

THE GARDENER'S CRAFT

C. R. Faddis

A pale tongue of rosy dawn warmed the hills opposite the valley over which the landing party had kept a long night's watch, and the humans were anxious for relief from the pervading chill. Already, the flats and washes of desert to the south of them were visible, details of scrub and badland-erosion coming into vague pastel focus in the gradually expanding illumination. A dry, acrid breeze wafted up from the flats, a breeze sick with alkali, the scent of desolate places.

They had been down on those places yesterday, conducting a routine planetary specimen collection. There had been nothing especially interesting. The ship's botanist Lieutenant Anita Kutuzov had catalogued and collected what little plant life the land could support; xerophytic shrubs, some poverty grasses, and a miserable shrivelled specimen similar in structure to Terran caoti. What did grow was scattered in the widely separated, delusively random matrix pattern that typified flora struggling to compete for precious water.

Lieutenant Rivera, the exo-zoologist, had not been any more pleased with his findings: if there were few plants, there were dramatically fewer animals. Besides a minute flea-beetle, the one tiny lizard-like creature he had trapped had done its best to separate his index finger from the rest of his hand. Fortunately, the bite was not poisonous, just painful.

Even the geologist, Lieutenant Avery, had been disappointed. He had spent the night on the top of the shale hill, keeping vigil with the others, muttering to himself and tossing chunks of the loose stuff down the slide. Every once in a while, he would say, as though it were a charm or a litany: "Chert, sandstones and shales. Chert, sandstones and shales. . . ."

But with the appearance of the sun, the landing party stirred anxiously, waiting to be joined by a supporting party from the Enterprise, waiting to investigate the startling phenomenon over which they had kept watch through the long night.

It was genuinely incredible; on a planet banded by a great equatorial desert, between two enormous polar ice sheets that bound most water in frozen captivity, was this improbable place; a valley, twelve hectares of it. Green. Lush. Tropical. It seemed almost a mirage. Seen from the overlooking shale hill, it actually shimmered, for a light-distorting veil appeared to isolate it from the parched reality outside.

Lieutenant Sulu's tricorder insisted that the shimmer was a type of stasis-field the sort of device used to control climate in very limited areas, but Anita Kutuzov wondered aloud if it was not an hallucination.

"Those plants down in there are extravagant forms, Sulu," she pointed out. "They require constant pampering. They can't exist here. . . they never could. Evolution just hasn't progressed enough here to produce things like that."

Sulu sniffled in the warming air and studied the intense, fortyish, but still attractive botanist. She was, as always, worn looking but alert. He reached across and squeezed her icy fingers, giving her one of his dazzling smiles.

"Hang on, Anita, we'll go on down pretty soon now and have a look at your 'mirage'."

The woman sneezed, but came up with a wan, answering smile. She liked Sulu. She trusted him, both as a commanding officer and as a person. She sighed internally, wishing she were ten years younger.

"This is a place only a lizard could love," she quipped, trying to rouse her hibernating humor.

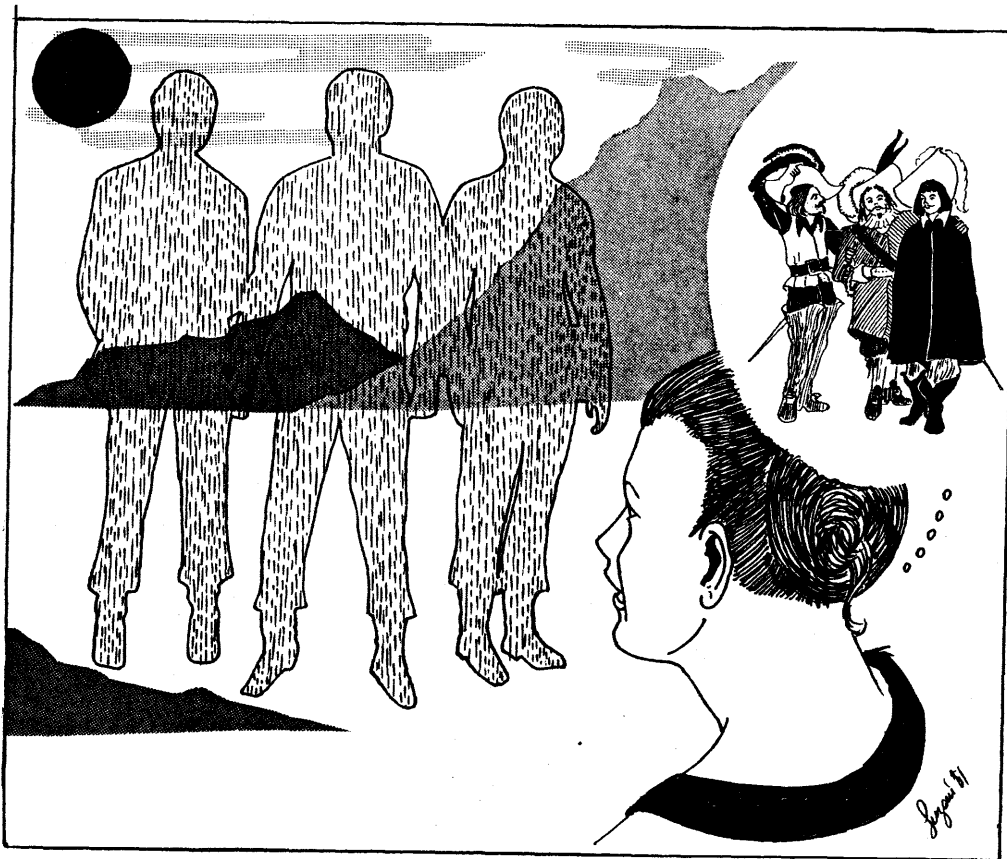
"Or a Vulcan," Bernardo Rivera laughed.

"It'll be hot as hell again in an hour," Sulu retorted, "and you'll wish you were a Vulcan."

The air began to sing in that peculiar manner that just precedes transporter materialization, and three forms sparkled into existence: Captain Kirk, Commander Spock, and Doctor McCoy.

"The Three Musketeers" Anita commented quietly as Sulu rose to confer with them. Doctor McCoy separated himself from the group and crouched next to Anita, Rivera and Avery, rubbing his hands vigorously against the sudden chill.

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"I don't believe it!" he exclaimed. "This planet scanned out as an uninhabitable hell-hole."

"Ship's sensors would n't normally pick up something this small unless it were being specifically looked for," Anita offered. "It was sheer luck that we even stumbled across it."

"That's the excuse Spock made, too," McCoy chuckled.

The Command group joined them and Captain Kirk knelt next to Anita. The warmth of the sun was beginning to er-

ase the universal grimace from everyone's faces and restore the general humor and vitality.

"Lieutenant Kutuzov," Kirk said, "what is your evaluation of this phenomenon?"

The woman licked her dry lips and answered carefully.

"From what we can see over the distance, sir, I do not believe those plants originated on this planet, and their continued survival here must depend on extensive, sophisticated care."

"In other words," Spock conjectured, "the artificial biosphere must have been created, and must now be being maintained, by aliens."

"We've seen no one," Sulu objected. "There are no signs of inhabitants, cultivating equipment, buildings, or even insects in there."

"The stasis dome is there," Spock said evenly. "One should not trust tricorder reading made through such electromagnetic interference."

"Maybe it is an hallucination," Anita breathed. "If we can't trust our instruments, we may not be able to trust our senses."

