fell on the liandus crouched by his head. Its golden eyes were open, staring fixedly at him, unblinking. He gave his head a tiny, impatient shake as the imperative call touched his mind.

"Distress. Seek out. Console."

He pulled his thoughts away sharply, a tiny frown creasing his brow. The first imperative was to determine who was in distress. He lowered his shields sufficiently to pick up the image of a liandus, cowering away in darkness. Since it was clearly not far off, he searched in the logically obvious place, and found it there, cowering beneath the bed, its wings trembling with agitation, an almost Human look of unhappiness on its face.

A gentle hand touched the tiny creature, forgetful of Hen-ka's warning of their ferocity, and lifted it up to study it more closely. Its golden eyes wooed him solicitously, and suddenly mindful of danger, he raised his mental shields firmly.

It blinked at him, chittering its disgust, and stretched its wings, lifting its snout appealingly towards him. Drawn to it despite himself, he touched the tiny face with one sensitive fingertip. Even through his careful shielding, he could sense the longing and loneliness battering at his mind, and the terrified distress. Curious, he tentatively reached out a tendril of thought to it, like a bather dipping one toe into a freezing ocean, and as hurriedly drew back as the ocean threatened to thunder about his ears with the overwhelming power of a tsunami. Kaiidh! The creature was powerful.

He sorted out the tremendous surge of information and emotion that had reached him, breaking it down into its component parts with difficulty. Of course! This was Dah-vee's liandus, and suffering greatly from its lack of comforting telepathic communication since the cruel loss of its mother. Spock felt a brief, unwelcome surge of totally negative emotion as he saw how the liandus pup had lost her. The wanton cruelty of the act sickened him. However, there was blindingly clear fact that did emerge from the brief contact. Dah-vee was totally psi-null, his mind unavailable to the most powerful telepathic contact. Even a Melkotian would be unable to penetrate such a mind. The condition was rare, but not unheard of, and must have been incredibly distressing to this tiny creature, dependent for its well-being on its master's love and devotion.

He opened the tiniest hair-line crack in his shielding, attempting to project palliative comfort to the distressed animal, experiencing a totally undesired prickle of pleasure down his spine as the little thing visibly warmed itself in the glowing radiation of his thoughts. It was like watching a cat, stretching lazily and sensuously in warm sunshine. Caught up in the little creature's need, he did not see the gleaming eyes watching him from the now uncurtained doorway.

The scream, wild, feral, assaulted his sensitive eardrums, and he found himself almost dropping the liandus in his desire to shut out the offensive sound. He swung round to see Dah-vee in the entrance.

"Mine. Mine. Mine!" Dah-vee screamed again. "You shall not touch. The pup is mine. Give it to me."

He stretched out a shaking hand, its fingers clutching convulsively. Spock noted, with distaste and incipient nausea, that the spatulate fingers were stained and smeared with blood. He held the liandus protectively up to his neck with his left hand, feeling the wild beating of its tiny heart against his palm. It throbbed so passionately it almost seemed too great a motion for the tiny frame to bear.

"You are not a fit keeper, Dah-vee," he said calmly. "The liandus must go to one who will care for it."

"No!" Dah-vee shrieked the word, convulsed with rage. "It is mine. Give it to me." He leaped forward, fingernails reaching for Spock's eyes, spittle flecking his cheeks with grimy foam, "Give it to me, or I will kill you both."

The familiar walls of the transporter room formed themselves around Kirk and he stepped off the station, mentally checking an involuntary sigh of relief. This whole mismanaged business was by no means over yet. Too many problems remained to be resolved, and they were no nearer their prime objective than they had been when they'd swung into orbit five days ago.

"Call M'Benga," he said curtly, lowering McCoy to the floor. "Bring a med-trolley, McCoy's hurt."

"Hurt?" The Scotsman swiftly made the call, then came round the console, a worried frown creasing his forehead. "Aye, I can see that, Captain. Whatever happened?"

"He's been stabbed."

"Wi' that?"

Kirk looked down at the knife in his hand with surprise and disgust. He'd even forgotten he was holding it. "Yes. One of the natives turned unfriendly." He dropped the revolting object on the edge of the console. "I need a wash like never before," he sighed. "I can't think straight in this condition."

"Weel," the Engineer grinned, "it's a bit like having a tame skunk on board, if ye'll forgive ma being sae frank, Captain." He bent to help lift McCoy. "And Leonard's not in much better condition, if ye ask me!"

The door swished open, and M'Benga hurried in, followed by two medics with a trolley. The Doctor's face registered the initial shock to his olfactory organ, but his professional instincts took him to McCoy without comment.

"Take him down and clean him up," Kirk said tiredly. "When he comes round, tell him I'll be down to see him soon."

"Affirmative, Captain." M'Benga looked up with a grin. "I'll...uh...give him a bath, sir."

Kirk grinned back. "Tactfully indicating I need one too, eh?"

"Well, sir, it is better for your health..." M'Benga said reasonably. "These clothes of the Doctor's were positively crawling. The standard transporter decontamination has killed all the bugs off, but you must come to the sickbay for a booster shot soon, if you're as badly bitten as Dr. McCoy."

"I itch as much," Kirk agreed. "I'll take the booster when I come down to see McCoy." He watched the trolley out of the doorway and turned back to Scott, seeing for the first time the object that stood in the corner of the room. "How in the name of the Galaxy did that get here?" he demanded.

"The wee statue? Mr. Spock asked me to beam it up for him, not ten minutes before you came aboard, sir. Told me to put it on one side until he gave orders for it to be destroyed."

