

THE GIFT

by Lynda Carraher

The situation, Spock told himself, was so patently ridiculous that it simply could not be carried to its apparent conclusion. Logic simply forbade it. And the repercussions -- no. It was simply unthinkable.

As he went through the mental contortions, no flicker appeared on his face. Not even a marginally raised eyebrow, though it took considerable control to achieve *that*. Yet he could feel their eyes on him -- Kirk's with surprise and just enough of that gleam Spock was learning to identify as what the Humans called deviltry. A gleam which made him decidedly uncomfortable. And the doctor... a relative unknown yet, but he seemed to take a special delight in seeing Spock wrestle with the absurdities of any occasion which would have called forth embarrassment or confusion in a Human. He seemed to achieve some obscure emotional gratification from such occasions. But then, "obscure emotional" was a redundancy. Certainly.

Recognition of that, and of the looks he was getting, didn't change the situation, however. Rerebava still stood there, looking eminently pleased with himself, because his action of course raised his social standing by several degrees. And

the female still stood there, eyes cast down appropriately, but with just a suspicion of color on her golden cheeks. Everybody still stood there. Waiting. Waiting for him to accept the gift, and with it the cooperation of the Cebans. Or reject it, and destroy all they had worked for these many days!

Without Ceban cooperation, there would be no otiyu. Without otiyu, the rodent infestation on the planet Teune would continue. And without the agricultural produce of Teuns, a fragile and many-stranded trade web would collapse, bringing half a dozen planetary systems into economic chaos and losing the very real specter of mass starvation.

Grey area. Certainly. One of those cases where the Prime Directive was lurking around the edges. Reject the gift and interfere with the normal workings of Ceban society. Or accept it and ultimately do the same thing, at least for one member of that society.

Kirk had a name for such knotty decisions, when any action seemed to chase its own philosophical tail, the origin of which Spock had never clearly understood -- did Kirk himself? Catch-22, he called it.

Spock felt a nudge at his ribcage. A decidedly unsubtle elbow. Kirk's. Mentally, he took a deep breath. Physically, it didn't show. Of course.

"Rerebava," he began, "while we are honored by your magnificent offer--" Rerebava smiled broadly, took the

female's hand. Obviously not cognizant of the importance of the restrictive phrase beginning with 'while". Language barrier. Tricky stuff.

He reached out and grasped Spock's hand; placed the female's hand in the Vulcan's. It was done. Rerebava turned toward the watching tribesmen, raising his arms magnanimously. Baz'tal was complete. The traveler accepted the gift. Cheers all around, and break out the drinking gourds.

The female raised her eyes to Spock's face and permitted herself a small smile before lowering her eyes again. Yes, there was definitely a trace of darker coloring on those tawny cheeks.

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It had begun innocently enough. That of itself should have been fair warning. That and the knowledge that Harry Mudd, interplanetary trader and general galactic nuisance was involved. But Mudd was only beginning his career in unexcelled nefariousness at that point; the name Mudd was not yet a signal to lock up the family silver and nubile daughters, and, blast it all, he did seem to have the answer.

Teune was infested by sufads? How unfortunate. Nasty creatures, sufads. Smart as a Terran rat, and twice as hard to kill. Eating their way through Teuns crops, and fouling what they didn't eat. Too bad, really, that their metabolism adjusted so quickly to every known pesticide as to render the poisons harmless. Even worse that they could figure

out the workings of every conceivable trap within days, solving the problems faster than Federation agronomists could think them up.

Now he, Harcourt Fenton Mudd, just happened to have with him a creature known as an *otiyu*. Discovered it on a small planet. Primitive place; wandering tribal civilisation. Hands-off planet, making barely perceptible progress toward a higher level of development. The *otiyu*? Oh yes. A predator. Voracious beast, about the size of a Terran badger. Has a metabolism so high it needs to eat twice its weight in prey every twenty hours or so. Breeds like an oversexed rabbit. A hundred or so live *otiyu* turned loose on Teune ought to take care of the sufad problem quite nicely. One other thing ... *otiyu* are terribly susceptible to cold. In fact, temperatures below three or four degrees Celsius are quite fatal to them. Neat, really. Drop the *otiyu* on Teune in the planetary spring, let them eat up all the sufads, and wait for winter to kill off the *otiyu*. Can't have them going around preying on Teune domestic animals now, can we?

"What do I want for the name of their home planet? A trifle, really gentlemen, in view of the gravity of the situation. I'm not a greedy man, you know. Half a million credits should do nicely, and of course the undying gratitude of the Federation. Oh. Well, the credits alone will do fine. No need for the gratitude. What's that? Well, two hundred thousand, then."

It was the sort of thing Mudd did well; unfortunately for

him, it was the sort of thing Federation officials did better. There was the little matter of the last registration fee for Mudd's one man craft ... and the insufficient funds to honor the credit slip with which he paid for it. "We wouldn't bring it up, of course, but it does present an untidy problem for Central Accounting. And the matter of transporting a harmful animal. And you did say it was a hands-off planet, Mudd. Blackmail? Of course not. We could run a check on our hands-off planets inhabited by wandering tribesmen; discover the place of origin, but that sort of thing takes time. An even exchange, then. You give us the name, and we'll exempt you from registration fees for this standard year. A medal? No, we're afraid that's out of the question. Not even a small one. Thank you, Mudd. That will do."

"Ceba, is it, then? Of course. Well, a small landing party ought to be able to pop down and remove a hundred or so otiyu without even coming into contact with the natives. Whose sector is that? Ah, *Enterprise*. James Kirk commanding. Promising fellow, that Kirk. We expect big things of him. Cut the orders, will you, Schnell? That's a good fellow."

* * *

And thus it was that a landing party of six, under the direction of Science Officer Spock, found themselves in the midst of the arid, inhospitable landscape of the great Ceban desert, embarked on the Great Otiyu Hunt. Great sport, really, it one enjoyed that sort of thing.

That sort of thing being beating the sparse underbrush for otiyu and netting them as they broke from cover. Great sport until it became obvious that this particular area held a paucity of otiyu. Even less sport when they flushed the first pair and Yeoman Mueller attempted to cage them, and it became apparent that otiyu have the temperament of a Denebian slime devil and the stench of a Terran skunk, squared. The hapless Mueller took a full blast of otiyu musk, which quite naturally led to his letting it go rather abruptly.

Ensign Kenoti, assuming the danger of the vitriolic spray was past, at least temporarily, picked up the snarling predator and was promptly bitten on the hand for his pains. That the bite was toxic as well as painful became obvious momentarily, when Kenoti's hand swelled to almost twice its normal size, and he became violently ill.

When Spock contacted Dr. McCoy on the *Enterprise* and requested his presence on Ceba, he also recommended that the doctor bring along seven filter masks. If McCoy had any question about the seemingly odd request, it was answered when he drew his first breath on the planet's surface.

"Good lord," he gasped. "Are you burning old socks?" Spock donned his mask and passed out the others before he answered.. Even through the filter he could taste the rancid musk that still hung in the air.

"It would appear that our knowledge of the otiyu is

somewhat less than comprehensive," he offered.

McCoy muttered something about the power of positive understatement and turned his attention to Kenoti.

"I'm taking him back to the ship," he announced shortly.

"Very well," Spock acknowledged. "Please relay a message to Lieutenant Zorn on my staff. Tell her we shall need caging areas for the otiyu which can be totally sealed off from the rest of the ship. And if you would be so kind, Doctor, give her this analysis of the creature's secretions and advise her that we would appreciate having a suitable compound made available to nullify its effect. I believe we shall have need of it when we return to the ship."

"If you mean you're all going to need a bath, Mr. Spock, you're absolutely right." As the transporter beam took effect, McCoy was making an obvious effort to stand as far away from himself as he could get, in spite of the filter mask and in spite of the physical impossibility of doing what he had in mind:.

* * *

James Kirk looked glumly at the report in front of him. Stripped of all its official gobbledygook, it said "*Enterprise* 10, otiyu 1." The idea that one landing party could corral one hundred biting, spraying predators in twelve hours had been but another pipe dream of some deskbound bureaucrat somewhere who had obviously never been within arm's reach -- or nose's reach -- of an

otiyu in his life. Lucky him.

He looked up as Spock entered his office, bringing with him the faint but undeniable tang of otiyu, masked partially by a chemical smell that was only slightly less unpleasant. Kirk tried not to make an obvious face and found to his dismay that his eyes were watering anyway.

"I am sorry, Captain," the Vulcan offered. "The neutralizing compound was not as efficacious as we had at first hoped."

"I noticed." With what he hoped was an unobtrusive movement, Kirk nudged the room's air circulation control to its maximum setting.

"There is, however, another problem which is considerably more serious than the olfactory manifestations of the otiyu's annoyance." At Kirk's gesture, he settled his lanky frame into a chair. "I have recently received a communication from the laboratory facilities on Starbase Six, and it seems that Mr. Mudd was a bit optimistic in his predictions of the fecundity of the species."

"Translation, Mr. Spock." There were times, Kirk thought, when the Vulcan's love affair with the English language threatened to get totally out of hand.

"It is estimated that the sufad population on Teune is approaching twelve million, and that population is increasing by a geometric factor of three every forty-five days. One hundred otiyu cannot possibly do the job, given their true reproductive capabilities and the time factor

involved before planetary winter sets in. According to my calculations, we shall need one thousand, two hundred and six otiyu." Kirk groaned under his breath. One thousand snarling, biting, stinking otiyu loose on his ship. It was enough to drive a man to drink. .

"They will not be 'loose', Captain, and only the adult males are equipped with functioning musk glands," Spock said, as though Kirk had spoken aloud. Perhaps he had. Who knew any more?

But the Vulcan First Officer was not yet finished heaping coals of fire on his captain's head.

"Furthermore, sensor scans indicate that the most plentiful supply of otiyu live in close proximity to the inhabitants of Ceba itself. I do not believe it will be possible for us to acquire the requisite number without making contact with the natives." The groan was clearly audible this time, and ended with an old Terran English scatological expletive Kirk had been known to use from time to time, particularly in moments such as this one. He rested his forehead on his palm. "All right, Mr. Spock. Check and see if you can locate the sociological report that declared it a hands-off planet. It would be nice to know--"

"I already have, Captain," Spock said, extending a tape deck.

"Of course you have," Kirk muttered under his breath. It would be nice, just once, Lord -- just once -- to catch the perfect First Officer with his pants down. Figuratively

speaking, of course.

"Sir" There was a quizzically raised eyebrow to deal with. Surely this time he hadn't spoken aloud.

"Nothing, Mr. Spock. Carry on." The Vulcan nodded curtly and left the office, left the Captain who sat and pondered on the exigencies of fate which left him, barely one year into his first Starship command, saddled with a half-Human, half-Vulcan First Officer. Well, not saddled, exactly. He *had* chosen him. *Had* promised Christopher Pike that he would consider the enigmatic Vulcan if the arrangement with Gary Mitchell didn't work out. Which it hadn't. He still thought of Gary often, dead on Delta-Vega.

Dead and gone to dust, probably, leaving the position of First Officer to fall on Spock. Spock, who was so constantly correct, so infuriatingly impeccable that, even though Kirk felt a curious stirring of friendship for the taciturn alien, he sometimes longed to ... longed to ... what? He couldn't really answer the question, but it had something to do with what Kirk's grandmother would have referred to as "rattling his cage".

His mind locked on the idea of a cage and he hoped again that the cages the science crew had designed would keep the otiyu confined in their sealed compartment. Good God. A thousand of them.

Some other corner of his mind threw back the correction. One thousand, two hundred and six. Somehow, even though it was his own thought, it had the echo of the

Vulcan's voice.

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Tribal society, the fifty-year-old report said. Nomadic people of the planet's vast deserts, wearing their emotions close to the surface. Well-developed code of personal morality. Language a variant of archaic Antarian, communication possible at a basic level. Origins of civilization unclear, possibly springing from an early Antarian expedition marooned on the surface.

