



"Will you check Spock?"

"No. M'Benga knows more about it than I do. And he can be more scientific, just now.

"Have you seen Theela?"

"Yes. She'd like to see you."

"Oh no."

I told her not to expect you today. Said you'd be too busy."

Kirk snorted. McCoy studied him for a moment, then moved to the cabinet and reached unerringly for the liquor supply. Not the right occasion for brandy, really--ah. He poured out two generous glasses of scotch, and set one in front of the captain. Kirk did not touch it.

"A toast, Jim. Here's to friendship."

Kirk smiled, and made himself pick up his glass. "To friendship," he echoed, and they sipped together.

A LESSON IN PERSPECTIVE

by C.R. Faddis

For Shirley:

*"The best part of beauty is
that which a picture cannot express."*

-- Francis Bacon
Apothegms

The gentle curves of the ship's corridors stretched out in distorted straightness, endless kilometers of blue/grey/white from the turbolift to his cabin, in a mobius strip of disoriented mind and vision. The scowling faces passed, looked away or stared in blatant hostility until the impatient gesture of his escort defused it. Bones' supportive grip on his arm tightened reassuringly, and the right door loomed, whisked open, and shut away the glare behind.

"Lie down," Bones' voice boomed, too close, and Jim Kirk sank obediently onto the spread and gazed up dizzily into the doctor's furrowed frown.

"I want you to sleep now, if you can," McCoy said. "You're on medical leave, so try to unwind. The shock of the transference should wear off in a few days. Spock will take care of the ship; you take care of yourself. Hear?"

"Bones," Kirk pleaded, "give me something for my stomach?"

McCoy fussed with the overhead light switch until only a dull glow suffused the room.

"Not right now. It'd be better if you sleep it off naturally. I'll be in to check on you at the end of the watch. If you aren't feeling better then ... we'll see."

Something in Bones' voice made Kirk wonder if there were more to it, but the surging blood roared in his head, making thinking too complicated. He threw his arm across his eyes to blot out the infernal blaze of the dimmed lights and rolled onto his side. The roaring diminished a bit, and he barely heard the door whoosh shut again.

Silence. Blessed silence.

He lay still for a long time, trying to relax, wishing away the headache and sickness, exploring the tentative security of his body. His own body. He was himself again, the captain, Jim Kirk in Jim Kirk's body, and a man. That thought automatically flashed the memory of waking up a female, and the inside of his skull throbbed. The pain blurred thought mercifully for a time, but when it eased, he scrambled to his feet and lurched across the cabin to the bureau mirror. His own eyes stared back at him. Yes, he was surely himself. He pressed his palms to the slight stubble of his jaws, then ran them over the broadness of his shoulders and clasped his upper arms in a reassuring self-embrace, but the conflict was still there, tumbling in confused circles of loathing, guilt, horror, and pity.

The bitch! No, the pathetic, mad creature. Smooth, pliant flesh; weak-limbed; slippery lank long hair. He shuddered slightly, unable to suppress the memory: the swollen protrusion of the breasts, pulling down, uncomfortable at almost any angle. He pressed his arms tighter to the correct flatness of his own chest. The thin, pretty face. The unfamiliar--absence--between the legs, the round, wide ass. She'd done it to him all right. Even when she'd loved him, she'd hated him, hating herself. She'd probably timed it or drugged it: Janice Lester had been having her menstrual period when she'd trapped him inside her body. The memory of the smell flooded through him again.



He stumbled to the little bathroom and was violently, lengthily sick.

* * *

McCoy was busy that whole watch, getting Janice Lester settled, arranging for security details for both Lester and Doctor Coleman (how he hated having those security "apes" in his Sickbay!), logging reports on the physical effects of the transference phenomenon, scheduling more tests, answering endless congratulations and questions, and brooding during every lull. One brooding session was interrupted by Spock's carefully prepared announcement to the crew, explaining the "Captain's" erratic behavior. Spock told the truth--almost. But most of the crew had already guessed the truth; they needed only to know that things had reverted to normal.

But had they? Jim had barely gotten into the turbolift after the body transference had been broken, when he'd collapsed. Yet test results had been ambiguous. This was a very nasty business.

Picking up his medical scanner and hypospray, McCoy signaled to Nurse Caffrey that he'd be back shortly, and took the lift to Deck 5. As he neared Kirk's quarters, though, he stopped and stepped behind an intersecting hallway's bulkhead. Lieutenant Natalie Peele was waiting by Kirk's door. After a moment, the door slid open and she went inside.

McCoy shrugged mentally and headed back to Sickbay. Peele was another of Jim's "old flames", a passenger bound for Starbase 19. There were some things that she might do to help Jim that an old country doctor couldn't. He'd stop back down again in a few hours, after his shift was over. In that time, he suspected, things would either perk up or they'd get a whole lot worse.

* * *

Silhouetted in the harsh light from the corridor, the tall female form appeared to loom over him like some hungry vampire. Then the doors shut out the glare and plunged her features into harmlessness. Natalie stood at attention, all cool professional lines and neutral face. Her science uniform was like steel armor over the softness that he knew beneath.

"It's Lieutenant Peele, sir," she whispered.

He nodded.

"I heard what happened. Can I get you something? Coffee, or some dinner?"

"No. Thanks, though."

He couldn't eat. He could barely sit up at his desk. He didn't want her here right now, but couldn't think quite how to send her out.

The silence threatened.

"Jim, are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he lied. "Just tired. Very tired."

"I knew something was wrong. You were all business, even here. You slapped me when I-- Well, you said you'd put me on report. And that, for sure, was not the Jim Kirk that I know."

He met her roguish grin, all perfect teeth, but did not comment. He still ached too much to smile.

"Well, hey, I'm glad you're back!" she said.

"I'm glad you're glad," he said, and held a hand toward her.

Gliding to her knees beside him, she took his hand, and grateful warmth poured through him and he wrapped his arms around her: not the usual embrace of passion--more a needfulness of the soul. Someone had to care. His soul and his body were in torment, and he needed her to care. But she knelt stiffly in his arms, her answering hug half-hearted, and he knew, with vague anger, that she wanted no part in this dark moment of his life.

"Hey, now," she said, "it's all over, huh? And things are back to normal."

Quick white grin was followed by ear-nuzzling kisses, and he endured it numbly, unable to escape the pain in his skull. Still, her fumbling eroticism drew him, not exactly the kind of intimacy he craved, right now, but the only kind that she had ever offered. Bitterness roused, he grabbed her shoulders, crushed her to him, wanting suddenly to mount her, press her down, screw her to the floor, make her pay! At the same time he didn't want to hurt her at all--only to be in her, with her, as close to her as possible, comforted by her. Neither feeling had much to do with what he thought of as sexual desire.

He broke the kiss and leaned back in his chair, still gripping her, but forcing himself to look at her objectively, though the concentration hurt him. Who was this woman, this lieutenant, this person he hardly knew at all? Oh, he knew some of her. He knew her sensual body, her elegant face, her witty surface personality. She was a pleasant lay on those rare occasions when their careers crossed paths. She craved autonomy. She made no demands of him other than sex; she asked no power, wanted no commitment. He wondered for the first time what she saw in him ... what any woman saw in him.

She leaned into him, tongued his ear, caressed his back. He pulled her closer roughly, pressed her splendid breasts against his chest--then nearly gagged when his mind insisted that he imagine how her breasts must feel when flattened against him. The dual memory shook him. He let go of her, dropping his arms.

She stared at him.

"We'd better not, tonight," he said. He forced the tremolo from his voice. "I don't feel very well. Probably the aftereffects of the transference."

He heard her suppress a sigh, or maybe a sarcastic retort, and she stood up.

"Then better get some sleep, Jim," she said quietly, and straightened out her uniform.

She'd missed his plea, or maybe she'd ignored it. She wouldn't stay, just to be with him, near him, didn't want to help to see him through this. Resentment flooded through his veins again, but he squelched it with the thought that he had no right to expect more from her. He was left with only a realized loneliness.

"No doubt, I'll still be here tomorrow, Natalie, if you'd care to look in."

"You bet, Jim," she said, pinching his arm cheerfully. "I'll be by, tomorrow."

When she'd gone, Kirk sat in mental chaos for long minutes. Then he sighed and went into the bathroom, stripping to shower in the hope of baking the ache and outrage from his bones. He turned the infrared source up until it threatened to fry him, and the ultrasonic shower scrubbed him until his skin stung. Stubbornly refusing to think, he concentrated on the physical sensations. He brushed the thin ash off his skin with the static-towel, then, and reached for his briefs--and wilted under a sudden tide of weakness. Propping himself against the wall, he panted hoarsely for a time, unconsciously pressing both hands to his genitals as though protecting them from some vicious attack. The ultrasonic shower, run at that high setting, usually would give him an erection, but his penis hung completely flaccid between his cupped hands.

What, he agonized, have they done to me? But it was a fleeting thought, barely noticed consciously, and when the vertigo and nausea let up, he went directly to the bed and crawled under the cover. The throbbing in his head engulfed creation, then gradually eased enough to permit sleep. He dreamt, though, and his dreams were nightmares full of drooping breasts and gaping vulvas and the incensed howls of Janice Lester's madness.

* * *

"The discovery of the corporeal transference device will present considerable problems for the Federation, Doctor," Spock said as he finished reading McCoy's report on its medical effects. "Many may find the possibility of trading bodies tempting. However, as transferences--at least between Humans--are an apparently temporary effect so long as both remain alive, they imply the solution that Doctor Lester attempted to implement: the murder of one of the transferees. Even were that necessity overcome, a serious question of ethics arises. Who should be given the privilege of a youthful, aesthetic, or healthy corpus, and who should be condemned to an aged, diseased, or otherwise less desirable corpus that is not his own? I have serious doubts that any legislative body within the Federation can deal with the problems in a totally ethical, logical manner."

McCoy eyed Spock.

"Surely you aren't including Vulcans in that statement?"

"Vulcans are flesh and blood beings, Doctor. No flesh and blood being would be capable of making a totally objective decision in a matter such as this. It touches on every being's mortality."

"If it were up to me, I'd go back and phaser the thing to atoms," McCoy said, depressed by Spock's admission.

"An attractive suggestion. It is not, however, our decision to make."

McCoy scowled.

"Putting that thing out of commission would take a load off everyone's mind--especially Jim's."

To that, Spock made no comment, only stared at one of McCoy's test charts. When he did speak, finally, his voice had an odd, subtly hoarse quality.

"I noted, Doctor McCoy, that your report on the physical after-effects of the transference was ... incomplete. You gave only slight mention to the Captain's incapacitating illness, and made no mention at all of Doctor Lester's." He looked up at McCoy, and added, very quietly, "Whom are you protecting, Doctor?"

McCoy opened his mouth as if to deny any such thing, then shut it as he met the hooded eyes. He crossed the office and flipped on the "Do Not Disturb" light over the closed doors. Turning, the cluttered desk between them, McCoy clasped his hands tightly behind his back.

"Doctor Lester is not ill," McCoy said. "And Jim shouldn't be, either. There are no debilitating physical aftereffects from the transference itself. Jim's indisposition is entirely psychosomatic. Organically, according to repeated tests and scanner readings, there is nothing wrong with him. Emotionally--he's got problems. I don't know yet how serious."

"I am not familiar with the concept of 'psychosomatic' illness," Spock said. There was alarm in his voice. "I do, however, recognize the language roots."

McCoy unclenched his hands and trudged back to his desk, sliding into the chair with a sigh.

"This experience was a deep, very personal shock to Jim. Can you imagine what it must be like to involuntarily trade not just bodies, but sexualities? There are, by definition, wide psychological chasms between maleness and femaleness in any species, and I'm not talking about the superficial cultural ones."

"Listen, Spock, it took Jim a long time to resolve most of his feelings that time the transporter split him--a lesser man couldn't have tackled it at all. This transference was an equally insidious attack on his basic identity, on his sense of self. Do you follow what I'm saying? His emotions want to reject the experience, but his intellect insists that he accept the reality of it. As a Human, he can't exercise the kind of emotional editing that your Vulcan upbringing taught you. For Jim's subconscious, the conflict is overwhelming, and it's making him physically ill."

The Vulcan stared at McCoy expressionlessly, then looked away.

"Does Jim realize ... why is he ill?"

"I don't think so, nor do I intend to tell him--the last thing he needs now is another source of self-doubt. I feel that he needs time to himself to think, to try to come to terms with what happened to him, and it will be better if he can do it outside of a therapy context. This illness is a convenient excuse to give him that time, a reason Jim's sense of duty can accept. That's why I haven't given him any drugs to counteract the symptoms."

Spock straightened.

"A logical, if not entirely above-board decision," he said. "Is there anything else that you or I can do for him?"

"We can be ourselves, his friends. We can be emotionally supportive without being meddlesome. For the moment, that's my only recommendation. I'll keep him under observation, and do what I can to get him to talk about his feelings, but we can't push this--unless you think the ship has to have his personal attention?"

"Negative. Our projected course is entirely routine, and we are scheduled to stop at Starbase 19 in five days for routine maintenance--"

"--and shore leave! I'd forgotten all about it."

Spock rose and resumed his robot demeanor.

"Very well, Doctor. I shall respect what you have told me in confidence, and I shall endeavor to be 'supportive' but not 'meddlesome.' Please keep me informed of any developments."

McCoy watched him disappear through the door into the corridor, then stood and switched off the privacy light, musing. Nurse Chapel, who'd apparently been waiting in the ward next door to use a file in the office, came through the ward door almost immediately, and in the brief moment of her passage when the doors were fully open, McCoy found himself peering at the patient in the other room. Janice Lester met his gaze with long-lashed, feline eyes and a thin smile that betrayed psychotic malevolence. When the doors snapped shut again, blocking out that stare, McCoy took several long breaths before he could shrug off the alarm that that smile had instilled.

* * *

People came and went the second day of his medical leave, Bones (nagging), Spock (reporting), Scotty (concerned), and Uhura (solicitous). Of all of them Uhura had been the hardest to send away; of all of them, she most likely would be the one to understand. But Kirk would not open up to her. For one thing, he couldn't put his feelings into words, not even for himself, yet, and most certainly not for someone else. For another reason, he remembered what she'd said after the incident on Platonius: "Please, don't open my heart, Captain. Don't ask for something I can't afford to give you."

He could hardly blame her.

He slept away the rest of the day. When his door buzzed again, wakening him, it was already into the sixth watch, last hours of the day, and it was Natalie. He'd thought about her much that day, unable to decide whether he wanted her attentions or would rather not be bothered. But to refuse her would only delay problems, not help cure them.

"Come," he called, and forced himself to sit up, swinging his legs onto the floor.

Clouds of wispy shimmer peeked out underneath the hem of her long cloak. Her skin was flawless, shadowed eyes made up for passion's invitation, mouth rouged only slightly--she knew he didn't care for lipstick. She'd pinned up her hair in formal curls and loops, but he remembered that, much like her gowns, the whole thing came undone with just two pins. A subtle jewel, a fine perfume--she smiled at him in the full knowledge that, at this one moment, she was the most seductive woman on the ship.

He gestured for her to take the chair by the desk, and she crossed the room and oozed into it, deliberately opening her cloak slightly to tempt him with her luscious breasts.

"You're lovely," he said wistfully, but made no move from where he sat.

"For you, I always like to look my best."

He smiled vaguely and ran his hand through his damp strings of hair, and rubbed his sleep-sandy eyes.

"I had a dream," he said. She had some odd obsession with dreams, always looking for hidden meanings in them. She'd be interested in this one. "I stepped outside myself--I think I was in Sickbay--and I couldn't get back. No body would take me, then, not a man's or a woman's, not mine or anyone else's. It was like being a ghost--people looked right through me."

"What happened then?"

"You buzzed the door, and I woke up."

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"That's ... scary. Are you running a fever? Sometimes you have strange dreams when you have a fever."

"Aren't you going to analyze the dream? I thought you said you could do that."

"Oh, Jim, it's not a very pleasant dream. Let's not talk about it now."

"Well, I know what it means. It was being uprooted," he growled, and lurched to his feet. Standing over her, he could see down into the cleavage of her dress, and as she shifted uneasily, a small cloud of musky fragrance rose from her. She looked frightened, and he realized how deranged he must be sounding, and how threatening he must look, unshaved, unkept, and sticky with drying sweat.

"Listen, I'm sorry."

"You're still ill. I understand."

He let the desk top take his weight. She gazed up at him worriedly.

"Would you rather that I left, Jim?"

He shook his head, not a yes, not a no, and she took the initiative, stretching out in the chair languorously and smiling up with invitation.

Another--what? Five days? Four?--and she'd be gone for another ten months, two years, twenty, or a lifetime, who could tell? Her beauty beckoned, but still he hesitated. Drain the chalice, such sweet wine, while the cup is at the lips? A long hard fuck might be just what he needed to sweep out the lingering cobwebs of self-doubt, renew the gusto that had fled his veins. He manufactured his most devastating smile for her.

"Give me a minute to shower," he said, "I smell like a horse."

She caught his arm.

"I rather like horses."

He pulled her up and brushed her lips with his. Her cloak stayed in the chair, revealing the translucent sheath stretched taut over her superb breasts, tight smooth belly, gloriously generous ass. She oozed against him, delicious goddess, Earth's sweet gift to passion, her bold fingers twining, her tantalizing tongue brushing the roof of his mouth, her pubis grinding into him with shameless sensuality. He tingled, crushing her with kisses, nipping her throat with impatient bites, smoothing her thighs with hungry fingers. Yes, he knew this flesh, familiar for a while. It held no hate, but offered only heat, and flame--the blaze--then dimming coals.

He bent to foreplay with a will. The bronze coils of hair fell, sleek hair to stroke. The shimmer gown slipped off like liquid, releasing a new cloud of that heady perfume. She moaned, caught by his expertise.

Yet underneath it all, he tingled but didn't rouse. His brain seemed to be taking it all in from a great distance, knowing what to do, and when, to bring her pleasure, but remaining himself detached, perverse, and unaffected. Stubborn in the conviction that he could do anything if he only tried hard enough, he kissed, explored, stroked, tasted, smelled, and wallowed in her manifest femaleness. Oh yes he could. he could, he could!

But when she reached to ravish his crotch, the pantomime was over. She drew back, bewildered.

"You, ah, aren't--?"

He swung away, humiliated.

"It isn't that I don't want to," he choked. "Look, maybe we'd better try another time."

"Oh, Jim, come on. It's nothing to get upset about. Relax, now. Take it easy. Maybe you just need some more persuasive attention ..."

