

## THE BIRTHING PLACE

To touch a 'sklepi was to risk madness, it was said. There was empirical evidence to support the claim. Spock had read the reports. Yet years of scrutinizing all of the Reform-era documents available, both the popular and complete copies and the obscure and fragmentary relics, had brought him to the inescapable conclusion: to find the fabled manuscripts of Sumi's Corollaries to Surak's Constructs, it would be necessary to track, capture, and establish a mind-link with one of the 'sklepis. And so he was determined to try.

The elegant herd of animals, so like Parjis IV's pack animals, or Terran antelopes, had an elaborate mythology attached to them. In one myth, the animals were immortal. That was not true, of course, for Spock had seen dead 'sklepis in his youth. In another myth, the animals were sentient beings who could travel in time, and would take a person who touched them back into the past and leave him in some savage era, unable to return. Whether the animals could traverse the laws of physics so readily was doubtful, but examinations of the unfortunate persons who had been known to have made contact with the animals revealed that the victims had somehow been purged of all knowledge of civilization. In essence, they had returned "in time" to the barbarian attitudes and practices of Vulcan's prehistoric culture, and the victims resisted all psychological therapies to return them to a civilized state of mind. For practical purposes, they were insane. They could not function in Vulcan society, had to be incarcerated for their own protection, as well as Vulcan's.

Yet the fragments of documents all hinted that the 'sklepis were the key to uncovering an important, and lost, school of thought on Vulcan logic and culture. Sumi's Corollaries had been written in the Pre-Logic Inquisition (seven centuries after the death of Surak), an era of a peculiarly savage nature -- cold, precise logic had been employed to establish a rulership over most of the two Vulcan continents, a rulership that had persecuted and attempted to eliminate all those whose interpretations of Surak's Constructs did not agree with the social and political philosophy that the rulership espoused. The Inquisition was the first broad testing of the Laws of Logic, and because it was essentially illogical and contrary to the concept of Nome, it eventually failed. But while there had never been an actual war, many of the persecuted dissidents had had to take refuge outside the reaches of the Inquisition -- and Sumi, the central opponent of the rulership, had himself fled into the innerlands. He was believed to have died there, and his famous Corollaries, of which no copies had survived, had been lost with him. The Corollaries had later been recorded from memory by those dissidents who survived the persecution,

but most of Sumi's followers agreed that their memories were imprecise, and they could only pass on the central ideas Sumi had taught, not the arguments in their elegant detail. Still, the Corollaries were considered to be the most important humanitarian document in the history of civilized Vulcan since Surak had laid down the concepts of that civilization.

And Spock, who had made a lifetime study of anything having to do with the Corollaries whenever he had time to spare, had a particular interest in Sumi's supposed permutation of the concept of Nome. In Sumi's alleged opinion, not only was "Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combination" an attitude of tolerance to be followed, it was a principle that was the essence of cultural vitality, and should be actively pursued. If Sumi's original document could be found, and if they contained that principle, it would be a direct blessing of Spock's dual heritage, and very possibly an exhortation to Vulcan society in general to examine and incorporate practical alien ideas and cultural artifacts into its increasingly stagnant way of life. Mere tolerance, it seemed, was no longer sufficient.

Spock glanced over his shoulder at the ruby sun, which was already low over the rugged desert terrain where he walked. He was running out of time, and if he did not have what Doctor McCoy insisted on calling "good luck", he would soon have to return to the flitter, and that would end his chance of contacting the 'sklepis on this shore leave. It would be at least a year before he would be able to have another shore leave on Vulcan, if, indeed, he were to return to Vulcan again. The ship had been ordered to the Tholian borders, leaving orbit tomorrow.

A movement on the striped maroon plateau to the south caught his eye. It had been in this area that he had distantly caught sight of a small herd of 'sklepis, during the previous shore leave. His father had been with him, then, and Sarek did not have the fleetness of foot necessary to run the animals down, and like now, night had been fast approaching. When the continent containing the innerland desert turned away from Vulcan's sun, the veil of solar wind flowed around the planet and left a whirlpool in its lee where the planet's shadow spread. Desert nights were cold and black, alive with carnivorous predators whose approach was not easily detected above the droning of the wind-whipped sand. In ancient times, there had been every kind of myth to explain the disappearance of many of those who ventured into the desert after dark. Even with modern knowledge and precautions, the wild places were potential deathtraps in the moonless nights. Spock had not expected or intended to pursue his search at night. He was not prepared and he should not stay.

Spock began an arduous climb up the rugged talus slope that led down from the rim of the plateau. He wished it were possible to pursue the 'sklepis from the air, but like chamelions, the 'sklepis would lie down at the approach of a flitter and blend into the landscape perfectly. Spock would have to corner the creatures on foot. Zoologists had informed him that the animals would respond to a mind-call, like most non-carnivorous

animals on the planet. Spock hoped that he would be able to employ the telepathic mesmerizing technique, for that would save him time. He was willing to risk a night's exposure to the dangers of the wilderness, but only if the risk promised a payoff.