Rotten place to be marooned, Kirk thought, looking out at the desert beyond the camp. Low, rolling dunes, covered with scrub brush and fist-sized rocks. A thorny succulent here and there, thrusting defiantly against a sky of washed-out blue. Clumps of long grey grass, now being industriously cut by a small group of Cebans.

And the Cebans themselves. Wary at first of this strange group of travelers. Cautious, yet breaking through the caution was an obvious curiosity that particularly centered on the shiny black skin of Ensign K' Boya and on the faintly greenish skin and elegantly pointed ears of Mr. Spock. They accepted with only rudimentary questioning the story that the six strangers were traders from "another place," but became reluctant to discuss the otiyu. They looked with interest at the metal cooking pots and lightweight, tough tent fabrics offered for their assistance in corralling the elusive predators, but stalled interminably when asked when their aid would begin.

Oh yes, the trade goods were fine, indeed. But the first day was not propitious for trapping otiyu. And the next day it rained. Oh, not much, but any rain in a place so seldom blessed with it called forth a certain amount of general disorganization. And the next two days were given over to the shearing of the panöe, so the day after that was a day to card the wool and argue over whose crop was the finest. And the next day was the sabbath, and the day after that...

The day after *that*, Kirk decided, was the day to stop sticking his toe into the edges of the problem and dive in. They had made short sorties into the desert each day and the otiyu were there, in abundance. Eighty had been caught and beamed up to the *Enterprise* in strictest secrecy -- that is, the transporting was done in secrecy. The fact that they were hunting otiyu could hardly be concealed. Why else would they set out each morning and return at dusk filthy dirty and reeking of musk and generally as short-tempered as the animals they sought? There must be an easier way, Kirk thought. So as the morning of the seventh day dawned, Kirk sought an audience with Rerebava, one of the underchiefs and the Ceban who had apparently been designated to deal with these impatient travelers.

Rerebava's tent was a great confusion of scurrying women and squalling children, all of whom seemed intent on interrupting the conversation. After trying several times to delicately broach the subject -- Kirk lost track of just how many times somewhere after the fourth attempt when a particularly obstreperous youngster spilled a hot and sticky

pot of something best left unidentified down the Captain's leg and into his boot -- he suggested rather unsubtly that they adjourn to a place of a less distracting nature.

Rerebava smoothed the sleeves of his robe and considered the possibility. "Perhaps later, Sha'Kirk." It came out "Keerk". "There is first the business of preparing for my son's wedding. You understand how these things are, Sha' Kirk. This taking of a wife is no casual thing, and it is, after all, only his third one. There is a certain order, but it comes only with such practice. In the meantime, perhaps a drink? A pipe? No? Well, tomorrow is. another day."

Kirk tried again. "Rerebava, it is most important that we have your help in capturing the otiyu. The plague of rats in my home is most severe. Thousands of people will die if it is not halted. Every day we remain here, more and more of my people's food is being destroyed. If the payment we offer is not satisfactory--"

Rerebava ,waved his hand. "The payment is fine. Most generous. It is the order of things which is important, and a man must respect that order. Surely you understand that? First the wedding. Then the ceremony of the pipe. Then -- but if you wish, Sha' Kirk, perhaps you will join us there? It is a fitting time tor discussion."

Kirk by this time would have agreed to anything short of a public disemboweling. He kept thinking of the sufads of Teune and how many more otiyu would have to be transported as the Teune spring slipped into summer while

he sat cross-legged in a skin tent with his boot full of viscous liquid and his ears full of Rerebava's equally viscous voice, pontificating about tomorrows that never come.

He called a temporary truce between the landing party and the otiyu. There would be no hunting today. It would hardly do for them to appear at the wedding and the pipe ceremony -- whatever that was -- reeking of otiyu musk. He got no argument. Not that he was expecting any.

The argument came later, from Lieutenant Ellen Whitney as she muscled her way into the men's tent, a five-foot-five inch bundle of outraged female dignity, waving a gauzy cloth like a battle pennant, which in tact was precisely what it was.

"Captain Kirk," she announced through clenched teeth, "I respectfully request to be relieved of this assignment."

"What's the problem, Lieutenant?"

"The problem, sir, is that ever since we made planetfall on this lousy place, I have been sneered at, ignored, and generally treated like a second-class citizen. It's not enough that I've climbed up hills and slid down gullies chasing Ceban skunks. I've been spit at, sprayed at, sunburned, and skinned up. I've chased otiyu every step of the way with you, and then I'm expected to come back here and haul water and skin panöe and sleep on hides that had more tenants than a halt-credit spaceport hostel. I'm a xenanthropologist, not a wild-animal hunter! And now,

when I have a chance to observe a Ceban ceremony first hand, I'm told that I'm expected to cover my face with this ... this ... thing--" she said, flinging the veil at Kirk, "- and sit around in the women's tent while the wedding is going on. If you 'll agree to have me transported back to the *Enterprise*, I'm sure I can find someone on the staff who'll not only be more helpful to you, but can ... can..." She spluttered to a stop.

Kirk attempted to placate her. "Now, Lieutenant, I'm sure you have a valid grievance. But I can hardly explain to the Cebans what happened to you. We're traders, remember? We've come overland on a long, difficult journey, and they don't expect members of the party to be popping in and out every time they turn their backs. As for your not participating in the wedding... Well, I'm sorry, but surely you can put the time to good use by talking to the Ceban women." He flashed her a devastating smile. "We can't have you around running competition with the lovely bride, now, can we?"

"Don't you patronize me, Captain. I've seen the lovely bride, and she weighs a hundred and fifty kilos if she weighs a gram -- including her moustache. As for doing studies among the women, they stopped talking to me when I wouldn't let them tattoo my--" She broke off with a sudden blush. "Communication has been difficult to establish."

Surprisingly, it was Spock who came to his rescue. He unfolded himself from the floor cushion where he'd been

sitting, taking it all in with that quiescent observation that seemed to judge nothing, yet judged everything.

"Lieutenant Whitney," he said, "your behavior is not only unbecoming in an officer, it is also most illogical."

The stiffening posture, the opened mouth, the indrawn breath of the lieutenant, all signaled the wind-up of a response guaranteed to scorch the spines off a bull shastik at fifty meters. Spock either didn't see it, or didn't comprehend it, or -- and Kirk had one of those sudden flashes of insight that rang with such clarity that he knew it was right; *had* to be right -- he both saw it and comprehended it and immediately dismissed it as irrelevant, rolling over it like some Vulcan juggernaut.

"As a xenoanthropologist, your job is to observe and record, not to interact with or to alter sociological patterns. By attempting to participate -- even as an observer -- in a ceremony from which members of your sex are barred, you are negating your purpose.

"Marriage, in a culture such as this one is a major rite of passage; in all probability, one of the very few in this society in which a woman participates. By discussing it with the Ceban women who have already made that passage, you have an opportunity to make observations and gain perceptions which would be totally impossible for a male.

"Those women made a gesture of acceptance toward you, and you seem to have refused it. I hardly find it surprising

that they are less communicative now. There are professionally acceptable ways in which one can refuse such an offer without breaching the trust of the subjects. I would strongly suggest that you consider one of them."

Whitney was having a hard time handling it. Jaw muscles working, she struggled to swallow the assault on her professional capabilities. The two pinched, white crescents at the base of her nose attested to that.

Kirk was having something of a hard time handling it himself. He had never seen his First Officer chew anybody out before, and though the cold Vulcan voice was flat and even, it carried the most profound kind of disapproval.

True, he hadn't been much headway with the aggravated xenanthropologist ... and true, social sciences were technically within the domain of the Science Officer... still, it was rather disturbing to see one of his subordinates step in without so much as a by-your-leave.

Whitney had control of her voice by that time; at least, as much control as she was likely to attain.

"Mr. Spock," she began, "if you're not satisfied with my work--"

"On the contrary, Lieutenant. I read your monograph on the symbolic aspects of body-painting in the puberty rites of the Halvan aborigines. I found it quite perceptive. You have a definite facility for cutting through the extraneous." His tone had not changed; he might have been discussing

some obscure point in interdimensional physics. But Whitney's color changed from white anger to the apricot blush of a woman being praised by a man whose opinion she valued.

Without touching her, Spock had managed to steer her toward the entryway. As they left the tent together, their voices drifted back in the gathering Ceban twilight, point and counterpoint. The words were unintelligible, but the tone -- of Whitney's voice, at least -- unmistakable.

It was McCoy who broke the silence.

"Well, I'll be go to hell," he pronounced solemnly. "I haven't seen anything that slick since I left Georgia. Remind me not to buy a used spaceship from him." Kirk felt a small frown crease his forehead. It was becoming a familiar expression whenever he dealt with his First Officer.

"I don't think so, Doctor," he said. "He wasn't trying to snow her -- he really meant it." He looked at his Chief Medical Officer, still an unknown quantity after less than two weeks on board the *Enterprise*.

"You ever serve with a Vulcan before?" he asked.

"Nope. Can't say as I've ever had the pleasure."

"I did -- an astronavigator on the *Defiant*. Sharp as a whip. But... spooky. You know what I mean?"

"I'm beginning to."

"Yeah." Kirk arranged the floor pillows and dropped to them somewhat less than gracefully. There was a great deal to be said for furniture with legs, he reflected. McCoy followed suit, and they sat for a while in companionable silence.

"I knew Spock at the Academy," Kirk offered. "Knew of him, anyway; he was in the graduating class the year I entered. Brilliant guy. But a loner, even then." He thought for a moment, remembering.

"Chris Pike told me he had a shot at command branch but he turned it down. Wanted to get on line as soon as he could." He didn't know why he was telling McCoy this. Just killing time, waiting for Rerebava to come for them, he supposed. Then something hit him.

"What was your specialty?" he asked.

"Me? I'm just an old country doctor."

"Don't snow me, Doc. I've seen your record. You were in psychiatry, weren't you?"

"It *is* a requirement," McCoy said vaguely, looking off.

"Now I remember -- you did a year with Karmezinski. Wrote a helluva paper on gestalt dynamics in prolonged deep space missions."

"Now, you're not gonna hold a little thing like that against me, are you, Captain?" McCoy wore a slightly embarrassed grin. "Chalk it up to youthful exuberance. "

Puzzled by the medical officer's obvious discomfiture, Kirk shook his head. "No... I was just wondering why you switched fields."

McCoy hesitated before answering, and Kirk had a moment of thinking he'd probably put his foot in it. "I guess it's kind of like Mr. Spock's decision," McCoy finally drawled. "I wanted to get on line, and there were more openings for medics than there were for headshrinkers."

There's a truth here that isn't being spoken, Kirk thought, and decided to let the matter rest. As it was, he had probably exceeded his authority in asking the question in the first place.

The sound of drums and the high-pitched, eerie notes of a bone flute crept in around the opening. One of Rerebava's numerous nephews appeared, and in a long formal speech, requested their presence at the marriage ground.

Kirk felt an anticipatory shiver crawl up his spine as they approached the massed Cebans. No matter how many times he made planetfall on an alien world, he always experienced this same response. Every sense was vividly alive, straining to catch glimpses of the foreign, the exotic, and even the mundane. He supposed it was one of the reasons he had entered Starfleet.

In a clearing before Rerebava's tent, fifty or more Ceban men had massed, wearing leather finery decorated with arcane symbols and paintings. Their collection of armaments contrasted sharply with their general air of

festivity, and several of them were passing around a flask made from the bladder of a panöe.

At the edges of the group, whole panöe turned slowly on spits, and the aroma of the roasting meat mingled with the smoke, with the pungent smell of the contents of the flasks, and with the highly identifiable odor of the Cebans themselves.

Kirk and his men were given places of honor near the front of the group, and after a few moments, they were joined by Spock, as unhurried and quietly observant as ever.

Jashkar, the bridegroom, waited impatiently before a withered old man whose robes were neither leather nor wool, but a supple, silky cloth faded with age and tattered at the hem. Kirk recognized the cut as traditional Antarian, and made a mental note to relay the information to Lieutenant Whitney.

