

# **One Bridge Out of Limbo**

*by Lynda Carraher*

Amanda sat quietly, watching her husband's face as he reached out to close the communications channel. There was a wrenching within her chest, so compelling she felt sure it must be audible, as she watched Sarek struggle to accept fully the consequences of an action he had requested of a man he barely knew.

At last he turned toward her, his weathered face carefully still. Only his eyes betrayed the turmoil within. His eyes, and his words.

"I ... did not realize..." His voice trailed off. Amanda knew he spoke not in an attempt to excuse himself, but in true bewilderment, and her heart convulsed again for the weight of guilt he had taken upon himself.

"No," she said softly. "Neither of us did. You did what you were compelled to do, Sarek, for our son and for the Tradition."

"But Admiral Kirk ... and his companions ... have destroyed their lives. It was not my intent..."

"The choice was theirs, my husband. They chose the only course available to them, as you did."

"There must have been an alternative," he insisted, still unable to comprehend what seemed to him to be the totally

illogical actions of the humans his son had called friends.

"None that he could see, Sarek. And we do not know the obstacles he faced, or even that he considers the cost too high. Did you not say he told you he could not have acted otherwise and retained his soul?"

Sarek made an impatient movement, and she stilled his objection before it could be voiced.

"Grant him command of his own destiny, Sarek. And consider what he gained -- for himself, for McCoy ... and for us, through Spock."

Sarek's eyes shifted away from her face, and she knew the rest of the struggle would be his alone. She had counseled him as well as she could.

"I must tell him," Sarek said. "It will not discharge the debt I owe, nor will it change the situation ... he must be told."

"Tell him, if you wish, my husband. But I suspect he already knows."

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Admiral James T. Kirk -- who at the moment was at best AWOL and at worst guilty of a list of offenses beginning with insubordination and ending with the willful destruction of several million credits' worth of Starfleet property -- lifted his glass in silent toast and drained the last of the potent amber liquid. He looked at his chief engineer with a bemused kind of awe.

*Leave it to Scotty, he thought. Even on Vulcan, he can manage to ferret out and acquire a very fine stock of drinkables ... and then passes it around without a second thought.*

He stretched a little, attempting the impossible -- finding a comfortable lounging position in an uncompromising Vulcan chair. He felt disinclined to move, or even to speak, and his companions seemed to share that attitude. For over an hour, they had sat in wordless companionship, each trying in his or her own way to absorb the events of the last 24 hours and to comprehend the repercussions of those events.

It was an impossible task, and at the moment it seemed unnecessary as well. They had done what they had set out to do.

Spock lived.

McCoy lived.

Each man whole, healing, and if not precisely the man he had been scant weeks ago, still potentially capable of becoming that former self.

Kirk felt his eyelids begin to droop. He really should make some announcement, give some signal, that this private-but-shared sacrament of rebirth was ended. Otherwise they would all go the way of Chekov, who sometime in the last thirty minutes had managed to curl up in his irrevocably angular chair and drop off to sleep, neck bent at an

impossible cant, one hand limply brushing the floor while the other still cradled a half-empty glass against his chest.

Kirk repressed a slight smile at the thought of Amanda finding them there in the morning, like left-over revelers at the end of a party that didn't know how to adjourn itself. He put the glass down and was halfway out of his chair when Sarek entered the room. Kirk was painfully aware of the picture they must present -- six Humans and one Vulcan-Romulan, sprawled in slovenly abandon about the severely neat room.

"Ambassador..." he began, but his embarrassed apology was cut off by a sharp movement of the other man's hand.

"I have most disturbing news," he said. The tone of his voice garnered the attention of everyone in the room -- except Chekov, who slumbered on.

"You've had a message from Starfleet, I presume."

One dark eyebrow went up in a gesture so familiar that Kirk had to smother the urge to laugh out loud.

"Not through official channels, Admiral." The eyebrow settled itself, but the look of puzzlement remained. "I take it you were expecting Starfleet's ... interest in your whereabouts."

"Yes. Though, frankly, I expected it to be delivered by an armed security detachment." He wondered fleetingly where the leak had been, who his unknown ally might be.

"I understand an official notification is due in fifteen point

seven hours."

"I see." Kirk turned to survey his companions. "We will not embarrass you by making your home the site of that official notification, Ambassador. Please convey our appreciation to the Lady Amanda for her hospitality. And now if you will excuse us..."

"No."

The steeliness in Sarek's tone caught Kirk in mid-turn. "Sir?" he queried, moving to face his host again.

"I do not wish to disassociate myself from your dilemma," Sarek stated. "You acted in my service, Admiral, and I will defend that action."

"Ambassador..." Kirk began.

