

The Firefly Factor

by Lynda Carraher

This must be what it's like to drown, he thought. And not even in clean and icy water that would wash away the detritus of thirty-some years of living and replace it with shining crystals of perfect nothingness. No. This was like drowning in honey, trapped with his own used-soul foulness, warm and sticky against his nose, inside his mouth, spreading to fill lungs that drew in only remembered vanities, regretted actions.

I won't! he thought. *No!*

And came awake, bolt upright, with just the remembered taste of it coating his tongue and slicking his skin, masquerading as cold sweat.

Heart pounding, he looked around the tiny room, knowing it would be empty but looking anyway, as if he might catch that flicker of movement seen from the corner of the mind's eye, might pin down a sticky-limbed demon or trap a wisp of honey-steam being sucked through the ventilator grid.

There was nothing there. Of course. His mind was the only landscape hospitable to the demons. It was only behind his closed eyelids that they dragged him down and poured their sibilant whispers into his brain.

The shakes were abating now, and that heart-thumping panic that came when he jerked himself back from the threshold of sleep, and he swung off the narrow-bunk, wondering why he'd been foolish enough or crazy enough -- *no; cancel that image* -- to lie down, knowing the danger and the terror that nested under his pillow.

It had begun four days before, in that deep pit his body told him was 0300 regardless of the numbers marching across the chronometer on the bulkhead.

It didn't matter what was done to time, what artificial boundaries were set for it; there was a three a.m. in the circadian rhythm of every species he'd ever met or read about. There was inevitably a time when sleep was so deep and the body functions so low that the border between sentience and nescience, between life and death, blurred and wavered and lost any real meaning. A time when being jerked awake by some extraordinary set of circumstances produced symptoms of systemic shock. In his case, it left

him standing, shaking, in the middle of the room with absolutely no idea how he'd gotten there, telling himself it was just a dream, *it was just a dream, ITWASJUSTADREAM*. Because if it wasn't...

He had refused to consider the alternative seriously, then. He had gone back to bed, only to have the same thing happen within half an hour; to have some unknown, unknowable, stimulus yank him fully awake and as adrenalin-flooded as a battle klaxon would have made him.

He had given up on sleep as a bad job for that night.

When it happened on the second night, he'd determined he would outwit the demons. He'd fought off sleep by prowling the night corridors, by drinking coffee until his stomach rebelled, by inveigling night-owl shipmates into long and pointless philosophical arguments, preferably ones in which he was totally out of his depth and therefore honed to a gut-response level of verbal tightrope-walking that charged his brain.

It worked, but at the cost of his efficiency. The third night, with demon-memory fading, seventy hours gone, he thought his brain so numb that he could sleep through any attack.

Any external one, perhaps. Internal ones were not the sane, and it was then that he seriously began to consider the possibility that something inside himself, some diamond-hard and unbreakable sense of reality, had shattered like a flawed dilithium crystal. And now, in the fourth night, he was beginning to believe it.

He was unaware, at first, just where it was that his feet were taking him. The corridors of the ship were as familiar to his waking brain as the shape of his teeth were to his tongue, and as little noticed. Even when the doors of the turbolift slid shut behind him and his hand closed around the activator, he knew the words only as his ears perceived them, as though they had been spoken by someone else.

"Hangar deck."

The ship was still there, as it had been for four days. He had expected nothing more, nothing less, yet he felt a vague...something...stirring in its presence; something visceral, almost sexual.

The alien craft looked remarkably harmless now, empty and dead. Yet when it had first shown up on the ship's

sensors like a wandering piece of a star, there had been indications of life on board. And aggressive life, though it had not fired on them. Nor had it responded to their hails. It had just kept coming, a diaphanous point of light with intentions unknown, capabilities unknown, seeming so powerful that the navigator -- a rookie ensign who was going to find himself back on a starbase at the very next opportunity -- froze at the phaser controls. Kirk had had to launch himself out of the center seat and fire the weapon himself.

And then the lightshielding was gone, the menace revealed for what it was: a vessel hardly larger than their own shuttlecraft, embarrassingly small to have caused such havoc in their defense systems.

Though he didn't remember moving toward it, he suddenly found himself less than an arm's length away, lifting a hand to touch the shining skin.

Flesh made contact with nonflesh, and he felt a tingle, like a mild electric shock, and he remembered an Iowa childhood trick of testing crop shields by touching them with a green weedstalk. The skin of the ship seemed to take on an opalescent glow, and he felt-the visceral crawl again, some illogical, indefinable drive of mating he could not

quite comprehend.

"Captain?"

He jerked his hand back, broke the contact as a burning sensation engulfed his hand and arm. He turned, rubbing his hand along his side as the sensation ebbed away.

"She's a mystery, right enou'," Scotty said, standing rumped and grainy-eyed, arms folded across his chest.