The solar disk was just touching its lower edge to the western mountains when he reached the rocky field atop the talus slope. The 'sklepis were there. Seven maroon heads came up, looking at him, and the animals poised to run. . .but there was nowhere to run on the uneven plateau, except to run down the steep talus slopes, which would be suicidal. Spock stood up, panting a little in the thin air to which he had lost his native accustomedness, and he began to transmit calming thoughts at the top of his telepathic "voice." The animals hesitated.

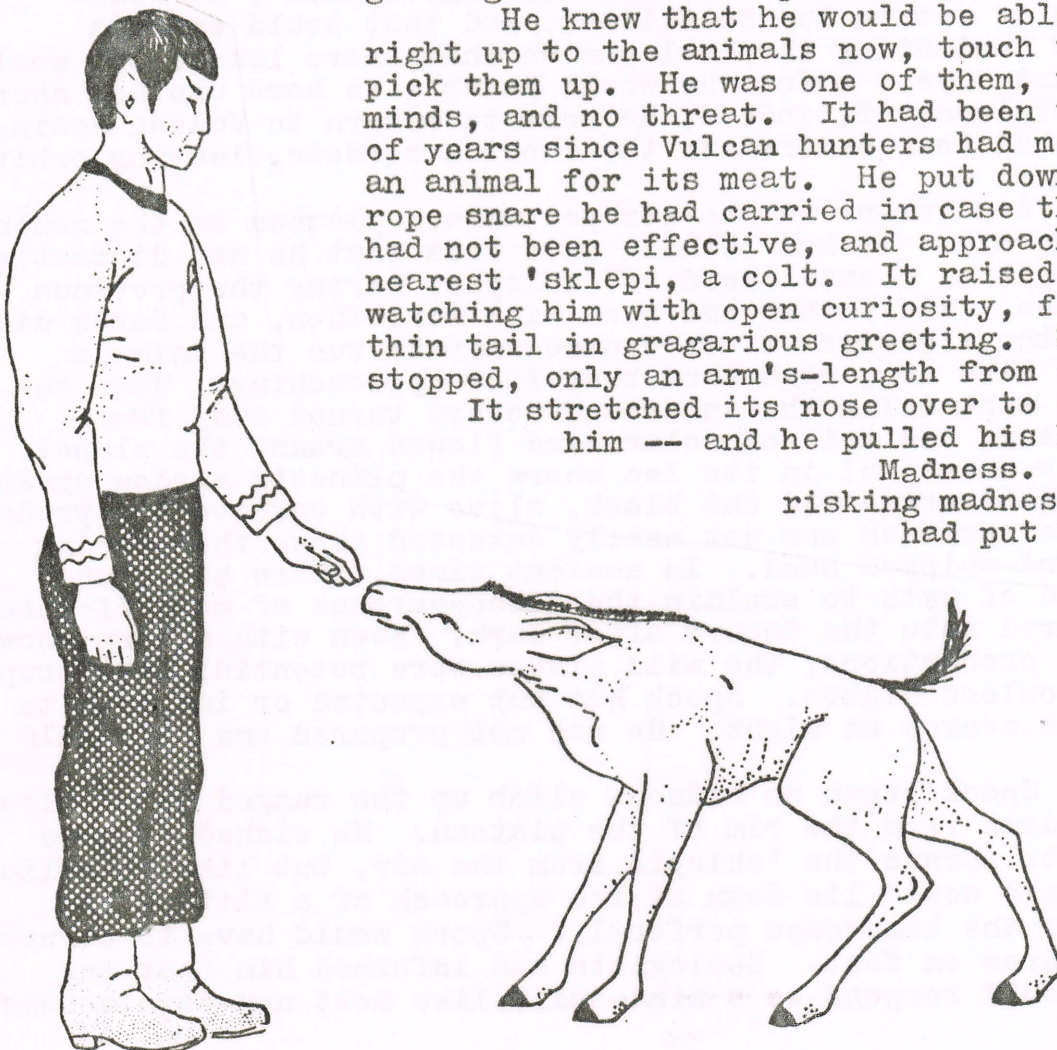
//Calmness. . .calmness. . .all is right. . .I am a friend. . .no hunter. . .//

The mental projection technique had been taught to him for his own protection almost as soon as he was old enough to walk, for away from the cities, Vulcan was still largely wild, and even herbivores could be dangerous. He used the calming pattern now that he had used on sehlats, yip-dogs, sand kurtles, and occasionally, humans. And it seemed to be working. The 'sklepis relaxed visibly, accepting him. They went back to grazing on the scant plateau-grass.