She took his arm and pulled him to the bed, pushing him down onto it.

"Lie back," she commanded, and drew off his briefs. She caressed his penis expertly, cupped and stroked his testicles, then bent her mouth to his service.

Miserable, Kirk fixed his eyes on the ceiling and did his damndest to think sexy thoughts. He conjured up every erotic notion he could imagine, but his mind skipped around from fantasy to memory to fantasy without arousing interest. He clenched his fists in bitterest frustration.

She sat up, finally, and stared away across the room, folding her hands decorously on her lap.

"I think I'd better go," she said. She drew the film of shimmer over herself hastily and closed the opaque cloak over it. About to leave, she hesitated by the door.

"Maybe you ought to talk to the doctors, Jim."

She stepped out and was gone.

Kirk found he couldn't move. His stomach spasmed and his eyeballs were exploding from the rush of angry pain. Setting his teeth, he rolled into a sitting position, dropping his head into his hands, and found his eyes inspecting his groin. The mental numbness abruptly wore off.

This can't be happening to me!

Impulsively, he grasped his penis, squeezing, stroking, and he experienced vague pleasure, but there came no quickening surge of blood, no damming up and hardening into a shaft. He masturbated frantically, until the distant pleasure soured to abrasive soreness, but his penis stayed limp as an infant's, arousal as distant as Andromeda.

* * *

The lights in Sickbay were lowered at "night" to a soft glow that gave just enough illumination to read the monitors or set the gauges on the instruments. Nurse Sajis Caffrey favored the first watch for the cocoon of quiet it always brought to the ship. Only she and Dr. M'Benga were on duty in the 'Bay, and M'Benga was dozing in McCoy's office, leaving Caffrey to keep an eye on the one patient.

Janice Lester was asleep in the private back ward, and none of the schizoid rage that characterized her waking hours was visible. The restraints stretched across her fragile form seemed barbaric now. The dim light emphasized her softer lines, making her seem as lovely as a swan.

The nurse picked up the compu-slate to record the readings for the morning charts from the monitor over the bed. Finishing, she tucked the blanket over Dr. Lester's shoulders, and contemplated the young woman with a sad compassion. Caffrey thought about loosening the restraints slightly when the whisk of the ward's door startled her, and Captain Kirk came into the room.

Kirk's uniform was rumpled, and his face was haggard in the shadows. He slumped tiredly against the nearest bulkhead.

"Yes, sir, can I help you?"

Kirk shook his head, no; but he certainly did look ill.

"Is there something you need, sir? Can I call the Doctor--?"

But he straightened, pushed his hair out of his eyes, and seemed to pull himself together. He gazed over at Lester's soft form.

"She asleep?"

The inflection he put into the "she" carried an overload of confused emotions. Caffrey studied him worriedly.

"Out like a light," she said.

"Sedated?"

"No sir. Normal sleep."

It may have been the gloom, or Kirk's dishevelled appearance, but an aura of danger crackled around him, and Caffrey unconsciously backed toward her patient.

"I want to visit with Dr. Lester," Kirk said. "Alone, if you don't mind."

"The patient is resting, Captain. Won't it wait until morning?"

"No, it won't. Please leave us, Nurse."

The edge in his voice worried her.

"My orders are to monitor the patient, sir," she countered. "You can visit, but I'll have to stay."

A storm composed of anger, frustration, and perplexity swept the Captain's dark face. Caffrey knew what he was thinking: Who in hell was this middle-aged, grey-haired mother hen? But Caffrey glared back obstinately. Captain or not, she didn't like his mood.

Standoff.

"Consider your orders countermanded, Nurse."

"No sir, not in Sickbay, sir; not without Doctor McCoy's concurrence."

But as Kirk paused to argue, Janice Lester stirred, awakened, then pushed up as far as the restraints allowed. She blinked, focussed on Kirk, and instantly transformed from sleepy innocence to rallied malevolence.

"You!" she snarled. "Aren't you dead yet?"

"No, not yet, Janice," Kirk said wearily, "not dead yet, not exactly."

A pulse of electric love/hate energized between the two, and Caffrey backed away. Whatever was going on with them, it was a private matter. And somehow, all the menace had melted out of Kirk's voice at his gentle retort to Lester.

"I'll be in the next room, Captain," Caffrey said. "But the doors will have to stay open."

He nodded agreement, and she went to the doors, reset the controls to keep the panels dilated, and left. Behind her, voices murmured, but she busied herself with routine tasks, and wondered if she shouldn't call McCoy to tell him Kirk had left his cabin.

In the private ward, Kirk waited until the nurse had left, then turned back to the swan that had transformed into a vulture. Janice glared at him with unsettling intensity, and he told himself again that he shouldn't have come, but there she was, and he could not leave.

"You ought to be dead!" she spat.

"I suppose it wasn't my time yet."

"I could have killed you. I could have won."

"You nearly did."

"I came that close," she said, and narrowed her eyes, for her arms were restrained. She fell back onto her pillow, and Kirk moved slowly to her side. She scowled up at him.

"You beat me, damn you. Why did you come here? Have you finally found the nerve to kill me?"

"No, no one will hurt you, Janice. I just came to see you."

"You came to gloat--oh yes you did. You men won--you and that Vulcan and your other friends. So look at what you've done to me. They tie me down, they say I'm mad. It's all your fault!"

Kirk shut his eyes tightly and shook his head.

"Your fault, yes, your fault! I'll get back at you for this!"

"You've had your revenge, Janice, in full measure." He couldn't keep the weariness out of his voice, and she pounced on his vulnerability, her face contorted with rage.

"You never loved me. I wanted you to love me. But you never loved anyone, only this ship, and you use people to keep it just like you used that Spock and McCoy. And you used me, like you use all your women Like that cheap thing, your Lieutenant Peele."

Some grain of truth in that cruel fabrication stabbed him to the heart. He leaned on the edge of the bed for support.

"You're wrong," he said. "It's not like that at all."

"You don't know the half of it. You were a woman, for a little while, don't you remember how it was? How it felt? How it hurts to be so helpless ... all the games you have to play? You wheel and deal with sex, it's all you have, it's all men want. They take you, use you, then throw you away. There is no dignity, you sell yourself for crumbs off their tables--little smiles, some gifts, a compliment, a pat on the head or on the ass, or that biggest thrill, a wedding ring so we can be your personal slaves for life. Men have it all! They get the glory. They make decisions. They change worlds, their whims are law. Did you know that back before the Eugenics War, things were different, women had power, women were equal? But we don't have that now, do we, Captain Kirk? We have to claw and fight for everything. We have to have men's permission, we have to work twice as hard. We can't be admirals, we can't be captains, don't let us get back to where we're making decisions "

She was wrong. Some of what she said was true, but those things were changing. He had to make her see that.

"You don't understand all of it, Janice. It wasn't your femaleness that kept you out of the Academy, it was your lack of aptitude. There are women at the Academy now, and women who came up through the ranks, who'll be in command positions before the year is out."

"No, you kept me out of the Academy. You talked me into going on with archeology when I'd had my fill of it. I was a threat to you, even back then, but you manipulated me, you always were so good at that. Loved me? You never even knew me!"

Kirk managed to hold back his wince, but every word from her was a slap. He wanted to get out, but there was a message he had come to deliver.

"In that, you may be right, I didn't know you. And I don't think I know you now. I'm sorry, Janice. Sorry any of it ever happened, but it wasn't all my fault, whether you believe it or not.

"But I came here to tell you that there will be an informal inquest held at Starbase 19, and I'm going to recommend that the authorities permit me to place you in therapy on Benedictine. It's a private hospital-world, and one of the best, and I think I can swing it. You'll get good attention there, they'll try to help you."

"'Help me!?' Help me become a good little girl, to knuckle under, not to be such a trouble-maker, that's the kind of help you mean."

"No, Janice--"

"You listen to me, Captain James T. Kirk. I won't give in to them, not at Benedictine or any other 'home' you send me to. I'll play their games, and I'll get out, and I'll come back for you. I'll find you, yes, and it won't be as easy, not this time ... I'll get you, I'll cut you up, I'll get a phaser, anything, and set it on slow burn and melt you down in little increments--starting with your prick! You don't deserve to be a man, you won't use women any more, not when I'm done with you. Used and used and used and used-- it's been that way all of my life, from my own father through to you, and you were the worst of all ... "

Kirk shuddered, done with listening, and he turned to go, to leave, to get away from those sick confused threats, but she had power over him now, some odd inner hold on him that he could not refuse, and when she called out "Stop!", he stopped and turned to look back at her.



"Before you go, I want to tell you something," she said, and her face smoothed out into quieter lines, though the vulture-smile lingered. "Something that I would have liked to teach you, only Spock and McCoy kept interfering, I could never get to you alone.

"You were a woman, you should have been made to know how it feels. Sex. I'd have shown you that myself, oh that would have been so right! You'd know then, what you really do to us, how it feels to be so helpless, to be entered, that disgusting invasion--"

Kirk clamped his hand over her mouth to shut out the venomous torrent. It was too much. Not this. Then, shocked at himself, he drew back his hand, and trembling inside, dropped his gaze from those hateful eyes.

"You're afraid of me, Captain Kirk. Afraid! And you're right. Oh, I'd have hurt you, pounded you, held you down with all that weight--I'll bet you have no idea how heavy you are, how you smothered me, how animal you smelled! I would have shown you, with your own filthy male-prick body, I'd have spread you out and then gone on you, forced it in, made it hurt, held you, pinned you, jammed it in you, made you feel degraded like you made me feel, with you thing inside me taking your damned pleasure, pretending that you wanted me to have some too, trying to make me animal like you are, dragging me down with you. Oh think of it! Slammed in and in and in until you'd jerk and squirt that stinking slime into my body, all your pleasure, and that time it would have been my pleasure, and you would be the one being soiled, yes ... You'd call it rape, Jim Kirk, but it would have been just the same as all the times you did that thing to me and called it 'making love'--"

He could endure no more. Pity aside, the rage and hurt in him demanded action. Part of him screamed for him to bloody that gloating, vindictive face, the abusive mouth. He bolted, knowing he must leave or it would overwhelm; staggering into the next ward, he swung around and hit the door switch, shutting away the raving bitterness behind merciful panels of steel. In the sudden silence, he let go and sagged.

A hand gripped his elbow and pinned him to the wall strongly.

"Hang on here, don't fall down," Caffrey was ordering. "Doctor M'Benga! No, don't faint on me. Breathe deeply ... come on ... again ... deeply."

For a middle-aged woman, the nurse was very strong; she kept Kirk from sliding farther down the wall. Then, from somewhere else, another hand took his other elbow, and Kirk realized distantly that it was M'Benga. They hauled him on rubbery legs to one of the ward's beds.

"What's going on here?" M'Benga's voice echoed, followed by the whir of a medical scanner. More voices mumbled, and footsteps moved around. A hypo hissed against Kirk's arm, cold, and the awful roar in his ears settled down. He forced his eyes open and regretted it.

"Lie still, sir, please."

"I'm all right."

"Just lie still."

McCoy's voice preceded him into the ward.

"What the devil's going on? Can't you people handle--oh, it's Kirk. What happened? What's the Captain doing out of his quarters?"

More doors whisked open and then shut, and the howling from the adjacent room had stopped.

"Doctor Lester's all right, now, I gave her the synthacodin," Caffrey's voice said.

"Yes, yes, what happened to the Captain?"

"He apparently came to see Dr. Lester," M'Benga reported, "and nearly fainted. Blood pressure dropped to 102 over 50, but is normalizing. I gave him two cc's of amphetamine."

"All right, I'll take over in here now, you go check over Dr. Lester and make sure her outburst wasn't patho-based; I suspect some biorhythmic hormonal dysfunction, check it out and see if you can come up with data to support that. Sajis, you go help him. No, don't wake up another nurse, we're fine here."

McCoy waited until the room was private. Kirk began to shoulder his way up.

"You stay right there and tell me what the hell you're doing up here."

The frightening weakness was sifting out of Kirk's limbs, and the faintness was completely gone. He felt slashed to ribbons inside, but the only physical symptoms were the headache and tiresome nausea with which he'd come to Sickbay. Suddenly he had had enough, he had to get OUT. He didn't want to lie around anymore with only nightmares for company, he didn't want to have nothing to do but think.

"It's really not your business, Bones. Now let me up, will you?"

"Don't hand me that; it's goddamned well my business when I have to get up in the middle of a nice wet dream to storm up here and hold your hand when you should be in your quarters instead of winding up that banshee in there and wakin' up half the ship!"

Kirk couldn't help it; he grinned. McCoy always knew how to defuse a bad mood when he thought it would be therapeutic.

"A wet dream?"

"A goddamned orgy, ya sonuvabitch."

Kirk's mouth stretched for another laugh, but then it soured: Sex.

"I'm sorry to get you up," he said somberly. "I came to talk to Janice. I've decided to commit her to Benedictine, and I wanted her to know."

"It could have waited until morning."

"Yeah, I guess so. Couped up in my quarters, I seem to lose track of time."

This time when Kirk tried to sit up, McCoy gave an assist.

"Whoa, stay put a minute. Your blood pressure's still a mite low, I'll walk back to your quarters with you as soon as it evens up."

"I don't want to go back there."

"You want to stay in Sickbay for the night?"

"I want to go back on duty."

"What's your hurry?"

"I'm sick and tired of lying around!"

"No one expects you to enjoy it, just to get better."

"I'm better enough to do some work."

"Uh-huh. How's your headache? And your nausea?"

"Awful. And I'm sick of having them. Give me something, shots, pills, anything, I can't lie around anymore, I'm going to go stir-crazy."

"Jim, I don't think you're--"

"Dammit, Bones, stop holding out on me. You've got all sorts of miracles in your little kit of hypos, you've cured bellyaches and migraines before. I want to get back to work. I need to. We're not likely to run into any major crises, this is central corridor space, don't start in with any 'unfit for duty' business."

He'd delivered that with eyes squeezed shut, as though trying to hold in the desperation, but now he looked at McCoy and met the troubled look in the doctor's face. McCoy's gaze shifted guiltily, and Kirk knew then that he was right--Bones had been holding out on him. Anger battled briefly in Kirk's mind, but he dismissed it, knowing Bones would have done it out of concern for Kirk's own good. Only this time, Bones was wrong.

"For God's sakes, Bones, have a heart!"

No sigh escaped that stubborn mouth, but the subtle resigned slump in McCoy's posture said it. He turned, selected a hypo, set it, and pressed it to Kirk's shoulder. The headache flowed out of Kirk's brain immediately, and the flutters in his gut began to quiet.

"Counteracting the symptoms won't get rid of the problem that's causin' them, Jim. I still think you need to rest. At least sleep off the rest of this shift, and start fresh in the morning, okay?"

"On one condition."

"What's that?"

"That you give me something to make me sleep."

"Good Lord, Jim, you wanna start your own pharmacy in your bloodstream?"

Kirk stared him down.

"All right. All right! Let's see, there's five hours left, I'll give you half of one of these."

Kirk clasped the pill in one damp palm.

"Thanks, Bones. Can you stand one more favor?"

"Huh, what's that?"

"Come walk me back to my quarters. My knees do feel a little wobbly."

* * *

His headache was back with a vengeance. The not-exactly-fainting feeling of the transporter beam tickled and dissolved, and they were back aboard the Enterprise.

My ship. My home. But I need a vacation.

The snarl from behind him, the voice of acid bitterness that had been interrupted by the transporter effect, erupted again with renewed violence.

"You stinking bastard--"

Doctor M'Benga had been ready with the hypo, and Janice Lester half-slumped against Spock as the tranquilizer took effect. The inquest was over, it was no longer necessary to keep the

woman in an undrugged state. She had testified, her mind as clear as a psychotic's mind can ever be. She had made her accusations, and she had lost her case in the plethora of raving illogic. The hearing was over and she would be sent to Benedictine, where, it was hoped, her brilliant mind could be rehabilitated.

M'Benga led her off the transporter pads, and Nurse Chapel took Lester's other arm to escort her back to Sickbay.

It was over. The doors whisked shut. Kirk heard them close, and opened his eyes, finally, forcing himself back to life. There were things to be done. Orders to give. He ached to be alone for awhile, ached to swallow one of McCoy's headache pills in his cabin and then lie down, yearned for quiet and some time to brace his mind against the completion of his next unpleasant task.

He startled slightly, looking around the room. No one else had moved for probably several minutes of attentive waiting. Orders. They were waiting for orders.

"All right, Scotty, you can alert the crew to begin beaming down for R & R, and secure Engineering for the maintenance teams," he said. "Landing party dismissed."

Kirk was half way to the turbolift when he realized that Spock was at his heels. Nothing odd about that: Spock would be going up to the Bridge to oversee the hundred and one duties left to be done, one of Spock's minor responsibilities as the ship's executive officer. Nevertheless, there was an unusual something ... almost a hovering. That was it: Spock was hovering.

"--Jim--"

"--Spock--"

The turbolift doors opened and they stepped into its momentary privacy. Neither man gave an order to the lift, and it, too, hovered, hesitated. Kirk pulled himself together.

"Deck 5," he ordered, and turned to look at Spock ... Spock, who had sat through the inquest, who had risked career and life in a gamble against Janice's plans, who had done so much ... The Vulcan's eyes were downcast, but he slowly raised them to meet Kirk's gaze, and Kirk realized: there's something he wants to say, but this isn't the time or place.

"Would you care to join me in my quarters for a little drink, Mr. Spock?"

It was a lame excuse, but Kirk couldn't think of anything else. The turbolift was slowing for Deck 5 already.

"I would be honored," Spock said, and followed Kirk into the corridor.

They sat in tongue-tied silence for a few minutes after the doors of Kirk's quarters shut them into the sudden tranquility. Kirk managed to busy himself looking for a bottle of something, and finally came up with scotch. He set the bottle on the desk, beside two glasses, but did not pour. From where he was standing, Kirk was looking down at the back of Spock's head, and beyond that, at Spock's slender hand relaxed on the desktop. An image flashed into his mind: how, alone in a woman's weak body and thought to be insane, there had come that small yet startling protective touch from Spock, when Spock had taken his hand and led him from the cell where he--as "Janice"--had been isolated.

Kirk did a startling thing himself: he let the moment carry him and settled both hands on Spock's thin shoulders, then laid his forehead softly on the crown on Spock's head, giving a deep, fatigued sigh. Immediately, then, before Spock could react, he straightened again and walked around the desk to sit down. He stared at the unopened bottle, a bit bewildered but not really embarrassed.