There was a great hubbub from the rear of the crowd, as the bride was escorted to the altar by her male relatives, facing away from the priest and proceeding backwards through the passage being cleared for her. At least, Kirk thought it was backwards. She was so rotund and so completely covered that it was difficult to tell for sure...

She backed into her husband's presence like a starliner being moored by shuttle tugs and knelt before Jashkar with bowed head. The Priest intoned a few solemn words regarding the worthiness of the respective families, and Jashkar received a rather lumpy bag from one of the

woman's attendants.

Jashkar drew a short dagger from his belt and handed it to the kneeling woman, who rose ponderously and crossed to one of the spits. She hacked off a slice of meat, impaled it on the dagger's point, and carried it back to Jashkar, who took it in one bite, wiped his face on his sleeve, and thrust his empty hand into the air with a wild shout.

And that simply, it was over. There was a great deal of good-natured shouting and shoving; Jashkar's senior wife appeared from some hidden cranny and led the new bride away, and all hands fell to devouring the sizzling meat.

Kirk found himself the recipient of an impossibly large joint, and without thinking, handed a portion of it to Spock. Or rather, started to hand it to him.

The Vulcan took half a step backward, and for a moment a flash of something very like disgust crossed his face.

"Sorry," Kirk offered. "I forgot. No offense intended, Mr. Spock."

"None taken, Captain."

It was then that Kirk noted the Vulcan's hands were busy elsewhere, guiding a tricorder scanner among the crowd. He looked at it curiously, then at Spock.

"For Lieutenant Whitney," he explained softly. "I told her--"

"Yes. Well, er ... carry on." He sought out McCoy, who,

having no tradition of vegetarianism in his heritage, gleefully accepted half the meat.

The doctor was enjoying himself immensely, and the wide grin that split his face came only partially, Kirk thought, from the fact that one hand held a drinking gourd. Kirk sensed the same kind of exhilaration in the doctor that he himself felt. Yes, McCoy was going to work out just fine.

"Now this is what I call a real shindig," McCoy grinned. "I haven't had so much fun since the hog ate my little brother." Kirk didn't know whether to take him seriously or not. But decided perhaps it was time to find Rerebava and pin him down. Once and for all.

"Look, Doc, I hate to break up a party--"

"Bones."

The non-sequitur halted Kirk in mid-sentence. "What?"

"Bones. That's what they call me. 'Doc' is my old white-haired daddy."

"Bones."

"Yup." McCoy was grinning at him, obviously expecting him to finish the thought. What was it? Oh, yes, Rerebava.

"Ah ... look, you round up the rest of the party, and I'll track down Rerebava. We've got to get this otiyu thing squared away."

"Right." McCoy wandered off, somewhat unsteadily, and Kirk blew out an exasperated breath.. Weddings. Sheep-

shearings. Rain festivals. Good lord, no wonder these people were still living in tents and wandering around in the desert. If he didn't get the show on the road, the whole crew was going to go native on him.

Well, maybe not the *whole* crew. Not Spock. Kirk had a nightmare vision of himself and his first Officer as lonely bastions of rationality in Ceban society and thought that after a few weeks of unrelieved exposure to the full force of Spock's undiluted logic, even he, Kirk might begin to go a little bonkers.

Got to get out of here, he told himself, and renewed his search for Rerebava.

It was the headman who found him, though, surging along at the head of a group of Cebans like a piece of flotsam borne on the crest of a wave. He exuded congeniality and a miasma of liquor fumes.

"Sha' Kirk," Rerebava said, "honored guest. I have been searching for you. It is time now for the ceremony of the pipe, and the other matter you wished to discuss. "

"Perhaps we could dispense with the pipe, Rerebava. It's really very late, and--"

Rolling like the crest of a wave, Rerebava caught Kirk up in his momentum, tumbled his objections into the sand, and swept him up on the beach of Ceban tradition. "First the pipe," he said firmly, and drawing Kirk into his irresistible current, swept him, still protesting -- mentally it not

vocally -- to the main tent.

Somehow, McCoy had done the impossible, and rounded up the men in the landing party. Kirk even caught a glimpse of a feminine figure swathed in the native veiling that he was sure was Lieutenant Whitney's, though how she had managed to insinuate herself into the ranks of the serving-women, he could only guess. And then decided he didn't even have the energy to spare for that.

He sat bracketed between Rerebava and the bridegroom, wondered fleetingly what Jashkar was doing here when the nuptial bed awaited him, thought of the chubby bride, and decided what the hell. Somehow, the forceful starship captain in him was going down for the third time.

One of the women brought in an enameled tray set with a great deal of paraphernalia and surmounted with what looked like an Antarian hookah. That was The Pipe then, he thought, capitalizing the words in his mind.

Rerebava deigned to take a twist of grey grass from the woman and then shooed her away as incapable of getting the pipe properly packed and lit. He fussed with it like a mechanic starting a reluctant engine, and the other Cebans waited with a patience colored with pleasant anticipation.

At last it appeared to be burning to Rerebava's satisfaction, and the interior of the tent, already ripe with the scent of Cebans and liquor, was overlaid with an aura reminiscent of someone burning creosote-soaked wood.

Kirk was reminded unpleasantly of the time he and his brother pilfered a box of his grandfather's cigars and puffed themselves into a green-gilled nausea in their treehouse.

Rerebava took a ceremoniously elaborate puff on the mouthpiece, inhaled deeply, and emitted a series of perfect smoke rings before he handed the mouthpiece to Kirk. Kirk, meanwhile, was fervently, if silently, cursing Starfleet, his immediate superior officer, sufads, otiyu, Lieutenant Whitney -- he was sure now the smugly satisfied amber eyes above that veil were hers -- Ceban society, and the galaxy in general.

He took the mouthpiece, thought again of Sam, and drew what he hoped was a modest amount of the substance into his mouth. The effect was immediate and as overwhelming as a draught of nitric acid. The smoke clawed at his palate like a sackful of brawling cats, and the muscles in the back of his throat closed down involuntarily. Which was a mistake, he realized, as it drove the vitreous fumes into his nasal passages, and his sinuses slammed shut like ten-ton doors.

The smoke exited from his nose like the exhalation of a Keronian dragon, and he hastily passed the mouthpiece to Jashkar, hoping his respiratory system wasn't shorted out permanently.

Jashkar took a deep puff on the mouthpiece, sending more clouds of pungent smoke into the tent, and closed his eyes in an expression of satiation before he passed the device to

McCoy, on his right.

McCoy, no fool he, had already seen the effects on his commander officer, and hesitated just the briefest moment before he accepted the ornately carved mouthpiece, covering his slowness by fiddling with the long flexible tubing that connected it to the tall hookah. He didn't care to contemplate what the tubing was made of, nor did he care to estimate the pathogen count on the communal pipestem. There must, he thought, be a graceful way to pass up this honor. Then he caught Kirk's compelling look.

You wanted on the line, the look said. Well, now you are.

There was also challenge there, and McCoy felt keenly the fact that he was the rookie on the crew, the unknown quality, and surmised quite correctly that his status on this new assignment was quite literally held in his hands. He told himself that the pharmacy on the *Enterprise* could undoubtedly annihilate any exotic germ he might pick up, promised himself the best medical attention in Starfleet, and took a tentative puff.

The vapors dived for the unprotected lobes of his lungs, and he felt like someone had hit him sharply at the base of the skull with a large blunt instrument. His face turned the color of old ashes and he hastily handed the mouthpiece to the Ceban on his right, struggling to draw a breath of clean air.

Unfortunately, there was none in the tent, and as he breathed the slightly used atmosphere, he felt an odd but

not totally unpleasant tingling in his fingers and toes. He tried an owlish grin at Kirk, signaling his survival, and even contemplated a broad wink, but he couldn't seem to get his eyelids to respond.

Kirk was feeling the same sensations, and a warning bell was going off in the back of his mind, but he couldn't quite pin down what the warning was supposed to be for.

His attention, anyway, was riveted on his half-Vulcan First Officer, who was at that moment accepting the pipe from the Ceban between himself and McCoy. Kirk thought -- and would have hidden the thought, because it was unfair and really unlike him, but it wouldn't stay hidden -- all right, you impeccable, imperturbable, im... im... There must be another word there, but what the hell? You get the general drift. Let's see how you handle this without turning a hair. Come on, show me just how that steel-trap mind of yours can reason away a lung full of supernova.

And was ashamed of himself for the thought, and waited for the Vulcan to gasp and cough and turn an even more interesting shade of green.

And waited, and watched with chagrin as Spock not only didn't respond as expected, but matched Rerebava's double smoke ring with a single one of his own. A bit ragged around the edges, perhaps, but nothing to be ashamed of.

Which annoyed Kirk no end, and he waited impatiently while the mouthpiece made its slow way around the circle, alternating between the suddenly urbane Cebans and the

varying responses of the men from the *Enterprise*.

And took the device from Rerebava on the second pass and saluted the Vulcan with his eyes and said, All right. If you can do it, I can do it.

And discovered that he couldn't.

The smoke went mostly down his throat this time, where it mingled most violently with the greasy roast meat and the bittersweet beer he had consumed earlier. He had an interesting suspicion that his color was even more spectacular than McCoy's, but found himself unable to confirm it. The tingling in his fingers and toes was now joined by a numbness across his cheekbones and down the line of his jaw.

The alarm bell kept ringing in the back of his mind, telling him to get out, to get his men out, that he was suddenly and perilously in over his head. But his arms and legs refused to move to his mental command. It was as if the message his brain sent was taking so long to reach its destination that the command was emasculated to the point where it was no longer compelling.

Time itself was out of sync, and he realized with a start that the pipe was in Spock's hand again and then passing on around the endless circle and on its way back to him.

He wanted to tell his host something, but as the thought formed itself in his mind, he lost hold of what it was, or indeed what the name of the man on his left was. If he had

ever known it. Whatever it was... What? Something about... Never mind...

He took the offered mouthpiece again, and this time there was no hesitation, only surprise that his hands were working. Only he had to be very careful, because he had the feeling if he wasn't, he could misjudge the distance and the mouthpiece would go flying past his head like a handful of salt thrown over the shoulder for luck. The smoke went deep into his lungs with a searing that he recognized but could not summon the energy to respond to.

The alarm bell in his mind finally made the connection he sought, and the word *opiate*, but it no longer held any significance for him, and indeed he couldn't imagine why he had wanted to pull such a word into his consciousness in the first place. All he wanted to do now was to find someplace warm and go to sleep.

The man on his left had the pipe again, but he wasn't passing it on. He appeared to be putting it away, and Kirk felt a faint spark of anger, but it was far away and muffled, like the movement of a kitten under a blanket. He was left only with the recognition of anger, but he couldn't remember who or what it was supposed to be directed at.

The man on his right was standing up unsteadily and. Kirk untangled his legs, careful not to move them too fast, lest they should disconnect from his trunk and fly off into space like ... like ... something. Space. That was supposed to mean something, too, but he couldn't remember what.

He saw the circle of men breaking up, rising except for two forms in red and one in blue that didn't move at all. The other blue-clad form, now ... who was that? Somebody he should know, he was sure of that. Maybe later he could figure it out.

He stumbled against the man in front of him, the one who had been sitting on his right, and the man stepped away from him abruptly. Too abruptly, and as Kirk could have predicted, he broke into very small pieces that glowed like live coals until the man in blue put him back together again and he thought that was time, because now, maybe, he could find someplace to sleep.

* * *

Spock had been aware, almost from the instant the heavy scent of the smoke threw its pall over the interior of the tent, that the contents of the pipe were most likely a drug of some sort.. The reverential attitude of the Cebans told him that much, and he considered advising his captain of the likelihood. It had been his experience -- and he had been on line while Kirk was still struggling through third-year interdimensional physics at the Academy -- that pseudo-religious substances in civilizations comparable to this one were generally either narcotic or hallucinogenic or both.