"Did you see that? What it did when I touched it?"

Scotty looked from Kirk to the ship. "See what sir?"

Kirk rubbed his hand across his eyes, no longer sure where reality became hallucination. "Nothing, Scotty. What are you doing down here at this hour?"

"Same as you. Tryin' to put it all together. I told the research crew I wanted their results the minute they had 'em, an' the lads took me at my word."

"And what did they find?"

"Just wha' I said they'd find. There was nae life support o' any kind in tha' ship, not e'en space for a pilot."

"But Spock said--"

"I ken what Mr. Spock said. But the way the sensors were misbehavin'... Captain, tha's a drone. A verra sophisticated one, but a drone, for allo' that."

"I guess you're right."

"Aye. But there's naught to be gained standin' here gawping like a couple o' lack-wits--" He broke off abruptly, embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Captain. Just because *I* ha'e no good reason--"

"Neither do I, Scotty. Have a good night -- or what's left of it." He pushed his feet into action, carrying him away from the ship, as something in his brain cried out a denial.

"You too, sir."

He waved an acknowledgement as he left, but knew he wouldn't have a good night. What he would have was four more hours of solitary, eye-burning wakefulness, and a day of fuzzy-minded tension to follow.

* * *

"You wanted to see me, Doctor?"

Uhura's voice pulled McCoy's attention outward. She stood silhouetted by the light from the hall, hesitant, as if she didn't want to intrude.

"Yes. Come in, Lieutenant. Sit down." He touched a rheostat and the light brightened. McCoy did his best brooding in the dark, but he wanted to be able to see her face as she answered his questions .

"I wanted to talk to you about what happened on the bridge today."

The light did its job well. He could see the conflict, marked by a slight tightening of her mouth as loyalties warred.

"Today?" She almost succeeded in making: it sound casual.

"Yes. Today when our compassionate, level-headed, gentlemanly captain reduced a yeoman to tears when she handed him a staticboard and no stylus."

She should have had one.

"And he should have reminded her of that, tactfully. Not chewed her butt from here to Andromeda. She can't decide whether to ask for a transfer or file a harassment report, or both."

Uhura made no reply, studying her folded hands instead, as if by ignoring Kirk's erratic behavior she could put an end to it.

"I smell a rat," McCoy announced. "There's something very, very wrong here, and it's either physical or professional. If it's physical, that's my problem. If it's not, I need to know." He thought of other times when Jim had purposefully used bizarre behavior to head off unwanted inquiries.

"Have there been priority transmissions from Starfleet, Lieutenant? Are we operating under sealed orders?"

Her surprised look gave him the answer to that one. Uhura could conceal the truth when the situation warranted it: that was part of her job. But McCoy was seeing honesty, and knew it. He didn't wait for her answer. "Well, that narrows it right down, doesn't it?"

Uhura was studying her hands again. Don't let her do it," she said. There was an almost pleading note in her voice.

"Let who do what?"

"Siebertsen. Don't let her file that harassment report. I don't know what's wrong, but it's been building up for two or three days. Like he was all full of broken glass inside. Doctor McCoy ... can't you help him?"

"I have to catch him first. As for Siebertsen, it's not up to me whether she files or not. But I'll talk to her in the morning.

"Thank you, Doctor. Was there anything else?"

"No, Lieutenant. Thank you for coming in. I know it's late. Good night."

He left the lights up after she left, tapping into the medicomp that stood at right angles to his desk, flashing Kirk's latest medical readouts on the screen.

Nothing there, nothing at all. And he'd had his quarterly physical less than a month ago, per regulations. What was not per regulations was that the ship's surgeon should have to use a combination of bluster, guile, sweet-talk, and outright intimidation to accomplish his task.

Getting Jim Kirk to come in for a physical was roughly comparable to nailing jelly to a wall. As long as the captain was ambulatory, he considered himself fit for duty; when he wasn't, he tended to get downright indignant if McCoy suggested the problem couldn't be solved by a couple of mild painkillers and a strip of plastiderm.

McCoy chuckled softly at that thought, then sobered as he began to plan his next campaign. Maybe reporting Siebertsen's threat would start the ball rolling...

He heard the office doors hiss open, turned, and was suddenly out of his chair and halfway across the room as he recognized the figure hanging on to the doorframe, stumbling forward with a sound that was half-whisper, half-sob.

"Bones -- help me."

* * *

Spock was meditating when the intercom beeped; he ignored it for some time before it became too insistent to shut out.

McCoy was not terribly informative, but whatever it was involved the captain, and it had disturbed the doctor enough to call for assistance from a most unlikely source. That was enough to shatter the inward calm he had so recently renewed, and to send him through the night-empty corridors with single-minded haste.

