

MUSIC OF THE SPHERES

A Star Trek Novel

by

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Historian's Note

The events of this novel begin immediately following the final frame of **Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home**. One might imagine James T. Kirk, having instructed Sulu to "see what she's got," settling back in his chair and musing upon the almost-fate of Earth. Between the end of the Prelude and the beginning of the first Fugue, there is a hiatus of several weeks, perhaps only to allow sufficient time for news of the Praetor's death to reach Starfleet and the Federal Council.

"Do you still play chess, Kirk?" Sarek asked as if casually before removing himself from the scenario entirely.

"Whenever I have the time, Ambassador," Kirk replied, knowing Sarek would not waste words on trivia.

"I suggest you will have much time on this mission," Sarek said cryptically. "Be mindful always of the importance of the king..."

PRELUDE

"And the waters prevailed without measure upon the earth..."

In the center seat on the bridge of a spanking new starship designated NCC-1701-A, Captain James T. Kirk watched the blue-and-white confection that was his home planet recede in the rear viewscreen. The waters, in fact, no longer prevailed. Cloud cover and planetwide temperatures had returned to within

normal parameters. Floodwaters had receded from all but the most low lying regions. There were the isolated food and medical-supply shortages to keep off-planet transports working overtime, and people were still being advised to boil or irradiate their drinking water until groundwater could be certified pure but, on the whole, Earth had been lucky this time.

And so were we, Jim Kirk thought, so were we!

His thoughts turned to the shakedown cruise ahead, and to the promise of extended shore leave thereafter. There was one place on Earth he knew of that the floodwaters would barely have touched.

As soon as we get her shipshape and home, Jim Kirk thought, I'm going to go climb a rock!

Aboard the soon to be departing science vessel *Clarke*, Dr. Gillian Taylor was talking for the last time with her staff at the newly-established New Cetacean Institute off Australia's Great Barrier Reef. Once the *Clarke* left Earth, George and Gracie would be entirely in their care. Gillian hoped to be back before Gracie had her calf, but even if she wasn't, she was confident her two beloved humpbacks couldn't be in better hands.

"You're sure about that?" she asked the wetsuited figure on her commscreen.

"Affirmative," the solemn figure replied with typical Vulcan certitude, disregarding the seawater dripping from the lank hair plastered against her fluted ears. In her brief time in this century, Gillian had come to love Vulcans, and not only for their certitude. "At least, Dr. Taylor, I am as sure as Gracie is, for it was she who communicated it to me."

"Okay, then. Can't get any surer than that!" Gillian said cheerfully. "In that case, double her vitamin supplement, and see what you can do about those barnacles on her chin, will you? They must itch like hell. Oh, and I meant to ask: how're you coming along with the language?"

"Slowly, Dr. Taylor. George assures me my syntax is flawless, but indicates I speak with a distinctly dolphin accent."

The one thing she didn't like about Vulcans, Gillian decided, was the she could never tell if they were kidding.

"Well, there you are!" she said, playing along. "You know what they say about being judged by the company you keep."

"Indeed."

"Okay, listen, kiddo, I have to go, if I can figure out how to shut this thing off. We're leaving orbit in about an hour. I'll send you a postcard from Mer. Taylor out."

In Communications Central of TerraMain Spacedock, Commander Kevin Thomas Riley, Starfleet Diplomatic Corps, watched *Enterprise* slip elegantly through the spacedoors before returning to what he'd been doing before she powered up, which was harassing the comm officer who had been trying for three hours to raise a particular private transmitter in Cairo. It had been exactly three hours and one minute since Riley had beamed off the Reliant-class vessel *Sadat*, back from a fruitless peacekeeping effort between Zeon and Ekos. He'd been trying without success to raise the Cairo transmitter ever since he'd heard about Earth and the Probe.

"Keep trying!" he urged the frazzled young comm officer, who frankly had better things to do.

"You have to understand, sir," she explained patiently, "communications are still in a tangle planetside. Even where the multi-phasics are back up and running, there's a logjam with everyone trying to get through at once."

"Never mind!" Riley barked, forgetting that he was supposed to be a diplomat even when he wasn't getting paid for it. "Maybe I can hitch a ride on a cargo transporter and beam straight down."

That's a good way to get fried, the comm officer wanted to tell him, but decided not to. Anything to get him off her neck.

Knee-deep in the rubble of a millennia-old city on one of the barrenest of the Empire's newly-acquired colony worlds, Dajan glanced up from his scrutiny of a weatherworn petroglyph to discover a pair of jackbooted feet planted on the rim of the retaining wall above him. The archeologist had to squint against the dull red sun to discern the true shape of the shadow-figure standing in the boots.

It was the sublieutenant from the guardian vessel which had dogged his research ship the entire way here. Why am I not surprised? Dajan wondered.

"What is it?" he demanded imperiously, in the precise tone his elder brother Delar had taught him to use with sublieutenants and their ilk.

"A summons, kerDajan, from the Capital. All scientific missions are herewith recalled."

"For what purpose?" Dajan's glass-green eyes snapped with fury. He had barely begun! He stood, abandoning his perusal of the petroglyph, thought he did not yet put his magnifier away. Oh, how he longed to flash it upward into the sublieutenant's eyes, claiming later that it was an accident! But he was not yet that far rehabilitated. And his sister was still in the Capital, her position far more vulnerable than his own.

"I was not told," the sublieutenant answered with a touch of smugness, "therefore I cannot tell you. But your ship departs within the hour. Be on it, or be marooned here."

In his departure, the sublieutenant managed to loosen enough scree from the top of the retaining wall to all but bury the petroglyph.

HAPPY 500TH, LUDWIG VAN! proclaimed the banner all but covering the porticoed facade of Lincoln Center's Philharmonic Hall, flapping indolently in the New York City breeze. Inside, beyond the chandeliered elegance of the ornate lobby, through the muffled doors which silenced street noises, down the raked and plushly carpeted aisles to the airy blondwood stage, the barely controlled chaos of a musician's rehearsal was in progress. Salzburg and Vienna, Tokyo, Sydney and ShiKahr might boast their own celebrations of the Beethoven quinticentennial, but the New York Philharmonic had garnered the most offworld soloists, and consequently the most extensive Federation-wide publicity. Tickets had gone on sale as much as a year before the repertory was announced.

The rep was simple and straightforward: the Nine Symphonies, performed by a full orchestra playing twentieth century acoustic instruments; the combination was unusual enough to attract a great deal of attention. And while the festival itself was months away, and most of the soloists would not arrive until the week before, preparations were feverish.

Admiral Robert Harvey Cafilisch, head of Starfleet Operations, strode purposefully across the broad, sunny plaza of Starfleet Command HQ San Francisco, on his way to a top secret meeting with Admiral Cartwright and the UFP President.

In the wake of what was being called, with a touch of gallows' humor, the Second Deluge, Cafilisch had barely overcome his fear of stepping into the shower; he had hoped for a brief respite to get his fleet back online before the next crisis. No such luck. And as if life weren't complicated enough, an added complication wearing dark Vulcan robes stepped out of the shadow of the Sciences building where, incredibly, a maintenance robot was still sucking up stagnant flood water, and fell into step beside him.

"Ambassador Sarek!" Cafilisch did not succeed in keeping his constant state of surprise out of his voice. "I thought you'd returned to Vulcan days ago."

"So I had intended," Sarek replied, his eyes straight ahead, his face unreadable. "But in view of the information about to be imparted to you by Commander Starfleet, I deemed it more logical to remain here for the present."

Cafilisch felt the hair prickle at the back of his neck. No one but Starfleet top echelon and the President of the UFP was supposed to be privy to the level of information Cartwright possessed. He wasn't about to ask Sarek what he knew or how he knew it; Sarek would not have told him if he had.

The two crossed the sunny plaza in tandem and in silence beneath a cloud-free sky. Bob Cafilisch suppressed a sudden chill.

Neither Cartwright nor the Federation President seemed surprised at Sarek's arrival, though the President looked as if he were about to object to his presence, then changed his mind. Without speaking, Cartwright activated the tape preset in his deskscreen, and the four viewed it in silence. It was Bob Cafilisch who broke the silence.

"How recent is this report, Admiral?" he asked Cartwright.

"As recent as a subspace squirt from the heart of the Empire received at 0300 this morning," Cartwright answered, his sculpted dark face looking ashen, suggesting that it had gotten him out of bed and he'd been hounding the decoders from that time to the present.

Cafilisch shook his head skeptically.

"There've been rumors of the Praetor's impending death since Hector was a pup, or at least as long as I've been in Starfleet. I suppose even a Romulan can't live forever, but even so - he's only third in power after the Emperor and the Consul."

"Third in rank, but first in power," Sarek interjected; he had barely glanced at the report, seemed to know its contents beforehand. "There is no question among those who know but the Praetor rules the Empire. Or ruled it, while he lived."

"Well, there we have it," Cartwright said, as if he at least were convinced. "It comes down to two questions, then. Is he truly dead, and what manner of transition can we expect if he is?"

He was.

The fact could no longer be suppressed. The Praetor at last was dead.

The press of the crowd in the streets of the Capital trying to get through to view the body in the Hall of Columns was terrifying. No one in the Citadel dared admit their official mourning was anything less than genuine, hence everyone came. It was impossible, Jandra thought, with the part of her mind which was not engaged in working its way through the maze of what this might mean to her, that for some very few it was a genuine mourning. For the rest, it was a show of Orthodoxy, most essential. As for her own feelings...

"An official flitter will come for you," Tiam interrupted her thoughts, trying not to posture too much in the glass as he arranged the mourning ribands over his uniform insignia. "I've had a place cleared on the roof to avoid the mob."

"What music will They require?" Jandra asked, careful to keep her voice neutral, her hands unclenched in her lap; tension was bad for them, and would affect her playing.

"The flitter pilot will bring it." Tiam turned in her direction. Jandra's heart quickened. She remembered when the marriage had been arranged, and how she'd raged and wept for days when told it was the only possible route to rehabilitation for herself and her family. Yet when she first saw Tiam, her rage had dissipated somewhat. At least, she remembered thinking at the time, he is handsome. That was before she knew the rest. "Though one supposes you can hardly go wrong with the Lerma Requiem. Lerma has been longer on the Orthodox list than any of his contemporaries."

"Of course," Jandra replied without inflection, thinking: Lerma is so bland that no one, not even the Praetor, could have objected to him.

So she had been summoned to play at the Praetor's funeral. Romulans were masters of irony but this, Jandra thought, was beyond irony. This Praetor, who was a swine and a murderer, who by the most

conservative estimates was responsible for a million deaths or "disappearances" among his own kind, not to mention untold incursions against alien citizenries, this Praetor whose own order had sent her elder brother on an impossible mission whose failure required his execution, her parents' ritual suicide, the unorthodox stigma placed upon her and her surviving sibling, this Praetor presumed to reach her even beyond his own death, and require that she offer him her music.

"It is quite an honor," Tiam emphasized, not for the first time. "I do not need to tell you there will be - uncertainties - in the next several days. I am made a middle-level administrator by this Praetor's favor. Who knows what I may achieve with his successor, provided he is pleased with me and mine? And I'm told several elder musicians were passed over in your favor."

Tiam's own desires and ambitions always came first, Jandra knew. How dare he presume to say these words to her - knowing her family's past, knowing she had only married him in order to win rehabilitation for herself and her brother; that fact above all must gall him still. There was no cruelty like that which could flourish at the heart of a marriage.

She looked up from the hands in her lap to see that Tiam was watching her narrowly.

"You're indolent," he accused her. "Have you some - qualm - about the honor assigned you?"

"I will play, husband." Jandra fought to keep the indolence out of her voice. "More than that you need not know."

The entity traversed the silence between the stars. It had learned something incredible from the minds of the air-swimmers on the last blue world it had visited, something five hundred millennia of wandering had not taught it before: There were some who presumed to own the distance between the stars.

By such a definition, the entity now moved between "Federation space" and "Romulan space" though, curiously, it experienced no material difference between the two.

The entity had many names. Some called it Probe, some Traveler. The name its creators had given it translated either as Messenger, Gatherer or Wanderer. Its name for itself, and for the creatures it communed with, was Singer. Such designations had long ago lost their distinctness, blurring into insignificance, so that the Wanderer no longer cared what name was given it by those it visited. But it remembered that some had cursed it on the last blue world, and it still did not understand why.

The Wanderer had meant no harm. It simply had not understood. The Singers' Song had ended three centuries before, and the Wanderer had hurried to learn the reason why. Finding the Singers gone, it had sought to return the blue world to its pristine state, the better to encourage new Singers to evolve. It had not been prepared for the Singers' sudden reappearance, nor for what the male had told it when he reappeared.

They are intelligent, the Singer the humans called George had explained. They build, they speak, they think great thoughts. They brought me and the female here from where we were. Is that not sufficient proof?

They do not Sing! the Wanderer had objected. Heretofore, on all the worlds it had visited, that had been

the sole arbiter of intelligence. When I sang the flying-song, their life-pods blinked and sputtered and went dark, adrift in space. They do not Sing! How can they be intelligent?

They will Sing, the Singer said, when they have learned the skill.

Thereafter the Wanderer vowed to be more careful about the species it encountered. It did not Sing to the life-pods it passed in space, and they no longer went dark. It no longer stirred up the seas of the blue worlds, merely studied them. Sometimes it even permitted itself to be studied as well.

"Just how long is this shakedown cruise supposed to last, anyway?" McCoy groused at Kirk's elbow.

"What's the matter, Bones? Bored already?"

"No. Just I heard mention of unlimited shore leave once we got back. Seems to me that's not the sort of offer Command makes lightly or too often. Best we take them up on it while it's still outstanding."

"We'll get there," Kirk said vaguely, preoccupied. Two things were on his mind. One was the Eyes-Only message Uhura had relayed to Sulu this morning. Sulu had asked to be excused from the helm to take it in his quarters and hadn't returned. There was only one reason Jim Kirk knew of that his helmsman should start getting secret messages, and that was because Special Section wanted him for another spy mission.

Espionage was a kind of second career for Sulu, something to siphon off all the excess energy steering a starship left over. The civilian intelligence arm didn't borrow Starfleet operatives that often - sometimes years went by without Sulu getting the nod - but when he did, he'd get that funny gleam in his eye and go. There was no telling when, or if, he'd be back, and he could never talk about it afterwards. Jim Kirk, accustomed to playing the daredevil, felt uneasy when any of the rest of his crew got similar notions.

All right, Sulu would tell him what he could when he could. In the meantime, where the hell was Spock?

Oh, the Vulcan was physically present on the bridge - at his science station, bent in study over some intensive research project involving elaborate maps and starcharts. But his mind seemed to have slipped into the space between the stars on those starmaps, and Kirk was concerned.

Still not working on all thrusters? Or back up to full efficiency and simply being Spock? Kirk itched to find out. Nor was he a man to leave an itch unscratched.

"What's all this?" he asked casually, stepping up from the command well and peering over Spock's shoulder. He thought he recognized the trajectory away from Earth, at least. "Not the Probe?"

"Yes, Captain." Spock showed him how it had approached Earth out of the Romulan Neutral Zone, and where it had been heading since. "While I am aware that Starfleet Command is satisfied the Probe is no longer a danger, I shall continue to track it on my own."

"Why, Spock!" McCoy had to chime in. "Don't you trust our fearless leaders when they tell you, without even bothering to communicate with the thing, that it's promised to behave itself from hereon?"

"I am - uneasy - at the prospect of an entity of such power being left to wander the galaxy unmonitored," Spock answered simply. "I am also curious as to its point of origin."

"Which you may never learn," Kirk was constrained to point out. "There's no way of knowing how long ago it left its homeworld, or whether it was instructed to return. We never did get a chance to have a look at it. Most people were just glad to watch it take off."

"Precisely," Spock said, unperturbed at the thought that his study might prove fruitless. The study alone was sufficient.

"Well, I for one am glad to see the back of it," Kirk said, returning to the center seat, bumping McCoy's elbow off it. "I can't tell you how it felt to have gone to all that trouble finding the whales, saving them from that whaling ship -"

" - almost drowning yourself getting 'em loose of the ship," McCoy interjected quietly.

" - then when George didn't sing at first I thought: We've risked our necks for nothing."

"Now we're just another footnote to history." McCoy managed to lean on his elbow on the back of Kirk's chair regardless. "'Where were you when the Probe came?' will be something Terrans will be talking about for years."

"So where were you when the Probe came?"

Commander Kevin Thomas Riley, Starfleet DiploCorps, was engaged in a most undiplomatic pursuit. First he kissed the top of Cleante alFaisal's head. Then he kissed each of her eyebrows. Then her eyelids, then the tip of her nose. In between kisses, he asked her:

"So where were you when the Probe came?"

Cleante laughed nervously and pushed him away.

"As well ask where I was when I heard that Spock was dead!" she answered, suppressing a shudder. "Or when V'ger came. I was lucky that time. Mother had just been reelected and was offworld on one of her junkets; she stuck me in some snooty girls' school on Erigena. I managed to miss the end of the world that time. Wish I'd been as lucky this time, but I was stuck here."

"Here" was Cairo, the High Commissioner's residence, where Cleante still had a key, though her mother had not held the post for some years. Here was where Cleante had taken shelter as the waters rose and everyone else abandoned the city, following the Nile upriver to higher ground. Here was where Kevin Riley, desperate to find the woman he loved, had used a diplomatic override to beam directly in when his transmission from Terra-Main couldn't get through.

"What was it like?" he asked Cleante now, sitting on a chaise in the reception parlor that squished slightly and smelled of mildew; the entire city was still soggy. "Unless you don't want to talk about it."

Cleante sat beside him, marveling at him. How could she be so fortunate? Years of aimless relationships,

some unpleasant memories involving a Klingon, then Riley had happened into her life.

She'd been too young to know him when he was a callow young lieutenant aboard Kirk's first *Enterprise*, could not know how the years had mellowed him. In his forties now, sporting a ruffian's salt-and-pepper beard, he was still rakish, still full of Irish wit and charm. The ginger-brown eyes could still sparkle with mischief, but he had matured, grown out of his ambivalence about the things Starfleet sometimes required of him in the line of duty.

Following a stint as Jim Kirk's secretary and some hit-and-miss adventures in deep space, Riley had found a meaningful life in the DiploCorps under Ambassador Sarek's aegis and, with his promotion to full commander, had been assigned to several missions on his own - to Ekos and Zeon, to Eminiar VII and Vendikar - the middle-era Federation worlds with their feuds which predated Federation admission, places where it was deemed he could do no harm, and might perchance manage to do some good. Riley was content. And it was that contentment which had given him the courage to consider a serious commitment to someone like Cleante.

She was an archeologist, a traveler of worlds as he was, as much interested in ancient civilizations as he was in modern ones. She would no more expect him to settle in one place for her sake than she would abandon her work for him. For nearly a year they had met when they could, parted when they needed to, and so far it had worked.

Riley liked to joke that their meeting was all Spock's fault.

He had always been attracted to dark women, so it was no surprise to him that he had sidled up to her in the officer's lounge of TerraMain on the very day *Enterprise* had come limping home from the Genesis planet, if only to get a closer look. On the way in he'd been buttonholed by Janice Rand, who'd had too much to drink under the circumstances and wanted to talk about old times, the good old days before Vulcans started dying to save their ships; Riley had excused himself as diplomatically as he could and gone to the bar - to be alone, he'd thought at first. Then he'd spotted her.

Civilian, younger than he by a decade, lithe of figure and possessed of the most glorious tumble of dark hair, and eyes he might have expected to find staring back at him from a Byzantine mosaic. Riley hadn't spoken, merely sighed. It got her attention.

There had been tears in the Byzantine eyes.

"For Spock?" was all Riley had said. It was all everyone else could talk about this day.

"For Spock," she had answered in her lyric voice. "He and Jim Kirk saved my life once."

They had sat side by side for nearly an hour without saying anything else.

"What was it like?" Riley wanted to know about the Probe. "We got the news on Zeon and we were stunned. There was no way to get a message through."

Cleante shook her head. "The President sent a planetary distress call, warning ships away. If you'd gotten too close you would have been neutralized. What was it like down here on the surface? Horrible!"

She had volunteered at first to help with the relief efforts. An endless stream of refugees from the Mediterranean coastal areas had passed from the Delta through Cairo, retracing the ancient routes into the Upper Kingdom and the Nubian Hills, slogging through the perpetual teeming twilight on foot - without the sun, skimmer batteries had died, and land vehicles couldn't negotiate the meters-deep mud - leading each other hand-in-hand when battery-torches died. Cleante had doled out coffee and hot soup until supplies ran out and the residence's kitchens flooded.

The wails of children had faded into the distance the endless torrents of rain. There had been no panic, no hysteria, no violence, only endless shivering, sodden misery, endless cold, endless rain. The great Sahara drank in the moisture until it was saturated, then overflowed, transformed once more into the vast pre-Cambrian sea it had been six million years before.

"We're not used to rain here. We normally get so little of it," Cleante said. "It was ominous.

"When everyone else had gone, I stayed here. At least I had a roof over my head. First the basement filled up, then the first floor. After the transmitter went dead I went upstairs to the top floor. I must have fallen asleep listening to the rain. When I woke, the sun was shining. It was like a miracle. But we had no power - still don't in some places. We got the news by word-of-mouth that Kirk and Company had saved the day yet again. I never expected you to find me so soon."

"Well, I did," Kevin said, wrapping his arms around her and continuing where they'd left off. "I'm on temporary leave until Sarek decides what to do with me next. He's left for home, but told me to stay put. Muttered something about 'the winds of change.' Vulcans!" He kissed Cleante long and passionately, then sighed. "Is there a room anywhere in this place that isn't waterlogged?"

The Praetor's funeral lasted two nights and a day. In that time, thousands upon thousands appeared to sign the Book of Death and pass before the wasted waxen figure in its upright sarcophagus in the Central Septum of the Hall of Columns. In that time, lacking food or sleep, the musician Jandra performed.

She alternated among the three stringed instruments best suited to elegiac music - the three-string the'el*. She worked her way through the repertoires of Lerma, Talet and Mektius without missing a note or repeating a single work.

Her person captivated her audience as much as her music, as the passers spread her history from one to the next. Wife of subCenturion Tiam, some whispered and, Twin of kerDajan the archeologist. A twin! those new to the information marveled. And was she the elder? Told she was, they were pleased: Well, that explains it!

But wasn't there an elder sibling as well? someone asked.

It was a reasonable question, in that clearly neither Jandra nor her twin was in the military. But the silence spread up and down the line of mourners.

No, of course not!

Never!

You must have been mistaken!

And the mourners passed the dais where she played, returning their attention to the motionless figure in the upright sarcophagus, who yet held sway over them, consigning music and musician to the background where they belonged.

Jandra played. Her head buzzed, her wrists and fingers were numb; she was beyond exhaustion. Betimes she daydreamed, remembering another lifetime when she had been a child and a prodigy, playing for the great musicians of many worlds. There had been one who had listened long and profoundly, then placed his gifted hand upon her head, telling her parents:

"Be grateful there is an elder to fulfill the military obligation. For this one is destined to be a musician!"

Betimes Jandra wept, the tears plashing from her glass-green eyes to bathe the soundboard of the'el or bahtain.

How touching! the passers murmured then. See how moved she is, that she weeps for Him!

Not for him! Jandra thought fiercely, save for the fact that he ever existed. Rather, I weep for them - my mother, my father, my brother...

Sulu popped back onto the bridge sometime near end of shift.

"Relieving you!" he announced, tapping the relief helm on the shoulder and sliding easily into his accustomed seat. He was well aware of the quizzical look Kirk had locked onto him from the moment he arrived, and he had barely recalibrated his instruments before Kirk broke.

"Mr. Sulu -?"

"Oh - uh - nothing to report, sir," Sulu said, not entirely suppressing a smile. There was nothing in the Special Section comppic that Kirk couldn't find out through channels, and it would give the captain something to do. Besides, there was nothing any of them could do until something happened.

PASSACAGLIA
(on the order of five hundred centuries)

The sea was shades of yellowpink that morning beneath a blue-white sun, as ever on the first hundred mornings of Warm, and layered about with sherbets of apricot krill, their fansides rhythmically facing the sun to warm themselves. Easiest to harvest them, slurping them up in seas of seawater then silted sideways out of rubbery slobbery lips, leaving only solids to swallow. Krill! Oh, Sing the Song of Krill! Most essential nutriment, All It Is Permitted To Eat on Firstworld, hence delectable.