But there was a very real possibility that Kirk knew this, also, and was counting on the physiological differences between Cebans and Terrans to protect him and his crew from the effects. Though to Spock, such an assumption

seemed presumptuously illogical, as he was not aware that Kirk possessed any data that he himself did not.

The sorting of these possibilities in the Vulcan's mind was done at a sort of hyperspeed; he did not consciously form them into patterns of thought which could be vocalized -- they were simply there. What caused his hesitation was at once more simple and more complex than his recognition of the situation and acknowledgment of the options open to him.

It was something more, something he as a Vulcan by half-heritage and total conditioning was ill-equipped to deal with, because the basis of it was emotion. He sought this Terran's approval in a way he only dimly understood and ... feared ... yes, that was it; though he acknowledged that only on the most subliminal level. He saw in Kirk an openness and emotional honesty that both repelled and attracted him -- repelled him because his lifetime of Vulcan training insisted that being so in touch with and open to emotion was a mind-destroying factor of personality, and yet attracted him because it obviously had not destroyed Kirk. If anything, it, made him stronger. And it was a strength that Spock could admire, even though he had no conscious wish to emulate it.

He had offended Kirk that afternoon in the incident with Lieutenant Whitney, though it had not been his intention to usurp any of Kirk's command authority.

It was an error in his own judgement that had given

offense, and it was not an error he wished to repeat or compound now. So he kept his silence, and regretted it when he saw Kirk struggling with the toxic smoke, and saw the struggle repeated and lost by the doctor.

Spock accepted the carved instrument gingerly, and would have perhaps even then risked disapproval by passing it on untouched, when he felt and then saw the captain's eyes on him.

Kirk meant challenge, but he did not intend it to show, and Spock -- after only a few short weeks as First Officer -- was still on unfamiliar ground with the unspoken, sometimes unintended signals Kirk sent. He interpreted Kirk's stare as an order not to disrupt the ceremony, and so he stole a few seconds as the doctor had done to arrange the flexible tubing. But his purpose was not to postpone the inevitable. He used the time to concentrate on slowing his metabolism so that the vapors would take more time to affect him. Indeed, it was a process already begun. As soon as the smoke had entered the air in the tent, the mucous linings of his throat and nasal passages had begun to thicken, lessening their possibility. It was a process he could not take credit for -- he thought of it consciously no more than a Human confronted with sudden danger consciously thought about increased adrenal flow or cold sweat. The reaction simply was, and it -- plus his purposely lowered metabolism -- would give him a margin of safety the Humans lacked.

The smoke, when he drew on the mouthpiece, was

unpleasant, but part of that, he knew, was a matter of mental conditioning rather than physiology. It left his throat raw and burning as he passed the pipe along, and by the time he could spare his intense concentration to check Kirk's response, the captain had gone from surprise to anger, and he was impatiently waiting for a second go-round with the pipe. Because Spock had been intent on protecting himself, he missed that moment of surprise on Kirk's face, and saw only impatience.

By the time the pipe came to him a second time, he was beginning to have serious doubts about Kirk's assumed immunity, and he knew that the Human crewmen were being strongly affected by the narcotic smoke.

With the third turn, his ears were beginning to ring with the cumulative effects of keeping his body's metabolism down and the necessarily restricted oxygen intake that accompanied that lowering. He was relieved when he saw Rerebava put the instrument away, and waited for Kirk to broach the subject of the otiyu hunt, which was -- after all -- their reason for being here.

He was contused for a moment when he saw Kirk preparing to rise without opening the negotiations, and then realized that the captain's mind was so befuddled he no longer had any clear conception of what his function was. That he could move at all was a tribute to his stamina, Spock realized, for the other three crewmen -- including the doctor -- rested in glassy-eyed immobility. They were probably safer that way, Spock decided, but the man to

whom he owed prime responsibility was endangering not only their mission, but also his safety by insisting on moving about while under the influence of the drug.

The prudent thing, obviously, was to assist Kirk to a place of security until the effects wore off, and he began to move toward the captain, who reeled unsteadily behind Jashkar.

Kirk stumbled on a floor cushion and fell against the bridegroom, who stepped back into a brazier, mounted unsteadily on a crude tripod. The brazier, with its dancing flame and glowing coals flipped into the air, shooting coals meteor shower. Several fell on Jashkar's exposed face and hands, and ignited his loose, flowing robes.

Spock was already moving toward Kirk when the accident occurred, and he was within arm's reach when Jashkar roared with pain and fright. He knocked the burly young men to the ground and muffled the flames with one of the many small rugs that covered the earthen floor before any of the other Cebans had time to respond.

Rerebava was on his knees beside Spock as the Vulcan pulled the rug away gently, revealing Jashkar to be more frightened than damaged. Rerebava and the other Cebans were babbling in excited tones, too fast and too unimportant for Spock to bother trying to translate.

He crossed to the comatose figure of Doctor McCoy and broke open the small medikit McCoy never seemed to let out of his grasp. Though Spock was not a doctor, he did have a thorough basis in first aid procedures, and he

quickly found what he was looking for. Returning to Jashkar, he used the Ceban's short, sharp dagger to cut away the young men's robes and smooth an application of regatril on the burned skin. Most of the burns were superficial in nature, and as the foam from the anesthetic healing agent dissipated, the most minor burns had already lost their angry redness.

He started to hand the balm to Rerebava, to instruct him as to its further use, and was surprised to see the old man's eyes had filled with tears, and that the forceful demeanor Rerebava usually assumed was completely gone. In its place was the expression of a man who had just seen a miracle performed, and who was awed to be in the presence of its worker.

"Sha' Spock--" he began, but he was unable to continue. He grasped Spock's hand in his, and Spock controlled his immediate impulse to pull away. As a touch telepath, he found physical contact with non-Vulcans disturbing; their emotions seemed always about to burst in upon him

Rerebava gathered his wits with visible effort. There was, after all, a ceremonial statement to be made, and Rerebava's whole existence was centered around ceremony.

"Sha' Spock," he began again, "you have given me back my son. The baz'tal is yours. My tent is your tent, and my lands--"

"Rerebava--" Spock could sense a mile-long speech coming, and he had neither the time nor the inclination to

listen to it. "I must attend Sha' Kirk. Your son's injuries are quite superficial, and he will be fully recovered by morning. Now, if you will excuse me."

* * *

McCoy thought perhaps he'd open one eye; not both of them, certainly. No sense rushing into things. Just one eye, then, and just a little bit, to see if Hell really matched the description pounded into his six-year-old skull in Georgia.

Has to be Hell. I mean, I am dead, aren't I? Because if I'm not, then I'm in a lot of trouble.

He did open one eye, but not without a great deal of concentration.. Hell, it seemed, looked remarkably like the interior of a Ceban tent.

I'm in a lot of trouble.

He shut out the disturbingly benign sight, taking a mental inventory. His mouth felt like a battalion of Arcturian cavalry had bivouacked there, complete with mounts. They weren't completely gone yet, for their six-footed steeds clattered around noisily in his skull, and the cavalrymen themselves were doing a bit of short-sword work in his stomach.

"Doctor McCoy."

Well, this was it, then. Time for the specific circle to be named. One of the outer ones, hopefully. On second thought, maybe if he didn't answer, they'd think he wasn't there.

"Doctor McCoy, I know you can hear me. Sit up, please."

Sit up? How could he sit up when he was dead? He opened one eye tentatively. The other one this time.

Black eyes, expressionless. Brows that angled up like the wings of bats. A lean and somber face. And ears that swept up to demonic points.

Yup. Definitely the Head Man himself. And holding a hollowed horn that exuded vaporous brimstone.

The figure touched him, but the touch was neither serpentine nor fiery. Just a touch, remarkably like a Human's.

"If you will drink this, I think you will find it most efficacious."

He wanted to deny the presence, but his tongue wouldn't respond. The touch encircled his shoulders and lifted him to a sitting position. And all the while, the satanic cup, moving closer to his mouth.

Inevitable, he thought. He'd have to drink it, and seal his doom. Like Proserpine and that damned pomegranate. She got six months off for good behavior, though.

Against his better judgment, he drank. It was warm and viscous and peppery, and the top of his skull detached itself neatly and rose several centimeters into the air, panicking the Arcturian cavalry mounts, who stampeded out through the opening, spitting and kicking.

The second draught neatly inundated the saber-wielding marchers in his stomach, no matter that it also permanently destroyed his duodenum; and the third charged through his circulatory system, sniping at laggards and guerilla parties lurking there .

The dregs of the drink proved too much of a good thing, however, and he came to his feet with a howl.

"Ye gods, what is that stuff?" He wasn't sure, but thought that clouds of flame emanated from his mouth with the words.

Spock sat back on his heels, watching the effects of the potion and looking insufferably pleased with himself -- for a Vulcan, at any rate.

"I do not think you really want to know, Doctor. Suffice that it is effective."

"So is a photon torpedo, but I don't go around prescribing them. And speaking of presoribing, who appointed you doctor around here, anyway?"

Spock rose to his feet, brushing a nonexistent speck from the knees of his trousers. "It was not an appointment, Doctor. The position -- temporary though it was -- fell to me by default. I revived you first so that you could assume your duties." McCoy blinked at him as he realized the other meaning under the Science Officer's words.

"You mean you used me as a guinea pig for that witch's brew? Of all the bone-headed--"

"Doctor McCoy," Spock interrupted him, "it seemed the logical thing to do. If you recovered--"

"If I recovered? If I *recovered*? Don't you think--"

--it would be possible for you to treat the Captain and the other members of our party," Spock continued, as though McCoy's outburst had not occurred. "Please do so. Rerebava wishes to see us shortly."

Still grumbling, McCoy gathered his medikit and began checking vital signs. No one seemed pennanentiyy damaged, and he passed on using any more of Spock's noxious remedy, preferring a tri-ox compound, some vascular decongestants, and a mixture of mild stimulants.

One by one, Kirk, M'Boya and Delveccio came to varying degrees of alertness, each pulling himself together by the method he preferred. M'Boya sat holding his skull together by main force, while Delveccio took a loud and profane inventory of various parts of his anatomy, offering a simultaneous and colorful commentary on the ancestry, social habits and sexual proclivities of his hosts. Kirk looked around, shuddered, and shut his eyes.

"Delveccio," he said softly, rubbing his forehead, "shut up." He opened his eyes again and essayed a second look around. "Is everybody all right?"

"I believe so, Captain," Spock answered him. "Rerebava would like to see us as soon as possible. There is apparently some sort of ceremony, and--"

"NO!" Kirk exploded, and immediately regretted it. The sound of his own voice cut through his head like a primitive rip saw and set his back teeth vibrating, but he ignored it and went on. "No ... more ... ceremonies, " he said through clenched teeth. "I have had it up to here with that doddering, procrastinating--"

"Captain," Spock calmed him, "I believe he will be ready to discuss business at the conclusion of this one ceremony."

The news placated Kirk somewhat. "You've talked to him? When -- last night?" The hazy and painful memory of the previous night brought a number of questions to mind.

As Spock explained the events that led up to his morning conversation with Rerebava, a thought was trying to form itself in Kirk's mind. A few lingering cobwebs in his brain seemed to be impeding the process. At last it clarified itself, and he broke into Spock's somewhat didactic monologue.

"Wait a minute, Mr. Spock. How could you have... I mean, that was pretty potent stuff. I take it you weren't as severely affected as the rest of us?"

"My physiological makeup is not the same as yours, Captain. In addition, there are certain biofeedback techniques which can be used to prepare the body for the ingestion of otherwise toxic substances. As soon as I realized the soporific qualities of the smoke--"

"Wait a minute," Kirk interrupted him. "You mean you

knew what that stuff was going to do?"

"Not precisely, Captain. Without a detailed laboratory analysis--"

"But you had a pretty good idea?"