The only outwardly disturbing thing about sickbay, when he arrived, was that the patient on the diagnostic bed was

Captain Kirk. The body function monitors all showed reading well within the normal range, even though pulse and respiration seemed a bit high for a man who was sleeping as soundly as Kirk appeared to be. He was absolutely still, except for the movement of his chest; the unnatural pallor of his skin accented by the bruise-like smudges of fatigue under the closed eyes.

"What is the nature of the emergency, Doctor?" The sound of Spock's voice yanked McCoy's attention away from his study of the sleeping man. He looked startled, disoriented, as if he had forgotten that he had summoned Spock.

"I don't know ... exactly. I was hoping you might be able to help me figure it out."

"You are the physician here, not I."

The fact that Spock had passed up an opportunity to gibe McCoy about his medical competence did not register on either man. McCoy took one final look at the monitors and then led the way into his office.

"Has he ... said anything to you about something bothering him in the last couple of days? Is there something going on

here I don't know about?"

"No." Spock looked toward the closed door that led to the treatment room. "But there has been ... a kind of tension about him."

McCoy nodded. "I've seen it, too. I would have called him down here in the morning, but he came in on his own about an hour ago. He was ... damned near incoherent, Spock. Kept saying he didn't dare sleep -- that 'they' came in his sleep. Turns out he's been awake going on five days, which is enough by itself to cause hallucinations. But when I tried to get an explanation out of him, I couldn't get anything that made sense. And when I suggested a sedative, he ... ah ... objected rather violently." McCoy fingered a welt on his cheekbone, and Spock's eyebrow went up in a combination of surprise, acknowledgement, and question.

"I did my time in the violent wards," McCoy said softly. "A sprayhypo is a very easy instrument to palm."

"You sedated him."

"I did. With a dose that should have knocked him on his can, given his condition when he came in here. It just made

him woozy enough for me to get him on a diagnostic table and give him a second injection. I've never seen anyone fight unconsciousness like that."

"A disturbing set of reactions, I agree. But I still do not see why--"

"There's more, Spock. I'm just trying to set this up so you'll understand why I called you." McCoy swiveled around in his chair and fingered the keyboard of the medicomp before he continued.

"With that much sedative in the system, there's always the chance that respiration or heart action will be impaired. His weren't. You saw the monitors?"

Yes."

"In fact, I was getting such crazy readings that I did a brain scan. That was when I decided to call you." McCoy tapped the medicomp again, activating the viewscreen where a maze of impulses left their tracks across the screen.

"There are five major impulses in the human brain, each

with a distinctive pattern of frequency that varies with the depth of the sleep cycle. Three of them -- theta, sigma, and beta -- indicate a fourth level sleep state: very deep sleep, compatible with the level of sedation. But these two--" He tapped a filtering control, and all but two of the tracks disappeared. "The red one is the alpha track -- the cognitive, thinking part of the brain, and it's registering a totally conscious state. the blue one is the delta track, and that particular frequency is associated with REM -- rapid eye movement, indicative of dreaming. They shouldn't be there, Spock. A man can't be asleep and awake and dreaming all at once."

Spock was nodding, slowly, and McCoy wished he could see behind those dark eyes; could know if Spock's quick intelligence was one step ahead of the doctor, and what his response would be. "Something inside Jim's mind is eating him up, Spock; burning him out. And there's no way I can see it. But you can."

"What you ask requires his permission."

"If a man is bleeding to death, I don't ask his permission to apply a tourniquet."

"This is hardly comparable."

"More than you think. There's a marked red blood cell decrease, a calcium imbalance in the cerebrospinal fluid, indication of capillary hemorrhages in the brain cells. The situation is critical."

Spock considered it. "I would still prefer that you awaken him. To achieve total contact requires--"

The scream cut him off, propelled both men to their feet and through doors that opened too slowly for the taste of one Vulcan. He slammed them fully open with one shoulder and was two paces ahead of McCoy when he reached Kirk.

The wide-open hazel eyes showed no recognition, little sanity, as he struggled to break Spock's grip.

"Get them out!" he screamed. "Make them stop! Make them -- I can't -- no!" The sounds of his rage and terror halted abruptly as Spock's hand sought and found the vital juncture of shoulder and neck. The Vulcan caught the sagging form and carried it to the diagnostic bed, where McCoy was already moving the brain wave scanner into place.

He watched the patterns as they appeared, noted the red and blue trails that twined around each other like serpents within the mind of the man he named friend.

He flexed his hands, loosening the muscles, preparing himself physically and mentally for the intrusion he abhorred, but now saw as bitter necessity.

McCoy stepped back, looked at him questioningly.

