

LETTING GO

by

C.R. Faddis

Like lovers in a glade, the younger man clung to the older, holding his companion half across his chest in a tight, protective embrace, his arm numbed by the weight. On his back, Jim Kirk stared into the smoke-fouled sky and watched the violet gloom pursue the flush of the setting sun up the walls of the ruined rooftops. The sounds of battle were moving away from the heart of Pirrus' capital, and he knew the fighting would stop soon, and there would only be the wait.

The older man shuddered faintly in his embrace, and Kirk peered worriedly into McCoy's shock-bleached face.

Your heart keeps pounding; so desperate, it rocks us both. So much blood--I'm sticky with it. So much pain--it slams through you at every breath, I can feel it. Breast to breast, I can warm you a little; only wish that I could do more. That grenade did in your hypospray, did in everything: the drugs, the mission, Captain Washoe, and very likely you.

Ah, Bones...my fault. There wasn't a good enough reason to bring you along to this insane world.

McCoy wrenched, straining against new pain, oblivious to the fierce embrace in which he was swaddled. He choked, drooling fresh blood.

"Lie still," Kirk breathed, his free hand stroking the dusty grey head. "Lie still, Bones, easy now..."

Lie easy. You're bled white already, don't make it worse. We've got a long wait, yet, relax, give in to it, go back to sleep. It's better there, holds off the pain...sleep's sanctuary.

The gasps diminished, the spasms let up. McCoy's head slumped back on to Kirk's shoulder, and Kirk continued to smooth the damp hair for long minutes before he could relax again.

Who was it, he wondered, said war doesn't decide who's right--only who's left?

It was beyond his comprehension that an entire planet would take up arms over a religious dispute, yet on Pirrus, it was custom: More years of war than years of peace, and the few years of peace spent girding for the next inevitable war.

What does it matter that God has different names and faces to different minds? Spock would have called it "most illogical."

Kirk's mind leapt beyond the curling smoke in the gory sky. A vague, familiar weariness tugged at his thoughts, but he shoved it aside with impatience, intent on the current of memories his old friend's name had invoked.

Spock. Dear Spock. Where are you now, my Vulcan friend? Closing my eyes, I can almost see you, bent over a console on Memory Alpha, studying, preparing, for your expedition...

Old anguish rose up to wash out Kirk's whimsy. Images of horror--phasers' flashes--sparks and screams--streaking warships--blood and mangled metal--cut into him again. He could not quash them, memories he never fully escaped, awake or asleep. He drew his free hand up and threw his arm across his face, but the scars in his soul were ever tender. Vollmer II had darkened his life. And not his alone, that was the worst of it.

You lost your eyes in saving me, my friend. An accident, a calculated risk--I'll never know for sure. They had to retire you; had to, damn them. You say you see again, bionics give you light, you read, you move, creation still has texture, color, shape. But android vision has its limits. Starfleet couldn't keep you on a ship.

You left.

Your dark eyes burned; they seemed the same to me.

Under his arm, Kirk's eyes stung in the funneled draft. He wiped them on his sleeve and wrapped the arm around McCoy again. Over his head, evening's first stars were twinkling through the smoke. Kirk watched them grimly until he'd steered his grief back into its old channels.

He knew, but did not like, that Spock's new life at Vulcan's Science Academy suited him as well as Starfleet had. The Vulcan had adapted with disconcerting ease, and no apparent regret at his losses.

I should be glad for him, Kirk mused, so why does his success still trouble me?

And yet, the pain and resentment of separation had dulled, and where there had been mostly a wrenching, there were only twinges anymore.

But I wish you were here now, my friend. The sun has set, and it's getting cold, and there's nothing to be done but to lie here, afraid, so much afraid, and hold on to Bones, praying he does not die before Thelin comes back with the ship. Your company, Spock, would warm me. But I brought Bones along for company--and see what happened to him...

That weary something nagged at Kirk again, but his mind was off on yet another track.