"I owe you a lot, Spock," he said simply.

"Jim ... I am ... concerned ... about you. I do not know what else to say."

"I'm tired, that's all," Kirk answered. He longed, suddenly, so vulnerable, to pour out his anguish to Spock. But this wasn't a burden that Spock could help him bear. "I'm dead dog tired, and a little confused. I'll be okay."

"You require rest, Jim."

"Yes. Rest. That's all I need. I'll get some soon."

Spock drew his hands together and folded them, dark-eyed gargoyle, still observer from a distant vantage. Kirk could feel Spock's concentration on him, a scrutiny that was more sixth-sense than visual.. Kirk's head swam with the slamming pain behind his eyes, and he closed them and leaned back--and still could feel the intense, worried look.

"It may not be the wisest choice, perhaps, for you to go with Doctor M'Benga and Doctor Lester to Benedictine," Spock said, voice so soft that it barely carried.

"I can't help but feel that I'm to blame in some small way for Janice's condition. I know I was a catalyst, and not a cause; I know she would have gone mad anyway, that if it hadn't been me, some other man would have become the focus of her problems. But I feel I owe her this last thing, to see her safely to Benedictine. I really did love her once, Spock."

"Will it make a measurable difference, Jim, that you are the person to escort her to the asylum?"

"No, I guess not. Not to her. But something in me feels I have a responsibility to her that won't be discharged until I know that everything is over and Janice is being cared for."

"It could be unwise for you to neglect your responsibility to yourself and your crew in deference to a doubtful need of Dr. Lester's. You are in need of rest: let someone else escort her."

Kirk almost smiled.

"My dear Vulcan friend, you aren't trying to make my decision for me, are you?"

Spock caught the mild teasing tone.

"I must admit to occasional parental urges in that direction, Captain. However, in this case, I am merely attempting to clarify the illogic of your desire to accompany Dr. Lester."

"Desire? Oh no, Spock, believe me, I'm not looking forward to three days in a transport cabin with a woman who tried to kill me. But M'Benga doesn't want to take Janice on the trip without another companion, and I agree with him completely; Janice is dangerous. And I don't think it would be right to ask someone else to give up the six-day's roundtrip out of their R & R. M'Benga's fine, because he interned on Benedictine and he was going there to visit friends anyway. But I couldn't ask anyone else. Who'd want to do something so ... unpleasant?"

"There will be other crewmembers travelling in the general direction of Benedictine. Myself, for instance."

"You?"

"The Physics Symposium on Sequar IV is not, in practical terms, significantly out of the way from Benedictine."

Kirk opened his eyes to find Spock's gaze still on him. The Vulcan meant it, of course, and Kirk had actually considered asking Spock earlier, as he knew Spock had been going to Sequar IV. But he owed too much to Spock. Too much? Spock's eyes said that it didn't matter. The Vulcan's unique love was not the sort to keep accounts. And Kirk knew, and admitted, that he really didn't want to go with Janice; there were, in fact, few things that he would less rather do.

"I'd appreciate it more than I can ever tell you, Spock," he said.

Spock nodded gravely, but sat back, a subtle easement that conveyed a sense of heartfelt relief. Kirk decided that the best thanks he could give Spock now would be some assurance that he, Kirk, would get some rest--or at least a change of scene.

"Well, I guess I'll give Bones a call and find out when he's leaving for Wrigley's," Kirk said.

"Doctor McCoy's companionship and Wrigley's Pleasure Planet will hardly make for a restful combination," Spock said mildly.

"Rest and Recreation", Mr. Spock. I don't think I'd find much recreation at a physics symposium, but it seems to suit you. Every man to his own poison."

Spock's slight smile was an acknowledgement. The Vulcan rose.

"I believe that Dr. M'Benga is preparing Dr. Lester for departure within the next few hours, so I shall have to arrange to delegate my responsibilities to other officers, as well as to organize my own belongings for the journey.

He stopped, and Kirk rose too, ignoring the lash of sickening pain that flared from the inside of his skull. A pill; he needed a headache pill. But he groped his way over to Spock, careful to conceal his discomfort. He offered a hand.

"Thanks, Spock, and have an enjoyable R&R."

Spock accepted the hand, and for a brief second, they were outside the brig again, Spock the protector, Kirk the protected. A warmth transmitted itself through the clasped hands, two smiles without faces.

"Take care, Jim," Spock said, his voice a tender rumble, and he released Kirk's hand and left.

"I will," Kirk promised after him. But mentally, he crossed his fingers and knocked on wood.

The hurried, clandestine conference took place a bare half hour before the crew was scheduled to begin debarking for their long-awaited three weeks of R&R, while the ship underwent repairs and refitting. Spock left Kirk and slipped into Dr. McCoy's quarters, being careful that the Captain, whose quarters were nearby, was not in sight.

"Doctor McCoy?"

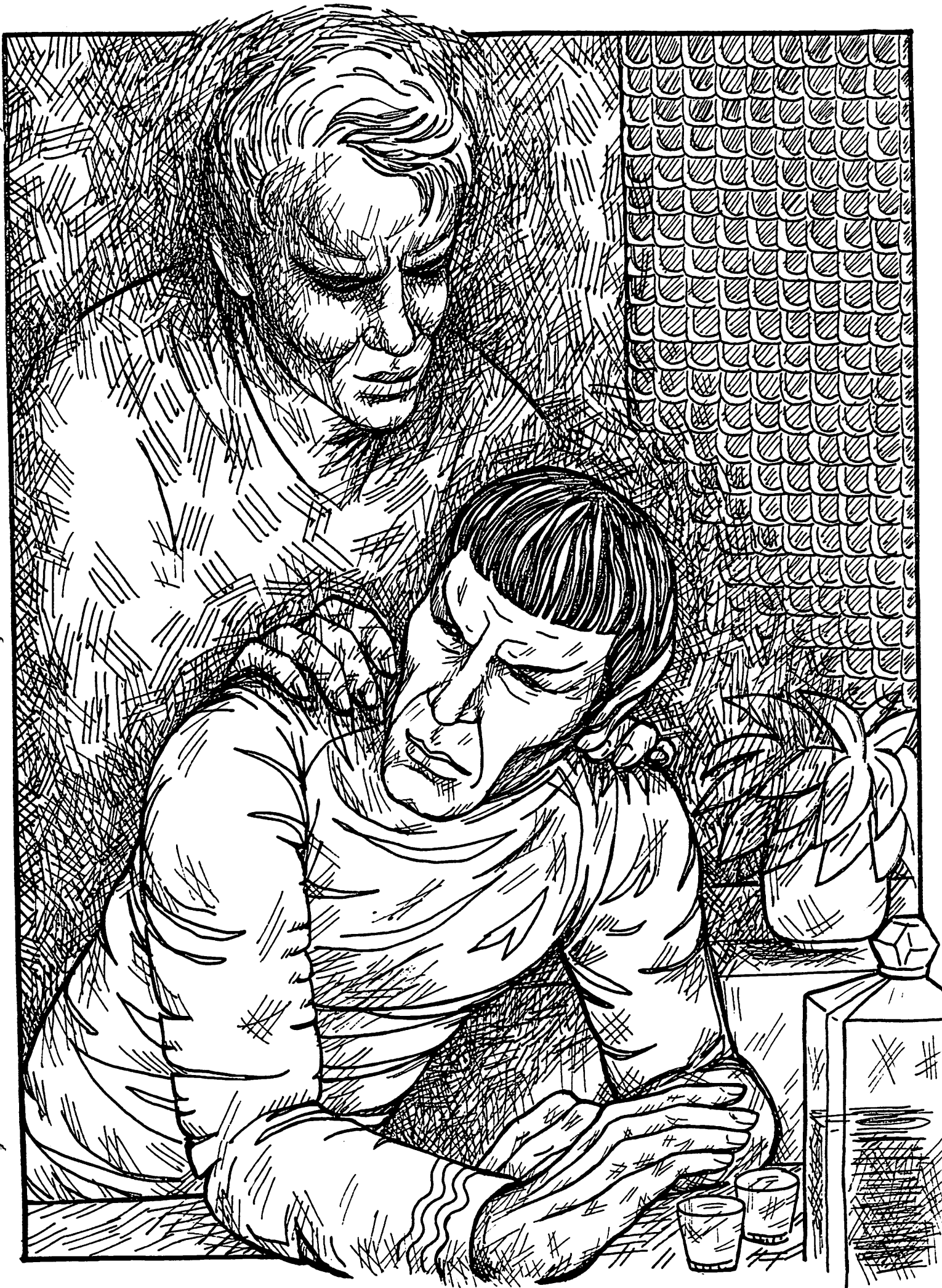
McCoy came out of his bathroom, already changed from his surgeon's tunic to civilian jumpsuit. The suit was gaudy, slightly out of style, and no longer fit as snugly as it had on his last shore leave, but McCoy patted its satiny fabric and looked very pleased with himself. He quit grinning, though, when he saw the Vulcan.

"Don't tell me you're wearing your uniform on shore leave?"

"Doctor, I shall be travelling extensively. Once I leave Benedictine, I plan to go to Sequar IV's Physics Symposium, where my status as a Starfleet Science Officer makes a uniform appropriate. Further, a service-being in uniform is entitled to a reduction in shuttle fares, making my choice of costume and economically logical one."

"You're taking Dr. Lester to Benedictine."

"Correct. You predicted that Jim would ask me to do so."



McCoy sat on the edge of the bed and sorted through a clutter of personal belongings before stuffing them into a satchel.

Yeah, I figured, but I wasn't sure."

"It was a logical request. Jim knew I was going to the Symposium, and Benedictine is not far off the route. Doctor M'Benga was not willing to make the journey with Dr. Lester unless another person accompanied him, which is also a logical request, as even under sedation, the woman is violent. By your own admission, Jim is in need of this relaxation, and for him to accompany Drs. M'Benga and Lester would aggravate his condition."

McCoy fingered a soft silk shirt absently.

"Well, it does kill two birds with one stone. It gets you out of Jim's hair rather neatly."

"Out of his hair', Doctor?"

"Yuh, well, I've been nosing around a bit, and ship's scuttlebut can be nasty, and I finally managed to corner Lt. Peele yesterday before she left the ship, and she wasn't talkin', but then, she didn't have to ..."

He saw the total blankness on Spock's face.

"What does Lt. Peele have to do with my being in Jim's 'hair', as you put it?"

McCoy grimaced, still fussing with the shirt. It kept slipping out of his efforts to fold it neatly.

"I, ah, think that Jim's havin' ... personal problems of a nature that you just couldn't relate to, Spock, that's all." He peered up into the innocent Vulcan features again, and his professional conscience clamped down on his tongue. "Well, never mind that, I can take care of it, I think. Doctor Lester should be up and ready soon. M'Benga's going to be keeping her drugged with a moderate validium dosage, so she should be docile for the duration of the trip. If she should turn violent anyway, don't hesitate to use a nerve-pinch; it won't hurt her condition."

The intercom buzzed, and McCoy moved to the desk and switched it on. It was Nurse Caffey.

"Doctor Lester is packed and ready, Doctor McCoy. Do you want to come up to give her a once-over before she leaves?"

"No, I don't think it's necessary, Sajis. Just make M'Benga has all the medical tapes and enough of the validium. By the way, have you found someone to share your resort expenses with, yet?"

"No, Doctor, but I'll be going anyway."

"Wrigley's Pleasure Planet is closer and cheaper," McCoy said, grinning, "and you know I wouldn't mind escortin' you there."

The nurse laughed. From her point of view, she could not see Spock, who still waited by the door.

"I'm too old for nonsense like that, Leonard."

"So am I!--but that doesn't stop me! Okay, Sajis, enjoy your leave. See you in a few weeks."

"Don't play too hard," she said, and cut off.

McCoy stood silently for a moment, shaking his head wryly, until he remembered that Spock was still in the room.

"Oh! Yeah. Well is there anything else you need before you go, Spock?"

"Negative, Doctor. I merely wish to know if you still plan to accompany Jim to Wrigley's Pleasure Planet."

"Does a hobby horse have a hickory dick?" McCoy laughed. "Uh, sorry. Yes, I'm goin'. Wouldn't miss it for anything. I, ah, have some old friends there, and I'll introduce Jim to them, and he'll have a fine old time. He jus' needs to get off the damn ship for a while and relax."

"Your particular methods of 'relaxation' leave me at a loss as to the true definition of the word. However, it is my ... hope ... that your 'therapy' is successful. May you find your leave refreshing, Doctor."

Spock turned to leave, but McCoy's call stopped him.

"I'll take care of Jim, Spock, but you watch out for yourself. Janice Lester doesn't exactly harbor good will for you."

"Understood. I shall be careful not to turn my back to her."

And he was gone, leaving McCoy with an odd mixture of warm affection and vague foreboding.

* * *

Take a Mardi Gras, a Divinian bacchanalia, a Tellurian new year, several circuses, an Edubis tourney, a Vedalian amusement park, and an odd number of assorted orgies, mix, shake, and spread over the entire second satellite of the planet called Starbase 19, and you'll have "Wrigley's Pleasure Planet, where your every wish is our command"--at a price.

Jim Kirk had been there twice before, and marvelled at how changed the place was each time he returned. The purveyors seemed to go to extreme lengths to provide the latest 'sensual technologies', the most exciting and challenging 'games', and the most exotic 'companions.' The 'outdoor' environment under the main dome was continually being holographically altered, so that from day to day, even though you might be standing in the exact spot as yesterday, it was as though you were on a different planet. Kirk found it disconcerting, and the only way to find a shop or bar which had been visited the day before was to remember its name or address, and tell the automated flitter cars where to take you. Everything had changed, except for the people, since his last visit. Kermut's Antiphon had become The Jackstone Harbor, its holo-cloud decor changed to forcefield-walled undersea, complete with rain-Chenshen deepsea lava that slipped through the currents like filmy, colored scarves. But the faces were the same everywhere--the patrons' boggled and slightly giddy, the staffs' compliant and unflap-pably cheerful.

"How do they do that, Bones?" Kirk said as they left the third glamor spot of the evening. They climbed into a vacant flitter.

"Do what?" McCoy said fuzzily. The drinks he'd imbibed had put the doctor into a mild, cheerful haze; Kirk's drinks had only made him moody and introspective.

"They smile like that, all the time. All of them. It's as though the smiles were painted on."

"They're pros, Jim. It's their business to make us relax, like there isn't a care in the world."

"I don't like it."

"What?"

"The smiling. It's too much. You'd think they weren't people at all, but androids."

"Some of 'em are."

"Hell, even the Vulcan gamblers smile like that! It's obscene."

"It's all part of show biz, Jim. I think it looks good on the Vulcans, m'self."

Kirk frowned, reminded of Spock and then where Spock was now, and again, he mentally berated himself for asking Spock to go with Janice when he should have gone himself. But Spock had all but volunteered, and Kirk admitted to himself that he really had dreaded that trip. It had taken all his strength to face Janice again at the informal inquest, and her cruel, uninhibited accusations had mortally embarrassed him, but the Commodore and the Psychiatric Officer had appreciated the woman's insanity very well, and no official records had been made of the testimony. Janice would be psychiatrically tested and her problem diagnosed, and no further testimony other than his captain's logs would.

"Hey!"

"Huh?" Kirk responded, pulled him back to the present.

McCoy was watching him closely.

"? Chrissakes, Jim, I know exactly what you're thinkin' about. Let it go, man; it's all over. Ya came here to enjoy yourself, right?"

Kirk took a deep breath and released it slowly. He glanced around at the passing streets and lights and wide-eyed faces, and blinked at the dazzling color of it all.

"I dunno, Bones, I can't seem to get into the right frame of mind."

"Maybe you need somethin' to perk you up!"

"What do you have in mind?"

McCoy was already giving instructions to the flitter, which took a U-turn in midair and rose to the passing lane near the domed ceiling of the complex.

"There's a little place near the 'South Pole' called the Arcadian Gardens. It's quiet, and has lots of green things, you'll like it. And they serve a drink that's guaranteed to make ya feel like a new man."

"Whatever you say," Kirk acquiesced, only half-listening.

The Gardens were quiet--between earblasting revues--and the "green things" were Orion dancers, most of them effectively nude. The Gardens put on shows calculated to raise sweat and heartrates around the scented floating tropical-flowered barges. McCoy ogled the delectable dancers, none of whom could be had unless the dancer herself expressed an interest--and then the price would be exorbitant, but then, this was one of the foremost pleasure houses on the planet.

"That petite l'il gal with the big eyes over there is interested in ya, Jim-boy," McCoy said, sipping his second "prescription". He ordered another drink for Kirk from one of the wading waitresses.

"What's in this stuff?" Kirk said. He shook his head woozily, feeling his cheeks heating and sweat drizzling inside his clothes.

"It's a secret potion that mankind hunted for centuries, but hadda go to th' stars t' find," McCoy said, grinning. "Hava 'nuther."

"What izzit?"

"Don't ask complicated questions, Jim-boy, jus' enjoy it. Ya like it, don't ya?"

Kirk ground his palms to his forehead and found his hair was wet with sweat.

"I dunno," he said. "'S worse than booze, it make you hot and all the colors go silly ..."

"Watch the girls, Jim, watch the girls. Yore friendly country doctor wouldn't prescribe anything ya couldn't handle. Hey--that l'il gal sure is givin' you the come-on!"

Kirk caught desperately at McCoy's arm.

"Bones, I don't like this stuff--"

McCoy was up, suddenly, holding Kirk firmly under the arm and helping him off the float into the waist-deep water, not waiting to request that the barge be docked. He steered Kirk toward the steps up onto the main dock.

"Need help, Mister?" a waiter asked.

"He just needs some air. I've got him," McCoy said, all the mellow haze gone from his eyes.

They sloshed through the pool, past flowered barges, clinking glasses, myriad damp faces, bare arms and torsos in bronze and gold and green and ebony, past musky smells and sweet smells that only made Kirk's head feel giddier, until they stumbled up the stair, then out the doors into the moving air under the satellite's outer dome. McCoy hauled Kirk across the moving walk and deposited him on a bench by a neon fountain, then made Kirk put his head onto his knees.

"Jesus, I'm sorry, Jim. Damn, wish they'd let a doctor bring his medikit! Hey, lessee--look up at me a minute, I want to check your eyes."

Kirk flopped against the back of the bench and let McCoy fuss over him. The gaudy fountain was spinning away like a fluorescent ferris wheel, and his body shivered, dripping its own fountain of sweat.