"It could be an alluring trap," Kirk agreed. He flipped open his communicator. "Mr. Scott, we're going down now to investigate the garden. Track us with the transporter."

"Aye, sir, tracking you and standing by," the Engineer's voice crackled.

They skidded and slid down the loose chips of shale that lined the hill, all the way to the gully that emptied into the valley. Doctor McCoy solicitously gave Anita his arm, smiling to himself as she grumbled bitterly about her uniform dress, and the sacrifices that had to be made by forty-two year-old spinsters.

The next half-hour was spent trying non-aggressive methods of entering the stasis-field, but it rejected all attempts as violently as if it were the detention field in the ship's brig. Kirk was frowning more and more, and Mr. Spock's blank face began to gather tiny, barely perceptible storm clouds, while the rest of the group clattered around trying to look useful. McCoy, meanwhile, had seated himself on a low dune of shale chips and watched the mounting frustration bemusedly.

Kirk threw him a wilting scowl.

"Haven't you got anything useful to donate to this effort besides sitting there?" he growled.

McCoy grinned widely.

"Keep on makin' noise like you are and you'll eventually attract someone," he said lightly.

As though on cue, a figure appeared through the foliage on the other side of the shimmering field.

"What'd I tell ya?" McCoy winked at Sulu.

The humanoid peered out at them with an expression of curiosity and elation, as though they were unexpected but welcome company. He -- or she, possibly -- seemed physically arranged like most humanoid bipeds, but with startling blue skin and matching eyes, tiny blue ears, and a thick shock of pale hair the color and texture of a winter cottontail. He/she could have been sixteen or sixty, and he/she was lovely in a way that would have complimented either a man or a woman, though which the being was, if either, was impossible to tell: A loose-fitting jumpsuit of coppery fabric covered all but the head, neck, and hands.

Recovering from his momentary amazement, Kirk launched into an introduction/apology, ending with his automatic, "our mission is one of peace and good will."

The elegant inhabitant of the garden cocked his/her head for a moment, with a look of concentration and evaluation. The he/she smiled, and it had a wonderful congruity with the gay, flowered oasis around him/her.

"Of course," he/she said in perfect colloquial English which could not have been the effect of the Universal Translator "Visitors and travellers are always welcome at the Residence. I am Itenn, the gardener. The Mistress and the Family are not here, but I bid you partake of our hospitality. It is authorized."

He/she - Kirk began to use a mental "he" for convenience--reached down and touched a little rod which protruded about two inches from the ground just inside the stasis field. An upright, rectangular portal appeared, static crackling at its edges. For the first time, the landing party noticed similar rods around the outer perimeter of the dome.

"S'wonder you didn't step on one," McCoy chuckled.

Itenn seemed genuinely delighted with the appearance of the landing party.

"Please, come in, you must meet Ipher, the caretaker. Stay, dine, enjoy the Garden," he pleaded sweetly. "We have not had guests for a long time."

Kirk became wary. The humanoid's warmth appeared genuine, but. . . . He eyed McCoy, then, and the Doctor shrugged and stepped through the portal into the Garden. Nothing happened to him.

"Suly, Kutuzov, go inside and make a sensor sweep," the Captain ordered.

As Anita entered, she took a deep breath and blinked bewilderedly. Being outside of the dome had been like looking through a dirty crystal. Inside, the clarity and vividness of color was almost painful, and the place smelled of heliotrope and jonquils -- delicately sweet and pervasive. McCoy plunged his nose into an exquisite orchid-like blossom and came up with a grin usually reserved for wedding nights.

"Ahhhh. . . ." was all he said.

"Everything seems to be in order," Sulu reported. "It's very pleasant in here, sir."

Kirk completed a transmission to the Enterprise and stepped through the portal reluctantly. He was alert and suspicious, and he faced the alien and stared keenly at the lovely being without addressing him.

"Sensor report on this alien, Mr. Sulu," Kirk ordered.

"Humanoid biped, species unknown," Sulu said, "Age and sex indeterminate, copper-based blood, high order of brain development. There are a lot of strange readings that I can't make sense of, but maybe Doctor McCoy--?"

McCoy snapped out of his euphoria and raised his medical tricorder, but Itenn held up a slender, uncalloused hand.

"Please, we can walk while you conduct your scans," he said. "Ipher is anxious to meet you, and I know that some of you have not yet eaten this day. A repast awaits you at the Residence."

Kirk turned to Spock, who still stood outside in the desert with Rivera and Avery.

"Opinion, Mr. Spock?"

The Vulcan's calm face might have reflected a tinge of excitement, but then, perhaps not.

"There is no evidence of malevolence, sir, and many unanswered questions."

Kirk smiled slightly and nodded.

"All right, come in, gentlemen, and let's find the answers."

They walked several hundred yards through a profusion of growing things, a neatly informal, seemingly endless collection of perfect, height-of-maturity specimens. There were apparently no two alike. Sulu, Spock and Anita Kutuzov were so glued to their tricorders that they had nearly to be led by hand to keep them on the path. The walk ended at a hillside that flowed over with mosses and ferns and other trailing plants. Itenn stooped to touch another of the inconspicuous little protruding rods and a door-sized portion of the hill swung inwards, revealing a pleasantly lit entrance hall.

"Welcome to the Residence, our dear friends," a voice said from inside, followed

by its owner: another blue humanoid, equally mysterious, ageless and asexual, but slightly shorter than Itern, and possibly even more beautiful.

"I am Ipher," the caretaker said, smiling warmly. "Come in and be comfortable."

Kirk gave a short, polite nod and followed Ipher inside. The roof of the passage was low, and most of them had to stoop slightly, but then the passage widened into a high-ceilinged room of smoothed sandstone. It was a cavern, but comfortably warm and dry. A deep-pile carpet of some fluffy, springy plants made a soft, yellow contrast to the banded buff walls, which revealed their origin in layers of polished, compacted ancient dunes. The place suggested a cathedral, but the atmosphere was definitely cozy. An attractive dark wood table was laden with foodstuffs--fruits, a huge bowl of some vegetable soup, breads of several types, a big salad, and what smelled just like hot espresso.

An invitation, the landing party descended on the food, which was delicious and filling.

"This is honest-to-god coffee!" McCoy exclaimed with delight. "Some of the best I've ever tasted. Where did you get it?"

Ipher smiled serenely, helping himself to more salad.

"We raise some plants here for eating, though most are the Mistress' collection of ornaments," the alien said. "We. . . synthesize. . . most of our foodstuffs. We are pleased that you enjoy them."

That seemed to perk Spock's curiosity.

"There is a highly refined degree of mented. "This rimbru soup is a tradition in my family, and you have reproduced it to perfection. Are you telepathic?"

"Not as you understand telepathy, Mr. Spock," Itern answered. "It really is a remarkable soup. Thank you for the recipe."

McCoy stopped in mid-spoonful of the soup, suddenly alarmed.

"You mean this stuff is another one of those Vulcan glops?" he cried.

"The coffee was your suggestion, Doctor," Itern laughed gently. "You last drank this blend at Starbase Brazil on your home planet, and you thought of it again when I mentioned sustenance at the edge of the dome."

Sulu's face lit up.

"I thought of bagels with honey, and here they are!"

"I would like to learn more of your mind-scanning techniques," Spock said. "I myself am a telepath, and had no awareness of my thoughts being probed. I would also like to see the synthesizing procedures that you use."

Itern looked thoughtful, pursing his lips, the first time had revealed anything but solicitiousness.