"Destroyed?" Kirk could make no sense of this at all, but had enough experience of Spock to trust his judgement - most of the time. "Did he say where he was or what he was up to?"

"No, sir. Just told me about the statue and said he wasna' with you. Quite calm, he seemed."

Kirk laughed. "I'd be really worried if he wasn't! As it is, I'll content myself with tearing my hair out. Well, at least he's still alive. I suppose that's something." He started out through the door into the corridor when a thought struck him. "Scotty, get something to cover that up with. You never know, Lt. Sulu might have occasion to come in here...I don't want him upset."

The Engineer nodded understandingly. "It's a beautiful likeness of the wee lassie, sir."

Kirk blinked back the hot tears of grief. "It is," he said steadily. "Indeed it is. That's their goddess, Scotty, their...totem, if you like. Their most sacred object, revered and worshipped. The only one they have, and Spock's taken it away from them!" He grinned at Scott's horrified expression. "I see you can't see the logic in it either, Scotty."

"No, sir," Scott replied emphatically. "In fact, if it wasna' Mr. Spock's order, sir, I'd be tempted to beam it right back where I got it from."

"I see," Kirk murmured. "So you don't trust my judgement either, Scotty?"

Scott looked at him severely. "Now that wisna' whit I meant; and you verra weel know it, Captain. If I were you, I should go and have that shower straight away."

"I'm off." Kirk went to the door a second time. "I don't think I can live with myself much longer either. Come and see me in my quarters, Scotty, get Kyle to relieve you in here."

"Aye, sir. I'll be there."

The shower was sheer, unadulterated heaven, and he soaked under the stinging heat, scrubbing the accumulated dirt and sweat away, enjoying it enough to want to sing, loudly and unmelodiously. Hearing his door buzzer, he switched off the shower and grabbing a towel, called, "Come in, Scotty. I'll be right out."

When he finally emerged, giving a last rub to his wet hair, Scott was sitting in the chair by the desk, patiently waiting.

"Sorry to be so long. That was the best thing that's happened to me in days." He threw the towel carelessly back into the bathroom, dragged a comb through his wet hair and went out into the office. "Still no anomalies showing up, Scotty?"

"None, sir. We're triple-checking everything and then some. Everything reads perfectly normal."

"Well, at least we know now that whatever made Spock hightail it out into the sunset didn't kill him."

"Made Mr. Spock...? Whatever are ye saying, sir?"

"Someone - something - made contact with Spock and he went off without saying why. One of these days I'll get him court-martialled when he does that."

Scott smothered a grin. "Have ye no idea at all, sir?"

"We're pretty sure the little creatures they all have as pets are telepaths, but unintelligent, or low-grade anyway. The people are pretty weird, too. Hermaphrodite marsupials." Scott's jaw visibly dropped. "Unusual, isn't it? McCoy's hpping with enthusiasm." Kirk sobered again. "I think that's why they killed Naznim Armitraj - because she didn't look like they do."

"You couldn't have been expected to anticipate any difference as outrageous as that, sir," Scott protested.

"I guess you're right." Kirk did not really want to discuss the matter. It was still too close. "Anyhow, my guess is it was the liandi - these telepathic creatures - that projected a...vision, if you like...of Naznim on the first landing

party. The locals mistook her for a goddess and moved into the area where they saw her." He got to his feet. "Never mind the answers we think we might have got, we still haven't got this damn bush we came for, and I'm not going without it. If necessary we'll beam down at first light tomorrow and collect it. Never mind who's around." He sighed. "But before that, I've a Vulcan Science Officer to get out before the whole thing blows up in my face." He went to the door. "I'm off to see McCoy before I go. Coming?"

"Aye." Scott lifted himself out of the chair and followed him from the room. "Ye know, sir, that new set of skins Stores sent up, smell nearly as nasty as the old ones."

"Authenticity." Kirk grinned. "At least it's a nice hygienic germ-free, chemically produced stink, Scotty!"

He walked into the sickbay as casually as he could manage, expecting the reception he got.

"What are you doing here, Jim? You should be down there, looking for Spock. If that madman gets at him..."

"I did relieve the madman of his knife," Kirk interrupted, "and Spock was all right ten minutes before we beamed up. He spoke to Scotty."

"Spoke to Scotty?" McCoy beamed, controlled it, glared. "What did he have to say for himself?"

"Beamed up the statue of their goddess and asked us to look after it for him," Kirk said succinctly.

"Beamed up...?" McCoy's voice failed him temporarily. "Is he trying to get himself killed or what? If they find that thing's gone, they'll lynch the most likely suspect. Jim, you have to get back down there. Curse this shoulder. If only I..."

M'Benga arrived in time to push him back onto his pillows, "Just you lie still, Dr. McCoy. You know you can't afford for that to start bleeding again. Captain Kirk, I've got your booster shot."

Kirk submitted his arm to the hypo and went to the door. "I'll find him, Bones, don't worry."

McCoy looked at the closing door in frustration. "But I do worry," he growled savagely to the empty room.

On his way to the transporter room, Kirk encountered Sulu. The helmsman was looking pale, a little red about the eyes, but reasonably chipper.

"No more luck with the landing parties?" Kirk demanded, none too hopefully.

Sulu shook his head. "I don't think so, sir. The last groups are in for debriefing now, if you want to see them."

Kirk made a swift decision. Ten minutes was unlikely to make that much difference, and if they could beam Spock straight up without further ado, it would be worth the added time. He led the way to the briefing room.

"Sir," Sulu said tentatively, "Sir, do you know any more about why they killed Naznim?"

"I have my suspicions, Lieutenant," Kirk said gently. "These people are a very odd race indeed, hermaphrodite marsupials. And one of them, I'm beginning to think, is crazy as well." He sighed. "I should have waited until I had more information, I suppose."