"--not supposed to react like this, the stuff's safe," McCoy was saying. "--gotta be psychosomatic--"

Kirk paid him no attention. His crotch was suddenly heated like a welding torch, and a sensation of swollen pressure between his legs became acutely painful. Then his stomach started to do flipflops again, and it dawned on him just what McCoy had ordered in his drinks.

"You lousy sonuvabitch!" Kirk spat, but didn't move.

"It's not supposed to do this!" McCoy said. "We'd better get you to the Park Infirmary."

"You take your hands off of me," Kirk said, swaying to his feet. "Don't touch me!"

"Jim, we oughta get you a shot of antidote--"

"Just leave me alone! I don't want to look at you."

"Where the devil do you think you're going?"

"Out. Away! I don't like the company. I'll find my own--"

McCoy caught at Kirk's arm as Kirk hailed an empty flitter, but Kirk spun and gave McCoy a violent shove that sent the doctor flying over the bench and nearly into the fountain.

"Don't show your face around me again until your leave is over--'Doctor'!"

Kirk gave the flitter the name of the central terminal for want of a better place to go. He ignored McCoy's yells as the doctor's voice was lost in the distance. An embittered rage was feeding on a hollow sense of betrayal. How could Bones do that to him? Damn the meddling bastard! McCoy seemed to think that his medical license gave him a right to make decisions for other people. And how the blazes did McCoy find out about the problem anyway? Surely not from Natalie ... or would she? Was there no one that he could trust anymore? Spock, maybe, but Spock was parsecs away by now, and Spock was definitely not the person to bring this sort of problem to.

No, this he would have to tackle by himself.

His head was pounding, now, and his throbbing, sensitive genitals were beginning to demand his attention. He'd never taken, or been given, an aphrodisiac before--he'd never needed one. But the sensation it was giving him was hardly the pleasure of lust, it was an uncomfortable feeling of pressing urgency--anything to get rid of this painful, enormous erection. Kirk shifted in his seat in the flitter, quickly pulling the damp cloth of his briefs away to loosen it around his crotch, then yanked at the hem of the poncho-like over-cloak he wore until the front panel hid the bulge in his pants. He hoped when he stood that the panel would be long enough to cover him. It seemed to him that the drug had made him big as a bull, and the skin and blood vessels of his penis throbbed as if it were about to split apart and would leave him to bleed to death. How long would the drug take to wear off? What should he do? What if he were having some kind of allergic reaction? McCoy had said that he wasn't reacting as he should--maybe he should go to the Park Infirmary, as McCoy had suggested. But he'd had enough of doctors. Damn the whole lot of them!

He dug his fingers into the upholstery of the flitter's seat, and the padding underneath automatically conformed itself to his grip, as though it were a living being. The fabric was smooth, sensual, skin-like, and he noticed that the pliant contours had a firm but flexible feel, like a woman's thigh. He yanked his fingers away abruptly, and saw the fabric and padding slowly return to their couch-like form.

All right. Maybe he should have a woman. It would be a waste to ignore such a huge hard-on, even if it was painful; and the women here were professional, and more than willing; and he had plenty of credits, he could easily afford half a dozen women at a time, if he wanted. It might take that many, too, he thought wryly, shifting uncomfortably in the seat. He began to scan the street over which he was skimming, studying the fleeting forms, wondering how many of the glamorous bodies belonged to employees and how many to patrons. Patrons dressed to the hilt here, seeking "adventure"--it was often difficult to tell the pros from the amateurs. He didn't want to chance propo-

sitioning another visitor. He thought about the dainty Orion dancer back at the Arcadian, but McCoy might still be in that area, and he didn't want anything to do with McCoy. He wasn't sure that he wanted to have anything to do with anyone, but the urgency in his groin was consuming his mind.

Then he remembered hearing about a "house" for S&M afficianados that provided "love-slaves"--androids who loved and suffered realistically, but who, of course, could not really be injured. Kirk had no interest in inflicting pain on his bedmate, but an android only had programmed "feelings" and reactions, it would not respond unfavorably to the violent need in Kirk's groin, it would not be insulted or amused by his problems. He could safely forget his image and rid himself of his discomfort without guilt.

He reinstructed the flitter, and shortly thereafter, found himself in an under-street complex called "The Marquis' Hideaway." Had he not been so grimly determined, so fully miserable, he might have appreciated the campy humor with which the place was decorated. But the iridescent-dildoes bar, the obscene psychedelic anatomy holographs, the racks of pastel leather-wear, the branding boutique, and the "Cat's-Scratch Recovery Room"; all went unnoticed.

Within five minutes, he was alone with his personal "love-slave" in a multi-purpose room with a variety of "equipment", and an environmental selector that could holographically transform the appearance of the room to a number of fantasy-scenes, including "A Terran Dungeon", "Volopian Arena", "Klingon Interrogation Chamber", and "Lolita's Bedroom"--where the room was, at the moment, already set. The "Bedroom" was an ultra-feminine chamber complete with pink canopied bed and ruffled lace curtains over the fake windows, all suggesting a child-like sensuality. A baby doll, stuffed sehlut, and training bra lay on the bed, and on the ornate dresser were a hairbrush, numerous silk scarves, more frilly underthings, and of all things, a riding crop.

The android, which had been sitting on the bed fondling the baby doll, slipped off the bed and stood, wrapping its slender arms around its slender shoulders in a gesture of submissiveness. It was a petite, Human-blonde construction, with huge blue eyes that really did seem both seductive and terrified, and it exactly simulated the appearance of a 13 or 14-year old girl just entering womanhood. "She" was dressed in a long, flowing nightgown that seemed to belong in a gothic novel.

The "slave" was not imaginatively programmed.

"What are you doing here?" she said, rolling her eyes fearfully. "What do you want of me?"

It was a machine, Kirk reminded himself. It didn't matter. It wouldn't be very different from masturbating. Kirk reached out a hand, and the slave backed away from him toward a near wall--a wall conveniently and obviously supplied with dual lanterns. The slave raised its arms in feigned fear, emphasizing the perfect height and separation of the lanterns, with their convenient metal rings dangling. At this point, the customer was apparently supposed to realize the availability of the scarves on the dresser, and tie the slave to the lanterns, enabling him to commence with his particular kind of foreplay. But in that, Kirk had no interest. He followed the slave until he had backed her to the wall, then placed one hand on the wall on either side of her.

"Pull up your dress," he said, feeling foolish yet desperate.

She raised the gown to her breasts, They were small, upturned breasts, too perfect to be real. Her body was nicely designed: nubile. For a terrifying moment, Kirk was reminded of Miri, and he almost panicked. But the android batted its eyelashes artfully, too plastic, and the illusion evaporated. Kirk dropped his pants and pushed the android's legs apart, then felt around for the vaginal opening. He grasped his swollen cock and positioned it against her labia, having to lift her bodily, then he thrust. He wouldn't go in--she was flexible, but "virgin." He pushed harder, wanting to slide up inside of the plastic sleeve, pump hard, and be done. He could not think of the warm form pinned to the wall by his weight as a person, a woman, though her mouth was pleading, her eyes ran programmed tears, her weak hands beat at his chest, "fighting" him. The artificial maidenhead split, suddenly, and he was inside a tight, mechanically squeezing cavity that was hot and wet, but felt about as much as a woman's vagina as an engineer's spacesuit felt like a lounging robe. He stopped caring, stopped thinking, stopped listening to his mind and his ears as instinct rammed him in deeply, then slid him in and out of her with a necessary rhythm as her simulated cries became simulated moans of pleasure, and suddenly the internal rhythm of her vagina went wild in a programmed orgasm that clamped around Kirk's cock and squeezed it violently.

Kirk screamed and pulled himself out, grabbing himself and falling to his knees in surprise and pain. The drug has made him too big and too sensitive. He looked down and saw blood on him--not that again--then realized distantly that it was artificial "blood" from the deflowering of the android. He rocked, holding himself, for long minutes.

The android had also dropped to the floor, and now began to kiss the bottoms of Kirk's feet, murmuring adoration for her "master." Abruptly, Kirk clambered up and scrambled into the adjoining bathroom, retching. Self-disgust and general revulsion emptied him.

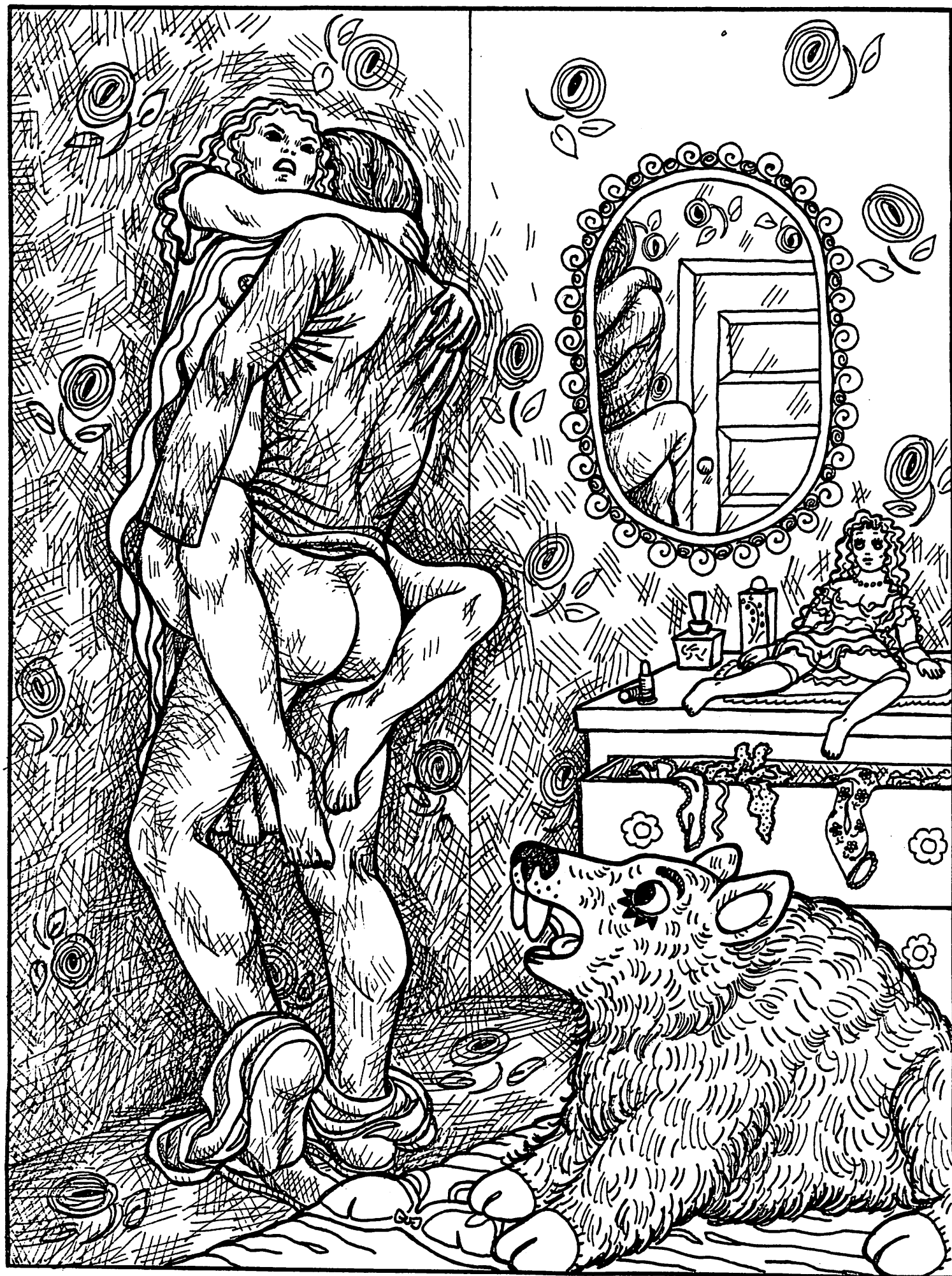
When he could stand again, he was shaking, but he rinsed his mouth and slapped cold water onto his face. Going back into the main room, he saw that the room had changed radically: the android had reprogrammed the environmental selector, plunging the room into the gloom of an ancient torture chamber.

"Oh kind Master, be merciful to me," the slave said with sincere melodrama. The next scheduled fantasy was apparently supposed to draw him into the role of tormentor, or perhaps tormentee, complete with rack, chains and whips. Kirk found his clothes and dressed, ignoring the clinging, pleading nymph. He let himself out into the hall.

"Hullo, one moment, sir--you paid for the entire night, why are you leaving so soon?" the Madame called after him, but Kirk pushed past her. "We have other love slaves, if you didn't like--"

But Kirk kept walking until he was back on the main-level street out under the dome. He took a random direction, moving fast and keeping an eye open for an empty flitter. He had to get away from there--from that house of plastic sex and sick fantasies.

Directionless, and with his organ still painfully distended and unsatiated, he hunched slightly as



he walked so that his over-cloak covered him. Where did he want to go? The streets were lined with curio shops, exotic restaurants, flesh-pots, massage and bath palaces, clothing boutiques, alcohol bars, drug dens, gambling establishments, sports purveyors (where you could defeat a champion or play an honest game, depending on how much you were willing to spend), and so on and on and on. They were honest places, all of them, careful to please, but the atmosphere of unreality, of artificiality, was choking him. He gazed idly into an alcohol bar. Did he want to go in there? No, getting drunk wouldn't last long enough. He could go to another "house", but he wasn't ready for that--though, he thought ironically, he was certainly "up" to it. He had the option, of course, of going back to the ship, but he didn't want to go there: Janice Lester still haunted the ship, though her presence was removed. To the Starbase, then? No, there was nothing for him to do there but to get under people's feet, and there were no facilities for any kind of entertainment (why bother when the Pleasure Planet was in the same system?), and the housing was more cramped and dull than the ship's brig.

He could go to a house, he thought. A house with real women. He'd find a real woman, there, someone who could understand him, someone who would care about him--oh, dreamer. His memory swept backward to Edith, long ago, far away, gone. He forced Edith Keeler out of his mind, a memory too sacred for this situation. The same for lovely Miramane, his innocent, and in a way, his victim. And Rayna? He could not imagine Rayna in a context of sex, though he vaguely recalled desiring her.

Sex. What was it about? Brief, violent pleasure, making babies, using people, for power, for love, for security, for enjoyment? None of the above? All? Carnal love, sacred love, no love at all. For now, a simple need. He hurt. He shouldn't hurt from an aphrodisiac, he knew enough to realize that, but he did hurt. And he needed to end the hurt, a need as simple as hunger or thirst, a desire as strong as escaping desert heat or arctic cold. Simple, see? It wasn't necessary to complicate it with feelings, was it? Just ending the need would be enough, all he would ask.

A real woman. He'd made a mistake before. Now he would find a real woman.

An empty flitter glided past him within hailing distance, but he walked, and as he walked, he searched, none too sure that it would matter who she was, yet suspecting that "who" might be the most important thing of all.

* * *

"Wrigley's Pleasure Planet guarantees the privacy of its patrons." That was the bland refusal that Doctor McCoy butted into for the entire first day that he tried to get help in locating Captain Kirk. For a while, he considered calling on Starfleet's muscle to get action, but inquiries to the Starbase discouraged him when he learned that pursuing that avenue would require him to file a full report on the circumstances, a report which would throw suspicion on Kirk's mental health as well as McCoy's professional ethics.

McCoy came across Scotty on the second day, and between McCoy and the miraculously sober engineer, they managed to set up a quiet, informal undercover search-network composed of vacationing Enterprise crewmembers. With so many people keeping a sharp eye out for the Captain, it only took another day to locate him. The call came in early in the evening, by the arranged code, and McCoy and Scotty went to the establishment, rewarded the informant, and surveyed the situation. The place was a bar for mishovan users, mostly, though other drugs and the more common alcoholic drinks were also served.

"There he is," McCoy said, peering through a beaded room divider. Kirk was lying in a quiet, peaceful heap in one of the booths. A green-glowing bulb hung over him, a monitor-indicator that showed, by its color-saturation, just how close the patron was to his particular mishovan tolerance level. When the indicator glowed at full saturation, the attendants would shut down the gas and pump the booth full of pure oxygen, which could maintain the drug's effects for weeks, if the patron could afford the time and credits.

"Mishovan," Scotty whispered. "Doctor, ye did no tell me he was as depressed as this!"

"I didn't know myself."

"We canna just go in and haul him oot, won't it be dangerous?"

"No, not yet. The light's still bright, he hasn't had too much, yet. We should still be able to handle him, it won't be much more than like he's drunk on alcohol. He'll be fine once he sleeps it off."

"The owners will no permit it, though. The Captain will ha' signed the full disclaimer."

"I'll keep the proprietors busy, you just get Jim out of here."

"Are ye no comin' in t' help, Doctor?"

"Scotty, please, don't ask questions; I can't answer them, I've compromised my professional integrity too much already."

"All right, Doctor, no questions."

"Just get him back to the ship, I've already talked Nurse Caffrey into taking care of him from here."

"Aye, that's clear enough. Where can I find ye later?"

"I'll wait for you at Tilbaine's."

"Tilbaine's! Doctor, only little auld ladies go t' Tilbaine's."

McCoy smiled slightly, but the anguish didn't leave his eyes.

"Well, that's about how I feel, Scotty. I made an ugly mistake in my treatments for Jim, and you see





where it's brought him. Maybe I'm gettin' too old to practice space medicine."

"Auch, Doctor, don't go blamin' yourself for bein' Human and makin' an honest mistake. We've all made our share--the Captain included. I'll meet ye at Tilbaine's, then, and we'll see what we can do t' raise a wee bit o' hell, and you'll feel like a bonnie young blade."

"Yeah. Sure. We could take mishovan, for instance," McCoy sighed. He looked in at Kirk again.

"Take care of him, Scotty."

"Aye."

Scotty waited until McCoy had left, then set his face to blank congeniality, painted a mild grin on his lips, and wove his way into the room, heading tipsily for Kirk's booth. He undid the latch on the glass door and slid over to Kirk's side. The booth stunk of a sweet, pungent aroma: the mishovan. But it would take much more than a few whiffs to affect a sober man.

Kirk wasn't completely under. He lifted his head, recognized his companion, and tried to sit up. Scotty had to help him. Kirk was weak as a child, and his eyes glittered, dark and dilated with the hallucino-relaxant.

"H'lo, Scotty. You real, Scotty?"