He knew that he would be able to walk right up to the animals now, touch them, even pick them up. He was one of them, to their minds, and no threat. It had been thousands of years since Vulcan hunters had mesmerized an animal for its meat. He put down the cince-rope snare he had carried in case the mind-call had not been effective, and approached the nearest 'sklepi, a colt. It raised its head, watching him with open curiosity, flicking its thin tail in gragarious greeting. Spock stopped, only an arm's-length from the animal.

It stretched its nose over to sniff at him -- and he pulled his hand back.

Madness. He was risking madness. What had put the idea



into his mind that he could touch these animals and retain his sanity where it had been proven that others had not? Yet his painstaking translations of the fragments of Sumi's writings had led inevitably to an unlikely hypothesis: Sumi could touch the 'sklepis, and he had done so. In some way that modern science had not or could not deduce, Sumi had intended to entrust his secrets, if necessary, to the keeping of these unlikely caretakers. Spock reached that conclusion over two years ago. Other Vulcan linguists disagreed with his translations, but other Vulcan linguists were ensnared in their own logical parameters while Spock, who had been exposed to many instances of logic-within-illogic in the course of his Starfleet career, did not close his mind to the unproven or unprovable.

The young 'sklepi still sniffed at him, but with uncertainty. It sensed his uneasiness. At any moment, it might bolt away. Behind him, the sun had set, and the eastern sky was glimmering with stars.

There remained the conclusive test of his hypothesis. If he did not act now, he might never know if he were right. If he turned away now, he might save his sanity. Logic alone could not solve the dilemma. But he had acquired another tool by living and working with the Humans he called friends: he had learned to trust his instincts. He stretched out his fingers and clasped the narrow skull of the colt between his hands, letting down his shields.

Sumi-e returns! I/we remember! Old and new, over and over, the same soul, seasons of yellow grass, and water in the sponge-stone; how many times down the hot-wet channel of my mothers' bodies to tumble onto agate-chips and cushioning frem-moss in the secret birth-places? How many times since then, mating/mated in the rutting time of cherl-blossoms and sweet leeds-pods? And the dying time, most often in the circle, comforted and wished safe passage, in the famine-season of grey mists? Once, though, alone under the great's claws, food for the cycle of greals, and twice, too, in falling from the high places when limbs had weakened with age or illness. All of those lives/times I hold within, but seek back to the body that the Sumi-e touched -- yes, we can reach it, it is not far in the course of things...

The leeda-pods were not so fat that season, for the air was sick with dust from the places that vomit hot stone. And Sumi-e was not so sleek as you/I am/was, for he was old and soon to pass on to newness.

You beasts of two legs do not pass on to newness? Ah, so he said, also. How, then, do you greet the time of dying, what courage do you find? If such is the ending of all your kind, perhaps it is well to be so. There may not be enough souls to fill all creatures of flesh, then. But no matter -- such is the way with greals and sehlat, too, who seem not to mind it. And the Sumi-e weighs upon your soul. . .back then. . .back. . . Lemhe, Vwal, Sessu. . .Memme. . .Grul. . .Ru. . .Invre!

He was in a narrow canyon, and there was a trickle of a spring in the cul-de-sac at the canyon's end that coursed through a few meters of succulent frem-moss before it disappeared into the curl of a dune. It was the time of birthing, he was heavy with the season's colt. He? No, he/she was a mare, come

to the hidden place to deliver the new one. Her mate waited, on guard, at the mouth of the canyon, and would stay there until she returned with the youngling. The birthing had started, little rippling contractions that were delicious, almost as joyful as when her mate had mounted her in the beginning of this colt's cycle. She folded her legs under herself to await the stronger contractions. She would not stand up again until the ecstasy of final birthing was upon her.

And then she saw the man-beast. He had been there, but had not permitted her to see him until she was settled. Sumi, he called himself. She was not afraid. The Sumi-e emanated peace. There was orderliness to his thoughts that was soothing. He wanted to touch her, to join minds in intimacy. That was good, she would share the bliss of her birthing with him. It seemed that he had never known that simple pleasure, not even with his mate. He had touched others of her kind, she knew. He had touched Maakiv, once, and the vroh-valley herd-stallion, Ushh, and yet he had never known a birthing ecstasy. She invited him to partake of hers.

But Sumi-e had another, urgent need. He was coming to the time of ending, and he would never again see others of his own kind while in this cycle. He doubted that he would go on to another cycle, and if he did, he explained to her that he would not remember what had transpired in a past cycle. He had a message for his kind; a message of importance. He knew that she, like all of her kind, passed from cycle to cycle, remembering. It might be many cycles from now when another of his



kind would touch another of hers, but she could remember his message, and relay it through all her offspring.