Sulu laid a hand on his arm. "Sir, I've served under you for several years now. If you took a risk, it was worth taking. Naznim was not very experienced, perhaps even a little over-eager..."

Kirk met his eyes. "I thought I was supposed to comfort you, Lieutenant," he said wryly.

Sulu looked away. "I guess we both need it," he said softly. "We both know the risks. It doesn't make it any easier though, does it?"

Kirk shook his head. "Nor does experience, Mister," he answered bitterly. "Come on, let's get this job finished, for her sake."

He waved the rising group of crewmen to sit down again. "First things first. Any of the specifically required specimens discovered anywhere?"

There was a chorus of, "No, sirs."

"Well, that seems to be that." Kirk covered his disappointment. "Anything at all out of the ordinary?" he asked. "Did anyone see anything they didn't expect?" There was a stir of movement in one group; he swung round to them. "Well?"

"We...uh...found a body, sir."

The last landing party of the morning was assembling, preparatory to beam down. Ensign Chekov in charge, accompanied by Botanist Ensign Rhys Evans, Security Guards Jin-Won Tu and Quentin Ellis, along with Medical Technician Sue Martin. They gathered round the display screen for a final briefing.

"As you can see, we're taking the risk of beaming down reasonably close to the track," Chekov pointed to the map. "This hill should give us plenty of cover, but both Security men must be alert the whole time. Sue...uh...Ms. Martin and I will assist Ensign Evans, and Lt. Tu and Ellis will confine their activities to security only. We mustn't have any slip-ups, and whatever you do, any of you, don't touch this mauve-leafed plant." He touched the button on the panel to display one plant on the screen. "That's the one that caused the problems first time. It's hallucinogenic and quite dangerous, so keep away from it. Now, you all know what we're looking for?"

"Should do by now," Sue said gloomily.

"Yes, well, that's just too bad," Chekov told her hard-heartedly. "Any questions? Good, prepare for beam-down."

They arranged themselves on the stations and the shimmer of the beam took them.

Sue Martin took a long, deep breath of sheer luxury. "This plain is certainly one of the loveliest on the whole lovely planet," she enthused. "The smell of the air is simply glorious."

"Come on," said Chekov fiercely, under his breath. "There's no time for sight seeing. Jin-Won, you go up to the top of that hill there. It should give you a good view of the track, which is about two miles away. If anyone starts coming too close this way, use your communicator and tell us at once. If that happens, everyone is to take cover immediately. Is that clear? There are to be no sightings by the villagers. Mr. Ellis, if you would take your station over there, it will give you a wide view each way down the river. Same goes for you. If anyone at all is about, let us know at once. Then give the all clear when it's safe to continue working." He watched the guards moving into position and turned to Evans. "Where do you want to start, Mr. Evans?"

The botanist looked about him dubiously. "None of this area looks too hopeful. I think down by the river is the best bet. That way."

"Very well. We'll fan out, about fifty metres apart. Take care."

As they moved off, Sue called out quietly, "Pavel, you're enjoying this!"

He gave her a cheeky grin. "It's not often I get to be in charge," he agreed. "Circumstances are a bit unusual this time."

Soon they were too far apart for conversation to be feasible, and Sue gave herself up to the pleasures of the day, revelling in delicious scents, warm sunshine, growing things under her feet...all the things one could not have in space, and did not miss until you found them once more. She knew that some Starfleet personnel suffered from an extremely mild form of agoraphobia, feeling faintly uneasy on landing party duties, but she had never experienced any such feelings herself, neither minding the closed-in-ness of ship-board life, nor the wide-open, untrammelled spaces of pre-civilised planets. She cast a careful look around to see all the group were within sight and safe. She could see the gleam of red as Jin-Won made his way up the hill, and thought, not for the first time, that red was hardly the best colour for a security guard under these conditions. Ellis, she took longer to find, but she spotted him at last, perched in the lower branches of a shrub overhanging the river and looking like some large exotic fruit. She gave a tiny giggle. Away to her right, Ensign Evans was striding purposefully towards a clump of shrubs, and to her left...where was Pavel? Swallowing panic, she forced her eyes to study the likely area slowly, giving a gasp of relief when



he emerged from the overhanging branches of a shrub. It turned to an exclamation of annoyance as she recognised the shrub, and she broke into a run.

"What's the matter?" Chekov demanded. "Found something?"

"No, but you have." She had the tricorder up, scanning him carefully.

"What are you talking about, Sue?" he asked, bewildered.

"Look at your hands," she retorted.

He looked, and made a movement of guilt and dismay at their streaked, orange appearance. "Isn't that the pollen that affected Mr. Spock?"

"If it isn't, it's very like it. Pavel, you are an idiot; what possessed you to go in under there?"

"I don't know," he said sheepishly. "It looked like a place in the woods I used to play in when I was a kid."

She giggled. "Idiot! I'd like to hear you explaining that to the Captain... or Mr. Spock! How are you feeling?"

"All right."

"No sign of sneezing?"

"No."

"Well, it didn't affect Sulu last time. I guess it's only irritant to Vulcans. But do take care, there's usually some sort of serpent in every Eden."

"Such profound philosophy," he teased. "I'll take care. Where are the other three?"

"You're in charge, you should know."

"Stop rubbing it in. There they are. I'm going further up that way, you go down towards the river."

"All right." She walked away from him towards the brown, dark water, glittering in the sunlight, the tall water plants swaying in the lightest breeze as would their Terran counterparts. She gave another sigh of satisfaction, running the silky, thread-like leaves between her fingers. A shrill beep broke the moment. She flipped open her communicator.