"Perhaps," he answered finally. "But we assure you, we do not pry into your private thoughts. We read only your immediate desires. It is merely an aid to serve you. If it disturbs you, we shall not employ it."

Anita Kutuzov, who had just finished a slice of ripe pineapple, was about to exclaim that it would not disturb her, but Captain Kirk stood up quickly and cut her off.

"Yes, it does disturb us," he said curtly. "If we want something, we'll ask for it vocally. That is our tradition, isn't it, Mr. Spock?"

Spock nodded gravely.

"Your caution is understandable" Ipher said amiably. "But we wish to put you at ease. With the exception of the sealed maintenance apartments, this home is at your disposal. We believe you will find your stay both relaxing and refreshing."

Anita had finished eating, and Itern took her arm and led her to a wall of the room touching yet another of the projecting rods. The section of wall disappeared--or more accurately became transparent as glass. It revealed a vista of the Garden.

"From here, one can view twenty percent of the collection," Itern said. "The collection is random, with plants from many worlds, including your own. We believe you will find the Garden interesting. You are welcome to inspect it, and, of course, you know enough not to disturb anything."

Kirk came up behind them.

"We do appreciate your hospitality," he assured Itern "but I hope you can appreciate our curiosity. You say you are 'caretakers'. Where are the owners?"

"We do not know," Itern said.

"To be precise," Ipher interrupted, "they are not here and so we cannot be certain. However, at the time of the most recent communication, the Mistress was at K'hai."

"K'hai?" Sulu queried. "We know of no planet by that name."

"It is somewhere in a nearby galaxy," Itern said evenly. "This is really just a vacation home, you see. We hope you will excuse us, now, but we do have household duties yet to be attended this morning. Feel free to roam as you wish. Nearly everything is accessible by touching the rods as we have shown you. We shall rejoin you as soon as possible, and we can talk more then."

Itern and Ipher collected the food service onto the wooden table and pushed the enormous thing through a hitherto imperceptible portal the size of a shuttlecraft.

The portal swung shut behind them, leaving only the lingering odors of the repast.

"It appears we have been left to find our own answers," Spock commented. "Fascinating."

"All right, then, let's get about it," Kirk said. "This place mystifies me. I leaned on that table earlier, and I don't think the seven of us could have budged it. But they pushed it as though it were rigged with anti-gravs."

Sulu walked over to the touch-rod the aliens had used to open the portal through which they had gone, but the device did not respond to his touch, his tap, or his concentrated push.

"Seems this is one of the 'off-limits' rooms," he reported.

"Hmm. Rivera, Avery and Kutuzov, you concentrate on the Garden. There may be more to that collection than meets the eye. Take a thorough look around out there. Sulu and Spock, since it appears we can't contact the ship through this stasis dome, you go outside and check with Scotty. Have him scan this place with every sensor we've got. See what he can find out about the nature of the field, and whether we can suppress its effect on our communicators," Kirk ordered. "Bones, you and I will investigate this 'Residence.'"



The more she was of the "collection", the longer Anita Kutuzov's face became. She was becoming convinced, against her will, that the Captain had been right about this place: there was more than met the eye. For one thing, the Terraform plants were indeed Earth species, but not in any contemporary form: they were old, extinct or since mutated forms.

"How old?" Rivera demanded, his thin mouth wry with amused skepticism.

"Try five thousand years for the Cyperus," she said blandly, "and probably twice that for the Epiphyllum, the orchid cactus growing in the crotch of the Altairian Vezmesz-tree, which I might add has been extinct on Altair V for at least ten thousand years."

"I don't get it," Avery said.

"Look, this form of Cyperus no longer exists on Earth," Anita explained patiently. After all, Avery was a geologist. What did he know of botanical evolution?

"This plant was contemporary with the construction of the pyramids in Egypt. The Egyptians used the plants to make their papyrus, which was the first form of readily available paper. The Cyperus as we know it on Earth today is the descendent of the early Egyptians' Cyperus, but it's mutated since then, not much, but noticeable if you're a botanist."

"You're saying that this plant here had to be collected around the time of the early Egyptians," Avery said. "It's been here five thousand years. So what? This is an old garden, then. It's had a lot of owners."

"No wait, I see Anita's point," Rivera interrupted. "Even if this plant were collected that long ago, it should still have done some mutating over the time it's been here. It should be changed, even here, though not necessarily in the same way it mutated on Earth. Much of evolution is a random process, and not all of it is externally generated, whether animal or plant."

"Yes," Anita added, "even if you raise a number of plants in identical conditions over generations, you'll eventually get some mutations. Genes divide improperly every once in a while without external stimulation. But according to my genetic scan, this Cyperus is exactly the same form as it existed in the time of the early Egyptians. I know of no way to reproduce such a plant in its same form over such a long time."

These people are in possession of a technology that can eliminate the effects of evolution; very possibly they have an answer that could be applied to birth-defect phenomena. There may be all kinds of other applications that we haven't even imagined."

Rivera stared at Anita with dawning realization.

"You'd better report this to the Captain right away," he said. "Avery and I'll keep making sweeps through this area until you get back."

The woman nodded and started down the path back to the Residence, her mind intoxicated with the possibilities of her discovery. She remembered the agony of her younger sister when that woman's second child had been born without limbs. No one could guess at the cause. The child was in his teens, now, and had long ago learned to use his prosthetic limbs, and psychiatric attention had helped him to adjust to his differences and limitations, but it had all been so useless! She was now how useless it was, saw it now most clearly with the possibility of a deterrent to such tragedies, and she wanted that deterrent, wanted it with a passion that only those linked by blood or love to such a victim of nature's caprice, could know. She found herself literally running down the path.

Suddenly, Itenn met her in the middle of the trail. She ran into him full tilt before she could brake and they tumbled into the foliage in a sprawl of limbs.

"Good heavens, I'm terribly sorry," Anita apologized, picking herself out of the crushed leaves. "Oh no, I've ruined your Protogoran Andibius!"

Itenn rose, wiping the crumbs of soil off of his coverall. He glanced at the damaged plant, then bent and plucked one of the delicate blossoms that had not been bruised.

"I can repair this, it is no trouble," he said gently. "Have this flower for your hair. I saw you admiring it earlier and it will grace your tresses better than its crushed parent."

Anita took the flower, flushing. "I don't know how to tell you how sorry I am, but I didn't see you until too late and I couldn't stop. Are you sure you can repair the plant? They lose their sap so quickly."

"Don't concern yourself," he assured her. "But tell me, Mistress, what was your hurry? Are you in need of something?"

Anita blushed again, embarrassed at having to lie. She had hurt one of this gentle person's children, his lifework, and still he had offered her a blossom and kindness. Yet how could she tell him what she was about to report, that he had something that she--and her culture--wanted, but that he probably would not want to give?

"I must see Captain Kirk," she said hurriedly, brushing past him.

Itenn caught her arm and gave her a tender, but penetrating look. The look seemed to mesmerize her. Itenn brushed her hair from her face, just grazing her temple. Anita's face went blank.

"You cannot imagine all the terrible things that can be done with the technology you so avidly seek," he crooned. "Tragedies like your nephew are a burden of your race: when you discover the technology in your own good time, maybe your culture will be ready to use it responsibly. Forget, Anita Kutuzov."

Anita collapsed to the ground and Itenn caught her. After a moment, she opened her eyes.

"You should not smell Andibius blossoms," Itenn told her, helping her to her feet. "I should have warned you. Are you all right?"