"Aye, Captain, it's Scott, an' I'm real, sir."

"'M mishovanned."

"Aye, Captain, so ye are."

"Call me Jim."

"Aye, sir."

"Wanna snort? Ya jus' put yer nose right by there--"

"No thank ye, sir. Don't ye think ye should get some fresh air, sir?"

"Huh? Fresh air. Uh-huh, fresh air. Um."

"Are ye all right, sir?"

Kirk sat a little straighter, and tried to focus on the engineer, but his eyes failed him. Still, he was a long way from being fully drugged, and the forgetfulness had not yet claimed him.

"No, Scotty, 'm not awright," Kirk said, very softly. He pressed his knuckles into his eye sockets. "Nothin's right."

"Aye, sir, I understand."

"You do?"

"Aye," Scotty whispered, and put an arm around Kirk's shoulder, drawing the drugged man to him protectively. Some of Scott's compassion seemed to register through Kirk's haziness, for the Captain leaned against the offered shoulder and let out a long, harsh sigh.

"'M jus' so gaddamned tired ..."

"Would ye like t' go home, sir?"

"Can't. Got none. Gonna lose th' ship, y'know."

"Come along, sir."

Kirk's head bowed, then just kept descending, and Scotty barely pulled himself together in time to keep the rest of Kirk's body from following.

"Oof, Captain, easy does it. I really think ye should call it a day, sir."

"Call me Jim," Kirk said muzzily.

* * *

The ship's corridors were slightly chilly for a bathing suit. Sajis Caffrey tossed her towel over her shoulder and pulled her robe around her more snugly as the turbolift opened to officer's country on Deck 5. The habitation decks were deserted, now, though on the engineering decks there seemed hardly room to stand where the Starbase crews were overhauling the equipment. But Sajis knew no one down there, and she had nothing to do until tomorrow's shuttle to New Seattle, so she had gone to see if Captain Kirk were awake yet, and feeling well enough to join her for a swim.

When the Captain didn't answer the buzz at his door, Sajis thought "Medical Privilege", and went in anyway.

Kirk was on the bed, his back to her. Sajis harumphed loudly, but Kirk was still. Too still. For an anxious second, she prayed for him to breathe, afraid that--but he breathed.

"Captain? Are you awake?"

Kirk slid an arm around behind his head, and dragged the pillow out from under his head, pulling it over his ear.

"Go 'way," he said, his voice cracking.

"It's Nurse Caffrey. Are you going to get up today?"

"Go 'way."

"You sound terrible," she said, and strode to the bathroom bringing back a glass of water. As she bent over him, she noticed a sour smell. He was still wearing his civilian clothes and he needed a shower. She pulled the pillow off him.

"Here, turn around and have a drink of water. Come on, sit up, it won't hurt you."

Kirk rolled over slowly, and Sajis saw that his eyelids were swollen, his lips bluish, his skin parchment-pale. He looked repulsive, and she knew it was the after-effects of mishovan. What price ecstasy? She tugged at him.

"Lemme alone."

"Drink the water. You're dehydrated."

He struggled up and she got an arm around his damp back and helped him to sit. He guzzled the water, coughing, then handed the glass back.

"Didn't know you were so thirsty, did you," Sajis said. "Want more?"

He nodded, and she got him another glassful. He guzzled it, too, and managed to get his eyes open, blinking.

"How'd ... I get here?"

"Mister Scott brought you in last night."

"Scotty? I must've been in sad shape."

"Drunk as a skunk," Sajis said, letting the smile she felt creep into her voice.

Kirk glanced up at her, a little startled. He was finally waking up.

"Nurse, I apologize fôr any trouble--"

"No trouble. Everyone needs to raise hell sometime. How do you feel?"

"Like I've been run into by a battlecruiser."

"Do you think you're up for a swim in the pool? I'm on my way there, I think a swim will do you good, it'll help get the toxins out of your bloodstream."

He looked up at her again, an odd suspicion on his face, and Sajis wondered, discomfitted, what he was thinking. But he shoved up to his feet and rummaged through a drawer, yanking out swimming trunks and a beachrobe.

"Lead on, Nurse."

He was unsteady, but when Sajis offered an arm to steady him, he stepped back from her touch.

"I'm on my feet, Nurse, lead on."

The pool was pleasantly warm, but the echoes and emptiness of the room made Sajis vaguely depressed. She was used to a crowded ship, alive with voices, shoulder to shoulder with the vibrant people who served on the Enterprise. The exploratory starships drew extraordinary personnel--even within the restrictions of Starfleet and shiplife, the vitality of all those curious and reaching minds could not be suppressed. Sajis found them stimulating, and versatile. Most of the crew of the Enterprise had dual specialities--Sajis herself was the ship's physical therapist as well as a nurse--and the spectrum of races added to the cosmopolitan atmosphere. Humans, a Vulcan, the twenty Catalans, the two Denebians, and even the new Caitian communications officer--they lived and worked here together, and they made their micro-society work. In her nineteen years in Starfleet, Sajis had served on many ships, and none held her interest and her loyalty like the Enterprise.

Tomorrow, though, it would be time to get away for a while, go dig her toes into sand instead of deck mats, seek that other facet of her life, a few weeks of fresh air and solitude. But today, still, on the ship, solitude was loneliness. The ship seemed somehow ... wrong ... without the bustling crew.

She looked up as Captain Kirk splashed toward her, finishing his tenth lap of the pool.

"Whew," he gasped, and shook his head, sending droplets flying.

"You look much better. Your color's coming back," she said. "A few more laps and you'll feel like a whole man again."

He had seemed about to share some thought with her, but at her comment, he pushed back into a swimming lane and resumed his modified crawl, without a word. Sajis pulled herself up onto the edge of the pool and watched, musing. When she'd been assigned to the Enterprise, about a year ago, Kirk has impressed her as impossibly young to captain a starship--he was only a little older than Avian would have been, had her son lived. But in that year, crowded with crises, Sajis had come to think of Kirk as just right for a tough job. She did not know him, would not have called him a friend, but she had learned a lot about him. She had witnessed his

affection for Leonard McCoy, a friendship which vastly exceeded the necessary professional relationship, the kind of friendship that would survive transfers and disagreements. And with the half-Vulcan First Officer, Kirk had a subtle rapport that could only be called love. Kirk's rare warmth, tempered by discipline and intelligence, had earned and held the loyalty of the people who worked with him. Events had proved it, most especially the recent business with Dr. Lester.

But that incident had somehow injured Kirk, and Sajis suspected that McCoy had been hushing it up. The Captain had seemed, suddenly, too old for his duties, an impression that had begun the night that Kirk had come to Sickbay and nearly collapsed. She watched him swimming, a third into a new lap, his heaving arms shoving the water behind him almost angrily, and she sensed an ache in him, not physical. Yes, it must have had to do with the corporeal transference with Janice Lester. It could not have been a pleasant experience for the Captain ... for a number of reasons, some of them indelicate.

Kirk lunged up onto the pool edge across from Sajis and scrubbed his hair with his towel. He was winded. Sajis picked up her own towel and walked around the pool to join him. As she neared, however, he rose and pulled on his robe to leave.

"Captain?"

"I've taken my swim, Nurse, do I need your permission to return to my quarters?"

"I have no authority over you, sir, but I think you'll find the corridor decks a bit chilly without your shoes."

Kirk glanced back to the edge of the pool and his forgotten slippers, then sat down to put them on. He was still panting from his exercise, and he radiated tension, despite the work-out. Sajis took hold of his shoulders and began to knead the tight muscles. He shrank from her touch, but she massaged him anyway.

"All that swimming should have relaxed you," she said.

He tightened deliberately, making it impossible to manipulate that brick-hard flesh.

"Did McCoy order you to pamper me?" Kirk snapped.

Piqued, Sajis removed her hands.

"No one ordered me to do anything, Captain. I am on R&R."

"I don't need a nurse, Ms. Caffrey."

Sajis put her fists on her hips. He might be the best ship captain around, but at the moment, he was being a cad. And he was sitting just right.

"No, sir, Captain Kirk, sir, you don't need a nurse--you need a kick in the butt!"

And she planted one foot squarely on his backside and shoved, sending him ass over tincups into the pool. He made a satisfying splash, and came up sputtering.

"Hey!" he yelled.

Sajis stomped over to her belongings and decorously pulled on her robe.

"Don't you 'hey' me, Mister! I'm not your nurse," she said, but inside, she was shaking with laughter, both surprised at and pleased with herself.

Kirk climbed out of the pool, his robe dripping, his hair in his eyes, and he looked thoroughly enraged. Sajis, her hands on her hips again, watched him coming, having no idea what he would do, but she gave him her best "so what do you want from me?" look. Kirk stopped two meters from her, ran his hand over his hair and down his face, shook the droplets from his fingers--and tottered to the nearby bench, beginning to giggle. Sajis watched, transfixed. Kirk's giggles bubbled into loud hoots until he was yukking and hiccuping so he could barely breathe.

"Ho ho--oh--heh--Jesus--heh," he wheezed, trying to calm himself enough to say something intelligible.

Sajis squinted at him, grinning. His mirth was contagious.

"You sure you didn't hit your head on the bottom of the pool?" she chuckled.

He dissolved into giggles again.

"You don't know--*snurf*--how much I--hehe--needed that," he managed. He swallowed and tried to tug the corners of his mouth back into a modicum of control. "That's an excellent therapy for a pompous ass," he added.

"We all have our moments, don't we, Captain?"

Kirk stood up, mostly recovered. He held his arms out and inspected the dripping folds of his robe.

"I can't decide whether to change or to eat first, but all of a sudden I'm starved. Do you think we could bend the rec room rules for once and eat our lunch in our swimsuits?"

All of the rec rooms were closed for maintenance except for one on deck 8, left open for the engineering teams. Fortunately, the room was unoccupied. Kirk hung his wet robe over a chair, and they punched in their meals and got comfortable at one of the tables.

"I meant to ask you, Ms. Caffrey, about why you're still aboard ship," Kirk said.

"I have a cabin on New Seattle for the rest of the leave, but it's off-season there, now, and the

shuttle only runs once a week. We just missed one when we made orbit, so I'll be catching the next one tomorrow."

"What is there on New Seattle that attracts you off-season? I thought it was strictly a winter-sports resort."

"Well, there's only one continent, you know, and it's a beautiful place in the summer, the mountains are magnificent even without the snow. There're hardly any tourists there now, and it's green and lush and warm and unspoiled, and I love it," Sajis said, carried away by her internal visions of it. "The cabins are right on the ocean, and there's a wonderful forest right up to the mountains, and--but it must sound dull to you."

"No, to an Iowa boy it sounds delicious."

Caffrey met his smile with her own.

"I'm glad to see you feeling better," she said. "A nice looking young man like you should always smile like that."

"Am I so young?" he smiled. "Sometimes I feel like ... Methuselah."

Sajis saw a shadow cross Kirk's face, and his eyes went far away, but whatever he'd remembered, he tucked it back wherever it had come from.

"Thank you for making me get some exercise, Ms. Caffrey," he said. "I feel alive again, at least."

"Will you be going back to Wrigley's, sir?"

"I don't know. Not today, anyway."

He finished his coffee and took the tray to the wall disposal. Sajis was still working on her sandwich.

"Is that all you're going to eat?" she said.

Kirk came back to the table, slipped on his nearly dry robe, and put his hands on the table, leaning over to look Sajis in the eye.

"My friend Nurse Caffrey, that is all I'm going to eat. If you have any complaints, you'll have to take them to the Captain, who will be in his quarters."

"Just asking!" she laughed, and watched him leave. There was still a detectable slump to the way he walked that made her wonder how much of his recovered cheerfulness was genuine and how much was bravado.

* * *

Kirk did not go directly to his quarters. He took the turbolift to the Bridge, stepping off into a mob of maintenance engineers who were working like beavers to overhaul controls and instruments. The command chair was apart and in pieces, and again, Kirk marveled at the complex parts that made up the simple-seeming piece of furniture that composed his command unit. It was amazing to him that they would ever be able to put it all back together. The panels on nearly every other station were open, too, their electronic guts spread out, mechanical servomotors disassembled on the floors. Kirk had to walk the perimeter gingerly to avoid crushing components or fingers.

The team chief, a Tellurian Commander unknown to Kirk, glared at the beachrobed invader and ordered him off the Bridge. Kirk complied meekly, knowing these people had enough to concern them without brass breathing down their necks. Besides, Scotty would cut his leave short after two weeks to come back and spend his last week of vacation supervising the work on "his" ship, and there was no fussier Chief Engineer anywhere than Scotty.

Crazy Scotty. Dear, hard-drinking, dependable, crazy Scotty. Kirk walked back to his quarters and went directly to his desk, switching on the vidscreen and having the computer display Scotty's personnel file. The man was a phenomenon. Kirk could trust him with his life. He had trusted him--with his life and the lives of the rest of the crew, sometimes with the lives of whole worlds. Scotty had stuck by him when Janice had taken over the ship. Scotty had gotten him out of the mishovan bar and brought him back here. Scotty--not Spock, not ... McCoy ... had helped him. It seemed strange but somehow very right. He wanted, suddenly, to thank Scotty, to call him, but Scotty would be out carousing---

And for himself, of course, there would be no more carousing, Kirk reminded himself.

He shut off the vidscreen and propped his head up on one arm. He felt uncomfortable in his quarters. Closing his eyes, he saw himself again as Natalie came into the room. The sex goddess. No, he didn't want to stay here and be reminded of her--or of any of the others, most especially of Janice. But he could not go back to Wrigley's. Couldn't. That last woman, the big-breasted Eurasian, had tried every technique in her enormous professional repertoire. He had guaranteed her an extravagant tip if she could bring him to orgasm. But expert though she was, and big as he was, bigger than he had ever been before in his life, he could not come. Sex just hurt. And later, when the drug had finally worn off, he was left with the first problem: he couldn't get an erection at all. He wasn't a man anymore; he could not function as a man; he was beginning not to really care about fucking anymore, it was gone, past, over. He was done with sex.

Janice had won. She was not a man, no, but neither was he. He was a neuter. He would get used to the idea of being ... impotent. There. He'd used the word. It wasn't as terrible as he had thought it should be. He said it out loud:

"Impotent."

It had an incongruously friendly sound. He wouldn't have to worry about a lot of things, now that

he could forget about sex; he wouldn't have to play seduction games; wouldn't have to worry about hurt feelings and sad or angry farewells; wouldn't have to concern himself with trying to treat his female crewmembers neutrally or fairly; wouldn't have to agonize over the problems of mixing a future marriage with his career; wouldn't have to worry about whether he would like to start a family soon ... would he?

He sobbed, once. Then he caught himself.

Let it go.

He could not stay here. He rose and walked into the corridor, looking up and down its curving length. Empty. Like the feeling in his chest. He walked.

He could not stay here. He could not go to Wrigley's. No point to staying at the Base. Where else was there? Nurse Caffrey's New Seattle? But he had no reservations. He could get to Earth in six days from here, but that would leave him little time to spend before he'd have to start back, and he didn't want to inflict his relatives with his depression. He had no urge to visit any of the nearby star systems. He considered joining Spock on Sequar IV for a full second before rejecting that idea; he'd be a millstone around his friend's neck, there. No, he really had nowhere to go. That realization made him feel more hollow, still. He walked the decks aimlessly. He paused at dinner time to have a light meal, but found he had no appetite after all. Then he resumed walking, and thinking, round and round and round without getting anywhere.

His meditation was broken by echoing voices coming around the bend in the corridor down which he found himself walking, and Kirk realized he was just a few doors from Sickbay. Who would be in Sickbay now?

The doors into the main ward were set open, and inside, a young woman in an engineering jumpsuit was sitting up on a bed while Nurse Caffrey was running an instrument over the engineer's hand.

"--Wouldn't be so bad if you electricians would start thinking with your heads instead of your hands," Caffrey was saying. "Oh, hello, Captain. Be done here in a second."

"I thought you were on R&R, Ms. Caffrey."

Caffrey raised her eyes to the ceiling.

"A nurse's work is never done," she said. "There, young woman, you're all soldered back together like a shiny new microcircuit."

The engineer thanked Caffrey, nodded to Kirk nervously, and slunk out of the ward. Kirk leaned in the open doorway while the nurse put away the medical instruments.

"It's so quiet around here that I half expect to find ghosts haunting the empty decks," he said.

"You're not the only one. The engineers have been talking about some strange man wandering the decks out of uniform talking to himself."

"Discovered!" Kirk laughed. "The Ghost of Missions Past himself."

"Have you decided to stay aboard, then?"

"I haven't tried to decide anything. A person can get tired of making decisions all the time."

"I don't doubt it," Caffrey said. She finished tidying up and set her back to a bulkhead, folding her arms.

"You might do me a big favor if you think you could produce one more decision today," she said.

"Name it."

"I need someone to share costs and accommodations on New Seattle. A girlfriend of mine on the Ypsilanti was supposed to be here for R&R now, too, but the Ypsilanti was sent off to that blockade on Tholia, so I'm stuck with the full costs. It's a nice place, Captain, and you'd have your own cabin, and no one around but me. I spend most of my time away from the cabins anyway, so you'd have all the peace and quiet you could want--if that's what you want."

Kirk studied Caffrey carefully for the first time. He knew very little about her except that she was an excellent nurse and physical therapist, and had a refreshing sense of humor. She was mature, in her early 50's, though she seemed to have the energy of a woman half her age. She was, he decided, both likeable and harmless.

"How soon do I have to come up with an answer?" he asked.

"I'm beaming down to catch the shuttle at 0500."

"All right, if I'm going, I'll meet you in transporter room B at 0500."

"You don't like to leave things up in the air, much, do you?" Caffrey said half-sarcastically.

Kirk shrugged.

"How much would half the costs be?" he said.

"Five hundred credits, or thereabouts."

"That's rather expensive privacy, isn't it?"

"To me, it's worth it. The place has sentimental value."

Kirk covered his surprise, but he would not have thought Caffrey to be the sentimental type. Then, again, he didn't strike people as sentimental, either, and he knew he was. It was why he avoided going back to some places ... like ... well, never mind.

"It's pretty there, eh?"

"If you're partial to mountains, ocean, and warm, sunny days."

"I like them very much. You said it's quiet?"

"Well, no, not exactly. There's always a breeze in the trees, and the surf pounding, and bees buzzing around a lot, and plenty of bird ruckus in the day and frog racket at night. Hardly any people, though, and no machines or motorized vehicles at all. In fact, to get to our cabin from the shuttlefield, we'll have to sail a sailboat--it's too far to row easily, and motorized craft aren't allowed."