"All of you, take cover. Group of natives will pass along ridge walking towards river. They shouldn't pass nearer that two hundred metres to any of you, but keep well down in the grass. Tu out."

Looking round, Sue could see no better protection than those very reed beds she had been admiring. The ground under her boots was damp but not muddy, and she pushed her way into their friendly cover, crouching down. There was another beep.

"Sue, they'll pass nearest to you. Be careful."

"Affirmative," she replied wholeheartedly, wriggling well down into the reeds, Indian fashion, making for the water-side away from the track. She lay quite still, unable to hear anything save the whispering rustle of the reeds and the pounding of her own heart. She closed her eyes, concentrating on slowing its throbbing, and as control returned, opened her eyes once more and found herself looking into the sightless eyes of a skull. She stifled her gasp of shock, praying she had not been overheard, and closed her eyes again, thinking longingly of her nice, safe, secure cabin on board the Enterprise.

Up on the hill, Tu watched the natives safely past, and saw the other members of the landing party emerge, one by one, all save Sue, down in the reed bed. He chuckled. Probably too scared to emerge. He flipped open his communicator.

"It's all right, Sue. You can come out now."

"Jin-Won? I've found a body."

"A what?"

"A body. A skeleton. I don't know how long it's been here. I'm just making a tricorder check."

"What did you say?" That was Chekov's voice breaking in.

"Over here in the reeds. Is it safe for me to stand up?"

"Yes, there's no one around now."

She got to her feet, waving, then bent to examine her gruesome discovery. It had clearly been there for some months, probably deposited when the river was fuller than it was now. The flesh was gone, shreds of skin clothing still clinging about the scattering limbs. The cause of death was painfully obvious - the knife still protruded its intricately carved, wooden handle from between the ribs. She looked up to see Chekov's concerned face above the reeds.

"Are you all right, Sue?"

"Of course I'm all right." She grinned, relenting. "It gave me a bit of a shock at first, though. I lay down right beside it."

He gave an uncomfortable shudder. "I'm glad it wasn't me. You medics have tougher hides than the rest of us."

"Anything I can do to help?"

They both jumped, turning. "Don't do that, Jin-Won," Sue complained. "You nearly gave me a heart attack."

"Sorry. Can I do anything?"

"No, and you shouldn't have left your post," Chekov said crossly.

"Sorry. I thought Sue needed help," Tu said apologetically.

Chekov's communicator beeped accusingly. He opened it.

"Are you three enjoying a good chin-wag?" Evans demanded. "There's nothing in this area, Ensign. We may as well make our way back to the beam-down point."

"Very well. I'll call Ellis. Chekov out." He began to push his way through the reeds. "Come on, everyone. Time to go home."

Last to leave, Jin-Won Tu looked down at the body, and on an impulse, pulled the knife free. It would make an interesting, if macabre, souvenir.

"I caught him trying to sneak it out of the transporter room, sir," Chekov reported. "Should it be taken back down?"

Kirk held out a hand for it, a chill fascination running down his spine. It was identical to the knife he had left upon the transporter console not half an hour before. Was this another of Dah-vee's victims?

"I'll take it, Ensign," he said softly. "It may add a...little local colour to my appearance."

He beamed back down into their familiar hut, wondering what sort of mayhem might have broken loose while he'd been away. Considering the crazy, uncontrolled screaming of Dah-vee, almost anything might have happened. It was quite a shock to find the village quiet, peaceful, apparently unmoved and unaffected by the violent events of the day. He moved cautiously out of the hut's damaged wall, listening intently. The night was comparatively light now, the largest moon and one of the smaller ones were both well above the horizon. He could still see no sign of movement, nor hear any murmur of voices. Slipping like a shadow, he moved from hut to hut on stealthy, fur-clad feet, hearing no sounds within any of them.

He paused to consider the situation. He had been gone, what? Threequarters of an hour, at the very most. Spock had been alive ten minutes before that, when Scott had spoken to him. He shook off the cold feeling of dread, telling himself firmly that had any more dramatic events occurred, the village would not be so apparently dreamlessly asleep - but the memory of Dah-vee's crazy, blood-maddened eyes was not so easily shaken off. The obvious place to look first was the temple. If Spock was not still there, he'd have to start searching until he did find him. He kept a wary eye open as he made his quiet way across the grass, wishing neither to trip as McCoy had, nor to miss any possible sign of ambush. It might well be this peace betokened nothing more than a trap set to catch him on his return.

Receiving no reply to his demand, Dah-vee struck out viciously at Spock, and lifting one arm, Spock blocked the maddened attack, hampered by the need to protect the liandus he held. The straining fingers were reaching for his eyes and he ducked and weaved to evade their clawing nails. Taking a deft side-step, he plonked the quivering liandus on Jen-wae's chest and concentrated on the fight he had unwittingly provoked. He grabbed at Dah-vee's wrists, taking them both in an iron grip and pulling his arms upwards as he did so.

Dah-vee gave a wailing scream of agony, turning visibly pale under the layers of filth on his face. Surprised, Spock almost let go of the arms, but he did not loosen his grip and lower them a little - then he understood. The left arm moved oddly, clearly broken. He raised an eyebrow at such illogical behaviour. Engaging upon unarmed combat with a broken arm must be the act of either a fool or a madman, and he was fast beginning to suspect the latter.

"Your arm is broken," he said quietly. "Stand still and let me tend it for you."

The only answer was a wrenching twist that further aggravated the break. Dah-vee gave a high-pitched, keening moan at the pain and stood still, panting, a dribble of saliva running from the corner of his mouth.