"I am ready, Doctor." He reached out and touched the familiar face, plunging suddenly into --

--chaos. Images he/they couldn't identify; sensations without appropriate channels of interpretation -- colors that sang; shapes that tasted; textures that screamed through olfactory nerves. Panic, like a child suddenly loose in a threatening landscape. And hunger. An overwhelming hunger, tantalized by food-images that were not food at all, all around and unobtainable. Danger. Danger that was tied to the panic and the hunger, shooting through him/them, and the vulnerability of being alone.

Alone. Danger. Hunger. Help me. Help me helpmehelpme--

McCoy was bowled over, pushed aside as Spock broke the touch and exploded past him, through the doors that hung open uselessly.

"Spock? What's going on -- why--?" He shot one glance at Kirk's still unmoving form and then propelled himself after Spock, into the office where a long and lean form hunched over the keyboard of the medicomp in wracking convulsions as the screen danced and flared with impossible displays of light and form.

McCoy reached out for him, missing contact by centimeters as Spock jerked away, stiffened, and then slumped over: the keyboard, sliding limp and unresisting to the deck.

* * *

Kirk had almost forgotten what it felt like to be rested, alert, back in control. It felt good: After fourteen straight hours of blissful, real, uninterrupted sleep, he felt ready to tackle any thing. Even this.

He switched on the recorder, opened the briefing.

"Bones, you start."

McCoy sketched the events from the moment Kirk had entered sickbay until Spock had collapsed over the medicomp keyboard. When he finished, he looked at the two men and managed a weak grin. "I thought I'd killed you both, " he admitted.

"That you did not, Doctor, is less a tribute to your dubious skills than it is to your uncanny luck."

"I thought Vulcans didn't believe in luck."

"Gentlemen, you're on the record," Kirk reminded them. "Spock -- the mind-meld?"

Spock gave McCoy an 'I'll take care of *you* later' look, and began. "I encountered a ... presence ... in the Captain's mind. A highly agitated pattern of thought, composed basically of sheer terror. There was no acknowledgement

of my own thought patterns being imposed upon it, no response to my mental queries. I..." The science officer's deep voice trailed off, and his downward glance and tightly clasped hands told Kirk of the difficulty this extremely reticent man was having with describing something as intimate as a mind-meld.

Spock gathered his thoughts, began again. "For the record, gentlemen, the Vulcan mind-meld cannot be defined through the normal scientific process. It is, therefore, impossible for me to describe my actions and impressions within the standard parameters. I can tell you only what I know -- I cannot tell you how I know it."

The other two men nodded silent encouragement. Spock shaded a glance at McCoy, as if waiting for a verbal thrust, and then went on.

"I ... found it necessary to attempt contact through a process of mental ... emptying – through the creation of a vacuum of sentience within my mind. The force ... the presence ... seemed to sense that somehow, and was attracted to it."

Kirk bit down on the urge to blurt out what he was thinking -- *You ... invited that thing into your mind? Knowing what*

it was doing to me? And did it with all your barriers, all your control, knocked flat?

Spock continued, slowly, the telltale, flush at the tips of his ears and his quietly working hands telling what his voice did not.

"The ... presence ... left the Captain's mind and entered mine. It compelled me to break off the mind-link without proper preparation, an action which can be extremely dangerous. I have no conscious recollection of the next few moments, and therefore must concur with Dr. McCoy's description of the events."

"But you are confident that there was, in fact, some kind of alien presence influencing my thought patterns?"

"Yes."

"Bones?"

McCoy shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He started to say something about bogeymen, and then remembered that it was he who first called Spock for aid, admitting that the

physiology of the Captain's illness was beyond his understanding.

"There was *something* in your system that didn't belong there, and it *was* influencing your brain-wave patterns.

"I think we have to go with Mr. Spock's admittedly empirical observations, Bones. There was same kind of force in my mind. Then it transferred to Spock. The question is, where is it *now*?"

"There is one other question, Captain," Spock began. "We still do not know--"

His words broke off abruptly as the briefing room lights cut out, leaving only the soft glow of the emergency panels. Kirk turned in his chair and realized too late that the action was a mistake as his body, suddenly free of the ship's artificial gravity, was lifted free of the seat by his motion.

He grabbed for the table's edge and hauled his floating body within reach of the desktop intercom.

"Engineering: What's going on?" There was no response, not even the white noise of a dead speaker. It was a silence made more ominous by the absence of the klaxons, which should have been blaring out their alarm by now; a silence that echoed in his brain and bones and gut as he registered the cessation of the ever-present background noises and slight vibrations of a functioning vessel.

A chill raised the fine hairs on the back of his neck as he realized his ship, his pride, his silver mistress, hung suspended in the infinity of space, cold and dark and dead.

* * *

The whirr of a suddenly-activated ventilating fan and the abrupt glare of light within the Jeffries tube warned him, and he made a grab for the handrails as the artificial gravity kicked on. Kirk paused in his climb, waiting for the momentary nausea to pass as his body readjusted itself.