Wun gobbled haphazardly, his thoughts more on Sen, undulating flukes to let her know he was still interested if she wanted. Sen ignored, more concerned with tasting the winds all morning, whiskered snout above the waterline until the sudden sheeting rain forced her below, her outer eyelids scowling. Sen had been Hearing across the emptiness from Secondworld, and what she Heard seemed to disturb her.

Only females could Hear across the space between the two worlds, as only males could Sing; that was the way of it. It made them interdependent down the eons for more than merely calf-making, but it was slow and oftentimes led to misunderstanding.

On the Worlds themselves, both males and females sang and heard, but across the vaster sea of space, only females Heard, only males could Sing. Legend told of a single sex which could both Hear and Sing, but not even the elder silversides remembered when this was so.

Wun swallowed, undulating again, singing to Sen: Hear later. Couple now!

Males! Sen thought, loud enough for Wun to hear. Wun chortled, laid his poison-spikes flat against his skull so that they would not harm in foreplay, and lumbered up the layers toward her. Sen waited, tranquil. The sea of shapes feeding placidly on either side, above, below, parted leisurely so Wun slipped through.

They played, lugubrious, sliding over each other, flipper-stroking until the proper places met, then joined, lying very still for the rest of the morning. When the blue sun was at peak and the rains had drifted coldward, Wun meant to settle back down the layers to the bottom to continue feeding, a lungful of oxygen from the surface gathered in a great snuffling huff of whiskers to last him a nap's worth. But Sen stuck her whiskered snout above again and Heard. What she Heard this time set her quivering from nose to flukes.

What? Wun thought to her. For all their joy in Singing, the males were envious of the ability to Hear, and many a war in the Before had been fought between male and female when one accused the other of less than truth about what it Sang or Heard. What?! Wun thought. What do you Hear?

Bad, Sen thought to him. The seas grow strange on Secondworld as they do here.

Colding, like ours? Wun asked.

They had observed it since the last Warmseason: a clouded turgidity to certain waters, a chill on the flanks when passing some places, masses of krill found dead of sudden drops in temperature, no explanation. Was Secondworld experiencing the same?

Too warm, Sen replied instead. Seas vapping, krill dead. Worldskin grows as the seas shrink from it. Bad!

How long? Wun asked after a long think.

Three generations, Sen replied, Hearing it.

Three generations. A million years in some species' reckoning, but so little time on the Worlds. The thought made Wun quiver as Sen had, quivering all over so that as he settled to the bottom, no longer interested in feeding (What was worse, to starve or freeze to death?), fitted in among, amid, between his kindred, the quiver passed a World-round.

The seas were growing too hot or too cold, and they who could live nowhere else were dying.

FUGUE

Captain's Log, Stardate 8475.3: Someday I intend to actually enjoy an uninterrupted shore leave...

What was once known only to Starfleet Command and the civilian intelligence branch known as Special Section is now common knowledge: The Romulan Praetor, said by some to have been "third in rank but first in power" in governing the Empire, is dead. The official statement, issued by the Emperor's Legate and sanctioned by the Interim Government, states "natural causes exacerbated by the burdens of office." Romulan-watchers both on Earth and inside the Empire suggest certain slow-acting poisons. We shall probably never know.

In a surprising turn of events for a government supposedly redefining itself in the wake of a leader's death, the Empire has tendered an offer of peace toward the Federation. In typically stilted terms which offer little concession, they request a meeting of minds on an uninhabited world of their choosing deep inside the Neutral Zone. While this is viewed by the experts as more of a "feeler" than an actual peace conference, it is hoped it may lead to something on as grand a scale as the ongoing negotiations with the Klingon Empire.

What it means to me, and to the crew of the *Enterprise*, is that we have been chosen, in Commander Starfleet's words, to be the ferryboat, bringing the Federation's diplomatic liaison to the conference table. All other starships are currently too farflung about the galaxy, or engaged in mopping up operations following Earth's recent encounter with a spacefaring Probe, to be of service. And privately, I can't help wondering if there is not some secret agenda involved.

My crew has been recalled from extended shore leave, and while Mr. Scott assures me that everything has been "made right" aboard my ship, I have nevertheless ordered a complete recheck of all systems. Scotty may curse me and mine to the tenth generation, but I have my reasons. The diplomatic liaison is not to be our only passenger...

"A what?!" Montgomery Scott protested when Kirk told him, on his way to yet another briefing with Admiral Cartwright. Admiral Cafilisch had the Chief Engineer bracketed on the other side, to put a damper on the expected wailing. The three of them abreast took up most of a corridor. "A straight course through the Neutral Zone, without an escort, to some little pissant dustball I can't even find on my starcharts. Over my dead body!"

"If that's what it takes, Mr. Scott," Bob Cafilisch said, unruffled.

"Time was, Scotty, when you could ferry a hundred diplomats to Babel and back without getting your knickers in a knot," Kirk offered.

"Aye, I was a lot younger then!" Scotty grumped.

Caflich took over the narrative. "If you're unhappy about the situation, Mr. Scott, I'm certain you could transfer back aboard the *Excelsior*. Captain Styles tells me they still haven't entirely debugged their system thanks to you."

"That pompous, bogus featherhead and his bleeding Spruce Goose..." Scotty muttered, raising eyebrows on either side of him before he remembered himself. "All right!" he sighed, "you'll get the best I've got, sir," he said, pointedly addressing Kirk and not Caflich. "I canna give ye more. Now, about these special passengers..."

"A what?!" Cleante alFaisal's voice echoed off the vaulted ceiling of the Egyptian Museum's Artifacts Room, and she nearly dropped the potsherds in her hand. "A dig on one of the old Korff Ascendancy worlds? But they're smack in the middle of Romulan territory! We'd never be allowed -"

"Haven't you heard the news?" her fellow assistant curator asked, dusting his long blue fingers, which were covered with disintegrating mummy wrappings which had not withstood the damp following the Deluge. Sharf was here on an Andorian student visa, learning Egyptology from one of its world's experts. "Or have you really been down here since the waters receded?"

"No, and yes," Cleante answered, the mildew making her sneeze. The museum had been spared the flood per se, but when the climate-control failed it had succumbed to damp, and countless second-grade artifacts had to be sorted through to determine if any could be saved; most couldn't.

Yes, I have been down here all this time, Cleante thought, except for the time I spent with Kevin at the Residence, and I refuse to feel guilty about that when, if it hadn't been for his using the DiploCorps override to beam me directly in here when the silt was knee-deep in the streets and all of Cairo was a virtual ghost-town with me the only ghost, I might still be wading in it!

"What news?" she asked, sneezing again.

Sharf, still picking fastidiously through yards of three-thousand year old orange-dyed linen wrappings, explained about the Romulans and their proposed peace conference.

"Lovely, I'm sure!" Cleante said, wondering if that was why Kevin had had to leave in such a hurry. "Oh, throw those in the disposal, Sharf. I've been looking for an excuse for months anyway. The trustees expect us to save everything, down to the last hanky Hatshepsut blew her nose in! But even if we'd signed a peace accord with the Romulans yesterday, it would be years before we got clearances for joint archeology work."

Sharf crouched on the spiral staircase above her, all elbows and knees, and shook his antennae head. "You're not paying attention!" he hissed Andorianly. "There's more to it. This is supposed to be a kind of showcase of intergalactic harmony. It's not only diplomats. They want musicians to perform and I don't know what all else. And they've got a team of crack archaeologists waiting to have a go at what they think is a Korff ruin near the proposed meeting site..."

Cleante's eyes glowed at the thought of it. Since the boundaries had been drawn about the Neutral Zone

during the Romulan Wars a century ago, no one had been able to touch the Korff ruins. Every species this side of Antares claimed the Korff as distant kin, and glory to the archeologist who could go in and find out for certain! But the glow faded as quickly as it had come.

"There must be a thousand applicants," Cleante sighed. "And every offworld grant I've applied for lately has been turned down. Everyone seems to expect me to use Mother's influence to get an 'in'."

"Well, why don't you?" Sharf wondered. "It's how we do it on my world. A little palm-greasing here, a little whispered word there, and if I had a lover in the DiploCorps as well -"

"Oh, bite your tongue, Sharf, both of them!" Cleante snapped. "And get on the commpic with Utilities and find out what happened to the ultrasound duster I requested three days ago. There's no other way to blast the mildew out of here, and they know I've got priority. If I hear one more Imshallah from one more government flunky, I'm going to..."

"A what?!" the principal conductor of the New York Philharmonic repeated when her secretary had given her the message. "A request for a classical orchestra to play for the Romulans aboard a starship, this close to the Beethoven five-hundredth? Impossible! Tell them to contact the Musicians' Union. I've never heard of such a thing!"

Sulu was barely back down from shore leave - windburned, still in mufti, and smelling suspiciously like cocoa butter - when he was literally plucked off the bridge by a Special Section transporter override. The news media were still deciding whether to continue "the Praetor Story" before or after the Quadrant IV Soccer Semi-finals. And Ambassador Sarek personally invited Commander Uhura to attend him at the Vulcan Embassy, to discuss matters Romulan.

"... matters which I believe you have made something of an avocation in recent years," Sarek observed when the *Enterprise*'s communications officer had been shown into the visitors' suite.

"Oh, it's a hobby, Ambassador; I'd hardly consider myself an expert," Uhura replied, remembering how comfortable Vulcan furnishings could be as she sank into something which moments before had folded out of a modular wall unit like a flower. She arranged her flowing dashiki primly over her knees before continuing. "So much of my time at that comm board is spent simply waiting. Except in emergencies, I'm really only a glorified switchboard operator; so few of my real skills are ever used. I'm grateful to have something stimulating to do."

"Indeed," Sarek said, encouraging her to talk freely.

He was reminded in Uhura of those qualities he had always cherished in Earthwomen - their warmth,

their ability to decorate the void of time with words. He and Uhura had spent considerable time together in the less than ample confines of a Vulcan shuttle making its way from Earth to Mount Seleya for the katra ritual, time which Sarek had been unable to utilize in his usual pursuits of study and meditation, for whatever reason.

"Perhaps you're upset," Uhura had suggested when he apologized for his restiveness. "Concern about Spock, and the outcome of the ritual."

Sarek had favored her with the trace of a smile he sometimes permitted himself, though only in the presence of human females.

"Upset?" he had echoed her, about to protest the word's inexactitude.

"My field is communications, Ambassador. I don't choose my words lightly."

"Ah!" was all Sarek had said at the time, and the word hung between them all the way to Vulcan, as he diplomatically chose neither to admit nor to deny that he was "upset" about the possible outcome of the katra ritual.

Thus abandoning his failed attempts to meditate, Sarek had spent the remainder of the journey in Uhura's company. Sometimes they had listened to music together, sometimes they had talked. By turns they played Sarek's harp. More rarely, Uhura sang, while Sarek listened with quiet appreciation. Somewhere during the journey, she might have mentioned her study of Romulans. Sarek forgot nothing.

"It began with my decoding work," Uhura was explaining now. "The Romulans are not only the best code-breakers in the galaxy, they're the best code-makers. In the process of trying to crack one of their more complex codes, I began to look for referents in their history, their culture, their mores - what little is available to the outsider, of course. It became a minor obsession. I can tell you about the Royal Family through seventy-six generations, about the various cross-castes - who can and can't marry whom and why - the tradition of the eunuchs, the Legend of the Twins..."

"You can also, not incidentally, crack all of their current codes," Sarek interjected, and Uhura looked chagrined.

"I'm talking too much," she said.

"On the contrary," Sarek said, "you have told me precisely what I need to know. The Emperor's Interim Government has let it be known that I by name am to be excluded from any attendance at this first peace conference. This is not to say that I must absent myself entirely. Adding my knowledge of the Distant Brothers to your own, I intend to be present in spirit, with your help."

"Of course, Ambassador," Uhura said without the slightest hesitation. "Just tell me what you want me to do."

Admiral Cartwright's briefing was intended for all of *Enterprise*'s senior officers, but Sulu was still being briefed by Special Section, and Uhura had not yet returned from the Vulcan Embassy. Scotty assured Admiral Cartwright that, with all due respect, he could contact him at any time in Engineering, providing he'd pardon his French if he caught him under a recycling duct with coolant dripping in his face. Ultimately it was Kirk, Spock and McCoy who sat across the briefing table from Cartwright and the Federation President, with an activated deskscreen displaying the Special Section colophon between them.

"Good morning, gentlemen." The screen began to speak before Cartwright could do more than motion them to be seated, the colophon dissolving into a holo of flickering lights outlining an animation of an approximately humanoid face. "This is Special Section Chief. The purpose of this briefing is to clarify your orders regarding the peace initiative to the Romulans, which are already on a computer feed to your vessel."

The voice was either computer-generated or that of a real person so altered that no voiceprint could be made. It was simultaneously monotone, stickily androgynous, and vaguely parental and threatening.

"...and those lights flicker at the exact frequency calculated to induce migraines and epileptic fits," McCoy growled in Kirk's nearer ear, scowling at the screen.

"Correct, Dr. McCoy!" the screen chirped; its acoustic receptors were excellent. "But as we are aware that no one in this room is susceptible either to migraines or epilepsy, you may experience some discomfort in looking at us, but you will not be harmed."

"Blasted phony!" McCoy fumed. "I hear tell there isn't really a Special Section chief at all. That all you really are is some computer-generated consensus of how Special Section spooks think the universe ought to be run, some nightmare out of somebody's idea of a sci-fi novel -"

"Bones -!" Kirk interjected, shrugging at Cartwright and the president as if to say, Medics! They're all a little loony, aren't they? "You do realize you're arguing with a machine."

"What pisses me off is that it expects me to take orders from it, too!" McCoy grouched, then subsided.

The Federation President cleared his throat. "Actually, gentlemen, the purpose of inviting Special Section into these proceedings is to utilize its vast knowledge of activities inside the Empire. Are any of you familiar with the term perestroika?"

It was the wrong kind of question to ask with a Vulcan in the room. Spock pricked up his ears, canted his head slightly, and answered with as much alacrity as he might with three of Mount Seleya's computers firing questions at him simultaneously.

"A coinage from Modern Russian, most precisely translated as 'restructuring'. First employed, in tandem with the less-easily defined term glasnost, which can mean either 'openness' or 'publicity' depending upon the context, by spokespersons for the Soviet Kremlin during the latter half of the twentieth century, Old Calendar, to specify a vast and pervasive liberalization of a heretofore strictly hierarchized Soviet government. This liberalization was to include the simplification of an unwieldy bureaucracy, the

elimination of corruption among government officials, increased agricultural and industrial production -"

"That will be sufficient, Mr. Spock, thank you!" the Federation President said. "It is exactly this manner of 'restructuring' which Special Section operatives report is apparently - and I want to emphasize the word apparently - taking place within the Romulan Empire since the Praetor's demise."

"Correct!" the Special Section pseudoface chirped smugly. "From the upper echelons to the Romulan in the street, our operatives and all political prisoners were released. Free trade has been established with non-Federated worlds on the far borders, and the so-called Banned Lists have been abolished. Philosophers and scientists, artists and writers formerly forbidden to speak or publish under pain of death are now considered Orthodox again..."

"Dajan!"

The cry escaped Jandra's lips before she could help herself. She knew Tiam would be watching via the wallcomm but did not care. She and her brother had not been permitted to see each other for five years. Let her spouse gawk; her emotions were genuine. She threw aside the bedcovers, where she had been languishing for days, and ran to him.

"Greetings, Little Sister!" He used their childhood nickname, though Jandra was in fact the elder by some six minutes, a significant distinction in a culture infatuated with twins. They embraced, and though they were of a height he was the stronger, and swept her off her feet. They were both laughing and breathless when he set her down. "What? No cry of 'my hands, be careful of my hands'? Are we grown so sophisticated, or only jaded?"

"Only so glad to see you that it doesn't matter, Sib." Delicately Jandra dabbed tears from her green eyes; seeing them mirrored in her twin's, she touched the handkerchief to his face as well. "What miracle permits you to be here? I have been sleeping, for days it must be now..."

She glanced at the chrono, which confirmed her fears.

"Shut up here for three days while the Capital empties of mourners. A 'collapse', if you please, from 'grief', if you please, following the funeral and seven public performances thereafter. As if grief were more genteel than exhaustion. Enough! You are here. How is this possible?"

"Don't you read the 'nets for anything beyond news of your exalted self and the pretentious subCenturian Tiam?" Dajan surveyed the apartments, sniffing disapproval. No doubt decorated in his brother-in-law's preferred stuffy style; he saw very little of Jandra here. "I've been declared Orthodox. Rehabilitated in full and 'under consideration for a project worthy of your august talent, kerDajan.' I may gag! Now, of all times, damn the luck! I was this close to translating the key petroglyph on Hiran. Well, but I kept copies to pore over at my leisure. Assuming I shall have any, between fetes. I'd almost rather be unOrthodox again. Parties - ugh! How do you stand them?"

"I do because I must." Jandra studied her hands. "It seems our fortune ever to be either condemned or coddled, Sib. Would that they would simply leave us to do what we do in peace -!"

"Opinions, gentlemen?" Cartwright asked.

"Admiral, if I may..." Jim Kirk took the floor. "It seems to me that change on such a vast scale as we've heard described could hardly have been orchestrated solely to impress the handful of Special Section operatives the Romulans know are at large within the Empire -"

"Further examples are endless!" the pseudoface chirped.

"Examples are only endless when one lacks either the resources or the initiative to enumerate them."

Ambassador Sarek swept into the room with his usual contained splendor, Uhura and Kevin Riley in his wake. Was it only Kirk's imagination, or did the walls seem to move back to accommodate him?

Whether this apparent perestroika be genuine or not is of true import only to the Romulans themselves. While we rejoice with them if it is genuine, it is of less consequence to us and to our purpose here than the answer to a single question: Who now rules the Empire?"

He took his seat without waiting to be invited. Riley sat beside him, Uhura across the table next to Spock. Sulu's chair was still empty. Sarek had apparently addressed his question to the projection on the deskscreen, for it was there that his attention was fixed, as if defying those flickering lights to unsettle him.

"We have no hard data on that as yet," the pseudoface answered, after a slight hesitation which might have been an instrument glitch, or the uncertainty of a group of human operatives feverishly trying to compile a cover story. "There is a so-named Committee which has assumed the Praetor's duties, though we don't know who they are."

Sarek deferred to Uhura. "Commander -?"

"Utilization of an Interim Committee is consistent with past law and precedent, Ambassador," she supplied crisply.

"A Committee, gentlemen," Sarek reiterated. "Names and numbers unknown. Our only official contact within the Empire with regard not only to the proposed peace conference, but to the proposed scientific and cultural exchange as well, if I am correct."

"As if he isn't always!" McCoy mouthed to Kirk, who shushed him, admiring as always the way Sarek took control. He was also studying Riley, whose career he'd been following over the years. For someone who'd made a lousy secretary, he'd turned out to be one helluva diplomat.

"I'm sorry to lose you" was all he could think of to say when then-Lieutenant Riley had told him he was requesting a transfer back to deep space.

"I wish I could say I was sorry to go, sir," Riley had replied, "but I figure if I accomplish nothing else, I'll at least guarantee you get a decent secretary."

"Get out of here before I change my mind!" Kirk threatened warmly, extending his hand. "Warp speed, Kevin, wherever it may take you."

"And may the wind be always at your back yourself, sir," Riley had winked and was gone.

The adventure of starship duty had been satisfying for a few years, but there was something unfulfilled in Riley, something that needed to express itself in his gift for gab. He sought a lateral move by transferring to Starfleet's diplomatic arm.

DiploCorps functioned in tandem with civilian diplomats in keeping the peace in delicate areas like the seemingly insoluble Eminiar/Vendikar conflict. Under the proper tutelage, Riley was certain he could shine.

It so happened that Ambassador Sarek was seeking to groom a new aid at the time.

His initial response to the candidate Starfleet sent his way was less than warm.

"You recount here an incident while you were on active duty," was the first thing the Vulcan said, scanning Riley's personnel file while Riley stood, not yet invited to sit, and sweated. "You were given charge of a landing party wherein a crewman was killed by an indigenous predator. You claimed responsibility for the crewman's death, and retired from starship duty for a time thereafter."

It was not a question exactly. Riley wasn't sure how to answer it.

"As the officer in charge of the landing party, sir, it was my responsibility -"

"- to anticipate every possible contingency? To know future events in advance in order to counteract them? I doubt that most sincerely, Mr. Riley. Do sit down."

Riley sat. He did not stop sweating. When he'd asked Command for a transfer to DiploCorps, he'd expected at most the kind of posting he'd had with Jim Kirk - a glorified secretarial job, attach, to some commodore's office in the boondocks where he could learn the drill and maybe, by the time he was in his fifties, end up second-in-command at some remote starbase where the natives were mostly female and dark-haired. He'd never expected to be assigned to Sarek, and certainly didn't expect Sarek to accept anyone less than a Vulcan as his 'fleet liaison.

"Humans have a certain - spontaneity - which I have frequently found of value" was Sarek's explanation when Riley had first appeared, newly-cut orders in hand, to suggest that there must have been some mistake. "If you are uncomfortable with the posting, Mr. Riley, you may request a transfer at any time. Barring our being in mid-crisis, of course."

With that Sarek contented himself with reading Riley's file. When at last he had finished, he contemplated his erstwhile new aide.

"You have no family, Mr. Riley?"

"No, sir. With the amount of traveling I do, it didn't seem fair to acquire any permanent attachments. And my biological family - my parents - were killed on Tarsus IV."

"I am familiar with the circumstances," Sarek said. "Do you believe this has any bearing upon your

choice of career?"

"I know I'd like to use whatever skills I have to prevent the kind of incident that gives rise to a monster like Kodos."

The answer seemed to satisfy Sarek, who folded his hands on the desktop and studied Riley in silence.

Riley thought he knew all about Vulcan silences; he'd survived a few under Spock in the early years. What was expected of him, he knew, was to wait, for however long it took - without flinching, fidgeting, looking bored, or otherwise implying that his valuable time was being wasted. He didn't know how long Sarek's silence lasted, although subjectively it felt like at least a year. Riley could almost hear his beard growing in the interim. He began to wonder if the beard was the object under scrutiny.

He'd started it during his years as Kirk's secretary and became rather fond of it, fascinated with the range of colors it produced, from brown to red to an oddly premature gray. He wouldn't go so far as to say it made him look distinguished, but it made him feel less boyish, and that had to be an advantage to a diplomat. He'd hate to have to part with it.

"Vulcans have a saying, Mr. Riley," Sarek said at last, some shade of emotion which might have been amusement passing lightly over his features. "'A beard more often reveals than conceals.' You will rarely encounter a bearded Vulcan. Do you intend to retain this - growth of yours?"

"It can go if you dislike, Ambassador," Riley offered at once, fingering it wistfully.

It was the wrong answer. Sarek shook his head.

"If you are to be liaison with Starfleet, Mr. Riley, you must understand one thing: I have no patience with indecisiveness. It was one of your revered philosophers who said 'Be thou either hot or cold. Be not lukewarm or I shall vomit you out of my mouth.' You may be unsure, but never indecisive. Do you understand the distinction?"

"I believe I do, sir," Riley had said after a long moment.

"I believe you do as well," Sarek responded. The deal was done, and Riley kept the beard.

As Sarek's protegee, Riley flourished; his record of accomplishments thus far was impressive. Sending him to treat with the Romulans was a measure of the faith his superiors had in him.

"For whatever skepticism we may reserve in our private thoughts," Sarek concluded, "we must treat this offering as genuine, and we must respond in kind. We will bring a negotiator to the table whose rank equals that of the Romulan negotiator. Where the Romulans wish to excavate the ancient Korff ruins on Dlundra IV, we will provide archaeologists to work with their own scientists. Where they offer music for our entertainment, we will provide the same. And because they have stated, and not inaccurately, that the use of a Universal Translator can lead to errors and misunderstandings, we will provide a living interpreter of impeccable credentials and unimpeachable qualifications..."