She had him. He knew it, and so did she. She was barely suppressing a smile of triumph.

"0500, then, Ms. Caffrey."

"Great! Bring some warm clothes, the evenings are cool."

"All right. Anything else?"

"No, the supplies are taken care of. There's no hunting allowed on the planet, but the fishing is fantastic, if you want to bring some tackle."

"I'll do that."

Caffrey unfolded her arms and let her smile overwhelm her face, a smile that erased twenty years.

"I'm glad you're coming--for my financial state and for you, too. I really think you'll like New Seattle, Captain. It's a lot like Earth used to be, they say. I always come away from the place feeling brand new."

Kirk nodded, made some parting comments, and wandered back to his quarters. To fill the rest of the evening, he packed leisurely, pulling his dressy civies out of his satchel, the things he had worn or planned to wear on Wrigley's. The clothes seemed obscene to him now. He stuffed them into the laundry chute with a vengeance. Then he rooted through his bureau, hunting more rustic clothing. He pulled out several hard-worn pairs of slacks, and found his straw farmer's hat that had belonged to his grandfather. It was still in excellent condition, though stained with three generations of noontday suns, and it fit. Then, under some socks, he came on a plaid, real-wool shirt, a heavy, cold weather garment that he had bought on impulse last year. He had never worn it. It had an antique cut, with buttons and a pointed fold-over collar, and it had reminded him of a shirt he had once worn in 1930's New York. He ran his hand over the soft, slightly itchy surface, lost in thought. Then he wrenched himself out of it, a little angry.

No point to this!

Life had taken too many turns since Edith Keeler. Life may be less, now, but it was still his life. And there was a clean, private world waiting to soothe his soul. He yearned for a rebirth of some sort, like Nurse Caffrey claimed she found there. He stuffed the shirt into his satchel with resoluteness. He needed a fresh start, and New Seattle was as good a place to start looking for it as any.

* * *

Genuine wool has a number of remarkable features, not the least of which is its ability to be soaked through every fiber and still retain its insulating properties. Kirk was glad to be wearing his wool shirt when the shuttle to New Seattle left him and Nurse Caffrey off in a chilling, driving rain-storm. The resort town was completely shut down but for one office, where they went to check in for their cabin and hire their sailboat. The proprietor eyed them, accepted their credits, handed them a plastic-coated map with the cabin site marked on it, and muttered, "Take the first boat on the dock."

Kirk and Caffrey marched through the stinging downpour to the dock and set about hoisting the sail of their craft. The rain was so heavy that at times, one end of the little boat was almost invisible from the other end, and a mist was rising off the water.

"New Seattle!" Kirk growled, but he might as well have said "Pig shit!"

Caffrey, who had been uncharacteristically quiet since they'd stepped off the shuttle, cast off the line and scrambled aboard, shrinking down against the stern to operate the tiller. At least the waves in the harbor were subdued by a breakwater, which could not be seen through the thick, clinging fog.

"Are you sure you know how to steer a--oof!"

The yard-arm had swung around, knocking the wind out of Kirk and narrowly avoiding sending him over the side. Caffrey was up instantly, yanking the sail back around and tying it.

"Do you?" she said.

"Of course I do," Kirk yelled, rubbing his shoulder. He could barely see Caffrey through the sheets of rain. "I'm a ship captain, you know!"

"Glad to hear it. So grab the tiller and let's get this show on the road."

"I can barely see where we're going, let alone the map. By the way, where is the map?"

"Don't you have it?" she asked.

"I thought you had it! We must have left in on the dock."

"Well, hell, we're half way out of the harbor, and the wind will have blown it off the dock by now. What should we do?"

"We could go back and get another one," he said, as the shifting wind bore them farther from shore.

"Wait, I've had the same campsite before. If we stay in sight of the shore, I am pretty sure I'd recognize it."

"If the rain keeps up, we'll be lucky to be able to see the shore."

"You have a better idea? The proprietor will charge us an arm and a leg for another map."

"All right," Kirk acceded. "Which direction do we go when we get out of here?"

"South, I think."

"In this fog, I couldn't tell South from Suquamish. Which direction out of the harbor?"

Caffrey was only a voice, now, cloaked in mist.

"Go left."

"Ms. Caffrey, on a vessel, 'left' is port and 'right' is starboard."

"Don't start pulling rank on me out here, or you'll end up taking another swim."

"I was not pulling rank, I'm trying to educate you in proper seamanship."

"Look out, the breakwater's right there!"

The concrete wall seemed to rise up out of the fog and drift past them. The water was beginning to get rough.

"All right, we're out of the harbor, go left, willya?"

"Hard to port. And, our luck is holding. We'll have to tack."

"What?"

"Tacking is a way of sailing when the wind is coming from the direction you want to go in. It's the hardest sort of sailing."

"Hey, you're heading for open sea, I think!"

"No, that's tacking. We have to zig-zag. We'll turn around in a minute."

"I never had to do anything like that when I was here before, the wind always seemed to be going my way. Then, last year, there wasn't enough wind to use the sail at all. We had to row the full thirty kilometers," Sajis said.

"There's plenty of wind now, it's just not blowing in our direction. Of course, we weren't counting on having a storm to turn the wind, either."

"You sound angry. You're not angry, are you?"

Kirk sneezed.

"I am soaked to the skin, and frozen to the core, on a beautiful, balmy, sunshiny planet. How could I be angry, Ms. Caffrey?"

"Yeah, that's what I thought."

"I didn't hear what you said," Kirk called.

"I said it's not supposed to rain this time of year here, only in the spring and the fall."

"Then let's hope it doesn't last long," Kirk said.

"I certainly hope it doesn't last long," Caffrey answered.

It took several drenching hours in the fog and rain to find the camp, by which time both Kirk and Caffrey were sniffing and sneezing and conversing in grunts. They hauled the sailboat's line to the trees above the high tide line, and trudged up the sandy path to the pair of wood-slat cabins. Caffrey immediately claimed the cabin to the left, which was the snuggler, though older-looking, of the two.

After several minutes of fruitless poking around in his own leaky cabin, Kirk stomped back out onto the little porch. Caffrey was standing, arms akimbo, inside her own doorway. She looked as disgusted as Kirk felt.

"No goddamn dry wood," she growled across the downpour between them.

"None here, either. Any food over there?"

"Flour, coffee, sugar. Not much else."

"I thought everything was supposed to be here," Kirk called, trying to keep a reasonable tone in his voice.

Caffrey sneezed heartily.

"Gesundheit."

"Same to you," she said. "I did hear that the management had changed hands, but I expected the services to stay the same."

She sat down on the damp stoop, looking miserable. Producing a hanky, she blew her nose.

Kirk splashed across the clearing and squatted under the overhang with her.

"It's not your fault, Nurse," he said. "I'm not blaming you."

"That's big of you," she sniffled. "If it weren't that the shuttle won't be back for another week, we could head back for the ship right now."

"Things aren't that bad," Kirk said, looking around. "I think we can get a fire going, at least."

"How? Everything's soggy. Some idiot left the wood right out there in the rain."

"Survival course: fire in a rainforest," Kirk said jauntily. He got up and trotted out into the rain, retrieving several logs.

"You can't burn wet wood," Caffrey said.

"Watch me."

He found an axe and went to work out on the porch, splitting the logs into thinner and thinner strips. It took a while, but when he laid the axe down again, he had a heap of kindling the thickness of matchsticks, and a number of chunks in progressively larger sizes.

"Let's go," he said, grabbing the kindling and some of the small chunks. He arranged everything in the wood-burning stove, opened the flue, and finding a lighter, set a flame to the splinters of soggy wood, which caught slowly, then crackled into flame.

"Voilà!" Kirk said.

"I don't believe it!"

"The secret is in cutting the kindling small enough. We'll be warm in no time, and once the stove is going, the wet logs should burn, too. I hope you don't mind if I stay here to warm up?"

"Great, I'll see about getting some coffee going," she said. With the situation in control again, she turned her mind to the other problems. "We'll have to go back to the resort to get food as soon as the weather clears. Until then, I think we should be able to shift for ourselves. I found enough supplies to at least make bread, and I noticed edible greens and berries back along the path."

"When I can feel my feet again, I'll see how the fish are biting down in the cove," Kirk offered. "Did you say that you know how to make bread?"

"Of course I know how to make bread. People didn't always eat synthe-food, you know."

"Between the two of us, there may be hope for this vacation yet."

"I hope so. Listen, both of us had better get into some dry clothes. We can hang our wet things by the stove to dry."

"Ms. Caffrey--"

"Wait a minute. If we're going to spend two and half weeks without another soul to talk to, you can at least drop the 'Ms.' business."

"What should I call you?"

"Caffrey is fine. My first name is Sajis."

"Sajis. All right. I guess you should call me Jim, then."

She nodded, busy with the antique enameled coffeepot.

"What was it that you were going to say before I interrupted?"

"I was going to ask if it would be all right if I spent the night here tonight, or at least until the rain lets up. My cabin was leaking waterfalls when I looked inside. I wouldn't want to be a bother, though, if it would offend you."

"Offend me? I've been married three times, and I'm a nurse, and I'm almost old enough to be your mother. You can sleep bare-mother naked, for all I care, but you'd better sleep warm, 'cause if you get sick, I'll warn you, I'm the meanest nurse in the Fleet."

* * *

The cabin was cozy. The stove, well-stocked with logs for the night, had a slight, rosy glow to it in the darkness. The rain was slowing, but the drizzle pinged lightly on the window glass, white-sound that lulled the mind, and every so often a log in the stove would settle with a muffled, crackling noise, a cheerful sound. All else was silence. In the heap of blankets on the thread-bare carpet, Kirk absorbed the calm that seeped through from the soul of the place.



Thy house hath a pleasant aspect, he thought, his mind in a drowsy muddle. But I'd like to get some sleep ...

His body was on ship-time, still early evening, though half the local earth-length night was past, here. Being bone-tired didn't seem good enough--he couldn't sleep. But at least he wasn't thinking very much at the moment. His mind seemed to have put some part of him on a shelf for a while, a simple act of self-defense, aided by a change of scene and pace. The roiling anger, the coiling pain, were elsewhere for a time, and he existed only to listen and to feel.

So comfortable. So different, this place. It had a magic, a presence. Sajis Caffrey was in tune with the presence. Several times he had seen her when she had not thought him watching, and she had brushed against this or that item, touched at a worn chair, lingered at a window. The mockery melted out of her eyes, then, and the constant hint of sardonic smile softened, and the steel-plated, no-nonsense would dissolve into ... something else. The transfigurations were momentary, but they left Kirk feeling almost a kind of voyeur. He had attempted to rescind his request to stay here, tonight, wanting to give the privacy the person had come to find, but Sajis had teased him out of it. She had a way of making sanity seem foolish, and foolishness seem sane, whichever she required at the moment.

She. He didn't think of her as a she, a woman. She was just ... Sajis. And that was a comfortable feeling too. Like the silk-down blanket, like the warm fire. Like a stomach full of homemade bread and real coffee ...

A drift of fragrant woodsmoke wafted by from the inevitable flaw in the stove's stack, and Kirk took in a deep breath. Even the air here has character ...

He sat up abruptly. There was too much smoke in the air, it was thick in the room, but he hadn't been noticing, the aroma had become so familiar.

The metal stack of the stove was glowing red near the roof and a cloud of smoke was swirling at the apex. The roof was burning!

"Caffrey!" he yelled, scrambling to his feet. "Sajis, wake up! Fire!"

He bounded in the direction of the single bedroom, tripping over a chair in the gloom. The crackling he'd been so blissfully listening to was becoming pops of combustion in the aged, exposed rafters. He picked himself up and swallowed a lungful of smoke as it swirled downward. He choked, coughing, and stumbled toward the other room.

"Dear God!" Sajis' voice shrieked.

"Sajis," Kirk choked.

A yielding warmth groped at his face. He grabbed the arm.

"Let's get out of here!"

"No, no, we have to put it out!"

"Can't, no way," he said, hanging onto her arm and trying to remember the way out. The smoke was hot and acrid. His eyes were streaming.

"Which way?" he cried.

"Oh God, it can't burn, it can't burn!"

"Get hold of yourself!"

"Oh God, God ... this way. Left. Can you see?"

"No, but go."

She doubled over, coughing helplessly, half-falling. Kirk shoved her ahead of him. The vague paleness of night peered through a window. Behind them, the rafter timbers and ancient, dry trusses and studs were going up like fall leaves.

The window opened outward with a weary creak. Kirk pushed Caffrey over the sill bodily, then scuttled over himself, landing on the sprawled nurse. They picked themselves up, and in the dim glow of low, reflecting rain clouds, they stumbled onto the porch of Kirk's cabin. The rain drifted in at them under the overhang, carried by the wind.

"The rain may put it out," Kirk said when he'd regained his voice.

"It's old. It'll burn to the ground." Each syllable was a sob.

"Well, we're safe here. And we didn't lose much, just some clothes and some sleep."

The flames were visible now, in small, opening seams in the roof. The fire was beginning to pop loudly, drowning out the distant hiss of the raindrops.

"Couldn't we do something to put it out?" she pleaded.

"We have no equipment. But the owners will be responsible; the flue was obviously in disrepair."

"Oh, to hell with the blame," Sajis wept. She sat down on the dripping step. "To hell with all of it."

"Is there something of value still in there?" Kirk said. "We might still break a window in your bedroom if it's worth the risk."

"No," she said. "It's not like that ..."

"Are you all right?"

"No, but what the hell."

"If you're hurt--"

"Just shut up, will you, dammit! Shut up and leave me be, f' God's sakes." She buried her face against her knees.

The cabin went up like tinder, despite the rain. They watched from the porch of the other structure, wrapped in blankets Kirk found inside. By morning, the rain had let up. The wisps of smoke caught day's first dancing sunbeams as they scurried over the glistening crests of slate-grey mountains to the east. The Human's first dawn on New Seattle was greeted with birdsong and ashes.

* * *

The next days after the cabin burned were busy. Caffrey and Kirk launched the boat again and sailed back to the resort town to report the accident. The proprietor only shook his head, made them both fill out long damage forms, and told them they would have to make do with the remaining structure, as the other cabins were either not available, or in worse condition than the one that had burned. He did apologize, more or less, for the lack of groceries in the place, and loaded the boat down for the return trip.

When they got back to the little cove at the camp site, Kirk and Caffrey hauled the food up to the cabin, divided the cabin space into separate territories, agreed to trade off the cooking chores, and proceeded to go their own ways. They saw little of each other except at dinner, which was scheduled at sundown. In the evenings, Caffrey went for long walks, and did not return until very late. Kirk would turn in to bed early in the sleeping bag he had borrowed in town, and then try to sleep. He wasn't sleeping well, and he was dreaming a great deal, always nightmares, the cabin burning around him, his flesh burning around him, his soul lashed to a high rafter in a crackling womb of blazing timbers that tented over him and trapped the smoke that scorched his future ...

He tried not to think. When he couldn't sleep, he would take walks in the moonlit clearing, or down to the beach. Once, coming back late from the beach, he had seen Caffrey standing in the ashes of the old cabin, not doing anything, only standing there as though communing with the night. She didn't notice him, and he didn't interrupt her. He wondered about it briefly, then put it out of his mind.

With the rainstorm past, summer reasserted itself, and Kirk set about exploring the area in earnest. The beach was grey sand and gravel peppered with touches of brown and yellow, and the white or purple parings of wave-polished shells. The wind had normalized, and now carried the fragrance of salt in from the sea. Back behind the beach, the land rose in storm-gouged, steep cliffs that were overhung with lush vegetation. Only the path up out of the cove could be negotiated without aid. Enormous scoured and bleached logs, often times entire trees with the worn-off stubs of their root bases, were heaped up in nature's order at the base of the cliffs, and Kirk amused himself one morning by manufacturing a chopped-wedge ladder from one of the thinner logs and maneuvering it, not without difficulty, against one of the most inaccessible portions of cliff.

From the top, he could see a long way, but there was only more water behind the water, featureless except for the whitecaps. The gulls were there, as always, though not Terran gulls, of course, but smaller, grey, stub-winged creatures. Their cries were different in structure and timbre, but the inflection of Joy! was the same. The sun was gliding toward the zenith, ducking behind some scudding, good weather clouds, and the wind was warm, salty, and sighed in his ears. He leaned back against a mossy rock and gazed up into the vault of brilliant sky, squinting against the glare.

Blue!

The rec room environment simulators came close, but there was always an immediacy to the real thing that could never be matched by programmed illusions.

So blue. Blue like Terran skies, some Terran eyes.

Bones' eyes, ice and noon skies, variations in blue.

The damned idiot. Kirk's bitterness had dissipated since, but a sadness still accompanied the memory: my friend didn't understand.

Well, it was over, no grudge to weigh it down, just ... regret. For Bones, too, he knew. No doubt at all that McCoy would have had a hand in it with Scotty seeing that Kirk found himself back on the ship. But Bones was letting him alone, now, he had the good sense to back off.

Going back was another thing entirely. Going back. It was a neutronium wall. It was the end. He would have to face up to that, try to decide what to do in the twelve days and nights left to him. Maybe if he could make a choice, he could sleep again, think again, hope again. Maybe. And maybe the sky would fall, too.

But there were choices, of a sort. He could resign. He could put in a request to transfer to ground duty. Or he could pretend that he was fine until the cancer in his psyche eventually crippled him, until he made some mistake that sent his ship and crew to disaster. Probably, he would not have the third option, though. Friend or no friend, McCoy would have psychological tests waiting for him when he came back, and those tests would pick out the fault, trace the lines of stress, predict a quake. He'd be pulled off command anyway. There must be no major flaw in the psychological topography of a starship captain.

Goodbye, goodbye, it's been so nice to know you. Too bad about you, James T. Kirk, but don't forget to write.

The sun was leaning into early afternoon, picking scintillating replicas of itself off countless crests and troughs in the surf, punishing Kirk's eyes with the dazzle. He abandoned his lookout, strolling inland to the cool forest, and deliberately stopped thinking. He had twelve days to decide.