How long had they been blind and crippled in space?

Long enough for him and Spock to pop the emergency panel and open the briefing room doors with the hydraulic backup; long enough for him to climb halfway to the

bridge through the Jeffries, while Spock used a similar route to engineering.

Eight minutes? Twelve?

Long enough, he decided, as he finished the trip by turbolift. Longer than he'd care to go through again, certainly.

There was no chaos on the bridge. His crew was too well-trained for that. But Sulu shot him an unmistakably grateful look and released the con, wiping away a trickle of blood that snaked from under his hairline.

"You all right?"

"Yes, Captain."

He flicked a glance around the bridge. "Anyone else hurt up here?"

"No, sir." Sulu looked sheepish. "I was the only one not strapped down when the grav came back. The air was

getting pretty thick up here, and I was trying to pull the filter out of the overhead ventilators to buy us a little more oxygen."

Uhura swung around from the com as Kirk nodded. "Engineering reports fully functional," she said. "Sickbay logs twelve injuries, most minor. Environmental fully operational, tactical on-line, communications--" She broke off.

"Lieutenant?"

She frowned, and shook her head. "Nothing. It looked like a message blip had been activated, but it's gone now."

Kirk put the curiosity out of his mind. "Position, Mr. Chekov?"

Chekov was scowling at his board. "We're one hundred eighty degrees off our previous course, Captain."

"Bring her about, Mr. Sulu. How long were we without power?"

"Ten minutes, twenty-nine seconds, sir."

That's quite a drift for ten minutes, he thought, and was yanked out of speculation by Sulu's voice.

"No response from helm, sir."

"Override, Lieutenant."

"Negative response, sir."

Kirk thumbed a toggle as he felt the subtle vibratory change that indicated warp drive engagement. "Engineering -- get a team to the auxiliary. And cut power."

He heard Scotty's acknowledgment, and then, seconds later, "Negative response from th' board. Leveling off at warp 2.6."

"Is Mr. Spock still there?"

"Negative, Captain. I believe he's on his way to th' bridge."

Kirk counted seconds and watched the helm display, rubbing a knuckle along his cheekbone in an unconscious gesture of frustration. He turned as the turbolift doors opened to admit Spock, and briefed him quickly.

The Vulcan nodded and crossed to his station, bending over his viewer as his hands demanded response from the computers. He looked at Kirk and shook his head slightly, crossing to the navigation console.

A woman's voice emerged from the intercom speaker. "This is Garson, auxiliary bridge. Nothing's responding here, sir."

Spock knelt at the navicomp, popping an access plate. "Controls are not interfacing with the guidance system, Captain." He killed power to the useless console and slid a circuit board from its clip.

The lights went out and Kirk felt again the subtle drift of a seated body in zero-G.

"Interesting," came Spock's voice out of the darkness. "Lieutenant Uhura, can you contact the crew in the auxiliary bridge?"

Her hands moved over the familiar terrain of the communication's board, and a red telltale winked as the connection closed.

"Yes, sir."

"Do they still have life support?"

She relayed the question, and Garson's affirmative reply.

"Instruct them to cut power to the auxiliary navigation console and report the result."

"Yes, sir." There was a moment's pause, and then Uhura's soft voice. "Auxiliary bridge reports a loss of lights, gravity, and ventilation, sir. And I'm getting similar reports from other sections."

"Since when is life support wired through the navicomputer?"

Kirk recognized the query as Sulu's, and the response -- "It is not, Lieutenant." -- as Spock's. He heard the soft rustle of cloth and creak of boot leather as the Vulcan stood up.

"Captain," he said, "I believe we have now determined the location of the alien presence."

* * *

"In th' master matrix? Th' control computer?" Scott's voice wore open disbelief. "Tha's hard to credit, Mr. Spock."

"Nevertheless, Mr. Scott, it seems to be the unavoidable conclusion."

"An' how did it get there, then? Tell me tha'." Scott, his arms crossed over his chest, scowled at the impossibility of it.

"The creature requires electrical power, Mr. Scott, just as we require oxygen. The electrical impulses of an organic

brain would appear to sustain it, at least partially, but--"

"Are ye sayin' it's ... alive? Intelligent?" The engineer's face was clouded with doubt, underlain with the centuries-old Gaelic tradition of creatures beyond human ken.

"It did return life support when we repowered the navicomp," Kirk put in. "It *knew* -- maybe from linking with me -- that we required those systems. That's the conscious decision of an intelligent mind, Scotty ... and an ethical one. To have the power to kill, but not use it."

Scott's internal battle raged -- he was the master engineer, the man who wore chained lightning on his breast, and yet who could not cast out the racial memory of singing sword and faery ring. And because he could not resolve it, he turned on Spock, the instigator of his unrest.