"I was able to make some inferences, based upon prior studies of similar societies, and intensified by--" It seemed to Spock that he was not going to be permitted to finish a single sentence in this discussion. The normal courteous reserve his captain maintained seemed to be conspicuously absent this morning, as Kirk again stepped on his First Officer's words.

"Don't you think, Mr. Spock, that as my Science Officer, you had a responsibility to advise me of your conclusions?" The words were bitten off precisely, like Targellian ice-diamonds. "I mean, that's your assigned function, is it not? Or have you forgotten that, along with forgetting that it is my responsibility, both as Captain and as head of this expedition, to initiate any discussions with Rerebava which would determine our course of action here?" Once he got rolling, Kirk found it difficult to shut off the reprimand. It began to have all the symptoms of a severe and extremely petty tongue-lashing. Even as he chewed Spock's performance ragged, he felt the unworthiness of it.

Part of it, he knew, was the raging hangover McCoy's medication had only slightly alleviated. Part of it was being fed up to the eyeballs with Spock's uncanny capability to

emerge unscathed from a variety of experiences that would have -- and in this case, had -- debilitated a mere Human. Part of it was guilt over his own inability to recognize and protect himself and his crew in a dangerous situation. And part of it 'was a seizing upon this rarest of all occurrences -- a lapse in Spock's efficiency.

Some little shriveled creature from a corner of Kirk's soul -- usually kept well-hidden and impotent -- had broken free of its restraints and taken over, pouring out Kirk's occasional resentment of Spock's annoyingly perfect behavior.

Do a good job, the hobgoblin said, because you don't get many chances.

Kirk realized all these elements, and was ashamed, suddenly, by their pettiness.

He had no excuse to behave like a raging tyrant. He finally ran down, wishing through the last few sentences of his tirade that he hadn't started it. If anything, he was more chastened by the outburst than Spock, who appeared to be totally unaffected by it.

Kirk was wrong on that point. Spock was most profoundly affected by it. Error was wasteful, and therefore must be scrupulously avoided. When it did occur, as was sometimes inevitable in a learning situation, the onus could be taken off it only by taking proper action to see that it was not repeated in the future.

He had erred in his interpretation of Kirk's attitude during the ceremony of the pipe, and he promised himself an intensive session with the Terran/Human, psychology tapes when they got back to the ship. That reaction was as it should be, and though he did not like being wrong, he accepted it.

The other reaction, however, was something he was not prepared for. As Kirk's diatribe went beyond the basic and necessary pointing out of error, he became aware that he was deeply disturbed by it. That it was an emotional response, and therefore even more improper than the judgmental error, only made matters worse. He realized with a jolt what he had been only subliminally aware of before -- that he wanted this man's respect, and that in this moment, he did not have it.

There was a third thing disturbing him, and it had to do with the forthcoming ceremony. Rerebava had mentioned the baz'tal -- the blood debt -- and Spock knew from his reading of the initial planetary survey that the ceremony would revolve around payment of that.

Baz'tal was the most serious and binding state a Ceban could enter into, and when he owed it to another, it was incumbent that he clear the obligation by presenting the most valuable thing he owned, freely and joyously. Doing so fulfilled his obligation, and the greater the value of the gift, the greater the honor which devolved on the giver. Thus, the ceremony not only cleared the debt, it raised the social standing of the debtor.

Spock had intuited Rerebava's almost unquenchable desire for social prominence, and found himself concerned by the prospect of receiving an awkward gift -- a herd of panöe, for example. What would he do with them, and how could he refuse them without offending their host?

The question was still troubling him when they gathered before the tribesmen. No panöe were in evidence, and Spock permitted himself to relax a bit. Something small, then, and inanimate. That would be tolerable. Perhaps a locally precious stone, or an artifact from the original colonists. That would be better than tolerable, because it opened the possibility of later study by xenanthropologists.

He listened to Rerebava's lengthy speech with a quiet confidence that was totally shattered when the Ceban took the hand of the young female who had been standing in the background and began extolling her virtues to the assembly. The very real possibility that Rerebava meant to present him with the girl was acutely disturbing, and the attitudes of the others did not alleviate it.

Now he found himself standing there with the girl's hand in his own, the Cebans making obvious preparations for another round of festivities, and Kirk watching him with a self-satisfied grin on his face. The outlook was not pleasant.

Kirk found to his surprise that he was enjoying the whole thing immensely.

Let Mr. Cold-Blooded Vulcan "logic" his way out of this one, he thought. He would worry his way through the ramifications later; the important thing now was that somebody had finally handed the Vulcan a bite he couldn't swallow.

He was almost loath to depart the scene when Rerebava approached him to remind him of their promised discussion. Spock was just standing there, the only outward manifestation of his uncomfortableness showing in the working of his throat. He plainly and simply did not know what to do, and the hobgoblin that lurked around the edges of Kirk's otherwise well-disciplined psyche was jumping up and down with glee.

Kirk decided he could safely leave with Rerebava, that it wouldn't matter how long their discussion took; when he came back, in an hour or in a day, Spock would still be standing there, stripping his mental gears to find a way out of the situation.

The thought formed in Kirk's mind that the problem was his, too; as leader of the group, it was up to him to resolve the difficulties Rerebava's generosity had brought, but there would be time for that later. Meanwhile, Spock could stew in his own juices, and he was going to enjoy it.

* * *

The girl, Shazmene, was neither displeased nor dismayed by her change in status.

It was something she had grown accustomed to.

Her father had no sons. What he had was a large sphere of influence, which he maintained by parceling out his numerous daughters as soon as they reached puberty; sometimes even before, as had been Shazmene's case. Because of her father's importance, and because her elder sisters and half-sisters had developed considerable reputations for beauty, docility, and fecundity, the daughters of Sha' Feltev were highly prized.

While Shazmene's beauty, by Ceban standards, was undeniable, her docility was considerably less than that of her siblings; and her fertility was yet to be determined. Each man who had been her liege -- and she had had five of them since leaving her father's tent six springs ago -- had calculated her worth as a bride, compared it to the comforts of having her warm his own bed, and opted for treating her as a daughter. So she had passed from tribe to tribe, each year growing a bit more impatient for a husband of her own. This latest looked like the best bet so far.

In the first place, he was not a greybeard, as her other protectors had been.

In the second, he appeared to have no wife of his own. It was possible, of course, that the five of them shared the services of the one woman in the group, but Shazmene did not think it likely. The third factor was that he was obviously unfamiliar with Ceban culture, and so would not be torn between lust and greed. Had she been asked she

could not have explained precisely how she knew this, but she did.

She often found herself convinced of things on the sketchiest kind. of impressions, and more often than not, her slapdash conclusions proved correct. It was something she had learned to accept without questioning.

For instance, she did not believe they were traders, though she had seen the items they brought. There were many other tribes more accessible to traders than this one, and whatever possible use traders might have for otiyu hardly seemed to justify a long and arduous journey to the interior of the desert.

Given her choice among the men, she would have picked the one with the intriguing black skin, but this one with the exotic pointed ears would have been second choice. In any case, it was not her decision to make. His hand was cool and dry under hers, and when she stole a glance at his face, he was regarding her with upraised eyebrows.

As the others around them filtered away, he gave no indication of moving. It was the woman -- their communal wife, or whatever -- who finally took her other hand and led her away.

Oh, well, she had not really expected him to carry her off to his tent and start ripping her clothes off. Hoped, maybe, but not expected.

Lieutenant Whitney had seen quickly that Spock was

totally at a loss. She took pity on him, partly because she liked him, and partly because she owed him one for the tricorder tape he'd made of the wedding ceremony. She took the girl to her own tent and talked to her while Captain Kirk was in conference with Rerebava. By the time Kirk summoned her to a briefing, she had a very clear idea of what Shazmene expected of them, and she was not -- to put it mildly -- thrilled with it.

"Captain," she announced, "We've got a problem"

"Later, Lieutenant. " He was jubilant, and unable to conceal it. Rerebava had I finally made a decision. He would render all assistance, Kirk reported. In two days, three at the most, they would have their quota and be free to go. In addition, he had learned in his morning's regular contact with the ship that ten of the female otiyu already captured had whelped. That left only eight hundred seventy-three to go. He decided against mentioning that figure. Somehow it didn't sound as encouraging as he had at first thought it would.

At any rate, there was a distinct possibility that they might get off this rock after all. And that was more cause for celebration than all the weddings, rainstorm, and panöe-shearings the Cebans could come up with in a hundred years.

Also -- though he didn't mention this, either -- the Great Bird of the Galaxy had smiled on him at last, and he had finally been permitted to see Spock at a complete loss.

Spock. Yes. He knew he owed the Vulcan an apology. It was, in a way, more important to him than to Spock. It was a necessary thing to timely shackle the ugly hobgoblin, to push it back where it belonged, or better yet, to expel it completely. He didn't know, however, quite how to begin, not with the eyes of the others upon them.

"Mr. Spock," he finally said, "I'd like to speak with you privately, please." The others took the hint. All but Lieutenant Whitney.

"Captain--" she began.

"Later, Lieutenant." He took her arm and gently propelled her out of the tent. "Later."

Later, it seemed, was going to be a long time coming. Lieutenant Whitney alternately paced and fumed and sat on a rock, wondering what was taking so long. The rock was hard and it was becoming uncomfortably cool as the day drew to a close.

When Kirk at last emerged from the tent, she pounced on him before he had a chance to find important business elsewhere, and led him away from the cluster of tents. What she had to say was best said in private.

Whitney was not the only watcher. Shazmene, too, waited until the strangers' leader emerged from the tent and went away with the woman. She was neither bored nor cold, for her quick mind was busy with plans, and the anticipated fruition of those plans warmed her considerably.

As she slipped into the tent, the object of her plans had his back to the entrance, and seemed to be talking to himself. She couldn't understand what he was saying -- she had observed that the strangers often spoke in a language she had never heard, and this of itself tended to make their story of being simple traders suspect. A quick glance around the tent assured her they were indeed alone. Perhaps he was praying, though his clipped tones hardly held sounds of praise or supplication.

She dismissed it as unimportant, and proceeded with the initial phase of her plan, which was to remove her clothes. She was nearly finished when he stopped speaking, and then a most remarkable and frightening thing happened. Had she not been nearly nude, she most certainly would have fled the tent.

Someone, somewhere, was replying to him, and this voice was different, with sounds in it like the rolling trill of the hana bird. She looked around the tent again, sure that someone else must be concealed there, but saw no one. The hanavoice stopped, the stranger made one brief response, and she saw him touch a small black box to his belt -- where it stayed, apparently of its own power.

She had, before coming to Rerebava's tent, been the ward of a powerful magician. He, too, could make voices come where no speaker stood, and he had a marvelous stone to which certain metal implements clung.

Was this man a magician, then? She remembered what the

women told her about last night's ceremony of the pipe -- how this one smoked the selash and did not lose his wits as the others did. That must be the answer. A magician. Well, this was certainly beyond all expectations.

He turned, then, and again both eyebrows went up.

Spock had been so intent on making his report to Mr. Scott that he had not heard his uninvited guest make her entrance. In addition, he was almost as deeply disturbed by Captain Kirk's apology as he had been by the outburst which had prompted it. Having been outwardly unaffected by the reprimand, he could not permit himself to be touched by the apology, and that was proving unexpectedly difficult.

Kirk, after relieving his painful conscience, had attempted to alleviate their mutual discomfort by turning the discussion to what he felt was a safer topic, offering up an account of a past judgemental error of his own.

Conversations on the personal level tended to make Spock uncomfortable, because he recognized in them the invitation to share incidents from his own past. He had found with Captain Pike that this led to a kind of emotional obligation, a set of personal interrelationships that were alien to his heritage and which he found disquieting. They required a kind of openness; a willingness to acknowledge and expose one's vulnerabilities. He had been drawn unaware into such a relationship with Pike, and found to his dismay that he was capable of feeling loss when Pike

left the *Enterprise*. He didn't want that to happen again. And yet...