Anita blinked, confused, then shook her head. "I feel dizzy. I'm so sorry."

"Perhaps you should return to the Residence and rest," the alien suggested.

"I will accompany you there."

Anita stood straight, untangling herself from Itenn's strong support.

"No, Thank you, I'm all right now. Funny, I know you shouldn't sniff Andibius, but it looked so delicious, I must have forgotten. But I'm all right, really. I'll go back and have Dr. McCoy take a look at me, if you think I should."

"An excellent idea," Itenn said, smiling. "I think we should tell your companions where you've gone, however. Where did they say they were going?"

"They went down this path," she answered.

Itenn nodded, bowing slightly, and accompanied her to the doorway of the Residence, then walked back down the path to find Avery and Rivera. Anita frowned as she ducked inside. She had the beginnings of a nasty headache, and she could not remember anything since leaving the Residence after breakfast, two hours ago. Damn Andibius. She thought she should know better by now!

Captain Kirk stood in front of the enormous, pool-size tank and watched the exquisite aquatic lifeforms drift through the currents, each of which had a distinct tint of color all its own. The whole tank, in fact, was layered with tints of color, ranging from colorless and clear nearest the top of the tank near the light, to a deep, almost space-black purple hue near the bottom. If the tank contained water, it was like no water he had ever seen elsewhere. Most of the lifeforms that swam in there were like none he had ever seen, either.

Kirk darkened the lights in the room around him by touching the rod that controlled them, and in the dimness, the layers in the tank wall glowed with phosphorescence, a literal rainbow of color. He noticed life forms in the middle green layers that he had not seen before, but in the dark, they glistened with an inner light all their own, swimming with graceful ease, propelled by hundreds of emerald-flecked cilia, nearly transparent. The closest analogy Kirk could imagine to their exotic form was animal-plankton from Earth's seas. Some of the minute nymph stages of shrimp resembled these green alien jewels. Plankton. The base cycle for life in the sea. Kirk wondered idly if these forms here were not the source for the base-proteins the blue "caretakers" used to synthesize their food.

"Jim, are you in here?" McCoy's voice called from the door.

Kirk found the little rod and raised the light again.

"How is she?"

"Napping," McCoy answered. "She's fine, just a little disoriented and headachy. When she wakes up, she'll be able to think straight again."

"It isn't like her to forget about a poisonous plant," Kirk pointed out.

"Kutuzov's the best exo-biologist I've ever known."

"People make mistakes," McCoy said, shrugging. He looked around him, suddenly, and added, "You know, I can't escape the feeling that we're being watched, though I can't imagine why. I've seldom felt as at home with two people as I do with Ipher and Itenn."

Kirk looked relieved.

"I'm glad you said that. I was starting to think I was the only one who felt something wrong about this place."

"Now I didn't say I felt something was wrong, just that there's someone watching us," McCoy retorted. "It's probably Itenn or Ipher keeping a scan on us so we don't hurt ourselves on something innocent, like Anita did."

"I'm not so sure her 'mistake' was so innocent, Bones."

"A hunch, Jim?"

Kirk shook his head tiredly.

"Not exactly. Just a whole feeling I get about this place. What I was trying to get about this place. What I was trying to get across to you a minute ago, but you don't feel it, not the same thing."

"You've got a suspicious nature, Captain," McCoy laughed.

"All right, mark it up to mild paranoia, Doctor," Kirk conceded mildly, "but we've had enough nasty brushes with malevolent beings to know to be careful around mink lined traps."

McCoy grinned broadly.

"Speaking of mink-lined, I'm starved and ready for the bait. Let's go find the kitchen."

They returned to the room where they had first dined, to find Spock and Sulu awaiting them. Anita was asleep on a raised portion of rug-plant which served as a couch. Avery and Rivera were digging into two dishes heaped with what had to be ice cream, while Ipher hovered over them solicitously.

"Report, Mr. Spock," Kirk asked.

"Mr. Scott reports a solar flare of considerable proportion which is disrupting atmospheric conditions here and causing some minor difficulties aboard ship," the Vulcan reported. "He suggests that we return to the ship, with Ipher and Itenn, until the flare subsides, since severe weather conditions can be expected here for several days."

Ipher, who had been listening, approached them.

"There will be no danger if you will remain inside the dome," he said. "We have endured many such storms."

"What about communications?" Kirk inquired.

"Ship's computer can find no way to penetrate the interference generated by the stasis dome short of destroying it," Spock said, "nor can our communicators function, transmitter to receiver, while we are within it."

"Meteorology requested setting up a surface monitoring station during the storm here," Sulu added. "They think the conditions are unusual enough to warrant it."

Kirk motioned Spock and McCoy away from the others, and when the three drew up next to the wall, Kirk spoke quietly so as not to be overheard.

"I'm hoping they're keeping their work and not reading our thoughts," he said.

"But several peculiar things have happened since you've been gone, Mr. Spock."

"Yes, I was told of Lt. Kutuzov's error, and I noticed an unusual vacuity in Lts. Rivera and Avery's reports."

"Jim, if you really think we're in danger" McCoy said, "then this storm that's brewing is the perfect way for us to get out of here gracefully."

Kirk frowned thoughtfully.

"If we go now we'll probably never get to the bottom of things," he said wryly.

"And it is our job to get there if we can."

"You sound more like you're trying to convince yourself than convince us," McCoy observed.

"So long as no visible threat exists, it would be illogical to abandon the pursuit of knowledge," Spock added.

"You're right, both of you," the Captain acknowledged. "Mr. Spock, I want you to go back to the ship. Have Meteorology send down its equipment with one of its junior officers, and we'll set it up before the storm breaks. Meanwhile, the rest of us here will hang around and see what we can get out of Ipher and Itenn, if anything."

"Atmospheric conditions may become perilous here, Captain," Spock reminded. "It would be best if you, also, returned to the ship."

"Yes, well, you'll have to permit me my human weaknesses, Mr. Spock," Kirk told him. "This place has got me intrigued."

"If you two are through," McCoy said, "Let's see if we can teach Ipher some recipes for dinner. I haven't had a good curry since Mahtma Krishnamurthy transferred off the ship!"

The Captain was worried. He stomped around the lounging room like a nervous bear, continually glancing out the transparent wall at the ominous thunderheads over the dome. Flickers of lightning already flared across the far western horizon, the bolts themselves hidden by the hills, but the flashes of their brief illumination painting the cloud banks.

Itenn appeared at the table with a tray of steaming cups, and the aroma of Irish coffee washed through the room. He set the tray down, letting the others help themselves, but he carried one cup to the Captain, offering it solicitously.

"This is the season of storms," Itenn said in his remarkable, soothing voice. "The solar flares are cyclical, and they bring the storms which bring the rains, which otherwise never fall. They fill the water cisterns, and we are grateful for them."

Kirk accepted the coffee, but did not raise it to his lips.

"It looks like it will be quite a storm. Are they always this severe?"

"We are safe here," Itenn assured. "The dome does not allow the weather to reach the Garden, or us."

Anita Kutuzov sat on the couch where she had awakened, and watched the Captain while she sipped her coffee. She frowned slightly, the coffee being stronger than she liked, and returned her attention to watching Kirk. The Captain did not seem at all reassured by Itenn's information. He fiddled with his cup, drinking some of the coffee automatically, but it might as well have been plain hot water: his mind was elsewhere. He frowned, he equinted through the crystal at the deepening gloom, he wiped his free hand on his trousers as though it were damp. Finally, the dam burst.