"Ye still ha'e no' explained how, Mr. Spock. Ye cannot transmit an electrical impulse into a grounded system just by touching a keyboard."

"The entity appears to be able to do so, Mr. Scott. It compelled me to activate the medicomp for the express purpose of merging with the system."

Kirk frowned thoughtfully and started to speak, but was cut off by Scott's impatient rumble. They were all short of temper, frustrated at being hostages to the force that now commanded the ship.

"Assumin' I agree wi' ye -- which I don't -- wha's your point, Mr. Spock?"

"My point is that we are wasting our efforts -- and possibly endangering ourselves -- by trying to retake the ship. And my recommendation is that we cease those efforts until we understand where we are being taken -- and why."

"Just go along for the ride?"

"Precisely Captain."

* * *

Just go along for the ride, Kirk thought. It was easier to say than to do. The rest, the passivity, the security, of being carried along in a functioning unit, which had seemed so

necessary in those first few hours after the alien had been purged from his system, had rapidly become anathema to him. Being carted across space like a flea on the belly of some cosmic hound was making him -- making all of them -- tense and angry.

And there was something else nibbling at the edge of his awareness; something Spock had said about the entity wanting to merge with the computer system.

Merging. Joining. It seemed that concept should have a meaning to him. Something that had happened -- or not happened, though he had wanted it to -- when his body had played host to the invader. He could not remember.

He pushed the vague and troubling idea aside, scanning the bridge. He could almost taste the sense of impotence shared by the watch crew as they idled through a pointless span of hours.

The watch was nearly over when their long-range sensors picked up another vessel.

"It's an ore carrier, sir," Uhura reported. "Unmanned, outbound from Rigel XII, probably."

Kirk nodded and sipped his coffee. A drone. A damned drone. It couldn't even respond to a distress signal from them -- not that the alien would let them signal anyone. They had tried, of course. The systems simply wouldn't respond. And any attempt to re-program had been met with that frighteningly implacable cutoff of their life support.

Chekov was plotting course figures again, Kirk noted. Another exercise in futility. Kirk saw him frown, hunch over his display, re-run the calculations, and mutter in Russian.

"Something wrong, Ensign?"

"That ore carrier; Captain. She's going to cross our bow close enough to let us spit into the cargo hold."

Something began to simmer in Kirk's mind. "How close, Chekov?"

"Less than a thousand meters, Captain."

"Time to intercept point?"

Chekov consulted his board again. "A leetle over eight minutes, sir."

Eight minutes. A drone ship. No life support. But a comm system sophisticated enough for a planetside programmer to enter course and running signals. And a cabin big enough for a man in a life-support suit to do a little re-programming of those signals. A thousand meters...

He looked at Spock, who was already nodding.

"Suppose our host will let us use the transporter, Mr. Spock?"

"I see no reason why not, sir. The calculations will have to be extremely precise, however."

"Then start them. I'm going to suit up."

"Captain--" Spock started.

"I don't have time to argue with you, Spock. Mr. Sulu, you have the con."

He was halfway into the suit, sweating even in the air-conditioned calmness of the transporter room, when the klaxons kicked on. That meant the drone was within ten kilometers. It also meant collision shields.

He slapped the intercom switch. "Mr. Sulu, we'll need an override on those collisions shields when I'm ready to beam over."

There was silence for a moment, then Sulu's tense voice. "It's not just collision shields, Captain. We've gone to full attack mode. Phasers are arming now."

"Shut them down: And get me some visual here."

Isolated in the empty transporter room, cut off from the bridge both by distance and by their alien hijacker, Kirk could only listen to the terse voices from the open comm. and watch the screen in frustrated anger as the phasers knifed out and sliced into the unarmed drone. *Alone*, something in his mind sang. *Alone. Cut off. Helpless.* And then the echo disappeared as the crimson splash of

destruction reflected from his face, from his empty, angry eyes.

* * *

He had been asleep, dreaming of fireflies on a long-ago Iowa summer night, when the call had summoned him to the bridge.

Now, as he watched the evanescent flares on the screen, that image came back to him. He remembered stalking through wet grass with a glass jar filched from the kitchen, Sam behind him, intent on adding to his personal horde of tiny captive stars. He remembered smuggling his treasure into bed when his mother called him, going to sleep watching the winking lights and wondering what their signals meant, whether they were sending messages he could not discern. And he remembered crying with the intensity only a five-year-old can muster when morning saw his starbits dead and colorless in their glass prison.

But these were not fireflies. They were seven points of pure white light, giving the same impossible readings activated by the alien drone they had taken aboard over a week ago. Only these were not coming at them as that one had. They danced as if to some unheard celestial music,

their outlines flaring softly as though they were displaying luminescent plumage for some ethereal mate.