"...for while it is true that some Federation diplomats speak our tongue, and many of ours speak Federation Standard, it is in everyone's best interests that the proceedings be translated meticulously and to the letter..." Commander Rihan of the warbird *Hannsu* read the Official Statement aloud in the presence of one of its chief proponents. "Further, while we will treat with humans as the majority race in this Federation, we insist upon an interpreter of Vulcan blood, for well we know how humans are gifted in the art of half-truth, obfuscation and outright lie.' Well, Tiam. Don't you think it's a bit harsh?"

The newly-promoted Centurion Tiam, Delegate to the Federation, contemplated the slowly-moving starfield through the single narrow viewport in the commander's quarters; the ship was still in homeport orbit, but Tiam rarely got offworld, and found the view alluring.

Tiam had not only survived the Praetor's death, he had flourished under it. His very title would have been impossible under elder regimes, for by custom a centurion was a leader of combat troops, and in point of fact Tiam had never led anyone anywhere. A lifetime of mid-level administrative work, and being in the right place at the right time, had won him this opportunity for offworld glory. Tiam intended to glory in it.

"Harsh', Commander? It is blunt, unadorned, and uncompromising. I am told humans respect that. At any rate, it is how I intend to conduct these proceedings."

"If you say so," Rihan remarked, swiveling his chair to see what the general was staring at; after all his decades in the void, the stars were simply stars to him. "I trust your accommodations are satisfactory? It is not often we have civilian guests aboard, and while the rest of the musicians have been stowed in cadet quarters, we have had to knock out three subsidiary bulkheads to create a suite large enough for you and your wife. I trust she was pleased?"

Pleased, Tiam thought, would hardly be descriptive of Jandra's emotions under the circumstances. After five years of unorthodoxy, she was so overstrung at the prospect of leaving the Capital to go anywhere she had almost required sedation.

"She will make do," he answered flatly, vaguely irritated at the commander's presumption to such familiarity. "I did intend to thank you, Commander, for providing us with three separate rooms. Her need to practice constantly would drive me to distraction otherwise."

"Mm," Rihan ruminated noncommittally, realizing he may have overstepped the proprieties. "Being married to a musician must have its disadvantages. I recall when the match was first announced; there was much speculation upon why one with your promise had made this particular choice."

"It seemed fortuitous at the time," Tiam replied, his face as flat as his voice, discouraging further speculation.

"It's fortunate for us that *Enterprise* is the only ship we can spare," Admiral Cartwright said. "And we're guaranteed the Klingons will be watching every move."

"I'm not certain I understand," Jim Kirk said, when in fact he did. He merely wanted the terms stated

aloud for the record.

"Ever since they've needed our help reactivating the two ships the Probe neutralized, there's been an odd flavor to the ongoing peace talks," the Federation President explained. "Nothing irritates a Klingon more than an unpaid debt, and they've been hard-pressed to find a way to repay this one. It might behoove you to note, Captain, that Ambassador Kamarg has been recalled by his government and instructed to abandon his personal vendetta against you."

"That's why we want to make it loud and clear that you are the captain of record on this expedition, Jim," Admiral Cartwright interjected. "Assuring your safety assures the safety of your ship, and of the first civilian passengers to willingly cross the Neutral Zone in a very long time.

"You're to be the ferryboat captain, Captain," Cartwright concluded. "We're aware of your diplomatic experience, but you won't be using it on this trip. Don't mix in politics; just steer the boat."

"Hi!" Sulu bounded into the briefing room just as the meeting was breaking up. "Am I late?"

"You're late," Uhura assured him, envying his instinct for avoiding the tedious parts. At least he was back in uniform and no longer reeked of cocoa butter.

Sulu slung one arm through Uhura's and the other through Riley's, and the three of them retired to the corridors, though not without a great deal of noise on Sulu's part.

"So, Kevin, me lad - it's been ages...What did I miss?...I hear we're all assigned together this voyage...Deja vu, huh? Just like the Academy days...All for one and one for all..."

"A what?!" McCoy demanded, as he, Spock and Kirk followed on the heels of the younger threesome, though with a lot less noise.

"A contrapuntal construct," Spock repeated. "The Romulans have structured this meeting of minds in the form of a musical composition. Fascinating!"

"Music, Doctor," he explained for McCoy's benefit once the threesome had retired to TerraMain's officers' lounge, where Spock had ordered a round of Altair water.

Through the clearsteel window, he noted the sleek shape of a Vulcan shuttle entering the open spacedoors, come to take his father home. Sarek had one final task relative to their mission before he could return to Vulcan. Spock watched the spacedoors begin their methodical closing behind the shuttle; out of the corner of his eye he could see a different kind of vessel suspended at the very pinnacle of the spacedock. Larger, more luminous, hanging in the antigrav like some ethereal Christmas ornament:
Enterprise .

"I think I understand," Kirk was saying. McCoy just stared at Spock slack-jawed.

"The principles of counterpoint, as epitomized by Earth's High Baroque era," Spock explained, "were concretized in a form in which the melody or main theme of a musical composition, usually a fugue, was first stated by a single instrument, such as the organ, or a group of instruments, then reiterated by the full orchestra. This theme was then repeated by the first voice, to be either answered or refuted by -"

"Yes, yes, never mind about music!" McCoy barked. "What's it got to do with this fool's errand they're sending us on?"

"What Spock's saying - I think -" Kirk ventured, "is that the Romulans think that by setting up the peace talks in such a rigid format, they hope to dominate the proceedings and get what they want - whatever that is. They state the terms, we answer. They send one delegate of a specified rank, we do the same. They specify the shape of the table; we don't want to look petty, so we acquiesce. They send a team of archaeologists to excavate on the surface; we do the same. Ditto the musicians. Point and counterpoint."

"Oh, is that all? Sorry I asked!" McCoy took a swallow of Altair water, frowning at the glass. For some reason it carried an unpleasant association he couldn't quite put his finger on.

"You know, I'm actually looking forward to this!" Kirk began to rhapsodize. "I've missed the Romulans and their, if you will, baroque turn of mind. They're masters of the oblique angle. Look at the beauty of it, Bones, the intricacy, right down to their specification of a Vulcan interpreter, on the theory that a Vulcan cannot lie. As if truth is any more or less palatable simply because it's true."

He drained his glass and motioned for another round, spinning his wheels.

"The only thing the Romulans haven't reckoned on is the human penchant for improvisation. I don't think they have the equivalent of jazz. They may think they're writing a symphony, but what they'll end up with is more likely to be a jam session."

Spock raised an eyebrow; his metaphor was getting muddled.

"Captain, the emblem of contrapuntal music is not the symphony but the fugue. There is always provision for a cadenza."

"Too deep for me!" McCoy stood up to go. "And we haven't even gotten to Dlontra yet. Pity the poor interpreter!"

A stately figure in dark desert robes strode purposefully along the small strip of beach leading up to the thermocrete jetty of the New Cetacean Institute, unperturbed by heat of sun or shift of sand, intent upon one last errand before his return to a planet which possessed a plenitude of both.

Ordinarily Sarek would not have indulged the privilege of a direct transporter beam-in, might have sent an aide about this errand, or used the commpic. But given the temperament of the one whom all variables indicated was the optimum individual to act as interpreter to the Romulans, this was a task best performed in person. While by logic T'Shael could not refuse the assignment, by temperament and a Vulcan's right of privacy, she might. Sarek had rarely needed greater diplomacy.

"G'day!" A deeply tanned young human male greeted the ambassador from behind Gillian Taylor's desk in the mostly-glass office, somewhat taken aback by this apparition which had literally popped in out of nowhere, dark presence on a sun-bleached beach. "Afraid T'Shael isn't here. Dr. Taylor left her in charge, see, only it's her day off, so I'm it. What can I do you for?"

The youth was barefoot on the clearsteel floor, which afforded an extraordinary view of the ocean beneath and anything that chose to swim by. Out of their wetsuits, most Institute personnel favored various swimming costumes; compared with Sarek's heavily-swathed presence the young man in his flowered jams felt positively naked. When the dude with the ears had first explained his desire to speak with T'Shael, he'd wondered who he was. Somebody important, anyway.

"You may do me the courtesy of telling me where I might find T'Shael on her day off," he said now.

"She's up N'York way, rehearsing with the Philharmonic. Kind of a hobby, I gather. I could try to get her on commpic for you."

"That will not be necessary," Sarek replied, "the error is mind, in not determining her whereabouts beforehand. Most illogical."

But as he looked about him at the gleaming thermoconcrete structures, the deep-water pool where iridescent fish sported flashing in the depths, the landscape gardens flourishing in brilliant-blossomed newness on what a scant few weeks ago had been a flotsam-strewn coral reef, Sarek knew why he had come.

"No matter," he told the young man, who stood there helplessly waiting for him to make up his mind. Beyond the young man's brown shoulder, through the wall of glass, Sarek could see twin spouts and the splash of flukes in deep water, where the objects of all this rapid construction were sunning themselves and feeding. "It was my desire also to see this place once more before I left your world."

Gillian Taylor had stood on the empty strand with her hands on her hips, a small fragile figure between the two Vulcans, father and son. The wind had been brisk that morning, the sky more blue than Gillian had ever seen it. She had shaded her eyes with one hand, looking out over an almost whale-less sea.

"They should follow the normal migration routes down here this time of year," she said to break the gull-punctuated silence, "they" being George and Gracie. "This place would be perfect."

"So our own scientists' research indicates," Spock concurred.

"It's all so beautiful!" Gillian exclaimed. "Hard to believe it's the same Earth. No pollution, no hunger, no wars - God, I can't believe it! But also no whales - am I right, guys?"

She wondered sometimes at her own irreverence, recent emigre that she was to this century, particularly the way she addressed her first real-life extraterrestrials. Jim Kirk had filled her in about Vulcans - geniuses practically from the cradle - and these two alone could shame a planetful of ignorant humanity with their degrees and accomplishments. It was only politeness, Gillian was sure, that made them address her as "doctor." A twentieth-century marine biologist's degree probably had the net worth of a cereal-box prize, if there still were such things. Where did she get off, sassing Vulcans the way she did?

Call it a defense mechanism, Gillian thought. Compensation for my own klutziness, or just the irresistible urge to see one of them crack a smile. Especially Spock. Now there was a wonderful face; how much more wonderful would it be if he'd allow it to smile! Irreverent she would be, Gillian Taylor decided, and to hell with anyone who objected.

"Not precisely, Doctor," Spock answered her question, however irreverent. "Several species of toothed whales and a number of dolphin species survived your century to be cloned and 'reseeded' in subsequent centuries. But *Megaptera novaeangliae* have been extinct, until now."

"Well, we're going to make up for lost time on that, believe you me!" Gillian began to map out a kind of dream-Institute in her head to replace the skin-of-our-teeth, never-enough-funding operation she'd left behind. "We'd have to dredge a deep-water pool where George and Gracie can harbor while we study them, and where Gracie can have her calf. Administrative offices, labs, storage..." She pointed them out on the bare spit as if they already existed. "Scads of equipment, a commissary, some sort of transportation to the mainland, a staff of - oh, let's say six at a minimum, and boy, would I love it if one of them was a Vulcan who could do whatever it was you did to Gracie back in San Francisco!" She resisted the urge to punch Spock on the arm, if only because it might embarrass him in front of his father. "I'm dreaming, right? There's no way I could get funding for all of that, not even in this century."

"Why not?" Sarek had spoken for the first time, uncertain why he had come here with Spock and Dr. Taylor, both of whom were essential to getting the whales settled in their new habitat, whereas he was not.

The Federation Council was still in deliberation over the fate of Admiral Kirk and his command crew; it was not expected to reach a verdict until sometime tomorrow. Having pleaded his case for the defense, there was nothing further for Sarek to do but wait. When Spock had casually suggested (Casually? Spock? Sarek remembered thinking. This was new!) he accompany them, and Gillian had added: "Oh, yes, please do!", Sarek had agreed, if only to indulge a little Vulcan curiosity.

"There is no logical reason why the United Earth Council cannot allocate sufficient funding for your needs, Dr. Taylor, based upon the importance of repopulating the very creatures who have in essence saved the planet from the Probe," he had said, and Gillian's reaction had been one of almost childlike glee. The two Vulcans left her to explore the remainder of the beach; Sarek took Spock aside.

"What precisely was it that you 'did to Gracie back in San Francisco'?" the senior Vulcan inquired dryly.

Spock had explained his spur of the moment decision to mind-meld with the huge and gentle creature despite the unfortunate presence of an audience of gawking twentieth-century humans.

"Somewhat precipitous" was Sarek's opinion, "and verging upon a breach of the Prime Directive, do you not agree?"

As was Gillian Taylor's arrival in this century, Spock thought, but that had not been his decision to make. And it was only serendipitous coincidence that nothing untoward had come of that.

"Captain Spock has just arrived, Shuttle Bay 4," a perky young yeoman informed Gillian when she

asked. Today was the day the Federation Council was taking final depositions on the Genesis case; Gillian knew the Vulcan would be there. "That's down Green Corridor, turn left, then left again past the atrium, and you'll probably intercept him just about there."

"Thanks, hon!" Gillian said with a confidence she didn't feel. Captain, huh? she thought. Here I've been so comfortable thinking of him as the White Rabbit. And after what Jim's been telling me about Vulcans...

The sight of him in his uniform almost made her abandon her quest. Formidable was putting it mildly. Still, he was the one person most qualified to help her find what she needed to know. Best get used to this new incarnation the way she had all the others.

Take One: Spock as just another California loony swimming in his underwear, messing up my whales. Nice legs, though, she remembered thinking.

Take Two: Spock as the somber Friar Tuck, always one step behind his more flamboyant companion, the one who did all the talking. Spock the unobtrusive one, with his slightly out-of-synch pronouncements, falling all over himself trying to get out of the way so Jim and I could be alone. Romance, I thought. The Fifth Wheel Syndrome, I thought. Boy, was I wrong!

Take Three: Spock in context, aboard the spaceship, pointy ears and all. Strictly through-the-Looking-Glass time. I'd almost gotten used to that incarnation, and now this.

Take Four: My, my, red really is his color, isn't it? And I like the cut of his jib! But how do I find the nerve to bother him with my insignificant problems?

Oh, what the hell! Gillian thought. I wasn't the class clown for nothing. She sidled into the corridor, grateful no one else was there, playing it for cute.

"Hewwo, Mr. Wabbit?" she greeted him in her best Elmer Fudd accent, grateful there was no one else within earshot.

Spock stopped on a dime and, to his credit, never turned a hair. "Were you speaking to me, Dr. Taylor?"

Gillian's laughter pealed down the hallowed halls of Starfleet HQ - too loud, almost out of control. It had been a giddy few days - few centuries, really - since she'd slapped her boss and burned rubber hauling her pickup out of the Cetacean Institute in search of Jim Kirk and help.

Oh, God, poor Bob! What must he have thought when she never came back?

The thought sobered Gillian right away. She fell into step beside Spock and apologized.

"I'm sorry! But remember what Jim said about 'Welcome to Wonderland'? I've been feeling like Alice ever since, and I can't help thinking of you as the White Rabbit, you're so implausible. I mean, the robe and the ears and all -"

"Ah. Lewis Carroll. Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. You were employing a colorful metaphor. But I suspect you have not sought me out solely to tell me that."

"No, actually, I sought you out to ask you something." Gillian tried to match her tone to his, as she tried to match his long, unhurried stride; she quickly abandoned the latter, and parked herself on a bench in the

atrium. "Something fairly serious, at least to me."

Spock sat at the far end of the same bench. "Do go on."

"This morning a select committee of your Federation Council gave me clearance 'for resettlement in this century'," Gillian began. "In this century! As if time travel was something you people did every day! No, don't tell me; I don't want to know. But after they interviewed me, it must have taken them a whole five minutes to decide. A good job of it, too, because how were they going to dump me back in my own time with what I know, huh?"

There are ways, Spock thought; few of them foolproof, none of them pleasant.

"Anyway, I'm on my way out the door and I have to open my fat mouth and say, 'Oh, yeah, huh? I guess that means nobody misses me after I was gone.' And all of a sudden I was the only one laughing. The whole room got silent, and the entire committee got evasive and Yes, well, thank you for your time, Dr. Taylor - biff, bam, thank you, ma'am. It was scary!"

Spock knew what Dr. Taylor was about to ask him. As recently as a day or two ago much of her racy, slang-laden speech might have baffled him. Today, he understood. The tutor Sarek had engaged for him had performed her task well.

"You are curious as to why the Council so readily granted your resettlement," he said. Given the care with which he himself had combed through Captain John Christopher's past before insisting he be returned to his own century and his Phantom jet, he was equally curious.

"Damn straight!" Gillian said fervently. "But at this point I don't know if I'm more scared of knowing or of not knowing."

"Certainty, however painful, is usually preferable to uncertainty," Spock suggested.

"You're right!" Not for the first time, Gillian had to restrain herself from affectionately punching his shoulder. "Bite the bullet, right? Can you help me?"

"It is within my abilities as a Class-7 computer expert."

"But will you?"

Spock rose from the bench, straightened his uniform tunic purposefully. "Of course."

As Gillian stood peering over his shoulder at the rapidly scanning history files, unconsciously tugging at her own fingers the way she did when she was keyed up or nervous, Spock was mindful of Edith Keeler. Not the same situation at all, he reminded himself, though he had always wondered if the Guardian of Forever could have been persuaded to bring the Angel of the Slums forward in time as easily as it had brought him and Kirk and McCoy backward. It was merely conjecture, and too late now.

He had correlated and cross-referenced all the personal history Gillian had provided him.

"I was an only," she began. "No brothers or sisters, just me. Best schools, piano lessons, ballet lessons - a real little princess. Then Mom and Dad died in the car wreck when I was twelve ..."

"An automobile accident," Spock observed, watching her chin quiver, watching her struggle to get her memories under control. "Were such accidents commonplace?"

"You know it. Next to cancer and heart attacks, highway fatalities were right up there. Add those to on-the-job fatalities, at-home accidents and plane crashes, and you beat out deaths from diabetes, AIDS and multiple sclerosis combined. Of course, if you were born in a Third World country you could die of measles or dysentery - I'm losing you, aren't I?"

"Unfortunately, no. I am somewhat aware of the hazards of living in the twentieth century. And I grieve with you in the death of your parents."

"Thanks, but it was a long time ago. I was raised by my father's aunt, who died while I was still in grad school, of nothing more terrible than old age. So when I told Jim I had no one in the twentieth century..."

"I do not mean to pry," Spock said, "but surely friends - emotional attachments..."

"You mean lovers? Not when you guys arrived, no. Oh, I had friends, but nobody really close. It's hard when you're a workaholic. Unless your friends can share your passion for your work. I thought maybe Bob and I might someday... But he was going through a messy divorce; I wanted to stay clear of him until he got over the Rebound Syndrome, you know what I mean? Anyway, I really gave him what-for for losing George and Gracie. Poor Bob! He must think - must have thought - I threw myself off the Bridge."

At that moment the library computer brought up a facsimile of a 1980's print newspaper. Gillian's eye was drawn to her name in the lead story:

"'SCIENTIST FEARED SUICIDE FOLLOWING WHALE RELEASE'," she read, scanning quickly: ""very emotional" following the whales' release into the open sea, according to her supervisor...her light-blue Chevy pickup truck found abandoned in Golden Gate Park...' Oh, my God! They really must have thought I jumped!"

"Does the thought disturb you, Dr. Taylor?" Spock discreetly wiped the screen.

"A little," she admitted, then shrugged. "But, easy come, easy go, and always leave 'em laughing right? So how come you look so disturbed?"

"I am disturbed by the fact that the termination of your existence in your own century automatically alters the time-line," Spock said thoughtfully, unaware that his face revealed so much and endeavoring to correct this. "Consequently we cannot know what might have transpired had you remained in your own time."

"Oh, I guess I would have handed in my resignation at the Institute and gone into research or something. Hanging around off Maui in a wetsuit always had a certain appeal - oh! You mean family - children and grandchildren, that kind of thing."

"Precisely."

"Boy, for a biologist, I can be awfully dense sometimes, can't I?" Gillian was joking, but it suddenly wasn't at all funny. Who'd have thought the adrenaline-fueled impulse that simultaneously threw her into

Jim Kirk's arms and into the transporter beam could have had an impact on countless generations?
"Spock, I'm even more scared now than I was before. How will we ever know?"

"We will not," Spock answered truthfully, "unless we scan all historical events between your disappearance and the present to determine if history as we know it has been altered by the absence of any person or persons who no longer exist."

"Meaning my children's children's children."

"Actually, generational parameters over the span of three centuries would indicate -"

"Yeah, okay - Bio 101; I know all that stuff!" Gillian snapped, then realized she was taking her frustration out on the wrong person. "I'm sorry! But what does that mean? Does it mean I have to go back?"

"Not necessarily," Spock said. "It merely means records will have to be scanned. If I am not mistaken, it was not uncommon for professional women of your era not to have children."

"That's true," Gillian laughed to cover a growing sinking feeling; Spock was just trying to make her feel better, she was sure. "Baby Boomers' revenge, or something. God, I'm so upset! I was going to go sight-seeing this afternoon; now I think I'll just sit in my room and cry into my pillow."

"I see no benefit to be derived from that," Spock suggested gently. "What 'sights' did you intend to see?"

"Believe it or not, I was going into Old San Francisco, back to the neighborhood where I used to live. I understand it's all landmarked now. I have to admit I'm surprised. I assumed it would have been built over centuries ago, if the Earthquake didn't swallow it."

Spock began accessing files even before he asked the question. "To which earthquake are you referring, Dr. Taylor? There have been several."

"Have there, really? I meant earthquake, generic. Everyone who lived in the Bay area used to kid about the Big One. As a way of staving it off, I guess."

She gasped as a series of old-style videos began collaging across the screen.

"October 17, 1989: hey, World Series; check it out! Oakland versus the Giants? What a rip! I could've made some money on that - what the hell?!"

A jumble of images - a beefy player in an Oakland uniform jogging across the outfield, broadcast test-patterns, a Please Stand By placard - dissolved into an overview of the cities of Oakland and San Francisco - the Bay Area Bridge, Nimitz Freeway, a fire burning out of control just to the south of the Golden Gate Bridge.

"Oh, my God!" Gillian whispered, church-awed, leaning forward to grip Spock's shoulders compulsively. "Can you enlarge that picture somehow?"

Spock silently complied.

"That's the Marina District..." Gillian was still whispering. "...those collapsed buildings...that looks like my block... that's my house! The one that's crushed right into the sidewalk. Early evening... I would've

just gotten home, gotten a brew from the fridge, popped something into the microwave, probably turned on the game..."

They watched in silence as the names of casualties scrolled down the screen.

"I know those people!" Gillian exclaimed in horror. "She lived across the hall; he was on the floor below, I think. Spock, if I'd stayed, I would've died!"

"Given the factors you describe, a distinct possibility. However, we will not know for certain until I have scanned -"

His thought was interrupted by the sudden movement of Gillian's arms about his neck - a quick hug, a quick peck on the cheek before she pulled away.

"I'm sorry, but I don't care! What's on that screen is proof enough for me."

"Doctor, if I may be so bold, this hardly constitutes adequate scientific method..." Spock suggested dryly.

"So sue me!" Gillian was tempted to kiss him again. She felt like dancing. "I'm satisfied with it. More than satisfied - you've given me back my life!" She squeezed his shoulder affectionately. Exit time, before she embarrassed both of them. "Gotta go! I'll bring you back a souvenir from San Francisco."

Two Vulcans, father and son, walked at the water's edge, the gentle surf of the South Pacific teasing at their feet.

"Was it precipitous to initiate a mind-meld with the whales, Father? Perhaps. But in view of the expediency of our position, I deemed it necessary at the time."

"Indeed," Sarek said mildly, and it was some moments before he could bring himself to ask: "What was it like?"

He himself rarely had recourse to mind-meld with any creature, found it personally distasteful most of the time to go poking about in another's subconscious while that other was engaged in doing like to his. There had been occasions in his career when knowledge of what the other was thinking might have been a distinct advantage, but Sarek preferred the challenge of learning this from signals and nuances emanating from the outer, conscious adversary, and was content. But his first meeting with these extraordinary leviathans, who had not their like in Vulcan's shallow, turgid seas, inspired him to contemplate how tranquil must be their minds. To know that Spock had actually melded with one of them was more than Vulcan curiosity could reasonably leave unexplored.

"It was - musical," Spock answered his father's question, surprising even himself.

"Musical?"