Maybe Thelin would bring the ship back early. So like Spock in such startling ways, the Andorian First Officer pursued his own odd ways. Unlike the Vulcan, he put trust in "hunches." Still, he mostly followed orders, and his orders kept the ship from reach for now, out of Klingon sensors. When the time for rendezvous came around, Thelin would slip the ship back into orbit and beam the landing team aboard "regardless of condition", homing the transporter on the subcutaneous transponders. Thelin could be counted on, but that was hours away yet. The twilight was already fading, and cold was not the only danger in the dark.

And what, Kirk asked himself, will they retrieve when they beam us aboard?

He glanced across the littered street to one of the casualties.

They'll beam up Talcot Washoe's corpse; and Ambassador Eicun, if the Klingons haven't taken him to their ship; and myself; and Bones, whether he's alive or not by the time the ship gets back.

That thought knotted a cramp in Kirk's gut, and he stroked McCoy's head tenderly, though the man could not possibly be aware.

Don't die on me. Don't die. This world's not worth your life. The Klingons want this stinking place--I say, let them have it. Let them try to tame this race of madmen.

Mentally, he heard again the dispassionate technical briefing: politicians, sociologists, the armchair admirals, all spouting facts and figures, theories and cliches that did not, could not, apply to the realities here. "Strategically vital"? Yes, Pirrus might be that, but it was also an abomination, teeming, overrun with violence that stained all who would touch it. Where life's full cycle was a mere ten years from birth to senility, where litters birthed in fours or eights at a time, and that time a mere six weeks--here life was cheap as nowhere else. On Pirrus, Malthus' grimmest theories ran their classic laboratory tests. Ambassador Eicun had hopes to defuse the impending war; sooner try to stop a nova. The Klingons might be blamed for touching off the blaze, but the kindling had already been smouldering.

It struck Kirk how closely the Pirrans resembled the Pre-Reform Vulcans, a people bent on racial self-destruction, snared in their own passions, steeped in every atrocity. But there was no Surak here, no voice of restraint.

Nothing has dignity. Not even the dead. The living make weapons of the casualties, rigging them with bombs to catch the careless or unwary.

He glanced again at Captain Washoe's corpse, at the eight or nine others, dead or dying, that were visible from Kirk's limited perspective. The cramp in his stomach climbed into his chest, and he clung to McCoy.

Ah, Bones, Bones--you had no way of knowing. A cry of pain would bring you to a slime-devil's side, damn the risks. None of us understands this world, not us, not the sociologists, not the Pirrans themselves, I think. Rest quietly in my arms, Bones, and hold on a while longer.

Night had closed down on the street, and the ruin that was Washoe's face became obscured by darkness, so that Kirk at last was able to look fully on the corpse and deal with the death. The man had convulsed for only a minute. There had been no time, with McCoy's gushing hemorrhage to be staunched, to render aid to Washoe, though Kirk knew it would not have mattered. It had been Washoe's time. It could as readily have been his own.

Perhaps, he thought, it should have been.

A damned fine man--one of the best, a captain to the end, worrying about his crew when he was in more danger himself. I wish I'd known him better.

His crew. They'll be disconsolate.

His crew...once my crew, most of them. We've put on a lot of years since the Enterprise, old friend. We're getting old, oh, yes we are. Commodore Kirk, aged 51; Commander McCoy, aged--what, 60 now? And always you stayed with me, transferring with me when I advanced to Fleet Captain. And after Vollmer II, after Spock, you came with me to my flagship, the Verity. How many worlds have we seen together, how many light years crossed? How many crises weathered, you and Spock and me, and after Vollmer, just you and me?

He ground his teeth against a surge of nagging bitterness, and turned his eyes and mind to the pallid face he cradled at his shoulder. McCoy's skin was grey in the deepening gloom, and the black blood was drying at his nose and mouth. But he breathed...he still breathed.