A mate. A joining. It struck Kirk suddenly, with the power of a nova, and he cursed himself for not realizing it sooner.

"They're searching for it:" he said, coming out of his chair, ignoring the startled looks. "The alien -- it was in the ship we took aboard, and they've come to get it." He looked at Uhura's wide-eyed stare of incredulity. "Didn't you say you thought you saw a signal, just after the alien took over?"

She made a small gesture of uncertainty. "It ...could have been, I suppose."

"It had to be: A homing signal? A distress call? Something."

"Captain, there was no life form on that ship when we brought it aboard." Spock's voice was soft, but its meaning inescapable. *Error. Delusions. The aftereffects of the alien's possession are clouding your mind.*

"It wasn't in the ship because it was already here: Here,

even then. From the instant we fired at it -- *I* fired at it, because Gomez froze at the control. And it ... rode that beam, somehow. Got sucked into the system, into me, because my hand was on the switch."

Spock cut a glance at Uhura, and she moved to touch a toggle. As the Vulcan stepped down into the well, one of the lights danced forward to brush against them.

It was tentative, almost playful, like an overgrown puppy tumbling an unwary child. But they were unshielded, wide open, and the result was anything but playful.

The ship rocked; the hull sang in a high-pitched agony that sent half the crew to their knees. Spock slumped over the railing, pale, his long hands over his sensitive ears in an instinctive and vain attempt to shut out the sound.

"Get a med team up here!" Kirk snapped, and turned back to the screen. The seven points of light were distant again, waiting, swaying on an ethereal wind. He heard Spock straightening behind him, breathing harshly as he fought to regain control.

Uhura was hanging on to the board with both hands, as if

stability could rescue her. She dragged herself upright to relay the message from engineering -- hull strength weakened six percent by the attack.

Sulu was sweating over the unresponsive control board. "I can't get any response, sir. No shielding, no phasers -- nothing."

"It doesn't want to attack them -- it only wants to go *back*." He shouldered past the helmsman and laid his palms flat against the board, opening switches randomly.

"Come *on*. I'm here. We'll send you to the others, but you've got to tell us how to *do it*"

There was a gentle hand on his arm.

"Captain--"

"Leave me alone, Spock. I know what I'm doing."

"Captain..." Spock shuddered and forced the words out past the pain. "Jim... your experience with the alien--"

"Told me. Only I didn't understand. Spock I have to take it back. Into my mind." From the periphery of his vision, he saw the turbolift doors open to admit McCoy and Chapel.

They came into the well, and he realized McCoy was reaching for him, not Spock, when another of the luminescent aliens danced closer again, delicately, in a weaving, almost hypnotic pattern. The only visual effect was the intense, painful brightening of the screen as it touched them, but the hull rang again with the effects of the sonic disruption, and pain lanced through him.

McCoy was diverted now, pulling out a scanner and running it over Spock as he shook his own head to clear it.

"It's the sonics," he said. "Vulcan system can't stand--"

"Engineering reports another six percent drop in hull strength, Captain. We're nearing redline."

He hung onto the board still, willing the alien to notice him, to blend with him, and thought he felt a faint tingle, but it vanished the instant he fastened his mind on it.

An emptiness, Spock had said. The presence was attracted to it.

He knew he could not do it alone. He simply didn't have the mental strength. He let go of the board and turned to where McCoy was injecting Spock with same substance.

"Is he fit, Bones? I need him."

Spock was drawing himself back up, his face deathly pale. "Perhaps we could gamble bypassing the controls, to gain some shielding."

"Not for that, Spock. I need you to help me contact the force. If we knew what it wanted--"

"What it *wants*, Captain, is its own way," McCoy snapped at him. "And when it doesn't get that, it sends us to bed without any life support."

"Bones, it's not malignant."

"Not malignant! Jim, it nearly killed you before. And it did kill that ore carrier -- which could just as easily have been another starship, or a passenger liner."

"But it wasn't. It hasn't killed yet, Bones. Those others out there -- they're more of its kind, and they're trying to contact it. Only each time they try, they're weakening our hull. If we don't do something, and fast, this ship will explode like an overinflated balloon. Then there won't be any more argument. Just little pieces of space ice that used to be human bodies. Is that what you want?" He looked from one man to the other. "Spock?"

"I shall try, Captain. What is it you that you want?"

Kirk put his hands on the board again, twisting his torso away to free his face for Spock's touch. "The meld. The emptying you did before. Can you help me do that?"

"Perhaps it would be better if I--"

"No, Spock. It knows me. And if this doesn't work ... I'll need you to put me back together again. Nobody here can do that for you."

Spock hesitated, nodded, and brushed past the protesting McCoy. He put his hands on Kirk's face, and Kirk was startled more by the cold and clammy skin than he was by the mental touch.