"You are in pain," Spock said again. "Let me help you."

The deep, calm voice seemed to penetrate the clouded mind. Dah-vee's squint eyes surveyed the ceiling and wall, and he nodded. Spock let go his wrists, alert for any sudden move, but there was none. He ripped a strip of skin from his clothing, making a rough and ready sling for the arm.

"That will have to suffice for the moment," Spock told him. "One of my companions is a Healer, he can tend it for you."

Dah-vee gave a choking snarl of laughter, jerking round at a plaintive cry from the bed.

"My son, Dah-vee, the evil one, you have found him."

Spock simply shook his head. "I have not left this room, Jen-wae. He returned for his liandus." He indicated the quivering creature on the litter.

"He left it here?" Jen-wae demanded in open astonishment. "Then truly Dah-vee has not been of the tribe of Jen-wae. No man who is there in the joining can resist the liandi when they cry to us." He glared accusingly at his son and took the tiny animal up in a protective hand. "Did the creature call to you, Dah-vee, or did you seek it against all laws?"

"It called," Dah-vee said sullenly.

Jen-wae glared at him, then holding up the liandus, stared into its golden eyes briefly. "You lie," he said angrily. "Spo-ka, kill me this renegade. I no longer name him son of Jen-wae."

Spock shook an imperturbable head. "It is not the way of my tribe to kill," he answered. "Dah-vee is for the tribe of Jen-wae to deal with."

"You are right," Jen-wae admitted regretfully. "I will call the joining." He took the hevika from his pouch, and lifting his liandus to his face, gazed deeply into its eyes. "Call to the minds, call to the joining."

Spock raised his shields firmly. He watched Jen-wae with interest, noting the fierce, inward concentration and the expressiveness of the face. The joy of the joining was plainly obvious to an onlooker, and he glanced at Dah-vee. The man was whimpering, cowering, darting sly glances from Spock to his father, his face a mixture of envy, hatred and surprise.

"You are not called to the joining," he hissed.

"I am not of your tribe," Spock reminded him.

"Then I am not the only one who does not feel the call of the minds," Dah-vee exclaimed eagerly. "What do they see?" The words were uttered with suppressed violence. "Even as a child I sought to understand, but they laughed at me for questioning what was clear to all, and I soon learned to be silent, to wear the sickly smile of contentment and prate of visions - but I never saw aught." He smiled at a memory; it was not a pleasant smile. "There was much I could do while they sat, grinning at the liandi in foolishness. Soon, many feared my perception, my learning of so many secrets while I roamed free among them, while they sat still and smiled. Dah-vee, youngest son, became one to be taken into account." He glanced up at Spock. "I am still to be reckoned with. Do not forget that."

He swung round as his father lowered his liandus once more. Spock eyed him, wondering if his attempt to erase Lt. Armitraj from their minds had been successful. Hearing a noise from the outer room, he turned. Three or four villagers were out there, he could hear the murmur of their voices but could pick out no words. He would have expected a loud cry had they missed the statue, but he could hear none. Several fur-booted feet left the temple, but one pair came on towards the inner room.

"You are right, Jen-wae," Hen-ka said sadly as he entered. "Dah-vee must no longer be one of the tribe of Jen-wae. He is not with us in the joining, and we must send him from us that he will do no further harm."

Jen-wae eyed him curiously. "You would spare his life, Hen-ka?"

Hen-ka met his eyes. "I could not justify his death," he answered.

Jen-wae frowned. "No more can I. I must be growing old, Hen-ka, for I thought he had killed, but why I thought so I cannot remember."

Hen-ka shook his head. "Your memory has played you tricks, old man. I do not remember any killing. I only know I pity him."

Dah-vee laughed suddenly, shattering the quiet night. "Pity me? Pity me?" He was almost choking with mirth. "If I but had my knife, I would show you whether I need your pity - but at least I took one more stranger with it before it was wrested from me."

Spock's head came round sharply, a tiny cold fear down his spine. "One stranger?"

Jen-wae's gnarled fists beat at his covering skins. "No more, my son," he wailed, "but still my sorrow. With the first light we will send you on your way into the wilderness. The tribe rejects you."

Dah-vee threw back his head, uttering an animal sound, a keening wail of loss and agony, turning to incoherent screams of rage and terror as he leaped across the room to Jen-wae's side.

Outside the temple, Kirk had heard the sudden stirrings of movement all around him with surprise and shock.

"Just as if they'd all wakened up at once," he muttered to himself. "What the hell is going on?"

Hearing footsteps, he shrank back into the shadows, Dah-vee's knife clasped firmly in his right hand, but the three men passed by without seeing him and went to their huts. Once they were inside, Kirk let out his breath in a long sigh of relief, and slipping like a shadow, crept into the temple. He stood by the door, allowing his eyes time to get accustomed to the gloom. The murmur of voices away to his right drew him towards the sound on cat-feet, freezing at a sudden burst of maniacal laughter. Dah-vee. Then, in reply, he heard the welcome sound of Spock's deep voice, and a wailing outburst that turned to screams of pure rage. Discretion gone, he leaped into the room, the knife in his upraised hand.

Three faces looked up, their expressions varying from polite interest to amazement. Dah-vee was too busy attempting to throw off the iron grip Spock had on his shoulders to look up. Kirk's face broke into a slow, irrepressible grin. He lowered the knife.

"Sorry, I thought there was trouble," he said coolly. "I might have known Spo-ka would have everything under his control."

The eyebrows spoke their silent message of disapproval as Spock surveyed the knife. "Such barbarism," he murmured. "It is not worthy of the tribe of Raw-lin"

Kirk's grin widened. "Some of us have been known to revert to our warrior ancestry," he countered. "The knife may yet have its use."