"Avery and Ensign Flynn should have been back by now!" he blurted.

Doctor McCoy was savoring his drink.

"Take it easy, Jim," he drawled. "Flynn's a meteorologist--he takes to storms like Spock to computers. They'll be back when they have what they want."

Kirk was unaffected. He turned on Itenn.

"Is it very dangerous to be out in that kind of thing?" he demanded.

"There is danger," the alien admitted.

That decided it. Kirk opened his communicator and checked it. Of course, there was nothing but static.

"I'm going outside the Dome to call them back," he announced. "Anyone coming along?"

Sulu glanced bleakly at the gathering storm, and Dr. McCoy and Lt. Rivera were clearly not budging unless ordered. Anita thought about it a moment, and decided she was worried about Avery and Ensign Flynn too. And it would be a polite way to get out of drinking the alcoholic coffee.

"Coming, sir" she volunteered, and immediately had misgivings. The storm had let go: rain was making a solid pelting sheet on the exterior of the stasis dome.

Sighing, and avoiding the slightly sadistic jeers in the others' eyes, she ran after the Captain, who was already out of the doorway.

He walked like he was sprinting, and Anita trotted behind him through the Garden to the edge where the stasis field met earth. Kirk touched the protruding bar, and the field crackled, parting again into a portal. Not hesitating, he plunged through it into the driving rain and snapped open his communicator. He yelled into it, first for Flynn and Avery, then tried for the Enterprise.

"No answer," he called needlessly. "The storm's scrambling the frequencies. We'll have better luck if we get out of the valley to a high place."

His hair was already plastered to his skull and his chin was fathering a significant waterfall, but Kirk began to trudge toward the nearest shale-hill as though taking a pleasant woodland stroll. He turned, after a moment, and yelled back.

"Coming, Lieutenant?"

It was not an order but Anita realized she was committed. She damned herself for having a big mouth. Shuddering in anticipation, she stepped into the halestorm.

It was cold. She was almost instantly soaked, and the wild, infernal gale winds shipped away her body heat as fast as he climbing could generate it. It was a losing battle to see clearly, and what could be seen had a sickly yellowish cast. The rain actually stung as it struck, and if she could have kept within earshot of the Captain, she would have begged his forgiveness and slunk back to the shelter of the dome, grateful for a drop of the coffee she had scorned earlier. But Kirk was a synamo, and was nearing the crest of the rocks before Anita had conquered the talus slope at the bottom.

By the time she huffed to the top, the Captain was already starting down the other side, apparently headed for the higher next hill. Anita felt a little cramp of panic in her stomach. It would not be hard to get separated and lost out here now. Visibility was not more than fifty feet, and the perils of the storm, not to mention the terrain, were numerous. Ignoring her breathlessness, she ran to catch up with Kirk. He was just in sight, going hands-and-knees up a rough, steep place in the next hill.

Did he expect her to climb that in a uniform dress? Anita thought angrily. He had not even looked back to see where she was! She could be lost. She could be hurt. She was certainly miserable. Suddenly, she resented him, the service, and her own stupidity. What the hell, she wondered, am I doing here?

A voice was yelling her name over the din, and she stopped, shielding her eyes with her hands, looking around. A pair of blue uniform tunics bobbed up and down in the misty gully between the hills. Avery and Flynn!

Waging frantically, she tried to point out the Captain to them. They waved back cheerfully, seeming either delighted with or oblivious to the storm. She began to scramble down the slide toward them, wondering if all that rain had not addled their brains. Or hers.

Then it happened. She heard it before she saw it. Rockslide! Half of the east face of the hill across the little arroyo began to slip and tumble into the gully. Flynn and Avery were already clambering to the safety of Anita's hill, but she felt paralyzed by horror. Then she was running full tilt towards the settling slide, knowing without thinking, that the Captain had been caught in it!

He was there. Somewhere. She screamed his name. She had seen a snow avalanche once, in the skiing mountains of the Martian Polar cap. She still had nightmares about it. She had been fourteen years old, then, but she was no less terrified now. The petty anger of a few minutes ago washed away in a flood of panic.

"Captain Kirk!" she screamed, hardly knowing her own voice.

Parts of the slide were still settling and a huge chunk of shale tumbled past her not ten feet away, but the adrenelin of horror made her oblivious to her own danger.

A patch of muddied gold revealed an arm, and she knelt, frantically clearing away debris. The rain helped wash away the mud, and she cleared his face so he could breathe. He was conscious, and he seemed momentarily more amazed than pained. His hips and legs were jammed under a heap of rocks too big for her to budge.

Someone was helping to throw off the lighter debris, and sharp, cold reality came back to her.

"Where's Flynn?" she gasped.

"Went to get help," Avery yelled over the thunder. He put all his weight on the least formidable-looking boulder on Kirk's legs. It budged slightly, then fell back, wrenching a cry from the trapped man.

"--Lieutenant--" Kirk gasped.

"Captain, don't talk. Help is coming," Anita said.

She could see a twisted foot lodged between the rocks. "Avery, don't touch any thing. He's got broken bones. It'll be safer to wait."

The rain was letting up slightly. She tore the hem out of her uniform dress, squeezed out the water, and made a crude compress for the heavily bleeding gash in the Captain's visible shoulder. The mud, rain, and blood made a sickening smear on his freed arm and face. As she applied the compress, she felt his body trembling.

It struck her with a sudden clarity--what she had always known intellectually, but had never accepted on a gut level: Captain James T. Kirk, her commander, was not a plastic superman. He was more than the calm, inspiring voice over the ship's intercom, but less than the aura that surrounded his reputation. He was, simply, a human being: he was frightened. And he was in terrible pain.

She crawled to his head and cleared the rest of the debris around it. There was no way to tell how extensively he was hurt, but it left him breathless with agony. She lifted his head carefully and knelt so that it would rest on her knees. He began to shiver uncontrollably. She pulled closer to him to try to warm him.

"He's going into shock," she moaned helplessly. "I wish Flynn would hurry back."

Avery just shook his head, looking miserable and ineffectual.



The sarned rain began to pelt down harder again. Anita twisted and peered anxiously at the tumble up the slope. More of it could come rushing down at any moment and bury all of them. She was an avowed agnostic, but in those minutes, she said a few precautionary prayers any how.

The minutes seemed dilated, endless. She could read the signs of battle on Kirk's face: the battle of his courage with his suffering. And his fear. She kept her fingers on his erratic pulse, and when spasms of pain seared through him, she held him and wished him the gentle mercy of unconsciousness. But he was still pitilessly lucid when Flynn returned with the others.

Doctor McCoy knelt in the mud and unslung his medical tricorder, then prepared a hprospray. His face was an expressionless as a Vulcan's, and Anita wondered then if she knew him at all.

"It is imperative that we get him to medical facilities immediately," the Doctor said tonelessly.

"The ship doesn't answer," Sulu growled "Probably won't be able to un-

til the storm clears."

Without a word or request, Ipher and Itemn put their hands under the massive chunks of stone pinning the Captain's legs, and lifted them as though they had anti-gravs. For a moment, Anita was amazed. Then she felt ill. The Captain's legs were crushed, the bones in splinters, the flesh a bloody, muddy paste. No one made any comment, but it was obvious: the limbs could not be saved. Probably, the life could not be saved.

"We will take him to the Residence," Itemn said.

McCoy, the automaton, made a cursory examination of the injuries, applied an auto-tourniquet to each thigh, then turned away.