The trees that rose from the soft loam were a timberman's dream--the immense, straight trunks rose at least sixty meters before branching into dense, pine-like foliage that blocked most of the sun. As a consequence, only mossy groundcovers, knee-tall fern plants, and straggling infant trees inhabited the forest floor, and walking was a pleasure. He met no animals, for the birds that he could hear but not see in the treetops broadcast his approach with a gossipy chirping. An animal trail wound around hummocks of moss, mouldering graves of fallen logs, low ponds of green water with cheerful yellow swamp blossoms, and Kirk followed it, absorbing its healthful calmness as best he could, though it seemed he was a sponge with a dense, metal center; the peace could only soak in so far.

Relax, he begged his soul. But every day was proving wrong a dogma by which he had always lived; sometimes trying wasn't enough. It was a disheartening discovery, and rather late in life to have to be dealt with.

The path led into the gentle foothills, and sometimes, through the umbrella of branches or the ordered stands of trunks, he caught a glimpse of glistening white snow against the blue, part of the breath-taking range of reaching stone that made this world a winter-sports valhalla. A good hike off to the north, there appeared to be a break in the trees and a hint of a meadow. Kirk left the narrow path and headed up the long slope toward the promise of tall, emerald grass, and a clear view of the mountains. He wanted to look at the mountains. He wanted that sensation of awe they could impart, that perception of tiny-increment-in-eternity that their virtual agelessness could awaken. Some things didn't change, not so it mattered.

The trees thinned, the light filtered down more freely, mossy ground firmed underfoot, and then he was on the edge of a broad, rolling clearing--with an orchard! Orderly ranks of leafy, gnarled trees ribboned in contours across the weedy field, bearing pale green globes of immature apples. There were--he counted the matrix dimensions and calculated--72 trees, at least. He could not imagine how Terran apple trees had become planted on New Seattle. This was supposed to be an untouched world outside the resort.

Some of the fruits were almost of an edible size. Kirk captured a low branch and plucked one. He knew it would be hard and sour, but he bit a chunk out of it, then puckered with nostalgic pleasure and strode toward the center of the meadow to take in the vista.

"Ouch!"

Something bounced off his ear, leaving it stinging. Another hard projectile pelted his shin. Little green apples rained around him.

"Hey!" he protested, and squinted up into the branches. A flash of plydenim-blue peeked through the topmost leaves.

"Sajis?! What in blazes are you doing up there?"

All he could make out was a Cheshire grin under a cap of grey hair.

"I'm eating lunch," came the reply.

"In a tree?"

"You have something against trees?"

"No, but--Are you all right up there?"

"Certainly I'm all right. Come on up and see for yourself."

He scanned the branches of the stately tree, but they looked sturdy. Shrugging mentally, he shinned up into the first limbs. From there, climbing was easy, with the branches arranged around the trunk almost like a winding staircase. Pushing leaves and dangling fruit out of his way, he arrived in the uppermost branches, where he found Caffrey comfortably straddled on a heavy limb, her back supported by another one immediately above and behind her perch. Her cloth lunch sack hung by its strap from a twig.

"These are good apples, but we're about a month early to enjoy them," she said as Kirk settled next to her.

"This must be an old tree," he commented. "I've never seen an apple tree this tall,"

"The climate's perfect and the soil is terrific, but it is an old tree. When I first saw it, some twenty-six years ago, it was already nearly this size. It's some kind of hardy hybrid, I think."

"You've been coming here for twenty-six years?"

"On again and off again. I missed a good eight years, once, when I was married to Timbuck Ahamele. He was a mining engineer, and trees weren't on his list of favorite things. He was a good man, though. See that row on the end, of younger trees? Meis Nauhaus and I planted those twenty-six years ago."

"Who planted the original trees?"

"Never found out. The first people on New Seattle were Filipino-descent farmers, I suppose one of them must have planted it, but the farmers didn't stick around for more than a few years before the resort people discovered the place and bought 'em out."

She dug into the cloth sack and came up with a wrapped sandwich.

"Here, have a sandwich. Real ham, I reconstituted it this morning. Help yourself, I've already had one."

Kirk made short work of the sandwich and then rearranged himself more comfortably on the limb.

"I see," he said, gesturing at the vista around them, "why you took to the treetops."

"It's nice and private up here, too, and you can see everything that's going on for a long way around without being seen yourself," she agreed. "And this old tree is my friend, been climbin' it half my life and know it like a child."

Her eyes softened, suddenly, and she looked away from Kirk and back to the mountains, smiling slightly.

"When I can't climb this tree any more, that's the day I'll fix an overdose of drexynol and kiss the world goodbye."

Kirk peered at her, surprised at her unexpected intensity. The wind from the sea stirred her short hair and fluttered strands of it into her eyes, and she squinted as she brushed them back, bringing the lines around her eyes into sharp focus that emphasized her age. But she still climbed trees.

"I haven't done this since I was a kid," Kirk said, putting the aches--hers and his--out of his mind.

"Done this? What climbed a tree?"

"Oh, I've climbed all right--to reconnoiter a military situation or to try to spot missing landing parties or to get away from a wild animal. But I haven't climbed one for the sheer hell of it, not since I was ten or twelve."

"That's a crime."

"I forgot all about how it feels."

"Living in a tin can all the time will do that to you. There are times aboard ship, between shore leaves, when I think I'll step out an air lock if I don't get some fresh air to breathe. The rec rooms can make you think you see grass and blue sky, but they can't make you think the air is fresh. It always tastes canned."

"And you can't climb the trees ..."

They laughed, then sat in companionable silence, listening to the leaves rustling around them, soft almost-hisses as the surfaces brushed each other in the breeze's embrace. The smaller branches bobbed under the weight of the apples, teasing the Humans with intermittent kisses of sunshine. The universe of the tree was green, dappled dark green, pale bleached green, rich golden green. Green. Alive. A little of the inner resistance seeped out of Kirk's soul, displaced by the harmony of shades of green.

A bird fluttered, then perched just above their heads. Neither Human moved. The bird had shaggy-looking feathers and was leaner than most Terran birds, almost a stick-figure bird, but it chirruped raucously at the intruders as though scolding them for venturing into its domain. It changed limbs a few times, as though wanting to retreat without losing its dignity, then with a haughty flapping, departed for a more private lookout.

"That was a Farnam diggory--bossiest bird on the planet," Caffrey chuckled, relaxing again. "I'm surprised she didn't chase us back down to the ground."

"We had her outnumbered."

"Oh, hardly. I'd back a diggory against a Starfleet squadron any day. Why, I remember the time my son Avian was playing near a mated pair's nesting tree, and the diggories chased.."

She stopped, her mouth still open to finish the sentence. Then she shut it, swallowing, and looked away again. The silence stretched out, broken only by the song of the leaves. Then she sighed.

"My backside's getting a little tired of this branch, think I'll go on down now," she said, unhooking her sack and hiking its strap over her shoulder.

Kirk caught her arm and helped her over to the trunk, and they scrambled down the convenient ladder of limbs and dropped the last two meters to the grass.

"Well, hell, I'm sorry I'm such a kill-joy."

"I hadn't noticed," Kirk said. "Where are you headed now?"

"Don't know. Maybe I'll head up into the mountains and see if I can spot some yandros or an energumen. They haven't been coming down to the shore yet this year, I haven't seen a track."

She waved and strode up the hill through the weeds, a distinct air of "don't ask to come along" about her. Kirk shrugged. It was just as well. The sandwich had awakened his stomach. Refusing to wonder what yandros or an energumen might be, he headed back through the forest in the direction of the cabin. He was tiring already of the reconstituted food, even if it was so close to fresh that the difference was elusive. Like the air in the ship's rec room, it still tasted canned. He decided to take out the sailboat and see what sort of dinner the water beyond the surf offered. And he would ponder his problem, again. There really wasn't any way to keep ignoring it.

* * *

After the strange but gratifying encounter with Caffrey in her apple tree, Kirk found or manufactured reasons which allowed him to share more time with her. Being around her relaxed him, and she was intriguing. In some ways she reminded him of his mother, in some ways of Bones, in some ways of a

dozen different people who had been important to him at some point in his life. And still, Sajis had her own uniqueness. She was like seasoned wood or an old boot: comfortable. Even the touch of lingering sadness that sometimes surfaced in her seemed appropriate, even endearing. Kirk found that he thought of her more and more as someone he could like. A peer that he could trust.

Sitting on a half-log in the late afternoon shadow of the cabin, six days left to the trip, Kirk tossed leftover bread crusts to the little "sparkies", the local analog of chipmunks, and he mused over what he had learned about Sajis.

Two nights after the treetop lunch, he had awakened to muffled sobs, and not one to ignore anguish, he had gone into Sajis' bedroom to see what he might do to help. But Sajis was only dreaming. He had nudged her awake, and she had startled him, then, by clinging to him and weeping in his arms. When she had calmed again, he had tucked her back into the bed and left without a word. But since then, she had begun to open up to him. The banter between them continued, because it was enjoyable, and because it was a safe way to become close without the dangerous intensity of direct discussion.

By bits and pieces, inferences and guess and cautious questioning, Kirk began to comprehend the facets of Sajis' character.

She had been married three times. The last two had been contract marriages, the first had been a marriage-for-life ... and a personal tragedy. The only issue of the marriage had been a son--a birth-defected and mongoloid child whose six happy summers of life had been spent on New Seattle--in the cabin that had burned to the ground. Not three months after the child had died, Sajis' husband, a Starfleet dietician, had been lost with all hands on the ill-fortuned Plinske. And Sajis went to space.

She had been a physical therapist before, and added nursing to her qualifications. Starfleet became her home, her life, as it had for so many others. Her two subsequent contract marriages had been genial, but when the times for renewal had come around, Sajis had opted out.

Kirk tossed out the last crust and showed his empty hands to the sparkies. They didn't understand, and kept waiting for more handouts. Their speckled fur was pretty, and Kirk kept still, wanting them to stay a little longer. But then they yipped and darted back to their trees, leaving Kirk to his thoughts.

He admired Sajis. She was more than the surviving type, she had gusto. Sometimes he wanted badly to talk to her, to tell her about the ... thing ... that had happened to him. She would understand, perhaps. She had had three husbands, she would have a healthy outlook on life. On sex. It couldn't all be so degrading to be a woman. It couldn't be all physical invasion, mental torture, functional disgust, game-playing, being used. He couldn't imagine Sajis being used. But then, it occurred to him that Sajis was an adult. Janice had always been a child. Even in her intellectual glory, she had been a child, always needy, never satisfied. Maybe Janice's continual needfulness had been what had set her up to be used. The idea drew a thorn out of his conscience.

I've known too many needy women, Kirk realized. They had fed on his hard-won strength, on his hard-earned power. And all the time that they thought they were being used, they were drawing on my strength ... and they resented it.

Oh God.

He didn't know why it was that way for them, the needy ones. But Sajis had avoided turning out like that. He sorted through his memories to find other women, like Sajis, who had made their lives their own. He was gratified at how many he knew: his own mother, for one; his sister-in-law, Aurelan, now dead; Edith, though Edith had come from another time; Areel Shaw, a successful lawyer and recently promoted to a commandership; Number One, an Enterprise alumna, now in line for a captaincy; Upenda Uhura, his friend and communications officer; Elaan, now the admired queen of Troyius; even Christine Chapel, whom he knew to be much more her own person than ship's gossip would admit her to be.

Still, he could not imagine how those women, those persons, coped with their biology. He remembered with fresh disgust the dark, foul-smelling blood that had collected in the tampon that had been pushed into him, when he had been her. To him, it had felt as though some part of his life were being lost, as though he had been injured, damaged, insulted. And it had hurt inside, where he could never remember hurting, not a clawed-out-inside pain like that was ...

And she had said that sex was an invasion. He had believed her. Just the tampon, deep inside, out of touch ... spread open and pushed in, later hauled out by some nurse and another shoved back in, a plug in a place to be invaded ...

He felt hot shame, knowing he had thought of vaginas that way, too, as a man. Often, in his maleness, they had been some item to be enjoyed, often a utility which happened to have a woman attached, and so the woman would have to be put up with, regardless of how dull or unpleasant she might be, would have to be wined, dined, lied to, pleased ...

But it wasn't always like that. No! Some times it had been, with a loved woman, the completion of joy, gates to heaven, vital act of most tender, consuming emotion.

But only some times.

So what is sex?

If, perhaps, he could find the answer, he would not have to face those other choices. Six days left. But likely there was not an answer, like so many aspects of the universe. No answers, only approximations.

"Kirk!"

The voice was far away. He stood up, trying to spot the caller.

"Jim, damn you!" the voice yelled, and it had an edge of pain.

Sajis!

"Where are you?"

"Up the trail. I've busted my damned foot, come here!"

He virtually flew up the path, through the berry shrubs and around the pines. Sajis was a disheveled ragamuffin, her clothes grass-stained and ripped, her hair stuck with leaves. She was leaning on a makeshift crutch of a forked branch, and had her lunch sack wrapped around her left foot. And the stormclouds on her face would have made a Klingon wet himself.

"It took you long enough to get here! I could have crawled it faster. Come here, let me get hold of your shoulder, I'm tired of this damn' stick."

"How badly are you hurt?"

"Ouch! Jesus Maria, this isn't the hundred meter dash, Kirk, what d'ya think I have on, seven-league boots?!"

"Maybe I'd better carry you."

"Oh no you don't! I'm not on my deathbed."

"Lean on me, then, you're not heavy."

"Ouch! Drat!" she snarled. "This sure puts a damper on things, doesn't it."

"Don't worry, I can take the boat to the resort and arrange for a special shuttle to get you back to the Starbase hospital."

"You just sit on that special shuttle. I'm not going to lose my vacation over a lousy foot. I'll take a good look at it when we get to the cabin."

They limped up the steps onto the porch, where Sajis finally eased down, and grumbling with every breath, began to undo her makeshift bandage to inspect the damage. Kirk knelt on a lower step and helped.

"Your shoe is soaking wet."

"Yeah, so it is. I hobbled to the nearest stream as soon as I could get up, and stuck the whole business into the cold water. Kept it from ballooning on me, or you wouldn't be able to get the shoe off by now. Kee-rist! Easy, will ya? You're not allowed to rip off stray toes without a medical license, I'll have you know."

Kirk eased the hiking shoe off and peeled down the sock. The ankle was puffy and watery-looking, with a huge purple bruise forming beside the heel.

"It doesn't seem to be broken," he said, running his fingers over the bones. "Of course, you'd need a scanner to be sure. How did you do this to yourself?"

"I don't want to talk about it" Sajis said.

Kirk smiled faintly, and pulled several leaves out of Sajis' hair as he sat beside her on the step.

"No, I wouldn't want to admit to falling out of an apple tree, either."

Sajis flushed.

"All right, Sherlock, wipe that wise-assed smirk off your face and go manufacture some bandages."

"Your wish," he laughed as he rose, "is my command."

"Up yours, Kirk."

Together, they bound the injured ankle, which Sajis confirmed was badly sprained, but not broken, and Kirk got her into the house and settled, then made dinner. The sun had dipped behind the trees earlier, and while they ate, the light blazed at them horizontally through the tall ranks of trunks as the day's angle reclined to bid the sky farewell. Throughout the meal, the glow passed over them through the open door, and they did not speak, attuned to the languid crimson light and its lingering heat. The birdsong outside had peaked, then tapered to a silent pause before the first tree-frog's chirrup greeted the alpenglow of evening. There was a special peace, tonight, or maybe it was an accumulated effect that Kirk was only noticing, but he felt that he might at last be able to sleep through an entire night. It would be a welcome respite.

He drew his eyes back into focus, then, and glanced over at Sajis.

She had not had much opportunity to clean up from her fall. A wilting apple leaf still dangled at the nape of her mussed hair. She looked almost pretty, gazing into the twilight.

"A penny for your thoughts," he said.

"I wish I hadn't bunged up my foot."

"Don't worry, I'll fashion you a pair of crutches in the morning, so you won't have to spend the rest of the week in that chair."

"Hey, thanks. I mean it. That would mean a lot to me, I can't endure being couped up. I'm afraid this vacation hasn't measured up to what it was supposed to be, has it?"

"I've enjoyed it very much."

"Maybe. You never quite let go, though."

A warning tightening in his stomach squelched his voice.

"Let go of what?" he managed.

"Whatever's been eating you since before we left the Enterprise."

"What makes you say something like that?" he scowled.

His eyes felt trapped by hers, caught in a phaser-sight, back to a wall. But then she looked away, inspecting a stain on her shirtsleeve.

"Never mind. Sorry I brought it up."

The tension had wound him up, and he uncoiled from his chair, pacing a semi-circle of the room before realizing what he was doing. He squatted beside the wood stove and opened it, poking at the burning logs with a stick, though the fire did not need his attention. He did not move for some time.

"Sajis?"

"Hmmm?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"Yeah?"

"It's personal."

"Spit it out."

"Your husbands. You said you had three of them?"

"Uh-huh. Meis, Timbuck, and Eddie. Good men, every one."

"But you left Timbuck and Eddie."

"Well, Timbuck n' me sort of left each other, just didn't renew the contract when it came around. But I did leave Eddie."

"Why?"

"He didn't like a traveling wife, and I didn't want to quit Starfleet. Why do you ask?"

"I'm not sure myself. I think I'm trying to work out something in my head."

"Oh hell. If anything as dull as my life story can help you out, then you're in dire straits," she laughed. "Ask away."

"You're sure you don't mind?"

"Hey ... Jim ..."

Her tone pleaded for him to look up at her again. Her face was ... open.

"It's okay," she said simply.

He nodded, feeling the knot loosen in his gut. It was okay. Sajis was okay.

"I was wondering, not sure how this fits in ... but did you love Eddie?"

"I still love Eddie. I just couldn't stay married to him."

"And you left him?"

"I guess I had to, to save both of us, in the end. Mostly, we couldn't cope with the structure-- he was jealous of my career, and I was jealous of his other women. Now that we're 'just friends' again, I think we have more good times than when we were hitched."

"But aren't you ever lonely?"

She had been carefully massaging her ankle to relax the injured ligaments, but she paused, and softly said,

"Do you know anyone who isn't?"

Kirk could only shake his head. He shrugged, then, and pushed up off his thighs to cross the room and latch the door against the infiltrating night chill.

"Jim, I've been wondering, too ... were you ever married?"

He forced himself to say it.

"Once. We were together for six weeks. She died."

"Good God. I'm sorry."

"I didn't know her very well," Kirk went on. "It happened much too fast, sometimes I can barely remember what she looked like. Anyway, it was some time ago--over a year."

"That must have been just before I came aboard. I remember you'd had some kind of injury around then, didn't you?"

"Amnesia."

"I remember that. It's in your medical file."