You held me like this once, Bones. Close, helpless, only waiting; I haven't forgotten Avar-dene. You've been my ace, Bones, my secret reinforcement against fate. But for you, miracle-worker, I'd be gone like Washoe. Given two functioning neurons to work with, you could pull a man through anything. Anything. And when there were deeper wounds of the soul, you were there to help heal those, too.

My strong right arm, that's what you've become, as much as Spock ever was; and it seemed so

natural to have you by my side, always, even coming here, even knowing the acute danger of it. There was no need, no practical justification for bringing you along, no reason other than my own unthinking selfishness. I'm getting careless as I get older, Bones. It used to be only myself I could risk. Now I risk you--and others--routinely, hardly a second thought. What is happening to me? What gives me the right?

Anguished, his guilt was a blade twisting in a wound, a fissure in his sense of integrity that he'd been indifferent to until now. His conscience mercilessly reviewed the facts: "Organian Peace Treaty, Article XXII, 13, 6. The testimony of two officers of command rank, corroborated by a non-military official, along with pertinent recorded evidence, shall be required to verify any infringements of Articles IV through XVI of this agreement, in order to file an official protest."

He knew the wording by heart; he had dealt with Klingon "infringements" before. Only Washoe, Eicun and himself--not McCoy--had been required to fulfill the mission. Even in that, he had failed, for they had never rendezvoused with Eicun, the Klingons would likely have him now, and the tricorder records had been damaged in the same explosion that had killed Washoe and injured McCoy.

You see, Bones, if you die--and I pray that you do not, I don't know if I could live with that--it will truly be my doing, as much as any Pirran sadist's grenade.

God help us.

Hurrying footsteps echoed down the street, and Kirk held his breath, pressing McCoy's body more tightly to his chest. Spattered yellow uniforms, a squad of Razzia gunners, passed at a nervous trot, late in getting back to their bunkers. A weird terror was scrawled vividly across their faces, and Kirk went cold with sudden shock.

He'd thought the report was a myth. But with the Razzias' fading footsteps, all doubt fled. He'd heard the fear in their wheezing breaths, seen it in their eyes. It was said that when dark fell on Pirrus, children ruled the streets. The scavengers of war, they preyed on dead and dying flesh, and any unarmed adult they could corner was fair game to their savage whims. Deadly as burr-ants, they'd tear a man to shreds even as he threw them off.

He knew without glancing around that there was no near place that offered shelter--open doorways led to deathtraps under sagging, failing beams. In any case, he could not move McCoy too far. That life hung in too fine a balance. Their only course, then, was to lie as still as death itself, and hope that no one came their way. It wasn't long now 'til the rendezvous with the Verity, a few hours, maybe three.

I wish I had Spock's timesense.

No, I don't; I'd be twice as tense, ticking off each minute in my mind.

But time pressed on him. A full hour had cycled since the sunset, and cold inched up his arms and legs. He pulled McCoy's torn tunic down around Bones' waist, and held him closely, but there was no way to cut the chill. Cold stars peered down through the smoky billows in heartless mockery. He wanted, more than any other time or place, to leave this world, to leave, to leave, to leave...

Defenses down, reserves off guard, the weary, hounding thing he'd been refusing, been ignoring, reared its head and faced him undisguised:

I'm tired.

He didn't fight it anymore.

Tired. Oh, Lord, I'm tired. Tired through and through, of this sick world, the cold, the fear, of all the rest of it. Enough of this--I've had enough for one lifetime for any man. I'm sick to death of trying to understand worlds (like this one) which repel my mind, tired of life-and-death decisions to which I'm becoming callous, of dreary ship cubicles to which I've become accustomed, tired of the insubstantial pleasures and the transient relationships. Tired, mostly, of command. I never thought I'd be saying that to myself. But it's naked truth--cold, sober truth.