The Sumi-e man stayed in the canyon when she left with her colt. When she returned in the next season of birthing to deliver the newest colt, she noticed the man-creature's bones scattered through the frem-moss, long cleaned and bleached by the famine-season's winds. Whether the Sumi-e man had cycled to a new body, or as he claimed, he had dissolved into time, she did not know. But she remembered the thing he had entrusted to her, and it was a message that all her kind would keep for the day when a man-creature would come and ask for it.

Come, come, back to this cycle, back do not fear, it does not violate the necessary orderliness, you are not lost.  
. . . Back, friend called Spock-e, back, for you must go to the place now, Sumi-e said it was important. . . .  
\* \* \* \* \*

The sky was still light. That was impossible, the sun had set even as he had reached the top of the plateau to touch a . . . a 'sklepi!

Spock sat up, alarmed. He was no longer on the plateau, and there was no 'sklepi in the wind-worn crevice of stone where he found himself. Nor was the sun setting -- it was rising, brightening the crimson sky behind high canyon walls. He did not remember coming to the place. However, he seemed to have had the good sense to sleep under an overhang of rock, where he had been protected from night's dangers.

He crawled out from under the overhang and managed to get his stiff legs under him to stand. The place had an odd familiarity to it, though he was certain he had never been there before. Or had he?

And he remembered: the rough trail between tall, smooth walls of sand-blasted stone that almost touched, and desert moss, and a spring. . . . But centuries of harsh winters had widened the canyon and dried up the spring. The 'sklepis no longer came here to birth, but Sumi-e. . . Sumi-e? Sumi?

A wave of acute dizziness passed through Spock and he clutched at the jutting stone for a long moment. It was possible that he was, indeed, mad. He did not know whether what he seemed to have experienced upon touching the 'sklepi colt was a true telepathic communication, or an hallucination of an acutely damaged mind. If he were mad, he could well be in custody in a Vulcan hospital back at the Starbase, at this moment, and be unaware of it. If he were not mad, he had somehow travelled back in time to the vital meeting of Sumi-e -- no, Sumi -- and the incarnation of the 'sklepi colt that had been a pregnant mare named Invre.

Invre. Sumi's time capsule.

Spock took deep breaths until his legs steadied, and then set off toward the cul-de-sac of the canyon with determination. Mad or sane, he would play the thing out.

He reached the dune-choked end of the canyon, much widened from the time when it had been Sumi's refuge. He did not look around for bones; Vulcans had no special reverence for the mortal remains of their dead, though it was logical to

return the organic nutrients to Vulcan's soil. In any case, thirteen centuries of scouring winds and layers of sand would have obliterated any remains. But the cave should still be there.

It was. Seismic activity since Sumi's time had tumbled down part of the cliff which had hung over the cave's entrance, and sand-storms had filled in most of the entrance, but there was a navigable opening. Down on hands and knees, Spock crawled into the cave. He startled a flock of little nemmits, who rushed past him into the open with such a flurry of wing-beats that Spock had to duck to one side to allow their passage by him. There didn't seem to be any other inhabitants in the cave.

He reached the area in the back of the crevice, and looked around dismally in the dim light. The earthquakes and time had rearranged everything, and part of the cave had collapsed. The memory-message had been specific: in the farthest corner of the cave, there was a great flat chunk of red granite covering a man-made mound of earth and rocks. But in the way that the cave had become dishevelled, Spock could not even be sure that he was in what had been the farthest corner of the cave in the time of Sumi. It could readily be buried under the debris of the cave-in, virtually unreachable without destroying its treasure in the process.

It? It, what? He strained to remember. It. . . "it" had been a deep jar laboriously carved of the same red granite as the covering slab. It had been massive, and Sumi had expended time and effort making it, without metal tools and without any real stone-cutting skills. But it had been carved with the possibility of centuries in mind, and it should have withstood all but the most violent ravages of time.

Selecting an appropriately shaped rock, Spock began to dig into the soft, wind-piled silt in the corner that he had reached. Thirteen hundred years, as both Vulcans and Humans approximated the passage of time, were heaped there. And then his digging-stone scratched a gouge in a pinkish-looking rock.

He had found it!

With no one around to be offended or amused, Spock allowed himself to express his welling excitement with an unpractised smile. He did not think Sumi would have disapproved. It took time, but when he finally had the rough, silt-smearred jar on his lap, his smile had become two great tears of joyous triumph.

He would not open the tightly stoppered jar. Its intact, dried-clay seal was reward enough until scientists could open it under carefully controlled conditions that would better guarantee against disintegration of the precious manuscript. In any case, Spock did not need to see the contents. Through the 'sklepi and across the vastness of time, he had touched the mind of the personality dubbed Sumi, or Sumi-e. And he knew what was contained therein.

Hugging the jar protectively, he scuttered back out into the cup of the canyon. The heat of day was rising, and he was already late in reporting back to the ship, but he did not think that Kirk or anyone else would hold this AWOL against him.