"I'm going to put you out, Jim," he said pressing another hypospray shot against the Captain's throat. Then he turned to the others. "If he's to have a chance, time is critical. Be as careful as you can, but don't dawdle. Let's go."

Itemn and Ipher helped with the ugly, but necessary, amputations. From somewhere in the recesses of the Residence, they provided laser instruments that served as scalpels, sterile bandaging, and supplies to rip up blood transfusions. Both Rivera and Sulu donated the necessary o-positive blood, and when McCoy was finally finished, Itemn mercifully spirited away the mutilated excised limbs.

Avery and Flynn spelled each other at the edge of the dome, trying without success to raise the Enterprise, but the storm showed no signs of abating. McCoy insisted that they keep trying. Kirk needed the ship's sickbay facilities to survive. He seemed to be holding his own against shock, but he was far from stable. Even deeply drugged, his unconscious features crawled with suffering and restlessness, something akin to delirium, but without its physical thrashing.

McCoy had been as detached during the whole operation as he had seemed out at the site of the rockslide. His orders were terse and precise, but as empty of humanity

as the ship's computer, and he spoke only of the exact procedure at hand. When he had cleaned the last congealed blood from his fingernails, he pulled a seat next to the table on which the Captain lay, and studied the readings on his medical tricorder.

Flynn was standing near the hall portal, and Sulu and Rivera had disappeared into the next room to rest. Itenn and Ipher were no where to be found. After a moment, McCoy noticed Flynn and waved him out of the room.

"You go get some rest, too," McCoy told Anita.

"I'll stay," she answered, gesturing at her hand, caught in Kirk's sweaty fingers. He had nearly come to consciousness once during the surgery, and he had captured her hand in his pain, not relinquishing his hold even now, though it was feebly maintained. Somehow, she felt she should not let go, either.

"If anyone needs rest, it's you Doctor," she said, trying to sound both logical and sympathetic. "It's been a long night."

To her surprise, McCoy nodded. He rose and set up the medical tricorder where she could see the readings.

"I'm going to hunt a drink," he said, his voice rough with a weariness that was more than physical. "If I find some, I'll bring you one too. I won't go out of ear-shot. Call me if there are any significant fluctuations."

Alone, Anita tried to untense her fingers without disturbing Captain Kirk's grip. Looking down on him, she felt a despairing heaviness--he looked younger than his years now that his face was lax. In pain, he had seemed ancient. She wondered what kind of adjustment he would, or could make to his injury. Her nephew had lived with his handicap since birth, he had had a life time to reconcile himself, and he had never known anything else. But Kirk, he was being taken in his prime. He was doomed, at best, to a position at a Starbase. No artificial limbs could replace his own with sufficient competence to continue starship duty; the hazards, the demands, could never be met.

Doctor McCoy returned with two glasses that smelled of the Irish whiskey that had graced the coffee served earlier that day. He handed one to Anita, and she guzzled it without paying attention to the taste.

"What will happen to the Captain now?" she asked bluntly.

"He will live or he will die," he said neutrally.

"And if he lives?"

McCoy's immediate answer was a wilting look as though she had asked him some ultimately taboo question. But after a moment, the mask dissolved into grief, and the grief, and the repressed anguish bubbled out.

"Spock will have to take command," he answered shakily. "We aren't due back to a Starbase for seventeen more months. That'll give us time to fit Jim with prosthetics and train him to use them. I don't know where he'll go from there."

"Aren't you afraid he'll turn to the wall?"

McCoy grimaced. He did not want to think about that; he had seen it happen, though: patients who died, often within a month of major surgery like Jim's, simply because they had no will anymore to live. It was medically illogical, but he knew it happened. It was a real phenomenon.

"Yes, I am afraid," the Doctor admitted. "For Jim, starship service is his life. I don't know what will happen when he has to face giving it up. The Captain has enormous emotional strength, but he's also compulsive, and he demands more of himself than is humanly possible."

Anita nodded, and bowed her head to hide the tears stinging her eyes. Some of her grief was for the shattering of a man's life, but some of it, too, was for herself.

The hub-bub in the next room woke Anita even before she heard her name called, and she sat up on the plant-couch in the lounging room and rubbed her eyes. She took a glance through the portal and saw that it had become day, but the storm still raged as before, and it obscured most of the light. She hurried into the next room, half-expecting to find the Captain expiring. Instead, McCoy was frantically assembling instruments for surgery.

"What's happening?" she asked Sulu fuzzily.

"Itenn and Ipher just brought the Captain a new pair of legs," the Asian said, his face bright with amazement.

Anita shook her head.

"That's crazy. Are you crazy, Sulu?"

He snatched her hand and dragged her to a long, narrow tank on the opposite end of the table where Kirk lay, and pulled back a metallic cloth cover. Inside the tank, floating in a murky brownish soup, were two perfect adult legs, one right and one left. They actually looked like Kirk's limbs. She swung on Sulu.

"This is impossible! Those legs were completely smashed."

"Itenn and Ipher regrew them or something," Sulu said. "It's hard to believe, but there they are. Doctor McCoy even checked the tissues--they're the Captain's. His body won't reject the graft."

"If you two are finished jawin', come over here and help me set up," McCoy snapped.

Anita was incredulous. She looked from Sulu to the immersed limbs, to McCoy, to Itenn and Ipher.

"You cloned these!" she cried. "How did you do it?"

Itenn looked distinctly unhappy.

"We must not discuss these matters now," he said. "You must accept our gift without questions or we simply cannot give it."

"I'm not sure you can give it anyhow," McCoy growled. "I'm sure we can re-attach the legs to the thighs, but putting life back into severed nerves is beyond any skill known to me."

"Your subconscious memories contain an instance in which you reconnected a brain to a brainless body, that of your friend, Mr. Spock," Ipher said. "We can make that memory available to you again, temporarily. We cannot attempt such a surgical procedure ourselves; we simply do not know enough about your physiology."

It was McCoy's turn to blink with amazement. But then he shook his head and went back to calibrating the lasar-scalpel.

The surgery was long and tedious. Avery passed out from queasiness and Sulu from bloodloss, his having donated yet another pint of blood. Anita had a few tense moments bringing Sulu around again, but his life was really not in danger, and he spent the rest of the surgery asleep on the plant couch in the other room.

McCoy worked like a man possessed; Itenn's touch to his temple had plunged him into a momentary fit of trembling. He had sobbed, unaccountably, the trembling had cramped his muscles. But when that had dissipated, he had grabbed the scalpel and proceeded to rejoin the limbs to the stumps with incredible precision speed. Ipher had leaned over Kirk's deathly still form at one point and touched at his skull, also, and the fearfully low tricorder readings had stabilized at a more acceptable level. But there was no way to minimize the strain on the man's physique and by the time McCoy had finished with the complex procedure, there was nothing more that could be done.

McCoy pulled a thermo-blanket up to Kirk's chin and checked the flow of blood into one vein and nutriment into another. The Captain's face was pale as tissue, his lips nearly white, and the sheen of sweat collected in his eyesockets and formed pools. McCoy turned the face gently to let the sweat trickle down the cold face. The respiration was barely perceptible.

"Now we wait," McCoy said as though to himself, and went to a couch. He promptly collapsed and fell asleep without even wiping the blood from his hands. Ipher covered him with another thermo-blanket.

Anita, the crisis over for a while, blocked Itenn's path as the alien turned to leave.

"You did something to me, out in the Garden," she accused. "I remember a little of it; I remember something about cloning, and this 'gift', this incident, reawoke that memory, or part of it."