"Yes, Father, musical. I can offer no more accurate description at present. Unless you would prefer to see it in my mind."

"Perhaps not," Sarek demurred, watching the small figure of Gillian Taylor returning toward them along the strand, ankle-deep in the surf, her shoes in her hand. "But it suggests the manner of assistant Dr. Taylor will require here. I believe we both know such a one."

PASSACAGLIA
(Music of the Spheres)

Only those who know the Music are true intelligence...

Sage rarely spoke, but when she did, it shivered down the melded mind in glistening glissandos. Among the blue-sun two-worlds there were many beings, and among the beings there were many sages, but there was only one Sage.

Rarely seen on Firstworld, only legend on Second', Sage harbored in the deepest deeps, grown ponderous and whiskery, barely able to heave her great heaviness above to sound, barely able to uncurl her fingered flippers to gather krill and feed. It seemed Sage had always been so, Eldest of the Eldest, for even the elder silversides could not say when she had been less ancient than she was.

Was it simply being Sage, and holding the quintessential Wisdom of the Worlds that kept her whole, spared her the flesh-and-bone pile at the World's deep-pressured deep? When she spoke in silver tremolo, all the beings stopped and heard. Even the younglings, their bodies sleek and swift-moving (still using their flippers to swim, when Flukes-Only was the adult way), ceased their boisterous play and, wide-eyed, listened.

Only those who know the Music are true intelligence...

She did not say it only to say; it Meant something, which the beings must come to understand. She did not say it only to say; it Signified, addressing what beset the worlds and killed the krill. Three generations more, then death? The beings waited. Sage would know.

Her body dwelt on Firstworld; her mind embraced the Two Worlds. It was the duty of the males on First' to Sing her thoughts to the females on Second'. Thus all could see her in their minds - her body creased and haired and wrinkled, scar-fluked, fingers arthritic-cramped, her mind a slow coolness purple-blue, mercuric-slithering, insinuating the Wisdom mellifluous into the melded mind, that the beings might save it, savor it incandescent, thence to use it.

Thus Sage spoke of Music, that which bound the beings in the melded mind. Sage spoke from Firstworld and the males Sang it across the voice to Second', where the females, Hearing, relayed it to all their kind. There were some who dared to question it.

Only the Music differentiates? Across a sea of stars, what arbiter is this? Has Sage been offWorld, to Know? Was there not once an intelligence on Secondworld which did not Sing, but could both think and build?

So I have heard, Sage thought to them down the tortuous process - to all who swam on her world, that the males might Sing it across the voice, that the females might Hear, and translate. Those who called

themselves Pithai.

Just so, the males answered, and Sage Heard. They built great cities on the worldskin, which we could not do. They swam in the lighter air on upright limbs. They built, they spoke, they could even fly.

A spidercrab builds, Sage retorted, having Heard what the Secondworld males Sang. Vast villages of hardened spittle litter the worldfloor, chamber upon chamber, intricate and brittle-beautiful, but is this intelligence?

Pithai were intelligent, Secondworlders insisted. Our sages were here. They saw, they remembered, they Sang. Pithai were.

Were! Sage let the word hang in their minds, atremble. They are no more. They clambered chattering from the trees. What matter that they build and flew? They could not Sing; they did not know the Music. Therefore they were, but are no more. Were, were, were.

It set a fever in the males, who liked to build things.

The beings had not always had fingers. Perhaps Sage was so old she even remembered this.

In what eocene era had there been only flippers to augment the flukes in propelling through the waters which were All There Were on worlds? In what millionth millennium did a fingerbud appear - a bump, dismissable as some mutant growth, wart, scar, disfigurement - except that it was mirrored millennia later by a like one on the flat opposing flipperside? How many million more turnings of the equinox before a second pair of buds appeared, then three, while first and second grew longer in a grandchild's generation than a grandam's, then jointed not once but twice? And when, most miracle, a thumb?

Pithai had fingers, Secondworld Sang. Four fingers and a thumb on either hand. They built, Pithai built...

Pithai were fools, Sage answered. Were, were, were. Sing it with me - were!

The song sifted silted slithered through the seas, sougled in surf, shot silver through the void of space.

We Are! the males of both worlds Sang.

Therefore we must build, the females added when they Heard.

Sage sounded, sighed, and slept.

FUGUE

It was not so very old a city as Earth cities went, and not nearly so old as the principal cities of Vulcan. Yet, Sarek thought as the telfer deposited him at the Lincoln Center terminus, New York had its charms.

He took the escalator down to the plaza with the fountain and entered the concert hall.

An entire symphonic string section labored raggedly through the final bars of what the elder Vulcan recognized as the first movement of the seventh symphony of Ludwig van Beethoven. As Sarek watched from the top of the aisle in the otherwise empty theater, the slender female figure at the podium expressed her dissatisfaction with the outcome by a gentle but authoritative tap of her baton.

"Cellos," she began in a low, clear contralto which carried to where Sarek stood. "I am aware of the arduous tempi in this section, but I assure you they can be achieved. It would be gratuitous to remind you that the notation for the movement reads *poco sostenato: vivace*. By no definition which I understand could your present rendition be construed as 'vivace'."

There was a smattering of laughter at her dryness, but one senior cello player took umbrage.

"...like to see you play it yourself!" was apparently what he said, earning the agreement of some of his fellows.

T'Shael set down her baton and stepped down from the podium.

"As you wish."

There were raised eyebrows and considerable stirring as she took the man's instrument and his place, proceeding to play the relentlessly repetitive five-note phrase that had been the downfall of many a lesser string player. She played crisply, precisely, unerringly, her fingers flying up and down the frets as she simultaneously continued her train of thought.

"...what Berlioz described as a peasant dance, following unexpectedly yet logically from the more slow and stately opening themes..." Sarek could hear above the music from where he stood. "...which some have characterized as being 'masculine' and 'feminine' in their voice and texture. However..." T'Shael ended the phrase, handing the cello back to its no longer quite so belligerent owner. "...one can also understand Weber's statement that, with this piece, Beethoven was 'clearly ripe for the madhouse'."

In one graceful movement she had returned to the podium and retrieved the baton. In a human the entire performance would have been considered showing off.

"Now again, please." She raised the baton as the musicians readied their instruments. "From the top, and _"

"Isn't she delightful?" someone stage-whispered at Sarek's elbow.

Sarek recognized the small, plump figure with the fringe of silver hair as Maestra Carmen Espinoza, the principal conductor herself, from the larger-than-life holos which graced the theater lobby. She was winded, as if she had run the entire length of the plaza once informed her distinguished guest had arrived.

"You're early!" she chided him with the easy familiarity of someone aware of her own talents and her place in the scheme of things. "Don't you know artists are not morning people? Well, I suppose Vulcans are, but then what about Vulcan artists?"

She did not wait for an answer. "Come. Given all of the authority vested in the two of us, even we don't dare interrupt one of T'Shael's rehearsals; I doubt anything short of the Second Coming could. I'm afraid you'll have to wait in my office, though I can at least offer you a cup of tea..."

She took his arm somewhat familiarly and led him down a labyrinth of corridors, backstage past the scene shop redolent with wood shavings and paint thinner where a massive backdrop for this season's Otello was under construction, and into her office.

"I have entertained ambassadors at premieres aplenty, though never in this mess," Maestra Espinoza apologized, seeming to address the cello which had somehow taken up residence in her chair, and which she now relegated to a far corner, making room among a clutter of music stands so that Sarek could sit on the divan while she programmed the servitor for tea. "I suppose I must ask what you've come about, though I can guess. Starfleet recently tried to commandeer my entire orchestra, but I was not to be budged. Now you're sent to draft my best rehearsal conductor for whatever secret Vulcan reason. Before you attempt to take her from me, I must tell you what a treasure T'Shael's been."

A small bell on the servitor intoned a perfect A, indicating that the tea was ready; Maestra Espinoza poured, never losing a beat in her monologue.

"As her sponsor on Earth, Ambassador, you doubtless know how she came to us."

"I confess I do not," Sarek replied pleasantly enough. T'Shael's aptitudes had never ceased to amaze him but, having sponsored her, he had left her to her privacy.

"Well, then!" Espinoza settled back in her chair, unapologetically propping her stockinged feet up on the desk. "About a year ago, or was it two, the Philharmonic was in the process of planning a retrospective of the works of contemporary offworld composers - one performance to be devoted to each of six, as I recall. Naturally, Salet of Vulcan was among those chosen, but when it came to selecting which of his works we were to perform within such a limited time - we were frankly stumped. There was so much, and all of it so good! When we discovered that the Gifted One's only child was living on Earth, and was something of a musician herself, we asked her if she would help us choose which pieces her father would have deemed most suitable for performance by human musicians. We also secretly hoped to persuade her to perform with us as guest artist - she is quite good on the ka'athyra, I am told - but that was not to be. However, we also learned that she had recently begun a private study of human music, and particularly of conducting. I don't have to tell you how extraordinary a skill that has become even among humans in this push-button synthesized century, but to encounter it in a Vulcan was most impressive. And T'Shael's field of concentration, fortuitously enough this close to the quinticentennial, was Beethoven - no surprise, as he is the one Earth composer Vulcans seem to find most simpatico. Someday I intend to find out why."

"If it is of interest," Sarek interjected, in a diplomatic attempt to move the narrative along; enjoyable though it was, he had business to attend to on Vulcan, and could not keep the official shuttle waiting overlong. "I prefer Mozart myself."

"Do you? In that case we shall have to lure you away from saving the galaxy some summer for our Mostly Mozart Festival. Did you know that it's been a tradition with us for nearly three hundred years?"

"I did," Sarek replied.

Maestra Espinoza sipped her tea. "Yes, I suppose you would. I'm squandering your precious time with my chatter, aren't I? It's the burden of the performing artist, you see. So accustomed to singing for our supper that we don't know when to shut up. Stop me before I ask you for your tax-deductible contribution!"

"But, to be concise: T'Shael has since become one of our rehearsal conductors - the best of the lot, I might add. How I wish I could persuade her to actually conduct at a performance, but she's so devoted to those whales... At any rate, she's refused any honorarium, and only takes the hours the other students can't cover so as not to infringe on their livelihood.

"It's been a lovely arrangement so far. The musicians respect her; there's a lot less carping and silliness when she's in charge. You know how musicians can get sometimes."

Espinoza offered Sarek more tea, which he refused. "However, I do believe you're about to tell me all that is about to change."

"Indeed," Sarek said, getting up to go. "I regret I must attempt to lure T'Shael away from you for a time."

Rehearsal was over for the day. Musicians were packing up their instruments - strange, antique objects in an era when the touch of a button could produce all manner of synthesesound, and most performers were not so much musicians as computer programmers - thumping and clattering, rattling one final arpeggio on the piano, chatting and laughing as they made for the exits, pausing, some of them, to glance at the two Vulcans seated in folding chairs beneath the worklight, closeted about in their own dialogue as if they were truly alone on an empty stage. Some ventured to call out "Goodnight, T'Shael!" on their way up the aisle.

Goodnight, indeed, Sarek thought. Objectively it was scarcely midday, but because their workday was over, these musicians presumed by some egocentric pathetic fallacy to render it night. Humans! Sarek paid them little mind. His concern was for T'Shael, and for what answer she might give him.

Immediately the Romulans had stated their requirement of a Vulcan interpreter, Sarek had accessed the skillscans which would yield the most gifted linguist his race possessed. He was not unsurprised to find his own name in the topmost few. But there were several who were better. And in overall mastery of the language, knowledge of regional accents and sublingual groups, in syntactical deftness, etymology, and idiomatic nuance, as well as the possession of a clear, pleasant and accentless speaking voice, there was only one.

"It is not so much a measure of skill as of exposure, Ambassador," T'Shael explained. "As a musician, my father Salet traveled widely - even, under artistic immunity, within both Empires. As he mastered a working knowledge of the languages of the Romulans, he would teach their rudiments to me. Thereafter I continued the study on my own."

"But even the Court Language?" Sarek marveled. "That is not generally allowed to outworlders, not even diplomats." Meaning he had asked to learn it and been denied. "Only the most rudimentary phrases exist in Federation memory banks. How came you to learn it?"

T'Shael seemed reluctant to discuss it. "Say it was part of my education during that time when Dr. AlFaisal and I were hostage to the Empire."

"Of course," Sarek said, thinking: Now we are at the heart of the matter, and the reason she might refuse.

In the earliest days of Federation, an entity known as the Warrantors of the Peace had been established in the Vulcan city of TlingShar. Following an ancient Vulcan custom, where a warrior-king would send his firstborn to live in the enemy's camp while he took the enemy's child as his own, it was meant to ensure that no Federation member would initiate hostilities against any other. A planetary leader would send a representative - often a child or other close relative - to live on Vulcan for the duration of the leader's term of office. These representatives became known as Warrantors of the Peace.

Both T'Shael and Cleante alFaisal had been among those Warrantors. Cleante's mother had been High Commissioner of the United Earth Council at the time, and T'Shael had chosen to represent Sarek.

Only on Vulcan could a leader value a stranger's life as greatly as a relative's. By rights, Spock should have been the one to live at TlingShar for as long as his father was ambassador. But Vulcan tradition permitted substitutes and T'Shael, orphan and linguist, had found a chance to be doubly useful as a Warrantor and a teacher.

Until the Romulans, hatching some convoluted plot to sow dissension with the Federation, had infiltrated TlingShar and kidnapped six of the Warrantors. Four of them - an Andorian and three Deltans - had died; Cleante and T'Shael had survived, to be rescued by the crew of the *Enterprise* .

"It is only reasonable to ask whether you may have retained any - residual effects - of your captivity," Sarek suggested judiciously, studying T'Shael's face for the answer.

Residual effects? T'Shael thought. In fact, there were many. The death of my betrothed, because I was not there to meet him in pon farr. The death of the Master with whom I had been studying because, bereft of his last pupil, he saw no purpose in continuing his long life. The unrelieved publicity with which Cleante and I were received on Earth, precluding our ability to venture anywhere without the finger of notoriety being thrust at us: "There go the hostages, the hostages, the hostages..."

As the child of a career politician, Cleante was accustomed to the media circus, and ignored it, but there was not its like on Vulcan, and T'Shael had still not grown accustomed to it. Residual effects, indeed. Call them ramifications, dimensions, colorations, consequences - they had affected every aspect of T'Shael's life since, even to her reasons for not returning to Vulcan. But this was not what Sarek meant.

"If you are asking if I harbor any resentment toward the Romulans for their actions, or any emotional reaction toward the event - I do not," T'Shael said at last. Did Sarek only seem to breathe a sigh of relief?

"I had hoped as much. Then this past event would not be an obstacle to your participation in present events?"

"It would not."

It was then that they lapsed into silence, waiting for the echoes of musician-voices to remove themselves

from the theater into the sunlit New York street. The silence lingered, as Sarek intended it to. Betimes a maintenance robot could be heard vacuuming the carpets in the theater lobby. Sarek sat in the folding chair beneath the worklight on a stage littered with similar chairs and music stands, his hands on his knees, waiting.

"Logic suggests, Ambassador," T'Shael said after a very long time; whatever else might be said of the austere face with its dark, hooded eyes, it was impossible for even a Vulcan to read the thoughts behind it, "that you did not seek me out in person in the expectation that I would refuse you."

"Indeed." A mild look crossed Sarek's stern features; it was not only human females who could make him smile.

"It had always been my intention to live a quiet life," T'Shael said. "That, of course, was predicated against my having been a hostage."

"I quite understand."

Did he? T'Shael wondered. Surely whatever reach of the galaxy had claimed his diplomatic attention at the time, he must have been at least subliminally aware of the uproar once the two surviving hostages reached Earth. Having lived so much of his life among humans, he would perhaps have better understood the public clamor, the seeming need of nearly every denizen of Earth to claim some personal acquaintance with the hostages, simply because they had been hostages.

How much ill-will had been generated, how many old prejudices exacerbated, by the event? Could what Sarek was asking her to do now rebalance the equation and set things right?

"If this proffer of peace be sincere, its outcome may hinge upon a turn of phrase, an adjective, an inflection," T'Shael said, as if to herself. "If, as the skillscans indicate, I am the optimal choice, by what logic may I refuse?"

"Perhaps the logic of a Vulcan's privacy?" Sarek suggested.

T'Shael dismissed this with a negative gesture. "It must not be said that the peace initiative failed because the interpreter was less than accurate."

She rose from the rehearsal chair, surveying the vast empty concert hall as if for the last time.

"I am prepared," she said solemnly. "You may so inform the Federation's president and Captain Kirk. I shall report to the *Enterprise* as soon as I have terminated my study with the whales. Spock and I shall have to continue our studies from afar..."

"Musical," she had confirmed Spock's hypothesis, handing him the tricorder transcript she had been keeping since she first stepped into the water to swim with George and Gracie.

Sarek had recommended her to Gillian Taylor, who had been delighted, grooming her to take her own place when she left aboard the *Clarke*. T'Shael had also been delighted in her quiet way to work with the gentle leviathans, studying their language both scientifically and telepathically. It was only logical that she

share her findings with Spock.

She and Spock had shared much since his return from Genesis, for it was T'Shael who had been his tutor.

"A mind-meld would facilitate the transfer of language considerably," she had offered at their first encounter.

"It might also constitute an invasion of your privacy," Spock had replied. "Since the katra ritual, I have not regained complete control."

"I have studied with a Master," T'Shael reminded him. Before the katra ritual he had known this, as he had known much about her. How much did he remember? "My own control can compensate for both of us."

"I should not wish to accidentally encroach where I would not be welcome," Spock suggested.

"I have no secrets that cannot be entrusted to you," T'Shael had assured him.

In a human this might have sounded coy, flirtatious. In T'Shael it was only truth. She had come at Sarek's request to help his son relearn the idioms and nuances of Federation Standard, and its English and Modern English roots. She had a gift, Spock required it; this much was only logical. But to offer a mind-meld was more than generous.

"And also logical," T'Shael had pointed out, reading his reluctance in Spock's face, "for it will save much time."

"Agreed," Spock said at last, and permitted her fingers to touch his face, her mind to touch his mind.

"I am reminded of certain dialects in Chinese, as well as the Withiki and Cherwtl tongues," T'Shael could say now, knowing Spock would understand, had had his comprehension restored to him by a perceptive and ministering mind, "languages which cannot be spoken but must be sung, hence to lack perfect pitch is to be classified as mute by either species," T'Shael went on. "The difference with Megapterae is that only the males sing aloud, while both sexes commune by gesture - possibly explaining the evolution of longer flippers than most species of great whale - as well as telepathically. And, as you discovered in your earliest mindmeld with Gracie, they even sing telepathically."

"Interesting," Spock allowed, wondering if he also evidenced the same intense absorption in a subject which now animated T'Shael's austere features; Jim Kirk would have said he did.

"George also communicated something to me which he refers to as 'the Vision.' He said he was forbidden to sing the whole of it to a female of any species, but that you would understand."

Spock considered. So much was still inaccessible to him since the katra ritual. His meld with Gracie had been expedient, precipitous, and in a public place, not to mention underwater. Not ideal circumstances for a mindmeld even if his skills had been honed, which they had not. It was the first meld he had initiated since leaving the care of the adepts on Mount Seleya - clumsy, inexpert, and with a creature whose mind functioned on levels he should properly have allotted months to study. Yet he had managed to communicate to Gracie that which needed communicating, and ought to have been content. Still, the great whale had hinted at something in their necessarily hurried communication - how long could even a Vulcan be expected to hold his breath underwater? - something essential, but incomplete, and this term "vision" struck a chord.

"Did George share any portion of this vision with you at all?" he asked T'Shael now.

"As much as his personal taboos permitted," T'Shael replied. "It was not something he had witnessed himself, but something which had been imparted to him by third parties, perhaps his ancestors, perhaps the recently-departed Probe. He was not specific. What he described was something he personally found - daunting, difficult to comprehend."

"Interesting," Spock ruminated. "Somewhere in Gracie's mind this vision is also stored, though not as clearly. I received only inklings of it during my contact with her, though she made it clear that it was something very important. Can you recall any portion of it at all?"

T'Shael closed her eyes, tilted her head back almost imperceptibly as if to call the memory the more clearly forward.

"A world..." she murmured. "...two worlds, each swathed in ocean...Creatures...not unlike Trichechus, what Earthmen call the manatee or sea-cow..."

"So what gives with those two?" Uhura had demanded as soon as she was able to connect with Cleante for a lunch date following the Deluge. The two had become fast friends since the Romulan incident. Uhura had seen T'Shael on *Enterprise* in Spock's company more than once, and wondered what they could be talking about so intensely. "You can't tell me they're closeted in his quarters two-three times a week just talking about whales!"

"Yes, I can," Cleante had countered, loving the privilege of being one of the few civilians with access to TerraMain's officers' lounge. What she really wanted to do was tell Uhura about her and Riley, but the opportunity hadn't presented itself. "They are."

T'Shael opened her eyes, tilted her head forward. "They differ, however, in two significant particulars. First, while both species are whiskered, the males possess vestigial poison-spikes interspersed within the whiskers, which can be voluntarily raised or lowered, as if they were formerly used in combat. Secondly, in place of flippers both sexes have elongated handlike appendages, with three long, jointed fingers and an opposable thumb."

"Fascinating!" The vision coincided with the fragmentary impressions Spock had received from Gracie. "Earth's anthropologists maintain that the opposable thumb is the single characteristic which separates Homo sapiens sapiens from his simian forebears. In this particular, these creatures strongly resemble a species well-known to both of us."

T'Shael concurred. "Vulcan protomers."

Laboring to restore his mind on Mount Seleya, Spock had naturally sought the sciences foremost. Evolution had been among the last topics he had had time to "cram", in McCoy's words, which were usually contained within a sentence beginning or ending with "all this stuff you're cramming into a brain that only a few weeks ago was the consistency of a Western omelette." Fortuitous, Spock thought, that this last-minute study had included protomers.

The term was not of Vulcan origin, but had been coined by a human paleontologist studying Vulcan fossil remains. The term was somewhat fanciful, but so were the creatures it described.

Vulcan, like Earth, had once been covered by oceans, and Vulcan evolution had progressed much like Earth's for approximately the first billion years until, transformed into desert by a series of cataclysmic events, it had forfeited whatever primitive primate life might have flourished there. Intelligent life would have to evolve from some other source.

What oceans remained following the cataclysms were small and warm and turgid, virtually tideless in the absence of a moon, sulfuric rather than saline in their composition. Ringed by algae in fantastic rainbow colors, these oceans teemed with plankton. In the absence of fish, there was only one species to feed on them.

Not nearly so large as Earth's whales, these so-named protomers grew to at most two meters in length, or so surviving fossils indicated. No complete skeletal remains of the parent species were ever found, but what were found in plenitude were the remains of two offshoot species which survived into the volcanic age. For these species had dared to venture onto land, heaving themselves up onto the beaches, risking collapsed lungs and the fury of the Vulcan sun to seek out alternate food supplies as their oceans grew ever smaller. It was theorized that only a small percentage survived, but these were the ancestors of Vulcans.

Preserved for the perusal of later generations in the original rock walls where they were discovered, their bodies remained. Asphyxiated by volcanic fumes, buried alive in pits of petrified mud or asphalt, they were the stuff of fantasy. Fish-shaped mammals with four elongated, flippered limbs, vestigial pointed ears laid flat against domed dolphin skulls, the very hair of their flowing manes delineated in mud long turned to stone, swam together with literal mermen - their heads and torsos plainly Vulcanoid, their lower limbs fused into a powerful tail or separated into exaggerated amphibian legs. They might easily be dismissed as chimera, counterfeits like Earth's Piltdown Man, if they hadn't been so real.

How these strange amphibians, these froglike proto-Vulcans, had learned to walk upright against the unfamiliar pull of gravity, to shield themselves from predators and the killing sun, to find food and prevail in the absence of water, how their digitated foreflippers, perfectly designed for scooping plankton from the waters, came in time to be articulated into tool-grasping fingers, were subjects still pursued by Vulcan science, and there were more questions than answers.

Fortuitous that Spock had been studying protomers on Mount Seleya. Fortuitous also that Mount Seleya's computers, programmed to reeducate him in his dual ancestry, had provided him with a study of corollary species in the known universe, including Earth's whales. Fortuitous that these examples had where possible included the sounds each creature made. Fortuitous that Spock, like most Vulcans, was gifted with both perfect pitch and total recall.