"The decision is no longer yours to make, Admiral."

"The decision had already *been* made," Kirk replied evenly. "The responsibility is mine, and mine alone." He stilled the scattered objections with an icy command stare, and spoke softly, but in a tone that permitted no interruption.

"Lieutenant Saavik comported herself with extreme bravery while on the Genesis Planet, and with commendable skill on the journey here. She had no knowledge that our actions were in any way irregular, and she is therefore blameless." The startled expression on Saavik's pale face told him that this moment was, in fact, her first inkling of his desperate and unorthodox gamble. "Spock was certainly blameless throughout. Dr. McCoy

was the victim of a kidnapping and, since he was incompetent at the time..."

"*Incompetent!*" McCoy put his glass down with a thump and came out of his chair. "Now just a cotton-pickin' minute..."

"Shut up, Bones; I'm trying to save your pension," Kirk said without rancor. "Captain Sulu, Commanders Scott and Chekov, and Lt. Commander Uhura were told our actions had been cleared by Command but -- for political reasons -- could not be acknowledged until completion of the mission; therefore, reasonable force in meeting opposition was authorized." Four voices rose in outrage at this blatant lie, but he ignored them, turning back to Sarek.

"The responsibility is mine, Ambassador. I'll survive. They won't cashier Admirals -- bad for public relations. I'll be given a choice between a ground assignment somewhere at the tail end of nowhere or early retirement -- which I will take, at warp speed."

Sarek's hooded eyes betrayed no emotion, but there was in his voice some trace of admiration. Ambassadors knew duplicity when they met it, acknowledged its necessity, and appreciated flair in its accomplishment. "Flawlessly logical, Admiral. You may even succeed in your machinations. May I point out, however, that if you vacate my home, it might appear that you -- and your officers -- had some apprehension over the consequences of your actions. A court martial might choose to interpret that as

admission of guilt. Therefore, you will remain here." He turned to go before Kirk could object, then stopped. "The resources of my Clan and myself are at your disposal in your defense, sir." Then he was gone, leaving a room that erupted into chaos.

Kirk found himself surrounded by four officers in varying stages of anger. Chekov, awakening in uncomprehending confusion, demanded to know what was happening, was filled in quickly by a loud and disjointed chorus, and added his voice to the fray. Only Saavik, still remote and pale, was silent.

"It's settled." Kirk was adamant.

"It's *not* settled," Uhura insisted. "They'll crucify you."

"Not me." He tried a grin he didn't really feel. "I'm the Golden Boy, remember?"

"Not any more, you're not," McCoy snapped. "Jim, they'll skin you alive, and your cover story for the rest of these people won't fly."

"It *will*," he insisted. "I'll *make* it fly." He looked around him and knew with a sinking feeling that he wasn't going to be able to bully them into silence. They had followed him to hell, and would again, but he could not command them to leave him to the flames.

"Jim..." McCoy seemed to sense the dissipation of his friend's determination, for his voice was gentle now. "When we stood on the Genesis Planet and watched the

*Enterprise* flame out in the atmosphere ... you asked me -- asked yourself, really -- what you'd done. And I told you. You'd turned certain death into one more fighting chance for life. Don't quit on us now. Don't set yourself up for martyrdom. It won't save us -- won't save them." He shifted uncomfortably. "You're definitely right about Saavik. She's blameless in this whole thing. And we have to leave clear record of that, without tangling it up in lies about the rest of them. You might even be able to get me off the hook ... but if you think I'm just going to let you dangle in the wind, you're nuts."

"Just what do you suggest, Doctor?" There was bitterness in his voice, and he turned toward the others. "I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have let you come." He locked eyes with Sulu. "Hikaru..." He could not recall ever having used his helmsman's given name before, but it seemed right now. He was no longer wearing the *persona* of command; he spoke as one man to another. "For what' I've done to you, especially, I'm sorry. You've deserved your own command for years. And now ... it seems..."

Astonishingly, Sulu's face moved into a lazy, contented smile. "I'm not Khan," he drawled. "I'd rather serve in heaven."

Kirk made a rude noise. "Not heaven, Hikaru. Not even a respectable hell, I'm afraid. Just ... limbo."

"There's one bridge out of limbo that we didn't burn," he said softly. "We still have a ship."

There was silence as six pairs of eyes turned toward him. It was Kirk who finally vocalized it.

"Just ... run?"

"Yes."

"Like criminals?" he spat.

"No. Like free men. And women."

"Where?" Again there was bitterness in the voice.

The slow, Oriental smile, lotus-like in its serenity, bloomed again. Sulu polished the silence to perfection before he said one word: "Thataway."

THE END