He realized then, with an ugly shock, that life in space had gone stale on him some time ago, but some part of him had denied it, hidden it away under excuses of duty when duty was long consummated, pushed it aside in the flurried excitement of this crisis or that--leaving him drained and sated at the resolution of each one, but satisfaction no longer lingered as it had. And so he'd sought out danger, more and more, like a man sought drink, volunteering for missions that consumed his energy and filled his mind for even a little while, until his frantic quest for the old gusto had brought him, finally, to this place--confronting his own truth at such a bitter cost.

I'm tired...

And you, Bones--now I realize, I see it, how tired you've been all along: the subtle messages, wishful prodding, gentle teasing--I heard your words, but somehow they never quite sank in: "One of these days, Jim, I wanna take a l-o-o-o-o-o-o-ng leave and go see my grandkids." "Damnation, this is a nice little world here, I could settle down in a place like this an' jes' wheedle away the rest of my days in a quiet little private practice." Or, "Y'know, a man could really sink his teeth into a project like Spock's."

Spock's project. The expedition. Why didn't I give it more thought? It would be a new life, new--challenging! They need someone like me, someone with military experience, diplomatic experience, all the things I know and can do; but there'd be much less danger, and we'd be together, together for probably the rest of our lives, all three of us, Bones. There'd be dignity in it,



and excitement. The Klingons of the Mirror Universe--so hard to imagine Klingons as decent beings, even there--are such unknowns; but now that the technique has been derived to allow passage through the barriers of interphase, it's too dangerous not to meet them "half-way." Suddenly we find we have an unguarded back door. That beachhead between universes, that cultural interface, is as vital as any mission we've undertaken in Starfleet. Radio negotiations cut Starfleet out of this one, or I'd have been bucking to command it all along; but both sides want to keep the military out of those first face-to-face encounters. We'd be priceless, there, if out of the service, Bones. Spock said he wanted both of us, needed a good medical person, needed someone to lead the group, needed us. And we'd fit.

The tiredness, soul-deep, weighed him down, and bare to his own heart's dichotomy, he could not decide. He feared that change. He'd pledged his life to Starfleet, to his ships, his crew-people, to his duty. Blood and pain and tears had bought him much, and yet he saw too clearly that the price must rise until he had none left to spend, until, like now, he started spending blood that was not his. Afraid to leave. And yet, afraid to stay: afraid, now, of the lethargy that slowly claimed his strength, where there'd been restless vigor heretofore. He did not relish this grim business of encroaching age: not old yet, no, but soon enough, too soon. He'd be another armchair admiral, another patterer of witless tales and doubtful strategies.

Oh, no, not that for him. He'd seen himself that way, gone useless and pathetic, shambling, rambling, hopeless and homeless, dying of old age at 34. There had to be some middle choice--or was he running from himself again? He didn't--

Contours in the darkness moved. A shaft of lantern light dashed down the silent street. In its meager glow, the night came alive. The night had scampering feet and lemur eyes and filthy faces--dozens of them! Not too far away, on an intersecting street, hoarse screams, doomed screams rose and carried on the chilling wind. The night-ghouls carried poles between them, long poles that they hoisted on thin shoulders, and their keening laughs stabbed through the dark.

Screams and screams--what in God's name are they doing?

Oh, God, make me lie still, make my arm stop twitching, don't let me need to vomit. Slow breaths, deep breaths now, quiet--they don't see us. They'll go for the gaudy Razzia uniforms, or the Semplars by the curb. The pole--they use the pole to poke at the casualties, make sure they're not faking, make sure they're not booby-trapped.

The corpse withstood a solid crack across its skull. Satisfied, then, they dropped the pole and drew long blades. Ribbons--cloth and flesh--were passed from fist to fist, picknickers and looters in their glory. Kirk only clung to McCoy, not looking, not thinking, sickened into silence, yet his brain beat round and round a dazed litany:

Sick. Sick world, sick people, sick!

Eicun had said there were no crops this year, burned or never planted, but imagination defied a turning to this source of food.

Cannon fodder, kinder fodder, people gotta eat.