How else would he have recognized the song the Probe sang to Gracie?

Blue! Gracie had exulted, blowing irreverent bubbles out of the corners of her mouth, one eye whimsically watching Spock butterfly toward the surface once he had terminated his most exquisite joining with her mind. Blue, his mind is blue! Most pearlustrious, iridescent blue!

Her ecstasies had put George in a pique for the rest of the afternoon. Even Gillian's soothing babble from the poolside couldn't calm him.

His first impression when the fragile, gangly-limbed thing had scissored awkwardly toward them from the world above was that it was just another attendant come from the air-world to feed them, examine them, cavort with them for the amusement of the clump of stick-figure air-swimmers on the far side of the separating wall - George could hear their feral grunts and squeals through the glass - scrape barnacles from their chins, or record all the many recordings that were so important to air-swimmers.

Male, George had noted, almost as an afterthought, having picked up the creature's scent as soon as it entered the water. But different somehow.

For one thing, his skin was different. Not the hard, dense artificial rubberstuff every previous diver, even Gillian, had had to wear to brave water usually too cold for air-swimmers. Nor was the creature breathing; he had no pod-apparatus strapped to his back, no bubbler emerging from his mouth. And he smelled different.

Alien! George registered, remembering the ancestors' songs of the Wanderer. Was this the Wanderer returned?

Impossible. Too flimsy, and it was not singing, could not sing, apparently, in water, practically naked as air-swimmers went, holding its breath in powerful lungs in order to do - what?

When George saw with what familiar intimacy the creature sidled up to Gracie, his tiny articulated flippers grasping at her cranium - a peculiar mating overture, if that was what it was - his impulse was to loom over the puny creature, threatening, telegraphing: Leave my mate alone! He emphasized it with a gesture; any humpback male would have understood. But the creature paid no heed. It was at that point that Gracie began to giggle.

What? George demanded.

Gracie only giggled again. Not now!

Their names were not really George and Gracie; these were names chosen by humans, for human convenience. Like T.S. Eliot's cats, they each had an ineffable, effable, effanineffable, deep and inscrutable singular Name. Nor were their concepts for color the same as humans'. When Gracie called this scrawny creature blue, it held nuances for George far different than it would for a human.

It was all he could do to contain himself, flukes undulating testily, until the creature disengaged itself, its long legs scissoring to bring it to the surface.

What?! he demanded of Gracie a second time.

Gracie didn't answer. She seemed to be purring.

"The use of color imagery is most curious," Spock said thoughtfully. "It is physiologically impossible for whales to see color, given the nature of cetacean retina."

"Indeed," T'Shael agreed. "Yet Gracie makes frequent reference to colors, including infrared and ultraviolet, as if she can actually see them. I can only conclude that there is some linguistic significance which I have not yet ascertained..."

"If only their concept of time were not so radically different from ours," Spock mused, "we might at least be able to ascertain when the Probe last came to Earth. Adding this knowledge to the whales' innate electromagnetic tracking ability, it might be possible for us to determine the Probe's point of origin."

"But when communing with creatures whose sense of the present is all-consuming, with past and future as an interchangeable continuum..."

"Precisely."

"Well, I think it's a crying shame!" was Uhura's opinion. "There they are - both unbonded, and as free of entanglements as a Vulcan's ever likely to get. Their careers are compatible; even they seem compatible, as far as I can tell. I know better than to expect some great, undying romance, but what are they waiting for? Maybe what they need is a good push. You know how thick-headed Vulcans can be sometimes. If I push Spock from my end, and you give T'Shael a little gentle nudge - don't you two ever discuss these things at all?"

"Certainly." Cleante picked croutons out of her salad with her fingers. "She's very happy for me and -

and this new fellow I'm seeing." Damn, you coward! she thought. "But she doesn't seem to think the rules apply to her at all."

Uhura shook her head, a conspiratorial look in her eye. "We'll have to see what we can do. It's such a waste of two good gene-pools, if nothing else..."

Spock was not so oblivious as Uhura seemed to think him. He was well aware of the attributes which might make T'Shael an optimal choice of mate, should either he or she prove in need of such a choice.

He found her presence eminently satisfying; they were, as Uhura had suggested, quite compatible. Why then did he not initiate some relationship closer, more permanent, than what was?

Call it a function of a particularly Spockian reticence, bred of a great deal of painful personal history. His past relationships with women had been tentative, frequently the result of untoward circumstance, and largely unfulfilling. Was it any wonder he did not wish to reprise any such experience, nor to inflict it upon another female?

His liaison with T'Pring, even unrequited, had had ramifications which might have ended his life, and had nearly ended Jim Kirk's. It was only with time a great deal of Vulcan discipline that he had been able to forgive his reluctant betrothed for this breach of the most basic decency. That which was logical could also be cruel.

"Do you ever think about it?" Jim Kirk had asked him after a decent interval; his own wounds from the kal-if-fee had healed, but McCoy had cautioned him about what might still fester in the Vulcan's psyche. "Ever wonder how your life would have differed if you'd - if I'd died down there?"

"There is no need to speculate, Jim," Spock had replied matter-of-factly. "I have no doubt that, having turned myself in at the nearest starbase, I should have found that the mills of Starfleet justice grind most swiftly."

Kirk had been stunned at this response. "You can't mean you'd have let them indict you! All you'd have to do is explain the extenuating circumstances -"

"And reveal one of Vulcan's best-kept secrets?" Spock had shaken his head. "No, Captain. There are some things which transcend -"

"All right!" Kirk had raised both hands in protest, unable to bear hearing that particular phrase just then. "But you can hardly have expected McCoy to keep quiet about it."

Spock had looked thoughtful. "That is true. However, Dr. McCoy's penchant for revealing all would have had little impact upon the ultimate outcome."

"Live long and prosper, Spock."

"I shall do neither. I have killed my captain, and my friend.")

No human had been present to hear the words when they were spoken. But at that moment Jim Kirk could hear them in his heart.

T'Pring aside, there were the human females, each disturbing in her own right. Were it not for the spores, did Spock honestly believe he could have sustained a relationship with Leila Kalomi? In fairness, he did not. Yet he could still see her tears, still feel them beneath his fingers as he tried to brush them away.

Zarabeth had wept, too; he had not even had the luxury of touching the tears tracking her cold face. Zarabeth had visited him with a lingering sadness, deep as mourning, not so much for his own loneliness as for her own.

Why did humans find that which caused such pain so desirable? Humans entered relationships so casually; their needs seemed so simple compared to that which compelled a Vulcan. Spock had watched with some bemusement down the years as one particular human entertained one liaison after another, until Gillian Taylor rocked him back on his Starfleet-issue heels with her genial brushoff. Curious, Spock remembered thinking at the time, that it took a twentieth century woman to see some truth about Jim Kirk that his own era's women could not.

But Vulcans, as a rule, did not engage in casual liaisons. It was not that they could not, but that they chose not. Vulcan biology dictated one thing; Vulcan discretion ruled the rest.

Vulcan biology, Spock was certain, had played some unspecified role on Genesis. Something had occurred to that part of him which had come to manhood on that doomed world, something which thereafter caused Saavik to avoid his eyes. But his mind had been a void, his katra elsewhere, and even beneath the ministrations of the adepts memory did not serve.

But Spock could well surmise. And though T'Shael might be an optimal choice, he dared not risk - not again, not so soon. He would not be the cause of the kind of pain which made Zarabeth and Leila weep, the kind of reticence that lowered Saavik's eyes, to any other female.

He had even been reluctant to have T'Shael as his tutor, succumbing reluctantly to the expediency of time saved.

The meld had indeed saved much time, restored much that was missing. If in their sharing Spock also became aware of the agility of T'Shael's mind, the deep, almost passionate devotion with which she wove amid the warp and weft of words (weaving abstract and concept into the concrete fact of neuron and cerebral cell, binding them inseparably, psychic weaver), experienced the care with which she nurtured his scarred and ailing consciousness, restoring it to what it was, this was not new to him. It was as if he had known it inasmuch as he knew T'Shael, as if, like language, it was being restored to him, reminding him of that which he already knew.

Deja vu, humans called it Spock remembered, surprising himself. The memory had not been there yesterday; T'Shael had given it back to him.

The meld ended, neither spoke of it. It was a deeply personal thing. Humans assumed all interchange between male and female to have sexual overtones; Vulcans knew this need not be so.

Nor need it be not so.

He knew T'Shael's past, and the events which had caused her to be unbonded. He did not know what she thought of these events, and would respect her silence. For the present what was, was. Let T'Shael choose whether their current status altered or remained the same.

Blue, Gracie had said. T'Shael had told him:

"Gracie said to tell you your mind is blue."

"Blue?" Jim Kirk had repeated when Spock told him.

"Yes, Captain, blue. I almost regret I did not have time to ask Gracie what she meant."

"Captain's Log, Stardate 8478.4: As our civilian passengers continue to arrive, *Enterprise* is preparing for departure. Commander Riley and his staff, including the Vulcan interpreter T'Shael, are already aboard, as is most of the archeology team. Only the musicians are still largely unaccounted for. We are under orders to rendezvous with the Romulan vessel *Hannsu* in ten days' time.

"Our passengers are an interesting study in diversity. The handpicked archeology team, led by an Earth-human and consisting of scientists from several worlds, has been selected not only for their expertise, but to provide the more homogenous Romulans with an object lesson in interspecies harmony.

"Acquiring enough talented musicians to balance the Romulan offering has been more difficult. All of Earth, it seems, is caught up in a paroxysm of preparation for Ludwig van Beethoven's five hundredth birthday. Their seasonal programs already thrown into confusion by the disruption of the Probe, music festival organizers have gobbled up the best musicians of several worlds, leaving Starfleet to settle for second-string performers. On a more discordant note - damn!

"Recorder off!" Kirk barked, and it hastily obliged. He hated puns when they came unbidden, and musical metaphors had been flying thick and fast since last night's sendoff reception. He needed a walk. And a chance to figure out what to do about a certain white elephant named Sir Rodney Harbinger who had been foisted on him at that very reception. Catapulting out of his chair, Kirk nodded toward the center seat.

"Mr. Sulu -?"

"Aye, sir." Sulu took the con without missing a beat in his intimate dialogue with the computer regarding mainstage flux-chiller status. Kirk wished his troubles were so simple.

Sir Rodney ("Do call me Sir Rod") Harbinger, composer and conductor, arrived with numerous recommendations, all of them relatives in Starfleet, including a rear admiral. His assignment to *Enterprise* had been a Bob Caflisch strong-arm special, loosely translated as "He's all we could get, so you'll take him off our hands, Jim baby, or else."

Lord Harbinger (no one seemed compelled to call him Sir Rod), arrived at the Admiralty's official sendoff with an entourage of some twenty artsy types, most of them female, and a full three sheets to the wind.

"About his usual state, sir," Riley whispered to Kirk, who wanted to know just how much of a pain in the rear admiral the composer was likely to be. "Fast hands and a hollow leg."

Harbinger was a big, bearish man with a limp handshake and a surprisingly schoolmarmish voice; he bypassed Kirk entirely during the introductions and set his sights on Riley.

"Riley...Riley..." Harbinger said in his nasal Gilbert & Sullivan accept, looking down at the DiploCorps liaison from his great height, unimpressed. "Always considered Irishmen to be common drunks, myself. Even wrote an operetta about it once."

"The Drunken Irishman; I'm familiar with it. Understand the critics panned it," Riley supplied smoothly. "Have to do our diplomatic best to disprove the theory this voyage, sir."

Some of Harbinger's entourage tittered nervously, but Harbinger had already found himself a new target.

"Captain Kirk, since we are apparently -" Harbinger pronounced it "appedlyntly" - "expected to coexist amicably on this voyage, I suggest you being by teaching your Communications officer some manners."

Kirk had heard all about it. Having smooched and cuddled his way through every one of the female mediamembers waiting in Command HQ's lobby to interview him, Harbinger found himself alone in a turbolift with Uhura. Seizing the opportunity to speak, Harbinger had attempted a little improvisational flanking action, only to discover that in addition to her proficiency in communication, Uhura was an expert in rearguard defense. Harbinger ended with the offending hand caught in the turbolift door. He showed Kirk the bruise.

"The upshot being, Captain, that I seriously -" Availing himself of the Admiralty's best bourbon, Harbinger pronounced the word "siddeously" "- question my ability to perform."

"I must say I'm somewhat surprised," Jim Kirk deadpanned with a wink at Riley. "It seems to me as if my Communications officer had gotten her message through loud and clear. You should be thankful that's the only aspect of your performance she's affected."

He'd left Harbinger gaping like a fish and sidled through the press of bodies toward the bar; he could hear Riley guffaw in his wake.

"Who the hell is that clown?" he demanded rhetorically of McCoy. "An what have we done to deserve him?"

"It's not what you know', Jim; you know that." McCoy happened to know a thing or two about Harbinger. "Who is he or who was he? He used to be one of those today-I-will-be-brilliant types, but that was twenty years ago..."

The trouble with cocktail party chatter was that it was always being interrupted just when it started to get interesting. Admiral Cartwright had buttonholed Kirk, dragging him off to make brilliant repartee with some civilian VIP's and, less than two hours from departure, Kirk hadn't a clue who Lord Harbinger was, much less how he was supposed to pass this sodden buffoon off to the Romulans as one of Earth's finest.

Uhura and Riley were in the 'lift when Kirk got in. He wished he'd been there last night to watch her outmaneuver Harbinger. She and Riley, gossiping like schoolkids, barely acknowledge him.

"... but you know what's extraordinary -" Uhura was bubbling, "- is that I never put the two of you together in my mind. You may have vaguely mentioned some girl you were involved with, and she was going on about this fella, but until you mentioned her name it never connected. Tell me how you met her."

"At the bar in TerraMain, believe it or not." Riley winked at her, mindful of Kirk's studied inattention. "Actually, it's all Spock's fault. Or yours, for giving her a pass to the officers' lounge. Say, Captain?"

"Hm?" Kirk snapped himself out of his self-induced funk.

"How's about letting me take her out of spacedock for old time's sake?"

"How long's it been since you were a navigator, Navigator?" Kirk shot back with a smile, as curious as Uhura, but not about to give Riley the satisfaction of asking. Some things about Riley never changed, including his intention of leaving Uhura with that puzzled frown on her face for hours, maybe days. Kirk spoiled his fun by paying more attention to the datapadd Uhura was jotting on. "Busy?"

"Oh, um, instrument status," Uhura said vaguely, jotting again. "Musical instruments, that is. Seems the Steinway got a little cranky going through the transporter, so the tuner's given me specific instructions for getting the other pieces up safely. I'm on my way down to the transporter room now to supervise."

Kirk wondered what a Steinway was, but wasn't about to ask.

"My problem, sir, not yours." Uhura stuck the stylus to the datapadd and tucked it under her arm. "And I know it's a little noisy down by guest quarters just now, but I promise I'll have Harbinger and his people out of the corridors and squared away well before departure."

"I thought I might personally see to the archeology team," Kirk said, having one person in particular in mind.

"That's exactly where I was headed myself," Riley declared, stepping out of the 'lift with Kirk. For some

reason it made Uhura giggle; she was humming the chorus to "Beyond Antares" as the doors closed.

"Imagine it, Little Sister," Dajan exulted as the *Hannsu* sped toward its rendezvous with the Federation ship, "not only are we permitted to see each other freely again, we have actually been selected for this voyage together! Rehabilitated, washed clean, deemed pure and Orthodox exemplars of our race, worthy to face the Earthmen and shame them with our brilliance. We have five years' worth of gossip to catch up on. Do you think we shall grow sick of looking at each other?"

"Once we arrive at this desolate rock, I doubt we shall see each other at all," Jandra said bleakly. She and Tiam had quarreled again this morning; the very engine room, several levels below, must have reverberated with it. It was humiliating to have one's private life bruited about the entire vessel, but the bulkheads were not soundproof and Tiam would shout. Naturally, when he shouted she was obliged to shout as well. Now she was hoarse and irritable, and Tiam was off sulking, or telling his troubles to that provincial, Rihan. "I shall be locked in some makeshift performance hall, playing my fingers to the bone, a situation not so very different from my years of atonement in the provinces. And you shall be grubbing about in your precious Rahcir runs, searching for god knows what."

Searching for more than you can know, Little Sister! Dajan thought, keeping his expression neutral.

"Korff, not Rahcir!" he chided her. "We have agreed to abide by the human designation for simplicity - Korff."

"Whatever!" Jandra said indifferently, her mind on something else. "I wonder if there will be a piano aboard this *Enterprise* ?

"Tell me what it is and I'll tell you if they're likely to have one," Dajan offered, his mood as sunny as his sib's was gloomy.

Jandra wondered if the computer library was as "restructured" as the society they now lived in. She accessed "Music: Alien" and tried to call up "piano" on the screen. The computer balked; Jandra sighed.

"A keyboard instrument," she said, struggling to be more specific, to limn the size and shape of it, perhaps to conjure it, in the rarefied air of a warbird's cabin. "Similar to a tra'am, yet not."

"Ah!" Dajan said, his monosyllable of choice whenever he would not admit he did not entirely understand the subject. "Is it something commonly found on Federation worlds?"

"On human worlds, yes, always." Jandra frowned. "Even a child may toy with one unchastised. I thought you knew Earth ways, you and your - what is the word -?"

"Penpal," Dajan supplied, realizing the gaffe he had made. Was he so accustomed to striving for Orthodoxy that he could not admit his knowledge of humans even to his sister? He shrugged. "The subject never came up. Perhaps she is not musical. But why are you so glum? Even when Tiam isn't in the room, you conjure him with your brooding."

"It is not only Tiam," Jandra replied.

Dajan recognized the look. "Still grieving, after all this time?"

Jandra's eyes were baleful. "As you should be, unless your loss is somehow less than mine."

"Will grieving bring them back?" Dajan dismissed it. "Life is for the living, Little Sister. While we live, we strive to restore their honor. There is nothing else."

The corridors between the main transporter room and the guest quarters were in chaos. Musical instruments from several worlds in their invariably cumbersome cases vied for space with truckloads of archeology equipment, while Rodney Harbinger's motley entourage chatted with less flamboyant archeologists in field gear, voices caroming off the bulkheads. A spindly Andorian maneuvering crates that seemed beyond his wiry strength acknowledged Kirk and Riley.

"Morning, Captain, Commander. Doc had to beam back down, Commander. Some form that needed signing for a piece of equipment that can't be found. The usual. I'll let her know you were looking for her."

"Thanks, Sharf. Appreciate it."

"Doc' as in Dr. alFaisal, I presume," Kirk said as they worked their way through the throng which, being civilian and totally self-absorbed, ignored the Starfleet brass. "I noticed you two really hit it off at the reception last - oh." Kirk realized by the expression on Riley's face that last night hadn't been a chance encounter. Jim Kirk suppressed a pang of regret. He too knew Cleante alFaisal. "I must be getting senile. I don't recognize the symptoms anymore. Where did you -?"

"At the bar on TerraMain," Riley said, intending to leave Kirk right where he'd left Uhura. His attention seemed to be drawn to the turn of the corridor ahead of them, where a gangly young ensign with a shock of cornsilk hair was weaving his way through the jostling civilians like a backfield runner, shielding what looked like a DiploCorps brief against his body as if it were a thrown pass. Riley and Kirk watched as the ensign got caught in a bottleneck, murmuring "Excuse me, pardon me -!" with desperate urgency as the civilians parted like a flock of sheep. Riley grimaced.

"Your new aide?" Kirk asked, just on a hunch.

"Awkward kid!" Riley answered by way of acknowledgement. "Means well, but awkward. If I could get my hands around the throat of the misguided personnel counselor who persuaded him he was DiploCorps material, and then, in their wisdom, assigned him to me -!"

"Makes you wonder," Kirk murmured, remembering another awkward, well-meaning kid he'd helped steer into diplomacy once. Deja vu.

"Ryan, Kevin J.," Riley greeted him as the youngster skidded to a halt barely ten centimeters from his nose, fumbling the brief into Riley's outstretched hand, breathless and sweating. "Too damn close to Riley, Kevin T. for the computers to distinguish. Half the time we end up getting each other's mail. Ryan - as you were!"

Riley keyed in the proper code, opened the brief and scanned it right there in the corridor while the kid

stood by uneasily, avoiding eye contact with Kirk, uncertain what to do with his hands, much less his feet. Riley closed the brief, clearing his throat; Ryan snapped to attention.

"You been cleared by Sickbay yet?" Riley demanded. "We're less than an hour from departure."

"Nossir, I - the brief was top priority - no time." Ryan's voice cracked, and he ran out of words.

"Ryan -?" Riley asked dangerously; only Jim Kirk could see the merriment in his eye.

"Sir -?"

"You're still here."

"Sir!" Ryan turned on his heel and started back the way he'd come, though there were at least two shorter routes to Sickbay.

"Poor kid's very nearsighted," Riley observed, watching his back. "Almost didn't pass the Academy physical because of it, and he needs a Retinax booster every six months. Still, even at 4A and 20/20, I don't see that as DiploCorps material, do you?"

Kirk hid the twinkle in his own eye. "Stranger things have happened."

"It's not fair!" Lieutenant M'Lynn Kittay lamented as Ryan barreled around a turn in the corridor and collided with her and her companion, muttering "Sorry!" before he bolted for the 'lift. "The DiploCorps assignment was supposed to be mind. What's he got that I don't?"

"You got assigned to Commander Uhura," the companion offered between plies. "I thought she was one of your personal heroes?"

"She is," Kittay admitted. "But Communications is not what I want to do. And babysitting these artsy types for the entire voyage -"

"I beg your pardon!" Annek, objected. "I happen to be one of those 'artsy types', don't forget!"

"Oh, you! You don't count!" Kittay said, as only a friend could and get away with it. She was glaring in the direction Ryan had taken. "My name was on the roster ahead of his. I've got seniority, I outrank him, I'm way overqualified. How come he gets the plum assignment?"

"M'Lynn, dear..." Annek, was small and lithe where Kittay was tall and willowy; she seemed to make up for her lack of height by her grandiose use of the language. Dressed in free-flowing dancers' clothes in contrast to Kittay's crisp Starfleet issue, she had been using the corridor rail as a ballet barre, stretching her limber body into impossible positions. "...forgive my boredom with the topic, but there will be other assignments. The important thing is, you got *Enterprise* ."

"Important for you, maybe!" Kittay grumped. Annek, was one of Harbinger's entourage, a new-wave breed of performer known as a kinetic transposer who, by means of a combination of dance and mime, interpreted music only she could hear.

"I know what you're going to say -" Annek, said, bending backward until it looked as if her spine might snap. "- but you're wrong. It so happens that, as the only dancer who can properly interpret Sir Rod's works, I - omigod, omigod!"

She had swung her leg down from the railing and was standing stock-still, both hands clasped over her mouth, her huge brown eyes wide with horror.

"Omigod, it's him!"

"It's he," Kittay corrected her primly, refusing to turn around to see what the smaller woman was staring at. She had known Anneke long enough not to take her melodramas seriously. "'Him' who?"

"Don't you mean 'he who'?" Annek, regained her composure, folded her hands demurely, batted her eyelashes. "Him, dammit! Captain Spock! He just this minute stepped out of that turbolift and turned that corner not three meters from where we're standing, and here I am acting like a absolute idiot -"

"Don't worry, hon," Kittay said dryly, heading off purposefully. Commander Uhura had asked her to clear the corridors before departure, and that was what she was going to do, beginning with Annek,, whose infatuation with Starfleet's most famous Vulcan had begun with news media reports on the celebrated Five-Year Mission when they were both in grade school. "I'm sure he didn't notice you. In fact, I'm positive he doesn't even know you exist."

"Don't you worry, hon!" Annek, muttered acidly, dogging Kittay's footsteps. "He will. He will!"

Uhura met Cleante coming from the transporter room.

"All fixed?" she asked.

"All fixed," Cleante answered, falling into step beside her. "Sign for this, vouch for that, wheedle and plead for the other thing. Ah, bureaucracy!"

They met Spock in the 'lift. Uhura had a sudden inspiration.

"...so I said, 'Chris, it seems to me that a women can get enough of that macho nonsense home on Earth!...' she began, as if continuing a conversation begun in the corridor. "'Why would she go looking for it on Vulcan?' And Chris said -"

"Huh?" Cleante said blankly. Uhura elbowed her in the ribs. "Oh! So - um - what did Chris say then?"