Some level of his mind had been working at the dilemma even as he spoke with Scott, and he planned to bring it to the surface where it could be resolved when his report was finished. He was, therefore, less than prepared to find a half-naked girl staring at him as he turned around.

Not half-naked, he amended quickly. More accurately, nearly naked. She wore only a brief loincloth, and what he had at first thought to be a strip of cloth across her breasts was in reality a band of decorative tattooing. That, at least, filled in the blank Lieutenant Whitney had left in her angry outburst to Captain Kirk, and he filed it away for future reference. For the moment, there seemed to be nothing to say as the girl smiled and stepped out of the pile of discarded clothes at her feet.

"Young woman--"he began.

"My name is Shazmene," she responded.

"Young woman," he repeated, more firmly this time, "you really must put your clothes back on."

"Why?"

"I have observed that it is not customary among your people to disrobe in front of strangers."

"But you are not a stranger. You are my husband."

"That is an incorrect assumption, based upon faulty data"

Her frown told him that his translation of the terms left something to be desired. Their language, while based on Antarian, had molded itself around the needs of the speakers, which needs apparently did not include terminology for processes of deductive reasoning. He simplified the statement.

"I am not your husband."

Shazmene allowed the beginning of a pout to form on her face. This was not the scene she had planned. "I am your gift of baz 'tal," she reminded him, and recalling that they sought Rerebava's assistance, shrewdly added, "Sha' Rerebava will be greatly displeased if you dishonor me."

"I should think he would be more displeased if he found you here in this state. Now please put your clothes on and leave at once."

"But he intended that I be your wife." She thought of the times she had been given in tribute and decided that was not a lie. Not precisely. No way to explain the details to him, though. He couldn't possibly understand.

"It is impossible for you to be my wife, " he stated. Simple statements. Yes, that was the way to stay out of trouble on this planet.

Shazmene regarded him carefully, calculating. "Is it because you already have a wife?"

"Yes." He thought of T'Pring and the formal agreement between them and decided that was not a lie. Not precisely.

No way to explain the details to her, though. She couldn't possibly understand.

Shazmene's green eyes narrowed until they were little more than jade gleams in her bronze face. "Where is she, this wife of yours?" If it was the woman, Sta'Whitney, that would be no problem.

"She waits for me, in my own land."

"Then she is far away, and I am not, and the night grows cold." She plucked at a thong, and the loinloth joined the other garments.

Okay. Enough was enough. It was possible that Rerebava had indeed intended this young woman as his wife, though the afternoon's ceremony bore little resemblance to last night's wedding. It was also possible that she was making the whole thing up for some arcane female reason, and that haft a dozen of her nearest male relatives would take him apart limb by limb if he accepted her invitation. It didn't matter, really. He had no intention of bedding the girl, even if she did look like some Terran wood nymph cast in bronze.

He crossed the tent, picked up the red and black robe that had been the first thing to go, and tossed it at her.

"You cannot be my wife."

Shazmene turned away slightly, letting the robe fall untouched, and allowed a tear to escape. It was a technique she had found useful in the past. "I am not pleasing to

you?" She managed a covert peek out of the corner of her eye. No response. "I have done something to offend you?"

"You have done nothing to either displease or offend me. But among my people, it is not the custom to treat people as chattels ... as things, to be given away or owned in any sense." A second tear joined the first, with no more effect than its predecessor.

"If you will dress, I will accompany you to Rerebava's tent, and attempt to clarify this misunderstanding," he said, and closed the space between them, bending to pick up the robe.

It was at that point that Spock totally lost control of the situation -- if indeed, he had ever had it.

Shazmene, abandoning her unsuccessful attempts at gentle coercion, opted for direct action. As Spock bent to retrieve the robe, she hit him with a shoulder block that would have done credit to a professional security man. The astonished Vulcan found himself lying on his back amid a tangle of discarded clothing, with Shazmene -- who suddenly seemed to have as many arms as a Hindu goddess -- attempting to impede his efforts to right himself. And doing an extremely good job of it.

One of the problems with removing her seemed to be that, despite her apparently amazing number of appendages, there was nothing for him to grasp which was neither potentially damaging to Shazmene nor excruciatingly embarrassing to Spock.

He had managed to achieve a sitting position, with the girl clinging to him like a mongcat, and for a moment thought he had the upper hand. Then, with what seemed a boundless supply of dexterity, Shazmene slid two hands under his uniform shirt and attempted to pull it off over his head.

In that moment, blinded and pinioned by the entangling garment, he heard the unmistakable sounds of someone else entering the tent, and an instant later, the properly shocked tones of Captain James Kirk's voice.

"Spock!"

The encumbering weight and nimble hands of Shazmene were removed rather abruptly from his lap, and for one ear-burning instant, he was tempted to remain within the mercifully concealing folds of the shirt.

Kirk was having considerable difficulty in maintaining a suitably stern demeanor. Informed by Lieutenant Whitney of the misunderstanding about the Ceban girl, he had set out for the men's tent with full intention of heading off precisely the kind of disaster in which Spock was, even now, so literally entangled.

But, Lord, it was rich. He clamped his back teeth firmly over the edge of his tongue in an attempt to keep the laughter tram climbing up his throat and into the open. With Ellen Whitney just behind him having little success at muffling her delight at the incongruous situation, the chore was made just that much harder.

Spock finally disentangled himself from his shirt, ears burning with a green flush Kirk had never seen before, and rose to his feet with as much dignity as he could muster.

Shazmene, in the interim, was snatching up bits and pieces of garments and attempting -- without much success -- to hide her considerable nudity from a man who was definitely not her husband.

Into this confusion ambled Leonard McCoy, totally unaware until that moment that anything at all unusual was going on in the outwardly quiet tent.

The appearance of a second non-husband totally shattered what little presence of mind Shazmene had left, and she made a final grab for her robe -- nearly upsetting Spock again in the bargain -- and fled into the night.

Her journey was not a long one.

Jashkar, who was certainly not immune to the charms of his father's young ward -- particularly when compared to the dubious endowments of his newest bride -- had spent an uncomfortable afternoon giving free rein to the carousel he assumed was going on in the strangers' tent. With heavy heart and equally heavy purse, he was now bound for the presence of the strangers, hoping to find an alternative to the payment of baz'tal which would leave Shazmene available for future need.

Her dishevelled and tearful appearance set a protective fire flaming through his heart -- and loins -- and he had a

moment of being torn between a mad desire to remove Sha' Spock's head from his body, and his equally great desire to comfort the insulted lady.

The lady won.

And in the tent, McCoy's question may not have been terribly original, but it was -- and even the Vulcan would have had to agree -- logical.

"What the devil is going on in here?"

Clasping down firmly on his most un-captainly urge to laugh, Kirk put on his most innocent face. "I believe the young lady was ... what is the correct term, Lieutenant?"

Whitney picked up the cue immediately, and turned an equally innocuous expression on the captain. "I think the expression is 'making a gesture of acceptance', Captain. And of course, Mr. Spock was searching for a professionally acceptable way of refusing it without breaching the trust of the subject."

If he hadn't been looking at Whitney's wide-eyed innocence, Kirk thought later, he could have made it through poker-faced. But the combination of her guileless face and the echo of Spock's stiffly correct reprimand, shattered the minimal control he had achieved. The laughter started somewhere in the vicinity of his sternum and poured out like rambunctious students let out of a classroom half a day early. Whitney broke up, too, as the two of them gave in to their mutually infectious laughter.

They howled and whooped and finally wept, leaning against each other like jovial drunks, and each time one of them regained momentary control, a look at the other shattered it in a new gale of hilarity.

And Spock, standing stiffly as if at attention, his face closing down as he fought to keep the telltale blush off his face. Taking the flood of alien sounds as if each one was a separate blow.

Empty, wrung out, Kirk attempted once more to pull himself together, realizing the inherent cruelty in their laughter. He rubbed his aching jaw and damp eyes. "I'm sorry, Mr. Spock. It's just that you looked so -- so--"

And Whitney, set off again by the memory of it, sat down abruptly because her legs wouldn't hold her.

Kirk gave up, joining Whitney on the ground.

Spock resisted the urge to tug the tail of his uniform shirt down. "If you will excuse me, Captain, there are certain preparations to be made at the holding area. If you have no objections, I shall spend the night there." In a rare breach of professional decorum, he left without waiting for Kirk's agreement to the plan.

Only after he was safely out of earshot did McCoy permit himself to speak.

"That was some display, Captain."

"I'll say it was," Whitney put in, too exhausted to even work up a giggle, "Ohh ... my sides ache."

"I wasn't talking about Mr. Spock," he snapped. "I was referring to you two babbling hyenas. What happened to military courtesy? To simple respect for the feelings of another human being?" He caught Whitney's puzzled frown.

"Yes, Spock has a human side, though after the demonstration you two just gave him of what it means to be human, it's not surprising he doesn't dwell on it."

Kirk was seeing a whole new side to the man he had assumed to be an easygoing type, and the white heat of McCoy's barely concealed rage made him feel small and vulnerable.

"You couldn't have attacked him more viciously if you'd staked him down and stripped the hide off him. He's a man, dammit, not a stone. At least, he was a man, until a few minutes ago." A sick feeling, like the aftermath of too many sweets, began to coil and uncoil inside Kirk's belly. He knew the truth of McCoy's words, and acknowledged he was guiltier than Whitney -- both by virtue of his rank and by his knowledge of Vulcans in general and Spock in particular. He remembered an old proverb -- Be careful what you wish for... you just might get it. He had asked for the sight of Spock embarrassed and unable to cope, and he had been granted that request. With frosting. But it didn't taste quite right any more.

He pushed himself to his feet and hauled Whitney up after him. "I guess this is my day to apologize to Mr. Spock," he

said, starting for the tent flap, only to find the considerable bulk of McCoy between himself and the exit.

"No, Captain. Leave him alone. I think you've done enough for one night."

"Come on, Bones, we didn't mean any harm. And you have to admit, it was damn funny."

"To us, maybe. Not to Mr. Spock; I can guarantee that." He hooked an arm through Kirk's; guided him to one of the floor pillows.

"Now, I don't know much about Vulcan courting practices," he said. "Nobody does, except the Vulcans -- and they're not talking. But I can guarantee you one thing. Whatever they do, they don't do it in front of an audience. I don't know if you interrupted a tender moment, or if you saved him from what they used to call a fate worse than death. But I do know a few things you don't -- and I think it's time I let you in on them. Have you seen his psych profile since he was reassigned as First Officer?"

Kirk had to admit he hadn't. That was inexcusable, he knew, but there had been so many things to do...

"Well, I have." The first thing he'd done, in fact, on being assigned to the *Enterprise*, was to pull the psych profiles on the primary bridge crew and submit them to a scrutiny which was sharper in insight and greater in recall than most people gave him credit for. That he concealed that ability, as he concealed his psychiatric background, was

purposeful.

He had, then, more than a nodding acquaintance with Spock's attitude toward their commanding officer, and he recognized Kirk's occasional impatience with the too-perfect Vulcan. He understood Kirk's need to find a flaw in Spock's makeup, at the same time understanding Spock's need to conceal any imperfections. Of the two, he thought the Vulcan's need greater.

Though McCoy enjoyed a joke as well as the next man, something about the tableau he'd just witnessed had struck him as distinctly unfunny. It smacked of ridicule, of goading, and that touched a chord in him that made him speak out. New kid on the block or not, he wouldn't -- couldn't -- stand by and see someone attacked. If it meant blowing his first Chief Surgeon assignment, that was just too bad.

The Captain, he realized, was waiting for him to elaborate on his statement about Spock. He took a deep mental breath and dived in.

"He respects you, Captain, though after tonight, I'm damned if I know why. Vulcans have a built-in respect for authority, of course, but you have to consider the Human factor in Spock's profile, too. He'd like to like you, but there's this ... control... that says he shouldn't. Shouldn't permit himself to get close to anyone. And part of it is because that leaves him open to the kind of attack you just laid on him.