"It is mine," Dah-vee said suddenly. "You have stolen it."

"Yours?" Kirk looked at him oddly.

"Mine. You took it when you broke my arm."

Jen-wae's tremulous voice said, "Violence is not the way of the tribe of Jen-wae. Strangers, you will not be welcome if these are your customs."

"Only to defend ourselves," Kirk answered politely. "The original attack was made by your son. He attempted to kill the Healer as he killed..." He broke off short, seeing a world of warning in Spock's usually immobile face and the sudden, emphatic shake of the head. Clearly Spock did not want him to mention Naznim. He gave a mental shrug. Maybe he'd get to understand it all one day. "As I see it," he continued as smoothly as he could manage, "the violence is his in origin. You claim this knife, Dah-vee?" He held it out.

"I do. It's mine. My only trusted friend," Dah-vee snarled.

"That's odd," Kirk said blandly. "This is not the knife you tried to kill McCoy with, this was found in a body, six months dead, lying in the reeds by the river." He looked questioningly from Jen-wae to Hen-ka.

"Six months dead," Spock repeated. "Jen-wae, the death of your son, Har-ky, took place six months ago. His body was never found."

At Jen-wae's wail of agony, Hen-ka rose to his feet. "To kill a brother is evil," he said savagely. "Henceforth, the tribe of Jen-wae cast you out forever. You are not of the tribe of Jen-wae, and I will be as a son to the old man, to comfort his last days and give him peace. Go forth. The tribe will no longer endure your presence in its midst."

Dah-vee's screech of fury tore at their eardrums. Flinging himself at Kirk, he snatched at the knife with a reckless disregard for his own safety. The high-pitched screaming did not cease while they struggled; even with one arm restricted by the make-shift sling, Dah-vee was a formidable opponent, but at length Kirk managed to wrest his knife-hand free. Hen-ka was between Dah-vee and the hovering Vulcan, preventing him from applying a neck pinch, so Kirk flipped the knife over Hen-ka's head and trusted to speedy Vulcan reflexes. Spock caught it, and in one swift movement, raised his knee and snapped the blade across it, tossing the pieces into the shadows of the far corner.

Dah-vee's shrill screaming stopped abruptly, his face gleaming hatred at the Vulcan. "You take everything from me," he hissed, "you shall not take the liandus



as well."

Sinuously diving under Hen-ka's arm, he grabbed his liandus from the litter, and before anyone could stop him, gave one quick, wrenching twist to its neck, flung it asi de and ran out of the room.

Spock, Jen-wae and Hen-ka screamed simultaneously, once, slutching their heads.

Abandoning any idea of chasing Dah-vee, Kirk went to his friend. "Spock!" He took his shoulders, worried by the unfocussed eyes. "Spock, snap out of it! Spock!"

He was about to administer a hearty slap to the thin cheek, when the eyes refocussed, looking at him full of pain.

"It's all right," Kirk said swiftly. "You're all right, Spock."

The Vulcan nodded, his habitual immobility of expression swiftly re-establishing itself. "I felt its death," he said quietly. "Hen-ka and Jen-wae, are they...?"

"Snapping out of it too," Kirk assured him. He turned to face them. "I'll go after Dah-vee."

Hen-ka took his arm, preventing him. "It will not be necessary, Jim-ka," he said, an expression of sick horror forming on his face. Dah-vee's action will bring its own punishment. Truly, the revenge of the tribe would have been preferable."

Puzzled, Kirk frowned. Hen-ka pulled at his arm, leading him outside, through the unlit outer room and into the open space outside the temple. Looking round in the bright moonlight, he pointed.

"Look. There is Dah-vee."

A dark shadow was running over the grass, moving in leaps and long, loping strides. Kirk felt Spock take up his station at his left shoulder as Hen-ka's pointing finger moved upwards.

"See. The liandi rise."

Above them, a wheeling crowd of liandi was turning like a storm cloud in the clear night sky, and even as they watched, it swooped with silent, menacing precision on the running figure.

Cold horror touched Kirk's throat with sickness. "Oh, no!"

Spock caught the tautly whispered words and proffered his own brand of comfort. "Vengeance is always ugly," he said soberly.

Hen-ka gave a shudder and turned away. "It is over," he said quietly. "The tribe of Jen-wae is released from the clutch of a madman. Tomorrow, if Jen-wae is well enough, we will be on our way once again."

"Your way?" Kirk asked, puzzled.

"We did but stay for the recovery of Jen-wae," Hen-ka said, apparently surprised by the question. "Now we know his ailing was caused by the limka-root, we have no further need to remain. It is not in the way of our tribe to stay for long. We are wanderers."

"But..." Kirk fell silent again as a warning hand grasped his shoulder. He acknowledged its presence with a friendly pat, and gave a silent chuckle when it was instantly withdrawn. They paused at the door to Hen-ka's hut.

"I will fetch the sisters to tend Jen-wae," Hen-ka said. "Sleep well, Spo-ka, Jim-ka. You have the gratitude of the tribe today."

"Sleep well."

As the door closed behind him, Kirk glared at his placid First Officer. "You have got some explaining to do, Mister," he grated.

"Indeed. May I suggest the privacy of our own hut?" Spock answered, undisturbed.

Kirk led the way, saying over his shoulder, "Comparative privacy, Mr. Spock. Someone...uh...tried to remove a wall earlier on."

Spock surveyed the damage with rising eyebrows. "Such unnecessary violence," he murmured.

"Well," Kirk grinned at him, "you should know!"

"I?"