"That is so," Itenn agreed sadly. "You shall have to forget about this, too, before you can leave this place."

"Why?" she demanded. "You're willing to save this one life why can't you help us to save many others?"

"You, yes. You would save lives with it," the alien said softly. Then he took her arms, moved her gently but firmly out of his way, and left. The thunder of the storm outside increased, then muffled again as the portal was opened and swung shut. When she looked back into the room, Ipher, too, had disappeared into one of the restricted passageways. Rivera sat by the Captain keeping virgil over the medical tricorder. Sulu was asleep on a couch, and Flynn must still have been outside the dome trying to hail the Enterprise. Avery sat on the plant-rug with his head in his hands and a visible "do not disturb" aura around him, McCoy was, of course, completely expended, and asleep.

Sighing Anita went out into the Garden and began to wander back down the path where she had encountered Itenn yesterday, trying to piece together the fragments of memories she had of the incident. She remembered the crushed Protagoran Andibius. When she got to the place where it had been, she was almost not surprised, had half-known what she would find: the Andibius was whole again. It lifted its perfect, dangerously-fragrant blossoms to the gloomy sky overhead as though it had never felt the weight of two crashing bodies, as though hardly a day had passed in the ten thousand years since it had been lifted from the soil of its home world and brought here to acquire immortality.

The rain poured down the entire day and on into the evening without a pause in its violence. Anita filled the hours with work: she went from plant to plant in the Garden, recording and cataloging each of the living fossils on her tricorder, noting with increasing disquiet the perfection of each specimen, the remarkable vitality evident in the whole collection. She should have been delighted to be recording the discoveries for science, but their presence only exasperated her: they were an inescapable reminder of the existence of a skill sorely desired, but denied to her.

Anita knew a great deal about vegetative, asexual reproduction in plants, but the kind of genetic duplication practiced by Itenn and Ipher's culture was an exponential leap in technology. She could not get the image of her nephew out of her mind. She kept thinking about Captain Kirk, lying on the table with only stumps where his legs had been, and then lying there, whole again, in a matter of hours. Why could not her nephew be made whole, too? She could not understand how Itenn and Ipher could restore Kirk, but refuse a full life to the millions of other unfortunates like him. The frustration fed the anger she was trying to deny.

She realized that it was becoming too dark in the Garden to keep working: evening. Outside the shimmering translucence of the dome, the flash-floods still rampaged, undercutting enormous sections of the shale-hills and tumbling them into the freshet. The white foam of the rushing water almost glowed in the failing light.

Anita shut off her tricorder and made her way back to the Residence, her path lit by repeated flares of lightning.

The mood inside the dwelling was as somber as the skies outside. Itenn had brought gaudy armloads of sweet-smelling flowers into the lounging room in an attempt to brighten the flumness, and Ipher was busy setting a gala feast, but no one rose to the occasion. Sulu poured himself a mug of soup and the others only picked at the food. In the room beyond, Anita could see Dr. McCoy sitting beside the Captain, who was unconscious. She joined Sulu with her own cup of the hot broth.

"How's the Captain?" she asked.

Sulu just shrugged: no change.

"I think I covered about a twentieth of the Carden today," she said listlessly. "The storm is worse than ever."

The Asian gazed into the bottom of the mug he held, studying his reflection in the silvered, soup-streaked surface.

"You sound. . . vexed," he observed.

"This place wears on me," she admitted. "We're being treated like children who asked embarrassing questions."

"I think you're taking it too personally," Sulu said gently. "We should be grateful; the Captain's alive."

Anita swung on him, giving him a piercing gaze.

"If you feel so good about it, why aren't you celebrating!?" she snapped, gesturing at the banquet.

"Touche," he said wryly. "But we have to keep in mind that we're guests here, Anita." When she did not respond, he added, "We can't go around like Klingons, taking whatever we want. We have to live by our laws, and our laws insist that we respect the rights of other beings and other cultures, even when we're tempted. Even when we're hurt."

Anita opened her mouth to protest, but than--abashed--closed it again. She was silent for several minutes.

"You'll make a good comander, someday," she said finally. "You swallowed everything they taught you at the Academy."

Before Sulu could form a reply, Itenn swept into the room with a dozen different metallic devices in his arms, some of them as big as a head, others the size of a thumbnail, all unrecognizable. With a flourish, he set them on one of the raised couches and gestured to the officers to gather around. Then, selecting one of the tinier items, which looked like a sculpture by an insane goldsmith, Itenn handed it to Ensign Flynn. The device began to hum--a low tune, gentle yet lilting, bright and unusual.

"It's a music box!" Flynn cried, delighted.

Itenn picked up another, different sculpture, tapped it, and gave it to Rivera. It, too, hummed, and then picked up a tune in counterpoint to that being played by the first device. Soon, all of the music-sculptures were going in full orchestration of the basic melody. The sounds were low and delicate, but still they seemed to fill the room.

Fascinated, Anita picked up one of the little sculptures, but at her touch, it began to play in angry discord against the others. She put it down so fast she almost dropped it, but all of the devices had gone silent. Her companions looked at her in bewilderment.

"I--I'm sorry," she blurted. "I must have held it wrong,"
Itenn was studying her with an expression of concern and distress, a wounded
frown.

"There is no right or wrong way to hold them," he said quietly. "They respond
to . . . personal emanations."

The woman felt her cheeks heat with an embarrassed blush. She spun away from the
group and hurried out of the room to the passageway. At the portal to the Garden, she
stopped and braced herself against the cool, fry sandstone wall, letting it take her
weight as all the anger, embarrassment and confusion inside of her battled with her
determination to control herself. Behind her, the music had started up again on a more
solemn note, but all she could hear was the frantic pounding of her heart, her delib-
erate, restrained breath.

". . . No right or wrong way. . ." she thought to herself. She was not all right,
Itenn and Ipher were not all wrong. They wished only to please. They were generous,
intelligent, well-meaning. Sulu was right about them: she had no right to place de-
mands upon them that they could not meet.

Anita forced herself to calmness. The music echoing faintly around the stone
walls had a soothing quality to it, and she wondered vaguely if the others back there
were not directing the mood this way to solve her anguish.

She opened the portal and stared out into the Garden. There was a delicious aroma
in the night air, a lemony sweetness that invited investigation. Guided along the
path by intermittent thunderbolts, Anita sought out the source: a pure white, long-
trumpeted single blossom half hidden in the dark silhouette-foliage. She could not
see enough to identify the plant, but she bent to take a deep breath of its fragrance.

Suddenly, the dome, the Garden, everything blazed in a flash of unbearably glar-
ing light, like an exploding sun! Anita screamed and automatically put her hands to
her eyes. Then, as suddenly, the Garden was plunged into utter blackness. Before
she could suck in another breath to scream, she was soaked and buffeted by drenching
stinging gale winds. The force-field had collapsed!

She ran in what she thought was the direction of the portal, straining her throat
to be heard over the storm. She stumbled, and strong arms caught her shoulders,
picking her up. In the brief flashes of thunderbolts, she recognized Itenn. Then she
was set on the ground inside the portal and Itenn turned to go back outside. Anita
clung to his leg;

"Stop! Don't go out there!" she cried.

But the creature's eyes were wild with purpose.

"We must save the Garden!"

He disappeared into
the tempest, Ipher already
ahead of him.

Anita shrieked with
terror and grabbed at Sulu.

"We've got to stop
them! The storm!"

"Stop them?!" Sulu
yelled. "We have to help
them!"