There was a clear pattern of disturbance in the Vulcan's mind, and Kirk thought, *Those probes really bother him.*

The effects are subsiding, came the reply.

He was unprepared for Spock's response, and nearly pulled away before he subdued the impulse, sending a mental apology. Spock did not even acknowledge it, concentrating on the meld and on drawing Kirk's essence into his own mind.

Kirk felt a moment of panic, like his first experience with freefall in space, and quelled it. *I've been here before. It's all right. Spock's here.*

Yes.

Kirk settled down, digging his hands into the toggles on the board, forcing his breath to come in slow, easy rhythm. There was a glimmer, a tingle, and his body remembered drowning. Something in his mind screamed, and the presence vanished.

No! I'm sorry. I didn't mean it; come back! Kirk called to the entity.

Alone. Empty.

No; they're waiting for you.

They?

The others.

Others?

Kirk could feel the entity exploring the concept of 'others' and finding no referent for it. There was only the resonance of incompleteness, and he tried again. *The rest of you. To be whole. To merge.*

Yes!

We'll help you. Only you must explain -- tell me how!

And then he was wrapped in its essence, reliving the initial contact from the alien's viewpoint, with no sense of past or present; with only a constant now which battered at his own hold on time and place.

We approach, seeking contact. Power here. Much life-force. Contact! Drawing us -- NO!

There was a desperate panic of total, sense-numbed isolation and Kirk felt as if he was being ripped from his skin. He fought for the two realities of here-and-now; his hands on the control board and Spock's touch on his face. He felt the alien's anguish as it remembered being pulled into--

--a weak subsystem, without sustenance for part.

That's me! some level of his mind registered, and suddenly

understood that what he had perceived as nightmares were the entity's attempts to contact him.

Vacuum. Drawing. Another subsystem.

Spock? Yes. The entity had left his mind and entered Spock's, using the Vulcan to gain entry to the computer system. Kirk felt the memory of the renewed strength as the entity fed on the starship's power. Through the alien's eyes, he relived the--

--attempts to steal power. Defend! Signal! Merge!

Time telescoped for him, and he shared the being's search as it directed the *Enterprise* back along its former course. He felt its wonder when the other light-beings appeared, and was lashed by its frustration when it couldn't reach them.

We are here. But separate. How can we be both? If we touch ... yes ... another touching...

Dimly, Kirk registered the shriek of stressed metal and felt Spock's hands rip away from his face, carrying part of

himself ... away. But his shout of denial was buried in the squeal of the klaxons as hull strength dropped into redline.

He saw/sensed Spock pushing away McCoy's hands and ordering a reduction in internal pressure. Kirk's ears popped and the air seemed suddenly inadequate, but he ignored the sensations, moving toward the turbolift.

Merge. Return to the source. Merge!

He ignored the hammering in his veins, the pressure behind his eyes, as an unexamined compulsion drove him to the hangar deck. The ship waited, beckoning, and his hands went up without conscious effort as he touched the sides.

His breath roared in his lungs and throat like flame, and he felt the tingle, saw the opalescent glow begin and swell with power. Then he was empty, drained, falling...

* * *

Sunlight. Golden. Warm. Dust motes dancing.

How could there be sunlight when his eyes were closed?

He opened them and met the familiar angles and planes of a known face. Spock made a sound that could almost have been a sigh, and let his hands drop from Kirk's temples. Kirk sat up and looked around sickbay.

The last thing he remembered was touching the alien craft, feeling the essence flow out of his body.

He allowed himself to smile.

"It worked?"

"Yes, Captain. When we reached the hangar deck, the alien ship appeared to be fully functional. As soon as we cleared the area and opened the bay, it departed," Spock explained.

"And I missed it. Damn!"

Spock and McCoy exchanged looks, and McCoy harrumphed, which for some reason made Kirk feel even better.

"I suspected that would be your reaction, Captain." Spock pushed a tape deck into the viewer. "This was taped from the bridge viewscreen seconds after the alien ship lifted off."

He saw the seven points of light hovering as an eighth point maneuvered into their midst. There was an instant of hesitation, and then the weaving dance began, light touching light, growing, swelling in an exultant mating that temporarily blinded the screen's sensors. When function was restored, the eight were separate again, moving away.

There was a odd, piercing pain somewhere in his throat, and then one of the points broke away. It returned, swelling in the screen until it filled a quarter of the field, dancing a slow, stately farewell before it streaked away again.

He swallowed the sharp lump that seemed to have manifested itself behind his larynx. "I wish..." His voice trailed off.

"What, Captain?"

He exhaled sharply and shook his head. "Nothing, Mr. Spock. Tell me -- do you have ... fireflies ... on Vulcan?"

THE END