"You were the one who did it. Set off like some latter-day crusader, scattering the opposition like autumn leaves..."

The brows settled into their normal position. "Your description is most

picaresque, Captain, but, I venture to believe, inaccurate."

Kirk sank wearily down on the tumbled furs, patting them invitingly. "Oof, I'm tired. It's been a long day. For goodness sake, fill me in on what's been going on down here."

"One question first, if I may, Captain. Is.... How is Dr. McCoy?"

"Oh, he'll be all right," Kirk hastened to reassure. "I forgot you didn't know. Dah-vee stabbed him, and I took him back on board. He's eating his heart out in sickbay. I guess we'd better put them all out of their misery." He pulled his communicator out. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Enterprise. Uhura here."

"I've made contact with Mr. Spock again," Kirk said. "We'll wait until daylight and then make a decision about our next move. Please inform Dr. McCoy in sickbay."

Uhura chuckled. "He's been on to me every five minutes, Captain. I'll be pleased to pass your message on."

"You tell him to get some sleep," Kirk said sternly. "We just might need him at planet dawn. Tell him it's an order."

"Affirmative, sir. Enterprise out."

"Now!" Kirk settled back, arms behind his head. "Let's have a full report, Mr. Spock. Just why did you leave us so suddenly, and why did you have that statue beamed aboard the Enterprise, and most of all, why didn't anyone object?"

"I left because I was compelled to do so, Captain. The liandi are empathic telepaths, and the queen pups, such as Dah-vee, Jen-wae and Hen-ka own are extremely powerful when directed by the will of an intelligent and receptive mind."

"Yes, we should have deduced they were telepathic much earlier," Kirk said, "Right back when I tried to take a pot-shot at them and thought I'd missed."

"Indeed," Spock agreed. "Jen-wae has a very powerful mind, and if he had not been consistently drugged by his son while we have been here, a joining would almost certainly have been called earlier and I would have understood our problem sooner."

"That's how they saw Naznim originally, is it?"

"Yes. The liandi flying over her were relaying messages to Jen-wae. It was their method of seeing where was best to move on to next. When Lt. Armitraj inhaled the hevika fragrance, she unwittingly got caught up in the tribal mind."

"And she was so different from them, they thought she must be a goddess."

"Very different," Spock said. "I believe Dr. McCoy was correct in his deduction that those carrying children are in fact female. It seems they undergo some kind of sexual change at one stage of their lives."

"Not quite a change. They're hermaphrodite marsupials. McCoy had to patch up a few of Dah-vee's victims. He thinks hormonal changes at puberty cause them to become capable of bearing children, and that after a few years they revert to masculinity."

"That would certainly fit the facts I have learned," Spock agreed. "There has been no joining called while we have been here because Dah-vee was totally psi-null. Not even the most powerful liandus, not even a telepath, could make contact with him. He has hidden this fact from his tribe all his life."

Kirk's swift sympathy was roused. "Poor devil," he said feelingly.

"His desperation is understandable," Spock said quietly. "His urgent need for recognition led him to seek leadership of the tribe. He almost succeeded in his aim."

"Would that have been so terrible?"

"For the tribe, yes. Only a leader may call a joining, and to be without it causes considerable mental suffering."

"I see. But you still haven't explained what took you out of here in such a hurry."

"Dah-vee attempted to kill Hen-ka's liandus, and Jen-wae called the joining to prevent him. He called for the strongest present, and I was compelled to go."

"And the statue? Why did you get rid of it?"

"I attempted, in a meld with Jen-wae, to remove all memories of Lt. Armitraj at the next tribal joining. If the attempt was to be successful, I had also to remove such a clear reminder from their midst."

Kirk stared at him, appalled. "You took a hell of a risk, didn't you?"

"A calculated one, Captain."

"So that's why you've been stopping me saying anything about her?"

"Yes. The attempt was successful. It had to be made. Jen-wae's mind is very strong, and the amount of information he had absorbed in his one link with Lt. Armitraj could radically have altered the tribe's development."

"But why did Dah-vee kill her?" Kirk whispered.

"I cannot be certain, Jim. I would guess it was terror. He had not seen her in the joining, was unprepared for the impact of her appearance, her femininity. He had the guilt of his brother's death on his mind, also. Murder among linked telepaths is rare, almost unheard of. He may have feared his secret was about to be revealed." He looked across at Kirk. "It could not have been foreseen, Jim."

Kirk smiled ruefully. "I must beat my breast a little less obviously, all my crew seem to conspire to reassure me."

Spock's face assumed an air of dignity. "I merely attempt to make you face facts squarely, Captain."

"Yes. I'm grateful." Kirk changed the subject. "We still have this drug to get, and time is running short. Let's sleep on it. We may have a good story ready to tell them by tomorrow." He yawned widely. "I don't know about you, but I'm desperately tired."

"Events have moved swiftly today," Spock agreed, stretching himself out comfortably. "Especially after our enforced inactivity before this."

"Yes. Too impatient," Kirk muttered to himself.

"I beg your pardon, Captain?"

"Nothing, Spock. Go to sleep."

Sunlight piercing the broken wall of their hut woke him, and he sat up with a shock at realising how late it was. Spock was kneeling at the gap, peering out.

"It would seem they are preparing to move out, Captain," he said quietly. "We have only to wait a few hours and we can take all the specimens we need from this area."

Kirk came to join him. "It looks as though you're right," he agreed. "Hello, that's the chap with the arterial wound, I hope it's safe to move him." He flicked a glance across at the Vulcan. "It wasn't easy for McCoy not to patch him up properly. I'd hate him to lose a patient because he couldn't treat him. That reminds me, I wonder how he is this morning."