Anita struggled to
her feet to find McCoy at
her elbow. He squinted
into the wet, howling wind.

"What's going on?"

She shook her head
dizzily.

"Stay with the Cap-
tain," she shouted, obli-
vious of rank, and ran
into the hurricane after
the others. Through the
wind-whipped trees, she
could see a glow, perhaps
a fire. The rain was colde-
r than it had been
out on the shale hills.
She stumbled through the
jungle of foliage, unable
to find a path, unable to



think through the deafening thunder, wind and downpour. Torn-away brush slapped at her. Then she was in sight of the source of the glare: another portal into the hillside, but the place was rigged with a force-field of its own, which was glowing with overload. Silhouetted by the terrible white aurora, Avery, Sulu, and Rivera were carrying someone out of the field--one of the aliens.

"Flynn, get out of there!" Sulu howled. "We can't save it--it's going to go!"

For one hear-stopping moment, Anita was afraid Flynn had not heard, but then he appeared through the blazing screen, which parted around him like water.

"Where's Itenn!?" someone realized.

Ipher, injured, strained toward the aurora, but the others held him.

"Itenn!" he shrilled.

A form molded itself in the blazing white edge of the field: a staggering, silently screaming, flaring form. Itenn was dead before the overloaded field consumed his corpse. Then the field consumed itself, sputtering, burning, exploding outward with light.

Ipher's sobs were lost in the fury of the insensate tempest.

The storm slowed early the next morning, and by noon, the sun had already baked and dried the top inch of soil. What was left of the Garden was half-buried in silt and rock carried into the valley by the flash-floods. Anita Kutuzov waded into one of the already-shrinking pools to rescue a long strip of broken-off Vegan Minntax: The piece could be rooted to start a new plant. Not everything was lost.

She was startled to find Mr. Spock waiting at the edge of the water to give her a hand out of the mud. She showed him the Manntax stem.

"It can be stimulated to produce roots," she said simply. "Ipher will have a new plant to help re-establish the Garden."

"He has refused our offer to assist in repairing the stasis-field generator," Spock told her.

"Oh. Well, I don't suppose I'm really very surprised," she said. "Did you know that Ipher is twenty thousand standard years old, or so?"

"So I was informed by Dr. McCoy, when he beamed up to the ship with the Captain."

"How is the Captain?" Anita asked.

"McCoy thinks he will be walking again in several weeks," the Vulcan replied.

"Of course, it will take more time for him to recover his full capabilities."

"Speaking of time," Anita said, "I wonder how often Ipher and Itenn cloned each other?"

"From Dr. McCoy's discussion with Ipher, the time-cycles varied; they 'replaced' each other's bodies whenever there was aging, illness, or a hampering injury."

Anita walked along the edge of the muddy pond, searching for more salvageable pieces of plants, and Spock kept pace with her.

"With Itenn gone, Ipher will have to stay in his present body until he eventually dies," Anita said sadly.

Spock was quiet for a moment.

"The possibility exists that ship's engineering and medical staffs could be taught the cloning technique. We could then restore or replace Ipher's present body whenever it became necessary. The knowledge could be a boon to all sentient life; it could extend the life span indefinitely, and practically eliminate genetic defects. However, Ipher has refused to divulge the technology."

Anita sighed.

"Yes, I expected it," she said. "He won't gamble. If the technique became generally available, it might become a greater instrument of mischief than of good."

She looked up at Spock in sudden realization, and added, "That's what they were trying to tell me all along! But I was too obsessed to see it!"

Spock regarded the woman solemnly.

"Wisdom is the product of experience, Lieutenant," he said gravely, "and we must accept the wisdom of twenty thousand years over the little we have accumulated in our few."

"I shall take these plants to the Residence," he added. "You may continue with your salvaging work. The Enterprise will not leave orbit for another 1.2 hours."

"Aye, sir," she said, and watched the slim Vulcan trudge across the soft silt flats and around the debris. Then she resumed her own walk.

She understood now; she felt a peace descend over her, quenching the covetous anger that had driven her. Her nephew would never know the chance that had slipped by, but Captain Kirk would be whole again, a gift freely given. She could be satis-

fied, now, with the knowledge that the technique was possible, would be possible again, someday, when her people were perhaps more able to assume the responsibilities such powers imposed.

She looked up and realized she had wandered past the perimeter of the Garden into the desert. A sleek, fat cactus-like native plant basked in the overhead sun, invigorated and renewed by the return of the rains. Only a few days before, it had been a shrivelled mummy. Anita gazed up into the white-blue sky for a moment.

"Maybe they'll return too!" she said to the sky. "Come home, Mistress of the Garden! Ipher needs you."

In the shadow at Anita's feet, the resurrected spiny plant was pushing out a hopeful blossom, its first of the season. It promised to be a most productive year.

first story

THE CORBOMITE HUSTLE

Diane Christensen and Donna Smith

"Scotty, stand by to beam up two. Mr. Bailey will be remaining behind to take part in a cultural exchange with Commander Balok." Kirk flashed a quick smile at Dave Bailey. "We'll pick you up in a few days. Have fun."

"Aye, sir--will do!" Bailey grinned, grateful for the opportunity to redeem himself in the eyes of Captain Kirk. "It doesn't seem like such a tough assignment anyway," Bailey thought. In the few hours they had been there, Balok had chattered practically non-stop about his ship. It had taken several minutes to accustom himself to the child-like alien commander, but Bailey felt at ease now.

"Gentlemen," Balok stated grandly, "It has been a great pleasure having you as my guests. I am sorry you cannot stay longer, but I am sure Mr. Bailey and I will get along splendidly. Farewell Captain Kirk and Dr. McCoy!"

"Goodbye, Commander Balok," Kirk returned, "thank you for your hospitality. Scotty, we're ready to beam back."

As Kirk and McCoy shimmered out, Bailey noticed Balok regarding him curiously. Bailey smiled shyly, wondering how to break the ice. They were silent several moments.

Then Balok spoke, "Tell me, Bailey...I am wondering...the corbomite device is nonexistent, isn't it?"

Bailey hesitated, trying to figure out why the commander wanted to know. After a few moments, he answered, "Yes it is. Captain Kirk was bluffing."

"Oh. I thought so!" Balok grinned widely. "But I did not wish to appear foolish by assuming that he was. Your captain is very good at this bluffing."

Bailey got a sudden glint of an idea. "Captain Kirk plays a lot of poker. It's a very popular Terran card game which involves some luck, but mostly skill and bluff. I would be happy to teach it to you, if you'd like," he told the commander earnestly. In his head, he began speculating on what they could use for chips or currency.... Balok looked like an easy target--"a piece of cake--no problem." Bailey smiled to himself. He fully intended to take the captain's advice.

"I am most eager to learn one of your culture's amusements, but first I must attend to some ship's business. I will be back presently." Balok exited with studied calmness. Once out of his guest's view, he eagerly hurried to a console to scan the information his computer had obtained from the Enterprise's library banks. He retrieved the information within moments, and after studying it thoroughly, he rejoined a smug-looking Bailey. "My tasks are now complete. I am now at your disposal. What was it that you called that game?"

"Poker!" Bailey answered with a self-confident smirk.

"It sounds like an excellent game. That should be very enjoyable, Bailey. Shall we make ourselves comfortable?" As they turned towards Balok's cosy control room, a small smile crossed the alien's innocent-looking face, and a wicked glint appeared in his eye. "Yes, very enjoyable indeed!"

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