Chris who? she was thinking, watching Uhura's eyes dance, unable to look in Spock's direction; Spock made her nervous under the best of circumstances.

"Well, you know Chris, the Great Romantic. She's got some pretty funny ideas about xeno-erotica, for all her years in space. I could see I was making no impression on her at all. 'Another thing,' I said, 'you can't tell me they only do it once every seven years!...'"

The 'lift stopped at their level and Uhura led Cleante past Spock as if he weren't there, continuing her imaginary dialogue.

"I said 'Maybe that's when they have to - you know, almost a religious thing - but the rest of the time they've got to be free to improvise or there wouldn't be such a mystique about them'..."

The 'lift doors closed. Spock exhaled long-sufferingly.

Ensign Kevin J. Ryan tiptoed into Sickbay, hoping that with all the pre-departure traffic no one would notice him so he could tiptoe out again. He hated the Retinax treatments; hated being reminded of his own vulnerability. Just his luck, not only was he noticed, it was Leonard McCoy who did the noticing.

"Riley -?" McCoy scowled at his datapad. "That can't be right! Already got a Riley, and one of him's enough, thank you!"

"It's Ryan, sir."

McCoy rekeyed the 'padd. "Right. I knew that." He led Ryan toward the Ophthalmology cubicle, where a balding human wearing a chief's insignia was just leaving. "Right this way, son. And for God's sake, relax!"

The Retinax took about fifteen minutes to take effect. Lying motionless in the darkened cubicle, trying to take his mind off how much it hurt, Ryan listened to the voices coming from McCoy's nearby office.

"Since when do you make housecalls?" McCoy took the medfile Dr. M'Benga had delivered in person. "I could get used to this!"

"Chris wanted the five-dollar tour," M'Benga explained in his rich, cultured voice, nodding toward Dr. Chapel. "Thought I'd tag along. And I wanted to give you that in person."

"Only chance I'll get to see the new *Enterprise*," Chapel defended herself. "You all took off so fast last time I never did get a chance to look at Leonard's new toys."

"Quite a set-up you have here, old man," M'Benga agreed, admiring the latest in Starfleet medical technology; for once the engineers had taken McCoy's advice.

"Mm," McCoy responded vaguely; he had put the medfile on his deskscreen and was scowling at it.

"I know what you're going to say," M'Benga said before he could say it. "Her T-factor's a little high, but that's normal for her. I've cleared T'Shael for Dlonbra, as long as you see to it she has a diagnostic every few weeks."

"Not to worry," McCoy assured him, slipping the medfile out of the 'screen and palming it tenderly. "I've

got a vested interest in this one. Saved her life once, don't want to have to do it again." A smile that was not quite a leer crept over his wily face. "There ain't much meat on her, but what's there is cherce!"

Chapel looked scandalized. "Why, Leonard McCoy, since when have you gone soft on Vulcans?"

"I have done no such thing!" McCoy blustered. "I have always had the deepest respect for our pointed-eared brethren. If I pick on Spock, it's because he deserves it."

This could go on for hours, M'Benga knew. Gallantly he offered Chapel his arm.

"Come on, Chris, before we find ourselves along for the ride..."

The ride was smooth and uneventful beneath Hikaru Sulu's unerring hand, out of spacedock under considerably less harrowing circumstances than some more recent endeavors. There was something comforting, Jim Kirk thought, about having a fully-crewed, fully-functional ship beneath you and a green light on the spacedoors.

They cleared the spacedoors, and Sulu skeined her out like silk, under impulse until she was clear of Sol and the outer planets, then eased her up to warp, hurtling like a whisper into the weave of hyperspace.

PASSACAGLIA (Wanderer)

The younglings did the first work while the silversides listened to the sky. The middle ones at first could only swim, and wait.

The younglings did the first work; they were the only ones who could. More slender than their elders, they could slip slide slither up the land, though sand-silted beaches rasped and grated tough-soft bellyskin, they slid, up up up the sandy slope to the ruined Pithai-cities left behind.

Less ponderous weighty than their elders, the younglings need not fear the squeeze and press of body weight which could crush lungs until they no longer drew air and died, drowned on dry land, helpless horrible fate. Too, they shunned the sun, which would sear and crack and blister blubbery skin evolved for water; they did their work at night or in the rain.

Each twilight saw the migration - younglings svelte and slippery heaving blubbery bodies bouncing onto sand, where long digitated flippers grasped and pulled as bodies undulated rhythmically, up, up, up. An outsider watching would have found it ludicrous, as the long-ago Pithai had, using similar events like calf-making, laughing their ratcheting laugh, to stock their larders with blubbery meat. But Pithai, Sage sang, were fools. Were, were, were.

We are, and thus will risk seeming fools in order to do. There are none here to laugh at us, only we.

The first night waned into purple dawn before they had finished wallowing blubbery up up up into the

city on the coast to explore, record, remember, singing every crossroads, every structure to their elders in the sea behind. While the melded mind knew Pithai had been extinct a thousand years, it was not untoward to find oneself scanning, eyes and ears and electromagnetism, seeking them. Expecting them, though generations dead, to lurk in shadows still - weaponed, ready, deadly.

As the blue-white sun threatened purple over morning's horizon that first day they fled, if fleeing it could be called - undulating back, back down down down, back slip slope sliding into embracing sea. Easier the downslope than the up for those lacerated, exhausted, dehydrating.

When they had rested, fed, and found their voices, the younglings sang a city to the silversides, who sang their newfound knowledge round a World. The males Sang it across the void to Firstworld. Sage heard.

She let them know what it was they must seek next.

Night after night the younglings returned, less laboriously - the strand worn smooth by undulating bodies. Night after night the younglings searched, until they found the alien structure. Smooth-sided, round-sided, shaped not unlike their own bodies in adulthood, though lacking flukes and fingers, it stood upended as if standing on its tail, to contemplate the sky. It seemed almost holy in its stillness. Had the Pithai meant it to be worshipped, a temple raised to the beings of the sea? But Pithai worshipped only themselves. Were, were, were. The beings no longer needed Sage to remind them.

The younglings pondered the structure, then tried to sing it. Only the silversides understood.

It is what we seek, they sang. Swimmer in a silent sea. Traveler, Messenger, Gatherer, Wanderer, Siren-singer solitary; it is what we seek. We must teach it our song, that it may swim from World to worlds and save us. Bring it.

Bring it? The younglings were nonplussed. It was large, larger than anything, except perhaps the mountains at the floor of the World, where the bones settled in the final sleep. Bring it? How?!

But the middle ones knew, and they brought it.

Stronger than younglings or feeble elder silversides, more numerous too (for few would breed in anticipation of the End of the Worlds), the middle ones gathered from all the sea of Secondworld. They could not bring the Messenger to the sea; they would bring the sea to the Messenger.

One by one they lined up along the coast where sea shelved into shore. One by one they sang the rising-up song. As one they leapt and crashed. Again. Again. A portion of shelf shattered and fell away. Behind them, silversides and younglings waited to scoop sand and rock away.

Leap and crash, and haul away. Day and night they labored beneath blue sun and orange moon. Leap and crash until there was no shoreline, only city, tottering, teetering. Only then did they withdraw, to wait for the hundred-day rains.

The rains ran rivulets down ancient Pithai streets, soak-saturated soil to mud, which flowed. Mudslide, mudslides, mud slid, and half the ancient city crumbled, toppled, tumbled, debris beneath the lapping oceans, end of Pithai grandeur.

After it had sunk, settled, simmered, they hauled it in places away, until nothing was left but the Messenger - huge, solid, silent, solitary, alone. Secondworld's beings rested.

On Firstworld, they had only listened all this time, as what was happening on Secondworld was Sung to them and the females Heard, sharing it, saving it, storing it in the melded mind. Though they could not come to Secondworld, they could see. Now they must teach the Messenger to see.

Firstworld began its labor, drawing up the knowledge of the crystal caves, distilling it in the melded mind - the Message for the Messenger. Once distilled, transmitted, instilled, sent sailing, it would reach a universe across - beacon, signal, seabound pharos weaving, sound-thread sounding: home, home, come Home!

FUGUE

Enterprisebriefing room, second day out. There is really nothing to be briefed about as far as the Romulan situation is concerned; Riley has his orders, which he can't discuss with anyone but his aide and the interpreter. But the rest of it - security, the archeological "dig", the protocol of who is and who isn't to be permitted down-planet or aboard either of the starships and, lastly, the musicians, are Kirk's bailiwick. He has called a general briefing.

He arrives first, hearing McCoy and Spock behind him in the corridor. No real business can begin until the rest arrive. The subject, not surprisingly, is Sir Rodney Harbinger and his music.

"Decadent" is Spock's opinion. Incredibly, McCoy for once agrees with him.

"I never heard of him until Command foisted him on us," Kirk confesses, holding his hands out to the other two to enlighten him. "You said he was a today-I-will-be-brilliant types," he says to McCoy. "Explain."

"Well, that about sums him up," McCoy says, wondering where he should begin; Kirk's taste in music has always been suspect. "Twenty-odd years ago the man was considered a genius, mostly based on the overwhelming success of one remarkably innovative work. They say if he'd never written anything after his Symphony for the Nine, he'd have gone down in musical history as this century's Beethoven."

"Hardly, Doctor," Spock presumes to contradict him; so much for agreement. "The term 'genius' is too easily applied in some instances. It was said by his contemporaries that Beethoven need write nothing after the Eroica. Nevertheless, had he not gone on to produce the piano concertos, six more symphonies - the Fifth and Seventh of which alone -"

"And The Creatures of Prometheus?" McCoy counters. "Or that godawful opera?"

"Doctor -" Spock beings. "The Creature of Prometheus in fact predates the Eroica by two years -"

"Gentlemen..." Kirk protests, already out of his depth.

"Forgetting Beethoven for just a minute," McCoy addresses Kirk, trying to finish his thought, which is

exactly what Kirk was about to suggest. "Harbinger was a genius once, regardless of some people's narrow definition of the term, Trouble was, he let it go to his head. Suddenly he found he couldn't top his famous symphony. It was all anyone wanted to hear. Then he discovered he couldn't compose at all anymore. Then he began listening to the sycophants, who told him that all he had to do was rest on his laurels and the universe would worship him. He began to believe his own publicity. Nowadays he's not so much a composer as an electrician."

"Explain?" Kirk asks patiently. A growing sick feeling in the pit of his stomach is telling him he'd have been better to go the Romulans empty-handed, but it's too late now.

It is Spock's turn to provide the subtext.

"Ever since the invention of the earliest Moog synthesizer circa 1957, Old Calendar, Earth's classical music has been at the mercy of radical pendulum swings between live performance and electronic reproduction. Among the earliest innovators of the so-called Electronic synthesizer, in which he played all the voices, laying them down on separate tracks -"

"Spock, Spock!" Kirk urges softly. "Cut to the chase."

In spite of T'Shael's tutelage, it takes a moment for Spock to translate.

"Ah. The disadvantage of exclusively electronic music, beyond the flawless but somewhat stale reproduction of the synthesizer, was that it precluded live performance. At most a composer would appear before his audience with a work pre-recorded. Live performers at first found themselves increasingly unemployed, and fewer and fewer engaged in the performance of classical music. In time the skill was almost lost, until by the latter half of the twenty-first century it was virtually impossible to gather enough professional musicians for a full classical orchestra. The subsequent renaissance in live performance in 2095 -"

"Spock -!" Kirk warns dangerously.

"As a result of this renaissance, human taste in music has gravitated between the two schools ever since, with the current taste favoring a synthesis of the two," the Vulcan concludes.

"With the exception of Rodney Harbinger." McCoy has been looking for a way back into this conversation for some minutes. Kirk gives him the floor. "The guy has the temerity to plug one of his older works into an electropak, retitle it, and pass it off as something new. His 'performances', if you will, consist of him walking onstage, setting up a synther no bigger than the palm of your hand, pushing a button and walking off until it's time for the applause."

"Actually, Doctor, the newer synthers are no bigger than -" Spock begins; Kirk gestures him to silence.

"And that's what Command expects us to present to the Romulans as our best musical talent?" Kirk can feel his blood pressure rising. "But wait a minute - Harbinger came on board with a whole flock of musicians. There must be two dozen of them fluttering around the corridors, scarfing down free food in the officers' mess -"

"They're not musicians, Jim," McCoy says. "They're his entourage."

"Say again?" Kirk wonders if his blood pressure is affecting his hearing.

"The aforementioned sycophants, Captain," Spock supplies. "Lord Harbinger retains them to mingle with the audience and augment the applause."

"In the old days it was called 'papering the house'." At what point has Uhura arrived to slip into this conversation? "Sorry, sir," she says to Kirk. "I thought you knew."

"This is ridiculous!" Kirk says. "We can't present this little one-man circus to the Romulans. They'll laugh themselves silly."

"Maybe that's what Command had in mind," McCoy suggests.

"I've been working on it, Captain." Uhura has her ubiquitous datapadd with her. "I managed to requisition a number of musical instruments, almost enough for a full orchestra. Command never bothered to ask me what I wanted them for, so I took whatever I could get. You might say I pulled some strings."

Kirk will not give her the satisfaction of a groan.

"Anyway, I've gone through the personnel files and found we've got any number of talented amateur musicians in the ranks. I've got Lieutenant Kittay collecting names of those who are willing to perform. There's also Annek. If we can persuade her to dance to more than Harbinger's music..."

Kirk looks blank. "She's a very well-known kinetic interpreter," Uhura explains. Kirk looks blanker. "She becomes a musical instrument. She dances the works of well-known composers so that, theoretically the audience can hear the music in their heads."

"Poetry in motion," McCoy supplies helpfully.

"So I noticed." Kirk has seen Annek, floating down the corridors; now he knows who she is. But is she enough? He gestures toward the datapadd in Uhura's hand. "What else've you got?"

Well, we've got a couple of competent pianists -"

"Including yourself?" Kirk asks.

"Only in a pinch," Uhura demurs, preferring to stay out of the limelight; she'll have enough else to do.

"I'm pinching," Kirk says.

"No promises, Captain. Now, there's an Andorian on the science team who plays a mean flute..."

"Scotty on the bagpipes for a little regional color?" McCoy suggests wickedly, thinking of the Romulan aural range and how some of the drones will impact on it.

"Oh, aye!" Kirk says, thinking the same thought.

"I'm hoping Mr. Spock will favor us with a harp solo!" Uhura flashes him her best dazzling smile. "Pity T'Shael can't be spared or we could have a duet."

"Or a trio?" Spock offers magnanimously.

"You guys -!" Uhura shakes her head. "We'll see. Oh, and there's this guy in Engineering..."

It was Sulu who discovered him, Sulu who has been endowed with more energy than any mortal man deserves. Sulu whose ability to latch onto any new subject with a dilettante's fervor has resulted in his discovery of Old American Jazz, which has had him up listening to Art Blakey drum solos nightly, to the distress of his immediate neighbors. Sulu who, religiously, runs six miles before breakfast through the bowels of the ship, and who on their very first morning out, was passed in the opposite direction by a race-walker who, without breaking stride, nodded Good Morning! and, elbows flying, went on his way. Sulu, whose curiosity would make a Vulcan's pale, and who consequently had to turn on a dime and jog in the direction the stranger had gone, to find out who he was.

"You race-walk every morning?" Sulu asks by way of introduction, careful not to let his breathing reveal that his newfound companion sets a faster pace.

"My morning," the stranger offers. "Most likely used to be your night. Mr. Scott's changed my shift, though, so now my morning's yours. Six miles, am I right?"

"The same," Sulu acknowledges, not sure which of them the stranger means. "How long you been running?"

"Since Fate was on the River," the stranger says, his gorgeous teeth exposed in an unabashed grin. Sulu almost recognizes the reference. Can it be that this is one of the neighbors he's been keeping awake with his music? With that the stranger veers off into a one man-wide corridor, to indicate the conversation's over for today.

The next morning, Sulu starts his run in the opposite direction, finds the stranger race-walking up ahead, and overtakes him.

"Fate Marable was an African-American musician..." he begins.

The man beside him nods. His own roots lie in that same culture, though he was born on the Rigel colony named New Africa by its earliest settlers, and while he is of that Earth race called Black, his skin is in fact a shade lighter than Sulu's - aged parchment, Tupelo honey. He is a tad taller than Sulu and likely ten pounds lighter, all sticks and bones and balding head. It is hard to tell his age. He does not laugh so much as giggle when he is amused and, discovering Sulu has done his homework, he is giggling now.

"Fate was an albino, which in itself made him a novelty. And he played a mean piano on a Mississippi riverboat for enough years to span the era of 'ragged time' or ragtime, into the birth of jazz," he says, still striding, elbows pumping, not at all winded. "It was the mark of a jazz musician's longevity for him to claim that he was old enough to have been playing 'when Fate was on the River'."

"You're a musician, aren't you, Mr. -?" Sulu prompts. He could have traced this character through the library computer, but this is more fun. "What do you play?"

"Oh, little of this, little of that. Brass, a little piano. Jazz and old classical, none of this modern push-button stuff," he says, dismissed Lord Harbinger even if he's never heard of him. "Conducted some, too. Lady Freedom's looking for musicians, I know. Well, we'll see. You call me Harper."

"Just Harper?"

"Just Harper."

"Why am I always the last one on this ship to know what's going on?" Kirk pouts.

"Because it's lonely at the top?" Uhura smiles; Kirk is not amused.

"What about this Harper? Do you think he's any good? Will he play for us?"

"Chief Harper," Uhura reports, having checked him out with Scotty, "is not only good, he's very good. He's a reservist, only works Starfleet when the music business is slow. Has degrees in engineering and musicology. But he's also Mr. Scott's right-hand man on this voyage. If he's not on duty, maybe I can persuade him."

"I leave it entirely in your hands," Kirk says. This matter of musicians is beginning to weigh on him more than the peace conference. "I had no idea music was going to turn out to be so important."

"Music?" Cleante alFaisal says, setting her morning tea on the table before her; as head of the archeology team, she has been asked to participate in the captain's briefing. "One of my bio profs used to say it was the only substantive difference between a camel and a whale."

Deep within its massive body, every great whale carries a ticklish little secret. The secret is skeletal, bone of its bone - a set of vestigial leg bones, possessed of all necessary joints, neatly fitted into the pelvic sockets, so profoundly surrounded by internal organs and layers of blubber as to be invisible on the exterior creature. The secret means that every whale was once a camel, who taught himself to swim. Some say it was because they missed the music.

Some seventy million years ago, George sings to his newborn son (neither a humpback's timesense nor the words he uses are precisely those used here; the translation has been simplified for human understanding), there were no whales. There were, however, many camels. And, unless you count birds and bats and insects (not to mention frogs - repeat, repeat!), there was no music.

Camels live in deserts, George sings. The sand is hot, the sun is hot, and there are many flies. Gravity makes a heavy hump heavier, causes the knee joints to creak. Camels groan and spit a lot; they also kick. Can they be blamed for being cranky? And there never lived a camel who could carry a tune, if you gave it to him in a handbasket.

It is a little known fact, George sings (Gracie, having done her share, listens placidly nearby).

Male-bonding - listen to them! Next time she will have a girl-calf), that camels are excellent swimmers, though they seldom, ordinarily, have opportunity to swim. But back when there were no whales, some camels swam - in rivers where they found them, in the seas surrounding their desert desolation - to cool themselves primarily though perhaps also out of boredom. Because, my son, there was no music. So camels swam. A million years later or so, their grandchildren discovered webs growing between their toes.

How many millions more it took for forefeet to flipper, for flukes to form, for noses to de-nostril for a more sensible top-of-the-head two-hole blowhole, for humpfat to turn blubber, no one knows - that part of the song, my son, is lost. First, one has to think, came the desire. The desire for the sea, the need to float and bask and browse on what feasts the sea could offer when the desert proved so sparse. Gradually the body altered. Eyes, always binocular, set on either side of the head to project two diverse images into the brain, grew farther apart, grew as accustomed to sting of saltwater as to sting of sand, so that eventually it no longer stung. Hearing, acute from eons in dry desert air, over which sound travels farther than anywhere except the sea, grew more acute, until brethren singing at one pole could be heard by those at the other. That was the origin of the music, we think, for sentiments sung travel better and farther than sentiments spoken. The swimming camel had learned to sing.

Gracie has listened long enough. She interrupts the song: Hippopotami, she says. The calf is suckling and will soon be asleep, enough knowledge crammed into his head for one day.

Nonsense! George retorts, blowing bubbles to emphasize his mate's frivolity. Hippopotami are tone-deaf. That theory's been refuted more than once!

So have camels, Gracie answers, unperturbed. The calf sleeps, tucked under her sheltering flipper. She is thinking of naming him Spock. No more singing for today!

The only thing I regret about the humans' having moved us, George thinks in that part of his mind that Gracie can't get at, is that there are no other males around to commiserate with!

When his son awakens, he will sing him more.

Sound travels farther in water than even in desert air, he will sing, and a swimmer's memory is long. I will teach you songs so deep, my son, that no human can hear them, songs so complex and so exactly woven into your memory that you can leave the winter waters in mid-note, follow the world around its seasons to the other side, then sing again, resuming the song exactly where you left off. Every orbit brings a new song, George will sing. Variations, involutions, contrapuntal convolutions - memory chains to sing to the Wanderer when it returns.

But will the Wanderer return? George wonders. When it departed, as always leaping from the Now into the not-Now, it did not say if it was forever...

Starfleet file footage shows starship briefings as exemplars of brevity, efficiency, and businesslike

enthusiasm. Officers enter, sit, discuss, conclude, depart - all in fast forward, and with no waste footage.

In reality, some arrive early, some late, and the early arrivees spend a lot of time making chat. The conversation in *Enterprise*'s briefing room has segued from music to whales, or perhaps they are both the same thing.

"...apparently why the whales found time travel less unsettling than we might have anticipated," Spock is explaining to anyone who will listen, indicating T'Shael, who has done the hands-on research he did not have time for. "Time as we understand it does not exist for them. Past and future are part of the same continuum, which George and Gracie refer to simply as 'not-Now', to differentiate it from the present, or 'Now'..."

McCoy does not even pretend to stifle the yawn he feels coming. He is not a morning person. He pours himself a second cup of the strongest coffee the wall servitor can deliver.

"...therefore being transported from the 'Now' of their own century to the 'Now' of ours was no more disturbing to them than transporting from one place to another would be for us..."

Spock has continued to track the Probe, as he and T'Shael continue to study its languages. He is aware that it has now dropped out of Federation space, hopped briefly across one corner of the Neutral Zone, to describe a leisurely looping arc through parts of old First Federation territory, where *Enterprise* once encountered a ship named Fesarius and a captain named Balok. Hyperchannel communicates from Balok's people, which Uhura has relayed directly to Spock as they come in, indicate that the Probe is behaving itself for the moment, content to take the scenic tour of First Federation marine worlds - perhaps, Jim Kirk considers, early-morning whimsically, in search of performers for some cosmic aquacade.

Did George and Gracie prove too cumbersome to jump through flaming hoops, especially with Gracie in her delicate condition? Or were they too intimidating, with their barnacle-bearded upside-down grins, to lay their heads in your lap and pluck a single shining shrimp from your outstretched hand? Too big? Too much? Too bad! Better luck in the next solar system!

Jim Kirk shakes the cobwebs out of his head, feeling useless and silly. So far, twenty-one hours into this voyage, he's had nothing to do.

"I keep waiting for something to happen!" he will tell McCoy more than once, until it does.

"The Australian aborigine," Cleante alFaisal (Dr. Cleante alFaisal, if you please, Kirk reminds himself with a pang; watching her and Riley when they're together visits him with an odd kind of pain which he refuses to call envy; he had his chance once and blew it) is saying. How did this conversational course-change transpire? "believed that when his totemic ancestors walked the countryside, they were not only mapping it geographically, but musically, laying down trails of song with their footprints, so that if a thousand years later you learned the songs, you could find your way unerringly across a land you'd never seen. Dr. Antonin Korff found similar evidence in the ruins named for him. That's why they were so devastated when later emigres arrived and began building, obliterating the landmarks, destroying the songs. T'Shael tells me it's the same with whales."