"My medical file." He flashed a wry smile. "It must make entertaining reading."

"You do have a colorful history. Some of the entries are even a bit bizarre. I don't envy you your job, Jim."

"I'm not sure that I belong in it anymore," he sighed. "I'm thinking of taking a planet-side assignment."

"You're kidding!"

"I'm serious."

"That would be disasterous!"

"No, I think I could adjust to it."

"To hell with your adjustment, I'm talking about us--the crew! There's no one else between here and Hell's Kitchen who can run that ship."

"A psychotic woman in a borrowed body could run it--so can someone else!"

Abrupt silence stunned the room. Sajis gave minute attention to the bruise under her ankle.

"Well, I haven't made up my mind yet," Kirk said after a while. "Your foot must be hurting, is there something I can get that would help?"

Shaking her head, Sajis bowed her forehead onto her raised knee.

"Oh God," she sighed.

Pulling himself together, Kirk crossed the room and put his hands on Sajis' shoulders. Regret and confusion were choking him.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry."

"'S not your fault."

"I didn't want to depress you. It wasn't fair ..."

"Life in general isn't fair."

"It does seem that way."

She sighed again and reached a hand up to cover one of his.

"I'm glad you're here. Thanks for coming along, Jim. Thanks for being here."

"I haven't done anything."

"You keep me from feeling too sorry for myself. You make me forget that I'm getting old. I wish I could do something to help you."

He felt a tiny smile tug at his lips, and encouraged it. He wanted to tell her, "You make me forget that I have to be a MAN--you let me feel like a person, first, and that feels good." Instead, he said,

"Anyone feisty enough to get high enough in a tree to fall out of it and sprain her ankle is a long way from getting old, Sajis."

"But I did fall out," she said. She made it sound like a summons to the Pearly Gates.

Her anguish mystified him. To him, she seemed to be dwelling on a problem that had no relationship to reality, no existence other than the existence she herself granted it. Sajis? Old? Ridiculous!

"Maybe you put too much importance on it. Maybe you should try to look at it from another perspective," he said. "You're only as old as you feel, they say."

"You're probably right." She tilted her head up to meet his gaze. "I'm beat. Aren't you tired? If you'll give me a hand up, I think I'll toddle off to bed. I've had more than enough of this day."

He helped her to limp to the bedroom.

"If you need anything during the night, call me. I won't mind."

"Thanks, I will."

She was about to draw the curtain that separated the rooms, when she reached out and traced a finger down the length of his nose.

"You're a good man, Jim Kirk. But you worry more than some old women I know."

His smile trembled slightly.

"Good night, Sajis."

Much later, as he lay between the warm folds of his sleeping bag, he gazed out through the rippled glass window at New Seattle's minor moon, and he pondered the tense, disjointed conversation. It had seemed as though Sajis had had as much on her mind as he had on his, but neither had seemed able to do more than touch on them peripherally. There hadn't been an inhibition, exactly; no, it had been more of a respect for each other's privacy than a reluctance based on fears ... and though the inner pains had not been exposed, examined, and discussed, there had been some subtle healing effects regardless. That cold core of brittle imperviousness that once dominated his inner self had seemed to shrink until barely a shadow of it still remained. The gentle peace had claimed him, most of him. It had crept in through tiny cracks, osmosis through the pores of his mind. It carried hope: the next six days. And what lay beyond them had acquired a faint green horizon instead of the utter blackness of before. What he had seen, where he had been, what had so shriveled him, seemed less a horror anymore, and almost, in brief flashes, sometimes, some strange and remarkable insight.

What is Woman?

Why is sex?

When is love?

No answers; only approximations.

His sleepy brain toyed with approximations.

Perspective lost.

Perspective found.

He climbed the apple woman tree in a soft dream and sprouted leaves and bore green fruit that carried seeds of joy.

* * *

The bark peeled evenly down the length of the hardwood pole to the fork in the branch, and when he had stripped the last of it, Kirk scraped at the slippery inner layer of green wood until the second crutch was dry to the touch. A few minutes of whittling had the splintered ends smoothed, and he passed it over to Sajis.

"Feels just right," she said. "Almost. It may be a mite shorter than the first one."

"Walk around and try them out."

"I'll try them out on the trail."

"The trail? Where do you want to go?"

"I have an appointment with an orchard, and a few choice words for a particular tree."

"I see. Is it a private rendezvous, or can I tag along?"

"Suit yourself."

"Slow down, I'll catch up with you. I have to close the door to keep the sparkies out," he said.

She nodded, but he had to trot to rejoin her as she hobbled at breakneck speed up the slope, flailing with the crutches as though they were oars in a regatta.

After that, Sajis and Kirk spent most of the days together. Kirk's claim that he was only trying to keep Sajis from having another accident was true, but it was never the major motivation. He enjoyed her company, and she seemed to like his. She retaught him the gentle art of enjoying the small things in life. They scolded the offending apple tree daily. They picked berries until they were stained and stuck with thorns. They endured verbal abuse from the Farnam diggories. They overfed the sparkies. Sajis taught Kirk how to make bread from scratch, and he showed her how to cast into the surf. And they laughed a great deal, over the little ludicrous discoveries that were the planet's nature, and over each other's foibles.

Inevitably, time closed in, forcing a slow retreat from the beguiling playfulness. The sober inner preparations began, a crisis for both of them: for one, in the leavetaking, for the other, in the homecoming. It robbed them, not so much of their delight--there were a few days yet, after all--but of their energy.

"Aw, Lord, I'm hot," Sajis complained, and squinted down the dazzling length of beach. "It must be a hundred kilometers back to the cabin."

"Probably more like two," Kirk said.

"Listen to Mister Accuracy! You've been hanging around with Mr. Spock too long."

"There is no law that Humans can't use logic, contrary to what Dr. McCoy may have told you. What do you want to do? We could cool off in the water."

"We could take a nap on the moss."

"The moss is on top of the cliff. How do you propose to get up there?"

"Wasn't that your ladder we passed a way back?"

"You couldn't climb it."

"Oh you don't think so, eh?"

"You'll break your neck, Sajis."

"It's my neck."

"Your neck is my responsibility."

"Not while I'm on R&R, it isn't."

They climbed the ladder, though Sajis looked about to faint by the time she flopped down in the moss at the top. She panted and laid back, throwing an arm over her eyes.

"Congratulations, Tarzan," Kirk said as he sat back against a rock.

"Whew," she wheezed.

"You're getting sunburned."

"Where?"

"I can't tell you."

"Huh?"

"Your neck isn't my responsibility while you're on R&R."

"Oh, hell."

"And pull your shirt together. I can see clear to Kalamazoo."

"To what?!" she hooted.

"My Aunt Lucille used to say that."

"You had an Aunt Lucille?"

"Doesn't everyone have an Aunt Lucille?"

Sajis sat up, grinning.

"You know something, Jim? You're so full of shit your eyes are brown."

"My eyes are hazel."

"Keep up with nonsense like that, and they'll be black and blue."

"Sajis, for mercy's sake, either close your shirt or take it off!"

She scowled insincerely and closed the shirt.

"If I thought I could trust you any farther than I could throw you, I would take it off. It's too blasted hot to wear clothes today."

To that, Kirk had no ready comeback. He settled himself more comfortably against his mossy rock, instead, and gazed out over the sea. Not quite ten days had passed since he had last sat here. The hour, the angle of the sun, the glint off the changeless, sweeping waves, the gulls over the surf--all were much the same as then. Yet the place seemed dramatically changed. No, not the place. Himself. He felt lighter, freer. Somewhere, in the forest, orchard, beach or cabin, he had dropped a crushing weight. The day after tomorrow was only the day after tomorrow, now, not the former neutronium wall. His life was back there on the ship. His friends were back there. They had covered for him, taken risks for him. He owed it to them--and to himself--to face his problem realistically. He did not know for a fact that he could not function again as ship captain. Or man. Maybe he would be all right. Maybe just a bit of therapy ...

Besides, he felt better already, right here. He hadn't tried to do anything with himself, not since the Pleasure Planet, but several times in the last few days, when he had carried Sajis over obstacles or massaged her back because her limping made it ache, he had felt a delicious closeness to her, that he had called affection. He twisted to smile over at her, but she had fallen asleep in the soft moss.

She wasn't old. Her hair was totally grey, her face had lines, her waist was thick, and she had lived for 55 years, but even asleep, with her marvelous vitality banked, she seemed lovely to him. He had never seen her kind of special beauty before, not because it had not existed all around him in many people, but because, he realized, his definition had been too narrow. Beauty and womanliness and Sajis were perfectly comfortable synonyms.

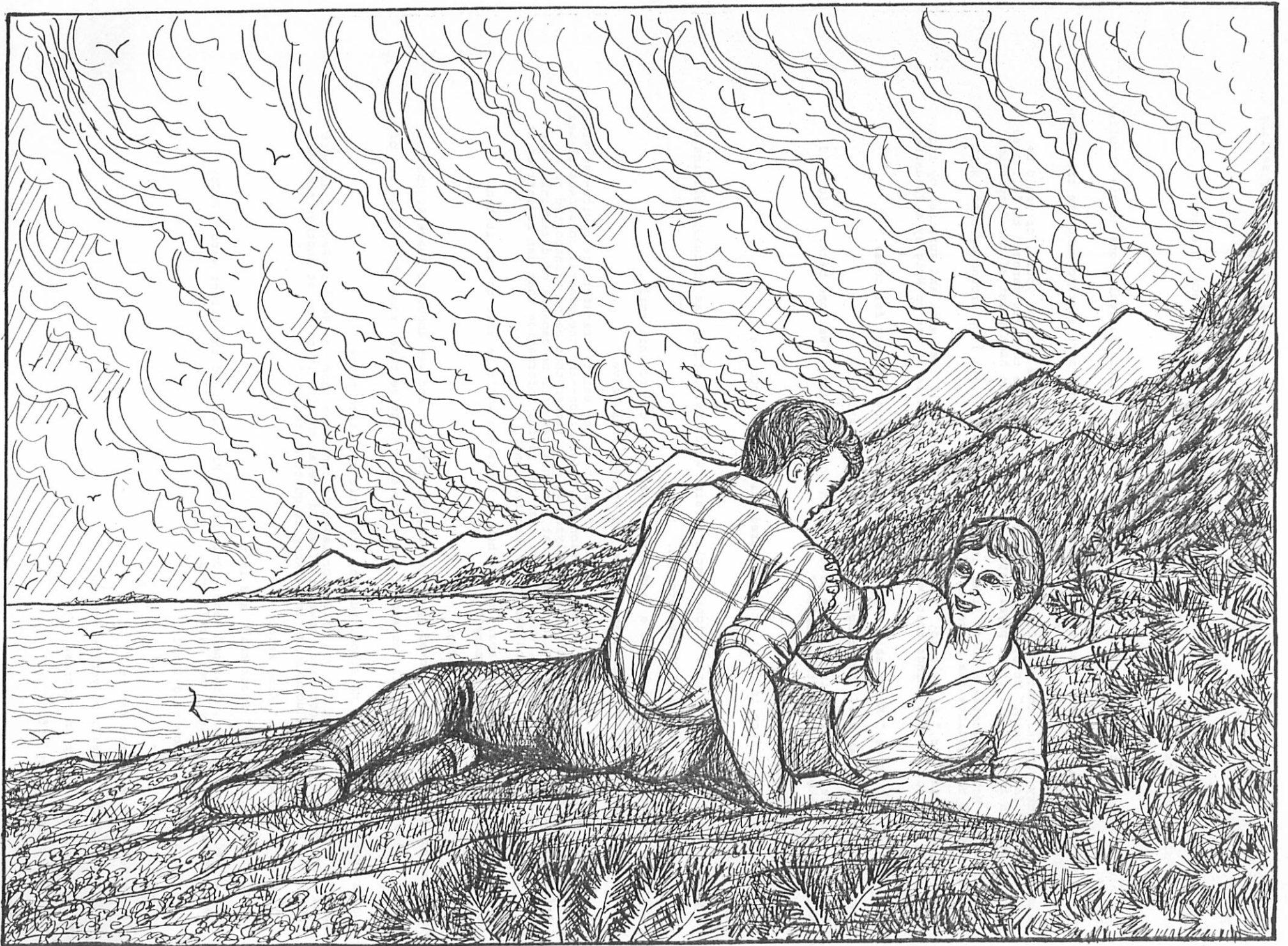
He shifted and laid back in the moss, baked and lulled by the heat. He was out of the sun, a nap would be just fine ...

He dozed, and captured wisps of dreams ... sweet dreams, where all things are allowed.

He woke with a start and sat up, rubbing his eyes. The sun has slunk to where it was blazing down through the fernfronds. His arm was stinging with a slight sunburn. He began to turn to wake Sajis before she burned, too--and stopped.

It couldn't be--?

He touched a hesitant hand to his crotch, felt the welcome, friendly fullness of a spontaneous erection. He ran his hand happily over the engorged organ and felt delicious bubbly laughter press



at the back of his throat. It was the final ragged edges of his soul healing, mind and body sealing together again, seams of sanity, ecstasy of life energies. The joy welled insistently.

"Jim?"

Sajis' smile was knowing, delectable. Her hands reached over, smoothed his face, his arms ...

He threw his head back and laughed into the sun.

* * *

"You have a proficient touch, Nurse," Spock said, enduring the vigorous manipulations of his shoulder muscles.

"Thank you, sir," Sajis said. "Those sprains will need at least one more electro-puncture treatment before your arm has all its strength again, though."

"You're jus' lucky, Spock, that Ms. Caffrey isn't scared off by those ears of yours, or you'd be stiff as starch for a month," McCoy laughed. "I still can't believe that you managed to fall over your own feet in front of all those physicists. It must've been the high point of the Symposium!"

"I fell, Doctor McCoy, because a loose fiber in the carpet caught in a loop around my boot, not because I failed to negotiate the placement of my feet."

"Aw, don't feel bad, sir," Sajis said, "I fell out of a tree myself last week and sprained my foot. And I could tell you several things that Doctor McCoy sprained while he was on Wrigley's Pleasure Planet--"

"That will be all, Nurse!" McCoy said. "Mister Spock's had enough therapy for today."

"Aye, aye, sir," Caffrey said, grinning, and handed Spock his shirt.

"Oh, there you are, Spock." Kirk's voice preceded him into the ward. "Welcome back. Sulu said you'd gone to Sickbay. What's the problem?"

"No problem, Captain--"

"--He fell flat on his face in front of two hundred scientists," McCoy said.

"Oh. I see."

"I am undamaged, sir, except for a slight muscle sprain, which Ms. Caffrey has virtually eliminated."

"But his ego may never recover," McCoy retorted.

Kirk caught Caffrey's grin and rubbed a hand across his jaw to control his smile.

"Yes. Well, Mr. Spock, other than that, I hope you enjoyed your leave."

"It was most educational. Word had leaked ahead of me about the entity transference device--several eminent researchers approached me for verification and information--and the general consensus seemed to be that the device should be studied and analyzed in situ rather than being transported to a Starfleet laboratory. I am dubious, however, that our sciences will be capable of determining the operating principles of the device, and I expect that any useful information that can be derived at all will involve its dismantling and permanent deactivation."

"You mean they'll have to take it apart to see how it ticks and won't be able to put it back together afterwards so it runs anymore?"

"I believe I already said that, Doctor."

McCoy turned to Sajis, who had packed up her electropuncture kit and was about to leave Sickbay.

"You should've massaged his skull instead of his shoulder. Might've taken some of the sass out of him!"

Spock's eyebrows arched, and he stood, pulling his tunic back into place.

"Captain, I do have a report for you on Doctor Lester's condition from the Head of Psychodiagnosis on Benedictine. If you do not mind, however, I would prefer to give it to you at another time and place. The level of superfluous noise in Sickbay is quite deafening."

"I'll hunt you later, then," Kirk said.

"I shall be on the Bridge," Spock said, and left.

McCoy looked around. Sajis, too, had gone. Only he and Kirk occupied the silent ward. McCoy looked over at Kirk and slowly met Kirk's eyes.

"You got a sunburn," McCoy said lamely.

"It stings like blazes."

"I'll give you some lotion for it."

"I'll take a drink instead, if you've got one."

McCoy's eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"Ah. Yuh, sure. In my office ..."

He poured two shots of brandy, handing one to Kirk.

"Uh, Captain ..."

Kirk raised his glass.

"To friends in need."

McCoy stared at the floor and didn't drink, though his throat had gone chaulk dry.

"Captain, I'm thinking of transferring."

It was Kirk now who was tongue-tied. He put his drink down on the desk and folded his arms.

"Transfer denied."

McCoy came unglued.

"Look, I can't stay here after what I did to you--"

"Bones. Look at me."

Reluctantly, McCoy's eyes swept up from the floor to meet Kirk's.

"It doesn't matter, Bones. It's over. I feel fine."

The corner of McCoy's mouth twitched, and he bowed his head, but after a moment, he raised his glass.

"To Jim Kirk ... one helluva man."

Kirk snorted.

"To Bones McCoy, foremost quack of the Enterprise."

McCoy beamed a gap-toothed grin.

"To Spock's nosedive!"

"To Scotty's new Feinbergers."

"To the Enterprise."

"To her crew."

They clinked glasses and gulped down the shots.

McCoy eyed Kirk.

"You're sure you're okay, Jim?"

"Never been better."

"By God, I believe you. You look like a newly minted credit--except for the sunburn."

"It's amazing what a little peace and quiet and a sturdy apple tree will do for you."

"An apple tree?"

"An apple tree." Kirk's eyes focused on something far away. "Could give you a whole new outlook ..."

"Huh?"

Kirk plunked his glass down on the desk.

"I may tell you someday, Doctor. Meanwhile, I have a ship to run!"



Tentatively entitled "The Obsc'zine," the 'X-Rated' series of WARPED SPACE will continue where WARPED SPACE 20 left off. THE OBSC'ZINE is scheduled to be published approximately four times per calendar year, with the first issue scheduled for late December. Limericks, poetry, short fiction and artwork are urgently requested. Send all materials (and a s.a.s.e. for subscription information) to: Lori Chapek-Carleton

(Already scheduled for THE OBSC'ZINE ONE is a front cover by Alice L. Jones, a short story by Gayle F. illustrated by C.R. Faddis, and a short, ahem, piece by Paula Smith ...)

WARPED SPACE 20 will be the last 'X-Rated' WARPED SPACE. THE OBSC'ZINE is designed to take the place of the 'X-Rated' WARPED SPACE series.