"When I reported in an hour ago, he was suffering from nothing more than his customary impetuosity as far as I could tell."

"You've been awake an hour...? Why didn't you wake me?"

"I would have done had it been necessary; however, since it was obvious from first light they were moving on, I saw no need to wake you from a sleep you clearly needed."

"Mother hen," Kirk said scathingly. "Sometimes I wonder just who is the Captain around here." He opened his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise."

There was a flurry of sounds as Scott's voice answered.

"Uh...was that McCoy?" demanded Kirk.

"Aye, Captain, it was," Scott replied indignantly.

"Put him on, then."

"Jim. I need to see that stab wound again," McCoy said urgently. "Spock wouldn't give me permission to beam down."

"Very proper of him. Patch me through to sickbay. I want to talk to M'Benga."

"I am here, Captain."

"Is the entire medical staff on the bridge?" Kirk demanded. "Is McCoy fit enough to beam down?"

"Provided he takes sensible precautions and does nothing strenuous, yes, Captain."

Ignoring McCoy's audible snort of indignation, Kirk said, "Very well. You may beam down, Doctor McCoy, providing you can get to the transporter room in for ~~ty~~-five seconds."

"I'm on my way," McCoy's voice yelled faintly.

"More trouble?" Scott asked, concerned.

"No, but we may have company in a minute or so."

The sparkle had barely died before Hen-ka approached the hut. Kirk stepped outside, closely followed by Spock and McCoy.

"We hope you find the herb you came here to seek," Hen-ka said gravely. "We regret Dah-vee hindered you in this."

"We will find it," Kirk assured him. "So the tribe of Jen-wae is moving on?"

"The old man is better now that the sleeping drug is no longer being given him," Hen-ka said. "We will be on our way very soon. May our paths cross again, one day."

The Doctor touched Kirk's arm, indicating the litter on which his patient lay. Kirk gave him a swift nod.

"The tribe of Raw-lin will always wish you well, Hen-ka," he said truthfully. "We shall not remain long in this place ourselves."

He fell into step beside Hen-ka, and as they halted outside the one-time temple, could not help wondering what memories, if any, it evoked. From the calm demeanour of everyone around him, they did not seem to attach any special significance to the place. He lifted an enquiring eyebrow at McCoy as the Doctor rejoined them.

"He'll be O.K. as long as they don't jerk him around," McCoy said tersely. "It's healing nicely, and no sign of infection."

"Good."

The three stood back as the procession began to wend its way across the plain, leaving their village behind without a backward glance.

"Spock, your efforts seem to have met with considerable success," Kirk said admiringly. "No one apparently remembers anything at all about their goddess." He gave Spock a teasing look and turned to McCoy. "Keep on the right side of him, Bones. He'll rearrange your memories as soon as look at you!"

"That he would not," McCoy said indignantly. "I'll trust my mind in his hands any day."

Kirk chuckled. "Just wanted to make sure Spock knew how you felt," he said provocatively. "When they're out of sight we'll beam down a team to collect this darn shrub, and with any luck at all, be out of here in six or so hours." He looked sympathetically at the First Officer. "You must be longing for a shower, Spock. McCoy and I both managed to get cleaned up yesterday."

"The idea is not unattractive," Spock admitted, "but I will stay with the landing party to monitor the presence of the liandi. We do not want a recurrence of recent events, Captain."

Kirk shuddered and grinned. "Just so long as we don't come back and find they've put up a statue to you this time... Scotty, prepare to beam down a landing party to collect this shrub."

"In full daylight?" Scott questioned tentatively.



"We'll be quite alone," Kirk assured him. "They've all gone away again, and the village is deserted. We'll explain the details later."

Clean, comfortable and conscious of smelling rather more sweetly than he had done for some time, Kirk poured the Doctor a generous brandy.

"I gather all the plants around the village are perikylin-rich," he said thankfully.

"Yes. We've specimens of everything possible to stand a chance of growing the plant ourselves," McCoy said happily. "Seeds, cuttings, young bushes, soil by the ton - if we can't get the thing to grow somewhere, we're not really trying. And we have enough of the stuff to refine very large quantities of perikylin, Jim. It is extraordinarily rich, this lot. Just get us to the Deltan Sector as quick as you can."

"We're already on our way, Bones. Once we had confirmation we'd got what we came for, there was no point in hanging about." He lifted his head, sniffing slightly. "What on earth is that dreadful...?"

McCoy grinned. "At a rough guess, your First Officer just went past on his way to a shower, Jim."

Kirk took a mouthful of brandy. "I'm glad he didn't call in on the way," he said gratefully. "I thought everyone was being extraordinarily fussy yesterday, now I'm not so sure they weren't being unbelievably restrained!"

McCoy shot a glance up under his brows at him. "Good thing we had Spock with us, wasn't it?"

"You could say that." Kirk's face was serious, although the tone was light. Then he grinned. "Mind you, I've not seriously contemplated the idea of trying to get rid of either of you for some time."

"And you'd better not, either," McCoy said darkly.

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ZENITH 3 - a genzine from Sue Meek, 314 Coach Road Est. Washington, Tyne & Wear, England, or Tina Pole, 11F Prior's Terrace, Tynemouth, Tyne & Wear, England. £1.35 + postage, 44p first class, 36p second class. Also TICKLED PINK, stories in a lighter vein by Tina Pole.

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

P.S. - We apologise for the typos in TRIBE OF JEN-WAE. I got a new typewriter, and haven't got used to it yet; and I was typing against the clock trying to get it finished in time. In addition, I had to do a lot of my own proof-reading, especially in the second half; and nobody should ever proof-read their own stencils. Sheila.