"As your Chief Medical Officer, Captain, my official recommendation is that you just back off nice and easy, and give him a chance to heal. Maybe he will and maybe he won't ... but my professional opinion is that you can't do a thing right now but make it worse."

Kirk studied the tips of his boots. "You're the doctor," he said softly.

Something inside McCoy breathed a sigh of relief. "I am that," he said.

"And my prescription right now is a good night's sleep. We've got one helluva day coming up tomorrow."

* * *

Sleep, it seemed, was not going to come. Lousy excuse for a bed, Kirk told himself. A floor pallet of panöe hides, and pillows that kept sliding out from under him, and rustling sounds which he was uncomfortably aware indicated that the insecticide they had applied to the hides had either worn off or had never been effective in the first place. And underneath it all, the inescapable knowledge that the most comfortable bed in the galaxy couldn't have lulled him into sleep tonight. A nagging conscience makes a rotten bedfellow.

Twice in less than twelve hours he had permitted his captain's stripes to become tarnished with the stain of pettiness, and both times, Spock had been the agent of that staining. No, not Spock. Be honest, Kirk. A petty-minded,

childishly malicious Kirk he'd never known existed inside him.

He twisted again on the pallet, dislodged a cushion, and various portions of his anatomy thumped against the floor.

The hell with it. The hell with McCoy. Something has to be done. Now. Or you'll be looking for a new First Officer again. Can't work with Spock with this thing hanging between us.

He got up, left the tent, heading for the base camp. Spock was awake, as he somehow had known would be the case. Low-burning fire ... why? Not warmth, for the wind had died and the earlier chill was gone. Not to discourage predators, for there seemed to be none on this planet large enough to threaten a man. Simple Human need for light? Impossible in a Vulcan. And yet...

"Mr. Spock?"

"Captain." The Vulcan did not seem surprised to see him.

"This seems to be my day for apologizing to you."

"Not necessary, Captain."

"Very necessary, Mr. Spock. For my peace of mind, if not for yours."

Spock gave him a long, totally Vulcan look, then shifted his gaze to the dying fire. "You Humans, I find, have a remarkable number of most curious needs."

Kirk sat, carefully but not consciously marking a proper

distance between them. Close enough to speak softly and still be heard, far enough not to encroach on the Vulcan's psychological territory.

"Yes," he said. "We do. . For instance, we need to blame our own shortcomings on someone else, the way I did this morning. And we need to ... express our relief at discovering perfection isn't perfection after all. It frightens us, to try to measure up to something we perceive as perfect. Because we know ourselves to be flawed, and live in constant terror that someone else will discover that.

"You were in an impossible situation with that girl tonight. Nobody could have handled it with any kind of grace... there just aren't enough common points of reference between her society and ours. And we shouldn't have acted the way we did -- Whitney and I. It was almost a reflex action -- to realize there are situations when you come off just as hopelessly outmatched as the rest of us."

The silence that followed his apology was as smooth and palpable as a velvet blanket. He was beginning to wonder if Spock was even listening to him when the Vulcan, unmoving, spoke softly.

"You will excuse me if I do not purposely seek out such situations in the future, Captain."

Kirk looked for sarcasm in the statement; found none. Found instead, to his surprise, a kind of gentle, self-deprecating humor he would never have expected in this man. Found it and was warmed by it, and felt his face

moving into a grin in recognition of it.

"You know something, Mr. Spock?" The Vulcan's raised eyebrow said he didn't, but was willing to listen to Kirk's hypothesis, whatever it was.

"You're all right."

"Thank you, Captain." And after that, even on the unyielding ground, sleep was easy.

* * *

Spock's intimation that there were many things to be done at the base camp was open only to the interpretation of just how many things *many* constituted, Kirk decided in the morning light. The cages were ready, and the filter masks. The trade goods for the Cebans had been beamed down from the *Enterprise*. As far as Kirk could determine, all that was needed now was a hand of helpful Cebans and 873 otiyu.

There was one thing he wanted to clarify, however, and he tackled that as soon as McCoy and the other members of the landing party straggled onto the site. It bothered him that he hadn't thought of it before. Or that Spock hadn't.

"Bones," he queried, "that antidote you figured out for the otiyu poison -- will it work on Cebans? I'd hate to have any of them hurt on this crazy roundup." McCoy frowned; the thought had obviously not occurred to him, either.

"That is a moot point, Captain," Spock interjected. "The Cebans have an acquired immunity."

"What?"

"I took a sample of the material they use in the pipe ceremony and had it analyzed on the ship. I was curious as to why that particular substance should be so important to them. Basically, its chemical structure is quite similar to the parathymene in Dr. McCoy's compound. By ingesting it regularly, the Cebans are able to live and work in proximity to the otiyu and not be endangered by an occasional bite."

Outgunned again, McCoy thought, and darted a quick glance at Kirk to note his response. The Captain, surprisingly, seemed more pleased than otherwise at his First Officer's announcement, and McCoy breathed an inward sigh of relief.

He had been quite aware of Kirk's midnight ramble, and it took no great powers of deduction to figure out what had prompted it. McCoy in fact had briefly debated the merits of heading off the potentially damaging interchange, deciding finally that discretion was indeed the better part of valor in this case. He might get away with pulling medical rank on his new commanding officer once in a while, but twice in less than four hours might be pushing his luck.

Apparently it had been the right decision... this time. He came to the sudden and somewhat frightening realization of just how much tightrope-walking he was going to have to do on this assignment.

He reassured himself by patting the medikit at his waist and bringing his thoughts firmly back to the job at hand. "If

the Cebans are okay," he said, "then we are, too. I've got plenty of parathyzene here, and more on the ship."

"I hope you're right about having plenty here," Kirk remarked. "Because I can't let you beam any down now that it's daylight. The Cebans might see the process. And since you won't have to treat them, don't let them see you injecting any of our people, either. I'm already on thin ice by making contact with them at all." He turned to look in the direction of the main camp.

"Speak of the devil," he said as the Ceban hunters came into view. "Come on people, let's get this over with."

* * *

McCoy sat morosely on a hillside and watched the tumultuous scene below. Heat, dust, noise, and the rank stench of outraged otiyu rose from the battleground, while he -- an official noncombatant by Kirk's orders -- sat there fuming inside because he was missing all the fun.

It was boring as hell to sit on the crest, keeping one eye on the base camp and its steadily increasing population of otiyu, while the other eye tried to spot any *Enterprise* people who might chance to get bitten. He wasn't consciously wishing that on anyone, of course, but if someone was, they could take over the camp-sitting chores and he might have something more exciting to do than sitting here slapping Ceban sand fleas.

With that thought, he smacked another one and resumed

his earlier game of trying to identify the individual members of the hunting party from his lofty vantage point.

His shipmates were easy to spot, of course, because of the uniforms. And the one in the loud purple robe was Rerebava. Next to him, in a poisonous green tunic and headdress, was Jashkar. And hanging around behind Jashkar was a slight figure in a red and black robe that tickled a memory McCoy couldn't quite scratch. It disturbed him considerably that he couldn't come up with an identity, because he was sure he'd seen that particular garment somewhere, and quite recently. It was rather like doing a holo puzzle and being unable to find the final piece for the frame. He knew it was there someplace and would turn up eventually, but he couldn't go on with the rest of the puzzle until he found that particular piece.

Maybe a different vantage point would help. He was in the process of getting up when a particular sound detached itself from the general clamor and set McCoy's medical teeth on edge like a feedback howl in a multiphonic soundbooth. He was fully on his feet and sliding down the slope even as his ears identified that particular human howl of pain as being female in origin, and his eyes located Ellen Whitney.

Whitney and the otiyu had, by mutual consent, parted company by the time McCoy arrived on the scene. That she had gotten the worst end of the deal was attested to by the jagged rip in her forearm. McCoy had one hand already on the medikit when Captain Kirk's voice, low but steely, cut

through with, "Not here, Bones."

McCoy thought Kirk was being overly paranoid about this whole Prime Directive nonsense, but he and Kirk nevertheless hauled Lieutenant Whitney over the ridge and into the base camp before McCoy broke open the medikit and began to repair the damage. Parathyzene first, then the cleaning and sealing of the bite. Finishing up, he sat Whitney on a rock and handed her the medikit.

"You're not going to be much good over there for a while," he announced, jerking a thumb at the ridge. "How about it we trade places?"

Whitney handed him the filter mask and leaned back as the parathyzene induced dizziness washed over her. "You're on," she said shakily.

Since Kirk hadn't stuck around for the treatment, he wasn't there to countermand the suggestion. And they were one body short down there on the playing field, McCoy told himself. By golly, this day might not turn out to be such a bust, after all.

* * *

Shazmene pushed back the hood of her red and black robe and looked up at Jashkar. Safely concealed behind a thorn bush, the pair had viewed McCoy's treatment of Lieutenant Whitney with considerable interest.

"You see," she said when McCoy had disappeared from the base camp. "They do have magic. I told you."

Jashkar was impressed, but as a man, he was less daunted by the supernatural than a mere woman was. Outwardly, at any rate. Inwardly, he was not so sure. If Shazmene was wrong about the source of the strangers' powers, then filching the black box wasn't going to give him much protection for what he had in mind.

On the other hand, if she was right, he could save himself the embarrassment of having his offer refused ... and not incidentally, could retain the dowry he had so recently received from his newest bride.

From the speed with which they had hustled the woman off, and from the white and stricken look on her face, it seemed obvious to him that the strangers were not immune to the poison of the otiyu's bite. If only the magic protected them, removal of the magic meant he wouldn't have to make the offer in the first place. He could proceed directly to his alternate plan, which would remove Sha'Spock from the scene in such a manner as to avoid direct blame and leave Sta'Shazmene a grieving widow to whom he could honorably offer protection and numerous varieties of comfort.

"Stay here," he ordered imperiously, and began his cautious stalk toward the magic box.

* * *

The excitement of the hunt was rapidly beginning to pall on McCoy. .But after arguing so persuasively to be included in the sport, there was now no honorable way to

back out. He consoled himself with the thought that at least the time went faster when one was occupied.

He noticed that Jashkar, whom he hadn't seen in some time, was back in the fray, but that the red-and-black-robed figure wasn't. His mind still niggled away at the identity of that other Ceban, but it kept coming up with nothing more substantial than the already encoded information that he ought to know.

Jashkar was sticking closer to the *Enterprise* crew than any of the other Cebans, and he seemed particularly inclined to work near Spock. Gratitude, McCoy marvelled, was indeed a wondrous thing.

It was hardly gratitude that impelled Jashkar, but rather a more devious motive. He had spent some time marking the stranger's actions, and noted that Sha' Spock was particularly concerned that no otiyu should get by him. It was a foolhardy attitude, as any experienced otiyu hunter could have told him. Sooner or later, he was going to encounter a pack leader that wouldn't give ground, and then...

Jashkar, in fact, was keeping close to Spock to ensure that the occurrence came sooner. He at last spotted what he had been looking for -- a bull otiyu that must have weighed twenty metnos, at least, battle-scarred and determined of mien.

Jashkar poked at the bull with his catch-pole a few times just to put him in the proper frame of mind. Then he

shouted for Sha'Spock's attention and felt quite well-satisfied with the stranger's response.

What happened next was something Jashkar never could properly explain. Instead of leaping for Sha'Spock's throat, the bull veered off in the other direction, toward the one they called Sha' Kirk, and the two strangers converged on the otiyu in a kind of unspoken teamwork which was as unheard of as it was unexpected.

Kirk reached out with his catch-loop and Jashkar knew the bitter taste of failure as the snare passed over the bull's head. Then came the proof that Jashkar had indeed stolen the magic. The catch-loop snagged on the bull's muzzle, and Kirk made the potentially fatal mistake of shaking the pole in an attempt to free it.

The instant's relaxation of pressure was all the otiyu needed and he shook himself free of the snare, powerful hindquarters bunching as he launched himself in a leap for Kirk's throat.