The Vulcan, so silent no one remembers exactly when she arrived, takes up the narrative.

"Until the advent of humans in large numbers upon Earth's oceans and, more specifically, the invention of the screw-propeller, cetacean life-forms evolved an extensive and extraordinary communicational

network, partly based in electromagnetism, but more largely in song - a tapestry, if you will, of underwater sound. Whalesongs enduring anywhere from five to sixty minutes were memorized and passed from pod to pod. Old songs were repeated, and new songs added, every year. One whale could communicate with another from distances up to 15,000 kilometers - literally anywhere on the planet.

T'Shael's face, so plain and angular in repose, grows increasingly animated with her narration; when she speaks, she is beautiful. Uhura looks from her to Spock and sighs.

"But the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with their incessant background noise of commercial and military steamships," T'Shael goes on, "ironically reverberating at the precise 20-Hertz frequency most commonly used by whales in their deepwater dialogues, made it impossible for whales to sing to each other over distances of more than a few kilometers. It was thought this was why so many species engaged in mass-beachings during the twentieth century, because they were disoriented and could not warn each other away from shallow water. The threads of song were broken, the global tapestry torn. Perhaps the mere physical killing of whales was only the end result of a more subtle form of extinction."

This said, T'Shael is silent again.

"Imagine," Uhura says, "strands of song woven round the planet, land and sea, like road maps for the ear, or for the soul." She sighs. "Pity we were too tone-deaf to hear them."

"At any rate -" Cleante brings the conversation back to center; much of her work depends on Federation grants. " - both we and the Romulans believe that the same may hold true for the race they call the Rahcir and we the Korff Ascendancy cultures. If we can learn their song-tracks, we can trace them back to their planet or planets of origin."

"And how does the lovely lady know what the Romulans believe?" is Sulu's entrance line. He is late, as usual. Riley is hot on his heels, having survived yet another Hikaru's Hobby of the Month lecture, this one on the banjo.

"...a far less forgiving instrument than the acoustic guitar, Kevin me lad, which was why so few musicians every attempt it. More's the pity, too, because the banjo is actually a far crisper sound, and purer as a percussion instrument..."

"Oh, my aching head!" Riley mutters for McCoy's benefit.

The briefing can finally begin. Cleante, Kirk notes, has not answered Sulu's question.

"Professional journals mostly," she will tell Riley later when they are alone. "They're called 'undergrounds'. Spock or T'Shael could give you the etymology of it, I'm sure. Hardcopy reprints of hyperchannel squirts that leak over the borders. The censors can't jam everything; there's just too much of it. The patrols on our side of the Zone scoop up whatever comes over, scan it for codes and spy stuff; whatever's left over the cres turn into a hefty info black market. You can buy anything from agricultural reports to archeology. All very hush-hush - and not cheap, either - as if it were as dangerous as dilithium. Now, I realize reports on agricultural quotas are probably priceless to Romulan watchers - an Empire that's having food shortages is more likely to be serious about negotiating with a well-fed Federation - but

the only thing I've ever bought, I swear to you, is the archeology."

"I see," Riley will say, remembering with his diplomat's mind that what she said was "professional journals mostly". If she has any other sources, Cleante does not tell him, and Riley does not ask.

Betrayal, Jandra thinks, her hand against the clearsteel where the stars show, is but the shadow-side of loyalty. One cannot betray until one has first offered fealty. One cannot exist without the contrast of the other, point and counterpoint.

Strange thoughts for a musician! she chides herself, coming away from the suite's only port, drawing the curtain across it to hide the velvet dark. Space, any kind of open space, makes her shiver. She has been too long shut in, in all respects.

Your thoughts should be devoted to your music, nothing more! she reminds herself. Nothing matters but the music! Say it until you believe it. What you shall play for these humans and how you shall play it - to divert them, soothe them, dazzle them, make them weep, win them to you; this is all. Which of their emotions shall you manipulate, which fickle feelings flutter as you finger the frets? Shall you play their own composers for them, better than their own musicians can? For so you can, ever since the Gifted One showed you how, and thus you can amaze them. Or is it too arrogant, too off-putting, to flaunt their own lost culture at them? What technical prowess will serve to win them over, make certain they adore you?

There had been a time when her thoughts held no such dimension, when nothing did matter but the music. Oh, for a return to such innocence, so lost in the years between!

"Commander Rihan," Spock retorts, indicating the holo on the deskscreen; the Saurian brandy Kirk has poured for him is as yet untouched. The time is evening, the place the captain's quarters, the occasion more of a chat than a briefing per se, "is a so-called 'shirttail relation' from a military family extending back seven generations to a matrilineal grandsire. Being from the provinces and without social connections, he has had to make his way solely on merit and without patronage - no easy matter. His rise to the command of his own ship is less significant for his interstellar achievements - he seems mostly to have been assigned border patrols and mapping expeditions - than for the fact that it was accomplished without any bloodletting among his fellow officers."

"A Romulan who earns his own ship without assassinating any of his classmates!" Kirk remarks, impressed. "No conspiracies, no double-dealing, no mysterious falls down turboshafts? Not even a thinly-veiled lovers' quarrel?"

"None of record," Spock reports.

Kirk studies the broad, smiling face in the holo. Odd, he doesn't remember ever seeing a smiling Romulan before. Rihan seems wider, more heavy-set than the average Romulan; Kirk wonders if that has anything to do with it. A pleasant enough looking fellow of about Kirk's age, if his guess is accurate.

"A straight-shooter." Kirk nods, already possessed of a sneaking admiration of his opposite number. "Does his job, enjoys it, hopes there won't be a war within his lifetime. Intends to die in bed, but with his boots on. Commander Rihan I understand. It's Centurion Tiam I can't read at all. More brandy?"

Uhura accepts; Spock demurs, at the same time changing the holo from Rihan's face to Tiam's.

"Nor can anyone else, apparently," the Vulcan says. "Centurion Tiam, recently promoted from subCenturion in keeping with his authority as negotiator to the Federation, has had his ancestral records sealed, in keeping with the late Praetor's 'Campaign Against Nepotism'."

"Promulgated by the one ruler who broke records for filling entire Cabinets with his relatives." Kirk turns to Uhura. "But what's Tiam's personal history, his background? He must have come from somewhere."

"What's his background?" Lieutenant Kittay hisses, scowling across the rec dec in Ensign Ryan's direction. Ryan, blissfully unaware of the venom in her eyes, doubtless blissfully unaware that Kittay exists - they are in different departments - is off duty, hanging out with some of the engineering crew, including an odd balding fellow with a high-pitched laugh and musician's fingers. "Is it family connections? Does he have some outstanding talent I don't know about? Because he was strictly white-bread at the Academy. What is it that makes him so special?"

"Oh, M'Lynn, can it, will you?" Annek, has been rehearsing all day; her muscles are sore and her temper is short. She sprawls across three chairs at the table she shares with Kittay, too enervated to do more than lift a glass of Altair water to her parched lips. She doesn't especially like the taste of Altair water, but she has been told that Captain Spock partakes of it, which makes it nectar. "It's a tempest in a teapot, you know? Everyone's sick of hearing about it."

"Fine!" Kittay snaps, almost knocking her glass over in Annek, wants to say, but Kittay is gone and, anyway, being a layman she couldn't possibly understand the need for the artiste to bask in the presence of a greatness such as Spock's - not in the hope of anything so mundane as love, but to be inspired to levels of unsurpassed creativity by the mere sight of her own reflection in his very Vulcan eyes. Annek, signs and sips her Altair water. It is the burden of the artist never to be understood in her own time!

Over in Ryan's corner, the odd balding fellow has produced an equally odd looking musical instrument, a kind of twisty golden horn whose only visible source of control, beyond his very mobile lip, is a sort of in-and-out slide, which he is expertly rejoining. He begins to play kind of bluesy melody - linear, mellow, fluid, irresistible. First Ryan's corner, then gradually the entire rec dec dims to quasi-silence, listening.

Transfixed, Annek, at first just listens too, but she is a dancer and her feet betray her. She is standing before she knows it and, aching muscles forgotten, she begins to dance. Oh, if only by some miracle Spock were to enter the rec dec at this precise moment and see her, she would need nothing more!

Vulcans are primarily touch-telepaths. If Spock tried hard enough, he might perhaps become aware of some subliminal fixation on his name emanating from the rec dec. But his thoughts are otherwise engaged,

as Uhura shares with him and Kirk her research on Centurion Tiam.

"...also quite distinguished academically, having earned a dual degree in engineering and political science. Youth-level prizes for fencing and gymnastics, distinction in linguistics and etymology - including flawless Standard, by the bye, which really makes T'Shael extraneous."

"Does T'Shael know this?" Kirk wonders.

"She knows enough about Romulans to know it's a favored technique," Uhura says. "Waiting for the interpreter gives them longer to think out their replies. One final note on Tiam..." It is Uhura's turn to change the holo, transforming his face into Jandra's. "Several years ago, he made a rather interesting marriage..."

Jim Kirk is only half-listening. He thinks he may be in love.

How young had she been, Jandra wondered, when she first realized that the emotion emanating toward her from a thousand Romulan hearts was love?

She had been barely old enough to walk, she knew, the first time she had brought her tiny fists down hard on the keyboards of the elegant tra'am her mother kept in the second parlor (strictly for show; no one in the family could play it or cared to learn) only to be led away from it by the governess Kalih, with stern admonitions about where sticky little-girl fingers did not belong. Was it that very same evening, or only a child's ability to telescope events in memory, that her father had brought the guests home and one of them knew how to play?

Jandra had hidden herself in the filmy wall-drapes, watching and listening for what seemed like hours or only minutes, until Kalih pounced on her and shooed her back to bed or tried to, for later when all but the serious guests were gone, and those lay about on the divans in the good parlor discussing crop yields and trade embargoes, she had crept down the long corridor from the sleeping quarters and into the second parlor, hauling her small self up to the keyboards and, tottering sleepily but quite determined, reprised note for note every piece the visitor had played, to finish, grimly satisfied, aware of a doorway full of late-night Ministry functionaries, her father among them, staring gape-mouthed at the prodigy.

That first emotion had not been love, only amazement and not a little fear, for a prodigy is also by definition a monster, and it had to be determined just how this small monster was to be tamed. There were endless examinations, tests, inquiries (Well, of course she has perfect pitch - don't we all? - but how is she able to memorize, then reproduce flawlessly but not entirely by rote, for she provides her own interpretation of the notes as well, a signature uniquely hers, however complex the work?). There followed tutors, lessons, travel and study with famous musicians and, at last, performance upon performance, and here at last was love.

It was nothing as fatuous as adulation; no cult collected about her as it might have on human worlds, for these were Romulans, who understood that when the gods gave you a gift they expected much in return. None presumed to gush over her youth, her smallness, the "cuteness" of her; these qualities had no words in the Formal language, which was all strangers employed with her. The reward of a thing well done was in the doing of it, and whether there were audiences to marvel at her or no, she was what she was.

There were drawbacks, sorrows, losses. No more time to play with Sib - they'd always been inseparable before, except that night when the tra'am caught her attention - who consoled himself by digging ever deeper holes and tunnels in the back garden, to Kalih's increasing despair. He was searching, Sib said, for Orion artifacts, though to Jandra they looked suspiciously like rocks. Their father said the Orions had never come this far, and the only ruins they'd ever left had been bombed-out Romulan cities, never their own. Nevertheless, Sib persisted in rotting about, whenever he could escape his tutors. He was young yet; there was time to find him a career. But he and his Little Sister never played together anymore. Jandra already had her career.

She was three when she performed for her first Great Audience, though the glitterati did not impress her; it was only Sib's opinion she valued. Long before she believed the importance to her family of playing before the Ministries, the court cliques, the Important Ones, Jandra knew that nothing really mattered but the music.

The music was the music, whether she played it for her own ears and the gods', for Mother and Father when they had time to truly listen rather than being caught up in the necessity of displaying for her yet one more select audience, for Sib when he would pick his head up out of his mole-holes and cock an ear for whatever drifted through the open casements. There was no point trying to impress Delar who, obliged to attend his sister's recitals, stood there stiff and indifferent in his plebe's uniform, his only concern how this might impact upon his own career plans.

Jandra would make note of him among the host of cadets filling the seats during Mandatory Cultural Acquisition days. These were among the hardest audiences to please - military careerists and rough colonials from the provinces, trying to pull themselves out of the agricultural muck by a pair of military bootstraps. In their experience music was a medium to carry dirty lyrics, the only necessary accompaniment enough blue ale to make it palatable. The elder, better known artists refused to perform for these unwashed minions, but Jandra rather relished them. She would float onstage, so filmy and ethereal her feet seemed barely to touch the floor, and the heat of erotic longing her presence stirred among the male and even some of the female cadets emanated from them in waves. How easy it was, with the trill of fingers across a keyboard, the tickle of plectrum over strings, to transform their carnal sweatiness into adoration! What it a human who had coined the phrase about soothing the savage breast? Nonsense! No human could conceive of the savagery within the Romulan breast, and how Jandra's music could sooth it.

More taxing than the cadet audiences were the official state audiences - jaded, sated functionaries preoccupied with gossip after too big a meal, too many mood-enhancing drugs. Yet she learned to win them too; it merely took longer.

Those performances begin in restless indifference - fidgeting, whispering, fondling their seat-mates, giggling - all of which she could transform into rapt attention, then into love. Was it Jandra or her music that she loved, or were they one and the same?

As she grew into winsome adulthood she played for all of them, Romulans and outworlders alike - their prodigy, their pride. There had even been a Vulcan once, who had changed her life. She had even played for the Praetor who, hidden behind his mirror screen, sent word that she had pleased him.

That was before the illness, which was to damage first his looks and then his hearing. Decrees were issued banning performance on tra'am and all other keyboard instruments - first from public performance, then from private playing. Instruments were confiscated, burned, destroyed. Is it memory or only imagination in which Jandra throws herself across the body of her parents' precious tra'am as it is carried out into the gardens to be burned? She remembers being dragged away, her hair and clothing singed, and

one wrist still bears the scar.

She was inconsolable for the proper amount of time, then resigned herself to string instruments, per the Praetor's decree and, being Jandra, mastered them all, domestic and foreign. She owned an Earth cello and a Vulcan ka'athyra and, defiant, played them in public performance along with plekt and bahtain. She was their darling, unassailable. Nothing mattered but the music.

Then Delar was chosen for the secret mission which brought about his death and disgrace. Sib was exiled, their parents suicided, and Jandra bound herself to Tiam and a lifetime of playing the provinces. The alternative was being banned entirely, unable to play her music, not even for her own ears and the gods'. And nothing mattered but the music.

Now this! Jandra thinks. The wheel has turned; the gods have changed their minds. Rehabilitated, she has been specially selected to play before humans. Perhaps there would even be a piano! But there was more to this than music.

Betrayal, Jandra reminds herself, is only the shadow-side of loyalty. Point and counterpoint. Nothing matters but the music. Turning her face away from the starscape, she plays.

"I don't care what your orders are, boyo," Riley tells Sulu. "I'd better not catch you recruiting innocent parties to act as couriers or any spy-novel hokum like that."

"Who, me?" Sulu asks, all innocence, offering his companion his choice of foils. "You don't even know what my orders are. Masks or bareface?"

"Oh, what a straight line! Don't even tempt me to answer that!" Sulu puts the masks back. Riley chooses an Italian foil, flexing it, preferring it to the French foil because there is more to hold onto. He is really not in the mood for this, but Sulu insists. "My problem here is that I don't know if you'll be working with me or against me. How do I know you aren't along just to keep an eye on me?"

"I'm along to steer the boat, like the fellow said." Sulu begins his warmup, shadow-fencing. "Between you, me and the wall, as your Irish grandfather would've said, there are those who believe this peace-feeler is just, if you'll pardon the expression, a foil for something else." Riley groans. "It's my job to read the subtext, see if I can figure out what that something else is. That's all, honest."

"Well, if you do read anything I'm not aware of, you come to me first, before you relay it to your masters back home, capish?"

Sulu doesn't much care for his tone. This is not the carefree Kevin Riley he once knew. Nevertheless, he shrugs.

"I hear you," he says, whirling to face his opponent. "En garde!"

Cleante rests her elbows on the top of T'Shael's computer monitor, her chin in her hands, until out of ingrained politeness the Vulcan is constrained to abandon her work and acknowledge her.

"How many hours have you been at that?" the human asks. "You speak better Romulan than most Romulans, but you've been cramming as if you were struggling with the ablative case in Ancient Hyksos."

"Seventeen point four three hours in total since our departure yesterday, not including what time I could spare on Earth once I had given Ambassador Sarek my consent," T'Shael replies in all seriousness. Standard Modern Romulan, yes. However, the nuances of the Court language, and entire dimensions of the six Colonial subgroups, continue to elude me. Nor can I vouch for my idiomatic proficiency in Accepted Rural dialect. And as no one has yet definitively determined who the Ancient Hyksos were or where they originated geographically or linguistically, beyond the fact that they were the scourge of Seventeenth and Eighteenth Dynasty Egypt, it is impossible to know if they even had an ablative case."

"Cute!" Cleante remarks. "I'm serious - if you don't turn that thing off and talk to a human being for a change -!"

T'Shael says something which is doubtless "Computer off" in one of the six Colonial subgroups, and it complies.

"What is troubling you?" she asks in Standard.

"Practicing psychiatry without a license again?" Cleante smiles. She is closer to T'Shael than to any human, even Riley. "All right, then, opinion: should I have told Kevin about my - correspondent - inside the Empire?" Even in the relative safety of T'Shael's quarters, she cannot speak his name; there are so many potential dangers at his end.

"Would such knowledge impact in any material way upon Commander Riley's mission?"

"What, diggers' shoptalk? I doubt it. I just feel less than honest for not telling him."

"And you do not wish anything less than honesty to cloud your relationship," T'Shael suggests.

Cleante gives her a grateful look. "For someone who's never tried it herself, you've a remarkable grasp of the subject. Is it only because you know me so well, or are you suggesting there's a logic to love?"

"There are some who suggest that any communication between male and female is not only illogical but oxymoronic. I believe it was an Earth philosopher who said 'Not only is the plumbing different, so is the wiring.'" Cleante laughs out loud. "However, to answer your question: I know your mind. And I have observed how Kevin Riley has enriched your life and given you happiness. I can only assume his experience is similar. Hence I understand your need to preserve this happiness however you can."

Cleante nods. "And while we're on the subject, what about you? Will you ever allow anyone to enrich your life?"

T'Shael indicates the evidence of her work displayed neatly about her quarters - the music, the cetacean research, the volumes on linguistics and etymology. "My life is rich enough at present."

"But I mean - ever? If someone were interested in you -?"

"A hypothetical situation. I can only give it a hypothetical answer."

"Uhura wants to match you up with Spock," Cleante says lightly; the logic of it has not escaped her, either.

"Indeed. Is Commander Uhura aware of the odds against always obtaining what one wants?"

Cleante realizes that is all the answer she's going to get.

"Right!" she says. She'll have plenty of time to work on T'Shael on this voyage. "But you don't think I need to tell Kevin about - everything?"

They recite the old adage together: "It is not a lie to keep the truth to oneself."

"Do you know what your father said to me before he left for Vulcan?"

Business is over for the day; the chessboard is in play.

"Prescience is not among my talents, Jim."

Kirk makes a wry face. "He took me aside and, with one eye on the Special Section holo the entire time, asked me if I still played chess."

Spock ponders his next move. "Indeed?"

"I said I did of course, knowing in my gut that Sarek of all people had never been accused of making smalltalk..."

As a matter of fact, Kirk wants to say, but restrains himself for his friend's sake, for a career ambassador Sarek manages to be among the rudest s.o.b.'s in the quadrant. He is mindful of a particular evening in his apartment on Earth when the senior diplomat's mere immovable-object stolidity was sufficient to whisk three of his senior officers wordlessly into the next room before the glasses had stopped clinking.

"...and he said, if I can recall his exact words: 'Be mindful always of the importance of the king. He may not be seen to do much, but the game cannot proceed without him.'"

Spock moves his rook to queen's level two, grateful Kirk is watching the chessboard and cannot see the amusement tugging at the corners of his mouth. Jim's mimicry of one of Sarek's favored profound tones is exact.

"What answer did you give him?" he asks finally, making no effort to hide the amusement in his eyes.

"I didn't." Kirk raises his hands helplessly. "He didn't' give me a chance. Just turned on his heel and

walked out."

"You suspect some hidden meaning to his words?" Spock suggests.

"Only one?" Kirk's knight is in jeopardy; eh searches for a way to wiggle him out. "Knowing Sarek, probably half a dozen. I'd welcome your insight."

"I tell you, Kevin me lad..." Sulu and Riley have exhausted fencing quickly enough, or perhaps it is only Riley who is exhausted; not many ordinary mortals can keep up with Hikaru when he's on a roll. The two have graduated to the game room, where they are playing vitron-B. At least here Riley can sit down. "...the more I learn about Romulans, the less I understand what the problem is."

"Me either," Riley admits. "We've managed to coexist with far stranger. Is it only that we both came out shooting so long ago? I'm going into this meeting with my opposite number without a clue to what's really in his heart. Oh, we'll cover the usual claptrap of borders and treaty violations and standing-down of vessels and weaponry reductions, but that's only the outer trappings, don't you see?"

Riley pulls his hands away from the vitron-B surface, where he's been turning the patterns from cool blues to fevered orange-reds with incredible rapidity. With his mental impulses removed, the board goes back to blue again. Patiently Sulu resets it. No keeping up with Riley's mind when he gets this way.

"It's the heart of them I have to listen for," Riley extemporizes, waving his hands around. "It's what lies between the words. I've told T'Shael as much, and she says she understands but, being a Vulcan, I wonder."

"Don't underestimate her," Sulu advises, "A lot of what she knows she's learned at firsthand. And she's the best we've got. Hands down, now; pay attention!"

"That's as may be!" Riley says, unable to keep his hands on the board long enough for Sulu to try to match his mental patterns. Sulu gives up and shuts the game down. The last time he saw Riley this wired up was when Lenore Karidian tried to poison him. "But at the bottom of it, she's only giving me the words. I'm the real interpreter.

"What motivates a Romulan, Hikaru? Beyond the ideological impasse, I mean, and the obvious grab for territory? And why do I get the feeling that Centurion Tiam is at this very moment asking himself the same questions about us? Because if you look at the situation from their side of the Zone, it's only a mirror-image of what we seem to be doing on our side. What do they yearn for? What do they dream about? What kind of heaven do they go to when they die? What are the things that wake them in a cold sweat in the middle of the night?"

"Nothing so very different from what affects us the same way, I imagine," Sulu says, unable to tell Riley that he knows this for a fact; he's been there. "Kevin Thomas Riley, you're a poet."

"So's every Irishman." Riley laughs nervously, only now realizing how wild he must sound. "Only the ones that deny it are the drunks, Rodney Harbinger's jingoism notwithstanding."

"The most obvious connotation," Spock suggests, watching Kirk waggle his knight uncertainly in midair before returning it to its original space (I-didn't-take-my-hand-off-it; it-doesn't-count!), "is that you are not merely the 'ferryboat captain' Admiral Cartwright purports you to be."

PASSACAGLIA (Siren Song)

Singer in a silent sea. Messenger, Wanderer, Gatherer - more prosaically: Probe. Sent sated laden with the wisdom of the crystal caves, to swim a sea none had sum in quite this same way, searching.

Five hundred thousand world-spins round the blue sun, its creators Sang. Seek what you seek for that long, and no longer. Find a world where others like us sing and swim and tell them, tell them...

Tell them to swim the silent sea - searching, seeking, save us. Five hundred thousand years and then return. Follow the pharos, return to save us...

The Singer swam, the Singer sang, sang its siren-song in a silent sea, discordant, jangling the music of the spheres.

Many species answered, though none would serve to save the singers. Many swam but could not sing; the Singer's song made them poke their heads above the waters of their worlds and marvel, cavorting in inspired dance, but unable to answer.

Some sang but could not swim; the Singer disregarded them. Some, like those on the small blue world which was the Singer's secret favorite, could sing most exquisite humpback whalesong and, in time, in many millions of turns of their own yellow sun, could learn to swim the silent sea. Too long, these many millions. Too long to save the blue-sun two-World Singers. Too soon the blue sun would destroy its children, too late such help from the yellow-sun blue world would arrive. Too long, too soon, too late, too bad.