He groped for calmness.

Whoa. I can't give in to this, I can't. Got to hold on, hold on, stay calm. Calm. It's not my place to judge, I don't have all the facts; Right? Don't understand because I don't have all the facts. Insufficient data. Keep your head.

Without warning, shudders shook McCoy again, and he drew in a long, wheezing breath as prelude to another bout of coughs. Before he could, before the spasms caught, Kirk clamped his free hand over McCoy's mouth and stifled the harsh sounds.

Not now, for God's sake, don't come to. They're busy, engrossed, but there are many...Quiet, Bones, don't fight me, Bones, I know it's hurting you. I know...

The looters stood and rummaged in the street. The pole was raised again and prodded at the exotic corpse that had been Washoe. Too strange to use for food, the stiffened corpse endured the slashes of the curious knives, until, in minutes, it lay ravaged like a Martian sand-clam's shell. The uniform shirt, smeared with clots, was first attacked in hopes of dividing, and when that failed, fisticuffs and knives were brought to bear for ownership.

Behind it all, Kirk did what he could. McCoy was writhing in his arms, barely restrained. Trembling himself, Kirk squeezed his eyes shut tightly, half-praying, half-planning.

How did Spock know it would be like this? "The day will arrive, Jim, when you will wonder whether Starfleet has any attractions left for you." I didn't believe him then, couldn't imagine it, but I'm not wondering any more. I know I've had enough. I've done my hitch, and more. Let someone else, someone who's younger, fresher, face the wars, the griefs, the blood. Let me let go.

The only thing I ask, whatever else comes of this, is that Bones makes it through. Don't let him die, not him. Please, God, not him. My fault...and his fault. He gives too much, always did, gave and gave--and I took and took. But this? I don't want this final gift. Don't force it on me, please. If anyone must die here, make it me. Or let us both come through, alive. Both.

I swear this to you, Bones, that if we make it, if we live through this, God willing, we'll do it.--We'll pick up the expedition, join Spock, go for that challenge where we'll be wanted, where we'll be needed. We'll take that long leave, first, go see your grandchildren--children--CHILDREN!

They were on him before he could tense. Instinct and long training moved him before he knew he'd moved. He scrambled out from under McCoy and bashed an arm into a grimy face, seeing the body fly back into others. Metal flashed, his arm shot pain. He jammed a fist past loosening teeth, felt hot blood splash his face and hands. There was no time for tactics, only swinging, mashing, flinging in a wild impression of bared teeth, scrabbling limbs, jabbing blades.

If stay no chance!

He gripped one demon by thin ankles, swinging it like a flail into its comrades, forcing a small moment's pause in that ferocious charge. It was enough. No time for mercy, gentleness, or even care, he hauled McCoy up on his shoulder and ran headlong through the horde. He shook off grasping paws, had no time to react to pain. He picked a random direction and ran full out, the screaming throng like bloodhounds at his heels. Out of the lantern's reach, he stumbled through the street, and death was on him for he could not see, he fell, he'd lost, there was no place left to go. Squeals and flares of light drowned out his senses, and in a final effort, hopeless, useless penitence, laid his only shield--his body--over McCoy's crumpled form.

An hour went by. He never felt its passage. Numbed beyond sensation, timesense lost and not regretted, he waited for death, but it did not come; for in his madman's scramble out of the deadly circle, he had kicked the single lantern, spilling out its precious fuel and spattering scalding oil. Those ghouls not burned were quickly left in darkness, and pursuit was abandoned almost as it started.

Afraid of the dark? Children, after all.

McCoy still breathed. Kirk gathered him, again, close to his breast, and gazed up at the stars. They beckoned, pleaded, worked their secret charms on him again; their claims, demands abided. Then, the smoke of Pirrus' befouled skies dimmed them to inconsequence. He closed his eyes, shut out the stars.

Thein would come soon. Of itself, at least for now, that was enough.

THE END