Spock's catch-pole cracked along the bull's side, deflecting the angle of thrust so that the vicious fangs scraped a furrow along Kirk's shoulder rather than ripping open his throat. Then he flipped the catch-pole in his hand, using the heavy butt to keep the furious otiyu at bay until McCoy responded to his sharp summons and dragged Kirk out of the way.

He picked up Kirk's fallen snare and maneuvered it over the otiyu's head, snubbing the loop up until the bull

abruptly lost both breath and fight. Then he dropped both poles and followed McCoy up the slope with a speed that was somewhat unseemly in a Vulcan.

Jashkar may not have been quite as intelligent as Shazmene thought him to be, but he did have enough mother wit to know it was time for him to make himself exceedingly scarce. He had no intention of being anywhere in the vicinity when the strangers discovered their magic was gone.

Unfortunately for Jashkar, he had not belted Ellen Whitney quite soon enough or quite hard enough with the rock, and she was just coming around when the three entered the base camp. McCoy greeted her news with an oath that made her blush, and Whitney thought she'd heard them all.

He handed the captain over to Spock and yanked his communicator free of his belt.

Kirk fought through the haze of pain and pushed the words up past a rapidly constricting throat. "No, Bones!" The phrase came out in a strangled whisper, but McCoy caught it.

"Captain, you're not going to make it if I don't get some parathyzene in you, and fast. Nobody's going to miss us if we beam up--"

"Not worth the risk," he forced out. "Orders stand. Spock--" He broke off, unable to continue, but the hand that gripped the Vulcan's wrist made clear the intent of

what was left unsaid.

Spock freed himself of the hold, understanding both Kirk's urgent demand and McCoy's intention to ignore it at the first opportunity. He pinned the doctor with his best Vulcan stare, guaranteed to cause a condition commonly known as "the willies" in ninety-eight percent of all the Humans ever to be on the receiving end of it.

"There are no major blood vessels involved here, Doctor. You can safely postpone treatment for fifteen minutes."

"At the risk of leaving him permanently impaired, yes," McCoy snapped.

He was one of the two percent, Spock realized. The thought was not comforting. "It is a risk he would choose," he said.

"How do you know that, you blasted, pointy-eared computer? What gives you the right--?" But McCoy was talking to thin air. Fifteen minutes was very little time, and Spock had no intention of wasting any of it.

McCoy touched the communicator thoughtfully, then flipped it open and contacted the ship. He was very much aware of Whitney and Kirk watching him.

"This is McCoy," he announced. "Lock on and hold these coordinates. I want a med team standing by in the main transporter room with a parathyzene and coradrenalin setup." He trailed to a halt as Kirk struggled to a sitting position, making violently negative gestures. McCoy

backed down, but only half a step.

"Unless I countermand, Captain Kirk and I are to be beamed up in precisely fourteen minutes." He snapped the instrument shut on the transport officers confirmation and crossed the sand to kneel by the captain. "That's the best I can do for you, Captain. I'll give Spock every chance to do whatever he has in mind, but I'm not going to sit here on this damned rock and watch you die when the means to prevent it are this close." He patted the communicator.

"I know all about that Prime Directive, but there's another directive a lot older than that. I'll follow it, Captain, or you can have these stripes." Kirk was having trouble following the drift of the conversation. His mind, like his sight, seemed to drift in and out of focus, and even when both were sharp, he was concentrating mainly on getting enough breath into his lungs.

He could devote all his energy to that now; none had to be diverted to maintaining command of anything but his own body. The other command, the ever-present weight of it, had been transferred to Spock in that last moment of lucid thought, and it had been as tangible to him as the removal of a crown. Or a yoke. What was left was not so much a patterned thought as it was an ambience of satisfaction, completion, and strangely enough, comfort.

It was impossible for him to calculate how much time passed before he heard Spock return, with Jashkar firmly in tow. The Ceban's loud protestations of complete innocence

subsided into a sulky silence when Whitney presented her accusation, backed up by the lump over her ear. Kirk felt McCoy leave his side to join in the fray.

Jashkar felt fairly confident that if the strangers had any intention of beating the information out of him, they would have done so before now. He was, therefore, considerably surprised when Sha'McCoy pushed past Sha'Spock and advanced upon him with decidedly unfriendly intentions. What surprised him even more was when Sha'Spock intervened, preventing the other man from forcibly rearranging several of Jashkar's most cherished physical attributes.

If Jashkar was surprised, McCoy was stunned into a rare state of incoherence. There were a number of things he wanted to say to Spock, but he was so angry he couldn't decide which to deliver first.

Spock was wrestling with a decision of his own. Given sufficient time, he could have finessed the information out of Jashkar, but time was the one thing he did not have in abundance. That fact left two avenues open to him, both of which were repellent.

The Vulcan mind-probe could, theoretically, extract the information he sought as easily as scooping the seed from a kfah. But he had never linked with a non-Vulcan, and to do so against the will of the other was a grievous wrong. Recognizing the potential for abuse in the skill, his people had wisely instigated restrictive laws and even more

restrictive psycho-social conditioning against its use without mutual consent. Spock was surprised at himself that he could even for an instant harbor such a repugnant thought.

It was only a shade more repugnant, in fact, than the other alternative -- which was a blatant appeal to Jashkar's emotions. Spock didn't trust emotional warfare, even though he recognized its ubiquitous use in virtually every kind of Human interaction. He conceived of it as a two-edged weapon, capable of dealing as much damage to the inexperienced wielder as it was apt to do to the object of the attack. Still, unless he was willing to stand by and see McCoy perform senseless and ultimately useless violence on Jashkar, or to witness Captain Kirk's equally senseless death, he had no choice.

He could, he decided, lessen the discomfort of what he was prepared to do by doing it out of McCoy's and Whitney's hearing. He waved off the still-sputtering physician and guided Jashkar to the spot where Kirk lay shivering under the covering McCoy had placed over him.

"Among my people," he began, "it is a great evil to take another's life."

Jashkar only scowled at him.

"It is also a great evil to permit another to die if you have the power to save him."

That statement brought an equal lack of response from

Jashkar, though it sliced neatly into Spock's conscience. He had that power -- or McCoy did, and Spock himself was restraining him. Knowing it had been Kirk's decision did little to staunch the wound. Indeed, as McCoy had pointed out, what gave him the right.

He knelt and touched the pulse point in Kirk's throat, feeling the thready hammering and the clamminess of the skin. And with the touch, telepathic as well as physical, felt also the other's indomitable spirit, his single-minded commitment to the upholding of his Starfleet oath, even if it meant giving up his life. Felt again the total trust that had been present when Kirk turned over command to him, a trust no other Human had ever given him. That was what gave him the right to make the decision and the obligation to see it made the way Kirk wanted it.

With that touch, some new bond formed between the two men, and with that touch there was a breaking of barriers inside himself that he had thought unbreachable. And with that breaking, some seed that had lain dormant in him, crushed under the weight of Vulcan discipline, burst its casing and thrust its first shoots into the deepest fortress of Spock's self.

He looked up at Jashkar, knowing suddenly that if this failed, he would indeed invade the Ceban's mind, without caution and without regret.

"Sha' Kirk will die if you do not help him. He is my friend, Jashkar. I do not wish his death. I call on your honor as a

warrior, on the bonds between warrior-brothers of all the worlds. Help, Jashkar, please. Give me the device."

"He does not have it." Shazmene, rising from the cover of the thorn bush like a Ceban Venus rising from the sea, could keep her silence longer.

She had not realized Jashkar's other purpose in stealing the strangers' magic; had watched with concern as the injured Sha'Kirk was brought into the base camp; but because the strangers had spoken only in their unintelligible private language, had not until this moment understood the intensity of their need.

She kept her eyes cast down properly as she approached her two husbands, and knew that her obligation to the law-husband was greater than to flesh-husband.

She slipped the carrying .trap of the device over her head, withdrew the case from the folds of her robe, and over Jashkar's angry shout, asked, "Is this what you seek?"

Spock was shamed at the intensity of the relief which flooded through him. He hoped it didn't show on his face as he rose, took the medikit from Shazmene, and tossed it to McCoy.

He caught the elbow of each Ceban and steered them away from the camp, out of view of the treatment he himself wanted very badly to oversee. But in view of all the effort they'd put into concealing Federation technology, it made no sense to permit the Cebans to remain.

Jashkar was looking daggers at Shamene, plainly waiting for Spock to remove his inhibiting presence so that he might point out the error of her ways. Just what the connection was between the two Cebans, Spock was not able to precisely identify, though he could quite literally feel it singing until he broke off physical contact with them. That he did as quickly as he could within the boundaries of safety. Even though he did not seek the knowledge, the act of touching the two simultaneously made his own perception ring with the resonances of anger, fear and surprisingly, sexuality. Without the deeper seeking of the purposeful mind probe, he was not able to clarify it further. Nor did he wish to.

Shazmene was oontrite, that much was obvious, and the tears that stood in her eyes were quite real now. That quick intuition which she never questioned had told her there was more depth of feeling between the two strangers than her husband-of-law cared to admit. She had sensed the difficulty he had experienced in revealing any part of it to Jashkar, and decided that the warrior bond he spoke of ran deep within him. Still not daring to gaze on what must be his considerable wrath, she voiced a sort apology.

"I am sorry, husband. We truly did not know how important your magic was."

The tone of his reply, surprisingly, was not wrathful at all. A thought had occurred to him suddenly; a thought stunning in both its simplicity and its potential for relieving him of the girl's persistent claims. He couldn't understand

why it hadn't hit him the instant she gave him the medildt, and he hastened to compensate now for that oversight.

"Shazmene," he said, "do not address me as your husband. You are neither my wife nor my chattel. You are one who has done me such a service as I can never repay."

She ventured a look upward, and was caught up in the depths of the dark eyes that regarded her gravely.

"You are my sister in baz'tal, and I am shamed that I have nothing to give you. Except yourself. That is my gift to you. Your freedom, and a share of trade goods large enough so that you need call no man husband or master unless that is your desire."

Shazmene felt a flush creeping over her cheeks, and the look she gave Jashkar spoke volumes. If he wanted to be her husband-of-law as well as of flesh -- or indeed, if he desired to enter into either estate now -- he was definitely going to have to measure up to some new standards. And this time, she would set them.

It was a good feeling. The best she could recall having had for some time.

* * *

The mingled sighs of relief were clearly audible in the transporter room as the last remnant of the Great Otiyu Hunt sparkled out of existence on the *Enterprise* transporter pads.

Even if the musky tang of the troublesome animals still

hung acridly in some sections of the ship, it was comforting to know the air purification equipment would quickly take care of that. Comforting, too, to know that the mission was at long last over, and could be relegated to the depths of some agronomist's file drawer.

Yet as the *Enterprise's* captain and first officer left the transporter room, bound for the bridge, Kirk knew his mind would carry a memory of the mission much longer than the ship would carry the olfactory remnants of the unpleasant predators; longer even than his body would carry the rapidly fading scar on his shoulder.

Through the haze of pain and numbing cold of that afternoon on Ceba, he had clearly heard Spock's appeal to Jashkar. Had heard it and understood it for what it was -- a proclamation he wouldn't have thought the Vulcan would have made under anything less compelling than a Klingon mind-sifting ... he is my friend.

Hearing that statement was a gift he knew he would hold private, as his gift to Spock must be held private... so private, in fact, that Spock himself would never see it. Would never know Kirk had heard the words, and recognized in them the Vulcan's Human half surfacing for a moment, giving Kirk something to cling to in the depths of his pain. Would never know that those four simple words, more than anything, had kept him from giving over to the numbness and just... quitting.

Kirk hesitated for a moment as the doors of the turboift

opened on the bridge, so that he and Spock stepped onto the deck at precisely the same instant. That felt ... right, somehow. A lot of things, he decided, were going to feel... right... in the future.

And in some far corner of the cosmos, the Great Bird of the Galaxy fluffed itself contentedly, and decided if all was right in the young and brawling universe, it might as well catch forty winks...

THE END