The Singer learned the music of the spheres, binding the many songs into its memory, interweaving. It continued the searching seeking, learning more than it could bear of joys and sorrows, impassioned paeans, painful passacaglias of species gone, dead worlds which made it hasten. Not this fate for the blue-sun two-World Singers -! Follow the pharos - home, home, home. Save them, save them...

Five hundred thousand years it sought, unsatisfied. No singing species found to swim the sea of stars and save. Almost resigned to returning, it stopped to save the yellow-sun blue world which was its secret favorite. And why? For the miracle of Singers silenced, vanished, then somehow restored. Strange! the Wanderer thought: Strange! Messenger, Wanderer, Gatherer - more prosaically: Probe, it asked:

Sing me, it sang to George. Explain. How could you not be, but now you are? Explain!

George had chortled in secret glee, while those who had saved them floundered freezing in the water ("Why don't they answer? Why don't they sing?"). Questions, George thought, greatly amused. Too many questions. How could he explain what he himself did not understand?

Answer! Gracie thought to him impatiently. They saved us, and they're freezing up there. Do something!

We teach our children, George sang finally; the Wanderer waited, infinitely more patient than the sodden, shivering stick-figures who had saved them, perhaps to our detriment, that a species is not to be judged by a single individual. This very species which nearly destroyed us, saved us. I do not entirely understand it myself. As to Singing, the one who swam with us - who is of them, but not of them - can almost Sing.

Impossible! The Wanderer, mindful of Sage, dismissed this. Only those who swim and Sing...were, were, were... These beings of building and great thoughts would someday destroy themselves. There was a certain inevitability to land-dwelling species.

Like camels? George wondered.

Perhaps, the Wanderer dismissed the species and wandered on. It had squandered time in seeking out the yellow-sun blue-world species; it could squander a little bit more. There were worlds it had not sung to yet; perhaps there was still time.

And if it could not find the world it needed? Return, the Singers had instructed it. Follow the pharos, return. If there is to be no help for us, we need to know. Seek, and then return. Come home...

There were worlds within this space called Romulan, worlds the Wanderer had not sung to. Messenger, Gatherer, Wanderer - more prosaically: Probe - perhaps...

FUGUE

Cleante alFaisal stood on the surface of Dlontra IV, on a rise overlooking a terraced and once-fertile valley. The prefab conference Dome, looking garishly modern and out of place on this soft-cornered ancient world, sat squat and unappealing just behind her left shoulder. Below her, the ruins stretched almost to the horizon, covered in less than two feet of silt and debris in most places, remarkable for a world abandoned so long ago. Cleante scanned the deserted metropolis with her tricorder, though its characteristic architecture and the serpentine street plat had already confirmed her hypothesis.

"Rahcir," she said out of deference to her companion, shutting off her tricorder.

"Korff," Dajan allowed graciously, simultaneously shutting off his scanner. "Unquestionably. Though we could be dutiful scientists and carbon-date the grain husks in the storerooms..."

Their eyes met, and Cleante burst into giggles. Simultaneously they both said "Naah!"

"Are they watching, do you think?" The human indicated the Dome, where everyone but the two of them

was supposed to remain until the formalities were concluded.

"Unless my brother-in-law has bribed someone to keep an eye on me, I doubt it," Dajan replied. "Is a hug in order?"

"Unquestionably."

They fell into each other's arms. They had only just met, but they had known each other for years.

At loose ends following the kidnapping, Cleante had stayed for awhile with her mother the incumbent High Commissioner of United Earth. Jasmine would not be seeking another term, and she and her daughter were cleaning out Jasmine's office before the new commissioner took over, when the mail came through. Rummaging through files and sorting flimsies, the High Commissioner had been watching the scrolling screen with only half her attention when suddenly she frowned.

"Cl,? I think this one's for you. It's coded 'Personal'."

"That's peculiar." Cleante sat at the screen, her mother's frown mirrored on her own face as she tapped in her access code. "Who do you suppose would send me a Personal here?"

Hundreds of messages from well-wishers had cascaded onto her and T'Shael since their return, though usually only official communications from outworld governments, addressed to her mother, came to the Residence. Personals were automatically routed to Cleante's home computer, which screened out lunatic-fringe and Death to the Romulans varieties. Somehow this one had slipped through.

"...deeply regret this incident and the suffering inflicted upon you and the Vulcan at the hands of my brethren..." Cleante read. "...know that hereafter I and mine are in your service, wherever and however you shall require us, though even this cannot eradicate the shame..."

"It reads like a mash-note," Jasmine couldn't resist, reading over Cleante's shoulder.

"Do you mind?" her daughter demanded testily, and Jasmine went back to her rummaging.

Cleante scanned the brief message several times, shaking her head incredulously.

"Mother, I honestly think it's from a Romulan."

"Nonsense!" Jasmine sniffed. "Though I don't doubt some of them have consciences, how would they ever get a message through?"

"Computer, origin of last entry?"

"Diplomatic Pouch Number 407X853, Stardate -"

"Yes, fine!" Cleante snapped impatiently. "I mean before that."

"Unknown."

"Then how am I supposed to answer it?"

"Unknown."

Never ask a computer a rhetorical question, Cleante reminded herself.

"Right. Computer, save last entry. Relay to my private comp, and provide disk and hardcopy."

"Complying..."

Cleante took both copies to Uhura.

"It definitely came from inside the Empire, hon," Uhura confirmed, the mystery transmission her impetus for inviting Cleante to have lunch with her on TerraMain. "Thanks to some creative backtracking, I can tell you it originated from a star system just inside Romulan space, near the outposts on the edge of the Zone, more or less parallel to the restored Earth Outposts on our side. Now, when I say 'near,' you do understand I'm talking several parsecs, but 'near' as in closer to us than, say, the homeworlds in the heart of Rom space, you see?"

"I see. I think," Cleante had said. Her work was based in millimeters - so many layers of history silted atop each other, the corner of an artifact millennia old found protruding from a given layer dusted and coaxed out of its centuries of grit with minuscule picks and soft brushes until it saw sunlight for the first time since the pharaohs died. Archeology was myopic work, microscopic work; this talk of parsecs visited her with agoraphobia. "But you're sure it's a Romulan?"

"It's someone using a Romulan transmitter," Uhura clarified. "And someone clever enough to know the diplomatic codes to make sure the message got through our space uncensored. Someone also clever enough - I hope - to wipe the transmission at this end."

"Then how were you able to trace it?"

Uhura smiled a secret smile. "You really don't want to know."

"Probably not," Cleante acquiesced. "What I do want to know is how I can give an answerback."

"Uhura studied her thoughtfully. "How badly do you want to do that?"

"Not badly enough to get anyone in trouble. But someone's risked an awful lot just to send me an apology for what he sees as some sort of collective responsibility for what happened to T'Shael and me. The least I can do is thank him, tell him no one's blaming him."

"You understand I can't do anything officially?" Uhura asked her carefully.

"Nyota, I wasn't even going to ask you."

Uhura had patted her hand then. "Let me see what I can do."

Cleante already knew about the "undergrounds," which were as active on the Romulan side of the Zone as on their own. All Uhura had to do was make sure this particular "underground" was beamed in the direction of that unpromising little star system just to the left of Outpost Four.

Cleante never expected a response. What she got was more than she could have hoped for.

His name was Dajan, his second communique, informed her, scrolling across her screen so rapidly she could barely read it. He hoped she would keep this, as all details about him, in confidence. He was, most amazing coincidence, an archeologist as she was, though currently in disgrace for reasons he could not elaborate upon, exiled to an outpost world - abandoned since the Wars, as its orbit kept it half-in/half-out of the Zone - where it was his unglamorous task to inventory for off-shipment the century-old materiel left behind. He was alone, except for a robot to do the heavy lifting, had been able to reactivate the outpost's antiquated transmitter, which was the source of these script-only messages. He would give her the transmitter's code, if she wished. Commpics were too easily detectable, whereas these scrolls would get lost in the welter of gibberish flowing through the sector.

Would she be so kind? Surely there was no danger at her end, unless the horror stories Romulan children were told about the Federation were true, and he considered the risks acceptable at his end, if only because even danger was preferable to loneliness. He had never communicated with a human before. He hoped she would also feel free to correct any errors in grammar she might detect, as he had learned his Standard via computer and was less than proficient. Again, he apologized for the sins of his brethren...

How could Cleante refuse?

Over the next several years they had kept the frequency open, filling it with shoptalk mostly, though personal details sometimes slipped through. When Dajan was finally transferred to the more prestigious assignment on Hiran, Cleante rejoiced with him, though she feared for him as well, for there were troops stationed on Hiran, and it was more difficult to get a message out; she held her breath every time she sent a message in, praying it would get to him without incident. More than once she begged him to sever the connection, but Dajan persisted. Ultimately, Cleante was grateful he did.

"And now here we are!" Dajan exulted beneath the gray skies of Dlonbra; whatever else could be said about this world, its climate was unremarkable. "In all the universe, who would have conceived it?"

"I certainly wouldn't have," Cleante said. "Even when we heard about the Praetor and the new restructuring, I thought Well, it would've needed a Vulcan to quote the odds against any of us being here. But here you are."

"Tell me, Cle-ante - am I pronouncing it correctly? - am I at all how you imagined me?"

"Handsome," she said honestly. "Human archaeologists get so wizened after decades in the sun.

CLAY-ohnt. You were close. A lot of humans have trouble with it."

"Cleante," he repeated. "You don't look wizened at all."

"I'm the exception," she demurred, wishing T'Shael could be out here to share him with her, instead of trapped inside the Dome doing the Hail-fellow-well-met.

"...and of course, Commander Riley, it is my honor to present to you Centurion Tiam," Commander Rihan finished in his stilted Formal language, waiting benignly while T'Shael translated. On a sudden impulse, or so it seemed, he turned to Kirk. "It appears there will be very little for you and I to do on this mission, Captain. I am not trained to diplomacy, nor do I know the first thing about archeology. As to music..." He glanced fondly toward Jandra. "We shall leave that to the experts, hm? Rather, I would be honored to conduct you on a tour of my ship, if you will do the same for me."

The two vessels had rendezvoused at the assigned time and the prescribed coordinates above Dlontra IV, the *Hannsu*, Kirk thought, popping out of warp smugly close to his portside nacelle before heeling over into their present nose-to-nose less than a hundred clicks apart.

"My, oh my!" Scotty had been heard to exclaim, coincidentally stepping out of the 'lift at the precise moment the warbird dropped her cloak and came alongside. "There's been a modification or three in the basic design in recent years, now, hasn't there?"

There had been, indeed. The Empire's fleet, well bolstered in recent years with Klingon-designed heavy cruisers, usually kept the smaller, more maneuverable but less heavily-armed warbirds in reserve. Their basic design had altered not at all in the hundred years since the Wars, and a less practiced eye than Scotty's might not have taken in the slightly sleeker cut of the *Hannsu*'s jib, the longer nacelles no doubt providing power for more than the warp eight her sister ships were known to manage in a pinch.

"Aye, and wouldn't I love to know what else she's got under her bonnet!" the Chief Engineer had added, in a far bonnier mood than he'd been since they started out, looking over his shoulder for gremlins ever since the prickling at the back of his neck had told him where they were a tick before the computer announced that they had entered the Zone.

"Keep practicing your pipes, laddie," Kirk said, "and we'll see what we can arrange."

Scotty twisted a wry smile at him, still eyeing the Romulan ship suspiciously. "But now why d'ye suppose they'd send a lesser ship than ours, knowing we could outgun her?"

"As a measure of trust, possibly," Riley suggested, watching from beside Uhura's station; it was Jim Kirk's show until they were planetside. "Considering the number of concessions we've made, they're showing us they're not afraid to meet our big guns with a smaller vessel."

Scotty exchanged glances with Kirk, exhaling under his mustache. Youth and innocence! he seemed to be saying. Trust a Romulan? That'll be the day!

"On the flip side, you could read it as an insult." McCoy had to put his oar in. "'You don't scare us - nyah! nyah!'"

"Or they might simply be implying that this conference is of very little import to them," Uhura suggested quietly. "In case anything goes wrong, it saves face for them in retrospect."

Considering the absence of fanfare on their first meeting, Uhura was probably right. There should be an honor guard, a band - something, Jim Kirk thought, facing four stiffly formal Romulans with six of his own people and a great deal of silence in the spaces in between. This doesn't look like an intergovernmental peace conference; it looks like a wake.

Riley spoke, T'Shael translated. Commander Rihan replied, T'Shael translated. The whole procedure was cold, impersonal, interminable, until Rihan interrupted it to make his request. Centurion Tiam remained silent, watching and listening, something which on a human face might have been a cold smile shaping the corners of his mouth. It was as if the guy came complete with his own little personal cloaking device, McCoy would say later. Jim Kirk didn't like Tiam one bit; he was glad he was Riley's pigeon.

The entire Romulan party wore miniature translating devices either in one ear or around their necks, though Kirk noted as Dajan went off with Cleante to survey the ruins that his was not even turned on, and he wondered how many of those remaining really needed them. Certainly not Tiam, he reminded himself, mindful of Uhura's intelligence report. The three remaining listened intently to T'Shael's translation; Kirk was reminded of how beautiful the Romulan languages could be when used for something other than the threat of war. He saw T'Shael was waiting for his reply.

"I'll personally escort you, Commander," he told Rihan, looking him straight in the eye, not trusting anyone else with the job. Still not trusting a smiling Romulan, either, if it came right down to it.

"What d'you think, Jim?" McCoy had stage-whispered as soon as both parties had executed their simultaneous beam-down into the Dome. "D'you think they breed them for looks? Some eugenics program! Honestly, have you ever seen a homely Romulan?"

It was true they were a handsome lot - vulcanoid, but something else - lean, straight, lively-eyed, many of them possessed of that attractively curly hair which Vulcans lacked.

"Bones..." Kirk warned, wondering if the translators were picking this up, wondering not for the first time why he'd brought the doctor along.

He knew why, of course. It was because, as much of a nuisance as McCoy could sometimes be, he was an essential part of the winning combination, the now-legendary triumvirate. Bracketed between these two, McCoy to his left and Spock at his right hand - id and superego, devil's advocate and guardian angel - Jim Kirk always did his best work. So what if it looked like overkill to Commander Rihan, who had only three other people with him? Improvisation, Kirk reminded himself, was the name of the game. Let Rihan think he had the advantage, for now.

"We want to establish a basis of trust," Kirk had told his assembled senior officers at their final briefing

the night before. "We beam down with communicators only. No weapons. Security team on standby, to be beamed down only on my direct order."

"I don't like the sound of that!" Scotty objected immediately.

"Me neither, sir," Sulu chimed in.

"That's the way it's going to be," Kirk said, curtailing debate. Riley at least was nodding agreement. "If two starships staring down each other's throats aren't enough deterrent, I don't know what is. We have to start somewhere. Mr. Riley?"

"Okay by me, Captain, as long as the Romulans do the same."

"We'll leave that up to them," Kirk said, remembering the smiling face of Commander Rihan. Would he buy a used starship from this man?

"This first meeting is intended to be strictly introductory. A few handshakes, a chance for the heads of both archeology teams to have a look around, then we retire to our respective vessels until the conference officially begins the following day. That's to be the pattern at close of day, incidentally. No one from either side remains on the surface after sundown. And our transporter chiefs have been instructed to keep a fix on each of us at all times. I can only assume the Romulans will do the same.

"Dr. alFaisal, you'll leave your team up here this first time. And you'll instruct them when they do beam down to have their communicators with them at all times."

"Of course, Captain," Cleante said, smiling at his formality.

"We'll also leave the musicians on board for the time being," Kirk added, thinking: Or for the rest of the mission, if I had my druthers. He stood at the head of the briefing table. "Any questions? Spock, McCoy, with me. Scotty, you have the conn."

Their party of six was met by a party of four. As the introductions were being made, he was pleased to note that the Romulans were also unarmed. Perhaps he'd read this Rihan correctly after all. Then Jim Kirk became aware of something else, a kind of subtle agitation in the air, quite aside from the expected tension of two traditionally adverse parties meeting for the first time. It was when he first met the musician Jandra's eyes that he understood what it was.

Uh-oh! he thought, feeling something in the air like static electricity. Did I say I couldn't recognize the symptoms anymore? Silly me! He'd avoided meeting her glance at first, aware of how a mere hologram had affected him, deciding he had to build up to this particular encounter. His ego was still fragile after Gillian. But he'd been thrown a curve by the extraordinary resemblance between Jandra and the head of the Romulan archeology team. (Dajan? Kirk tried to remember, having gotten that particular introduction muddled what with the subtext playing hob with his glands.) No, he reminded himself, all Romulans do not look alike. These two had to be siblings. Perhaps even twins? Or had Uhura already told him that?

Now he felt the look in Jandra's eyes, a look he recognized so very well. But it had bypassed him entirely and found Spock.

Double uh-oh! Kirk thought. Isn't she married to the wooden-faced centurion who's supposedly the heart of the negotiations and so far hasn't said Word One, merely nodded from the waist as if his neck were in a sling? Kirk cut a glance at Spock, who couldn't possibly be that obtuse, but Spock hadn't seemed to notice. Then again, Kirk reminded himself, even before the katra ritual Spock had been less than swift in matters of the heart.

Meanwhile, had he only imagined a look which was not quite a look exchanged between Dajan, Cleante and even T'Shael? What the hell was going on?

T'Shael had spoken of tapestries. Something tangible seemed to be weaving itself around everyone present. Tapestries or spiderwebs, Kirk thought. Why am I always the last one to know what's going on?

This one will serve my purpose, Jandra thought, studying Spock. She had barely recovered from the transporter effect when her green eyes began scanning, scanning - dismissing the humans automatically, seeking the distant brothers first. Her gaze had stopped at T'Shael and she thought: sacrosanct, for reasons having nothing to do with their purposes and cross-purposes here. Then her green eyes had appraised Spock and she thought: Yes. This one will serve.

The formalities seemed to be concluding. Sib and his human counterpart were off about their artifact-hunting, eager as children, and soon the two commanders would arrange to escort each other aboard their vessels, amid much posturing and technical one-upmanship. Tiam, of course, had not said a word, preserving what he thought was his aura of inscrutability before these humans, particularly the one he would meet in the conference chambers. Jandra assessed this Riley as well. Bearded, affable, fuzzy - a frail reed indeed to set himself against the collective guile of the Romulan Empire.

But none of this concerned her. Nothing mattered but the music. If she did not act now...

"Captain Spock?" she ventured softly. Her Standard held only the slightest accent. With a graceful movement she had crossed the invisible line between the two landing parties, which Sib and the human woman had ignored in their shared obsessions only moments before, to place herself beside this Vulcan before either Rihan or, worse, Tiam could react. "I am curious. Two captains assigned to a single vessel? Is the *Enterprise* so formidable?"

"Captain Kirk is the commander of record. I am his first officer," Spock explained stiffly, though the distinction had already been made during the formal introductions; perhaps Jandra's translator program was defective. "My own rank vis-a-vis his would require extensive clarification."

"Which I am certain I should find entrancing," Jandra said, touching his arm intimately, as a human woman might. She could feel Tiam's jealousy even at this distance and would not look at him, pretending instead to survey the Dome surrounding them. "I was asked to come here in order to judge the suitability of this place for performance. Quite impossible, of course. The acoustics alone -!"

Don't emote overmuch! she cautioned herself; Tiam knows you have played far worse in the provinces.

"But conference halls are designed for conferences, not music, while I am certain that aboard your vessel there are rooms where one might more satisfactorily perform. Is there - may I presume to ask - a piano

aboard your vessel?"

The human captain, assessing her little scene, stepped in then.

"There is," he said. "A Steinway, which my communications officer informs me is among the best of human manufacture. With your commander's permission -" Jandra saw that Kirk was pointedly looking at Rihan, not Tiam; perhaps she had underestimated this human captain. " - I'm certain you could come aboard as well."

"We all will!" Rihan replied effusively, once T'Shael's translation reached him. Let us collect our archaeologists and go at once!"

Was it only Jim Kirk's imagination, or had Centurion Tiam seemed about to object while the Vulcan was still speaking?

"I could say it was official business." Sulu knew Harper would be on the transporter while Kirk and his party was planetside.

"You could," Harper agreed, his talented hands resting easy on the controls, "but you'd use your Special Section override for that."

"How do you know about that?"

"I know about a lot of things," Harper said. "You've got your orders. Well, I've got mine. Captain said no one is to beam down, period."

"Come on, Harper, I won't even go near the Dome. I'm just curious about the dig. Archeology interests me almost as much as music."

"Everything interests you," Harper said evenly, refusing to budge. "If it's not official, it can wait till the captain gets back."

Sulu seemed to be weighing something. "Harper, you ever been socked in the jaw?"

The thin man nodded. "Once. Bar fight on Argelius. Wasn't even my fight. I just didn't duck fast enough. You going to sock me now?"

"Would I have to do that to get down to Dlundra?"

"Uh-huh."

Sulu grinned. "That's what I thought. Sorry, Harper, but I had to be sure about you. You see what I'm saying?"

"I hear you." The transporter beeped Incoming. "Anyways, looks like you missed your entrance." He scanned the configuration, noting the addition of Romulan readings. The captain had said they might have guests, depending on how well the first encounter went. Harper contacted Uhura on the intership.

"Commander? Transporter room, Harper here. Landing party's on its way up, with extras."

"Roger," Uhura said from her commstation, "on my way." She handed her earpiece to Kittay, who relieved her. "Mr. Scott, company's coming."

Scott swiveled in the center seat as she headed for the 'lift.

"I don't like it, lass. I don't like it one bit! Shields down, no security planetside, now Romulans rooting about in the machinery -"

"Steady, lad!" Uhura held the 'lift with one hand. "Captain's taking them on the five-dollar tour. They won't get anywhere near your precious engines."

"I still don't like it!" Scotty muttered as the 'lift closed, deciding as long as he still had the conn a couple of extra security people on the bridge wouldn't be amiss.

Two security guards stepped into the 'lift as Uhura stepped out, on her way to meet their guests in the transporter room. If she wondered what Sulu was doing there, she didn't have time to ask. She heard herself being paged and hit the button on the wallcomm.

"Uhura here."

"Commander, it's Lt. Kittay." The young woman sounded breathless. Make that more breathless than usual, Uhura thought; she'd noticed a certain skittishness about Kittay ever since she'd signed on. "One of Lord Harbinger's aides found out somehow that Captain Kirk's bringing a party of Romulans aboard. Lord Harbinger is on his way to the bridge to speak with the captain personally. Something about 'shedyuls'."

"'Shed' -? Oh, schedules!" Uhura said, no fonder of Harbinger's phony accent than she was of the composer himself. "Who was it who said timing is everything? You tell Lord Harbinger to sit tight in his quarters and I'll meet with him about performance schedules as soon as I've done the protocol thing with the Romulans."

"I tried that, Commander. He said he 'doesn't deal with supernumeraries.' He's on his way up here and I can't stop him."

"Well, you find a way to stop him, Lieutenant. That's your job!" Uhura said sharply, flicking off the wall comm. Behind her she could hear the transporter hum. "Oy," she said to Sulu. "Do I stay here and greet our guests or go back upstairs and head Sir Rod off at the pass?"

"Sounds like you've got a yellow alert brewing up there," Sulu suggested. "Go on. My smile's as good as yours."

Uhura squeezed his arm gratefully. "Thanks, pal!"

A transporter beam's transfer of matter to energy and back to matter again occurs with such simultaneity that the subject being transported experiences no time lapse. It is possible to speak, even to think, without losing continuity, while being transported.

Centurion Tiam, oblivious of the scrambling of his molecules, was thinking.

He had known what Jandra was up to even before she took Spock's arm, just as she knew it was essential to his diplomatic technique that he remain silent in all first contact meetings. Jandra was playing the harlot again, as she had during all their years in the provinces - she plying her whiny stringed instruments for unresponsive peasants, he shuffling flimsies from one local governor's office to the next - partly for the simple pleasure of making him jealous but also, this time, in an effort to provoke him to speech.

If he spoke - to reprimand her, call her to his side, excuse her shameless behavior before this human rabble - he lost his advantage as the unreadable negotiator. If he let her have her head, he was cast as the cuckolded spouse. What was sad about Jandra's non-musical performances was that she never intended to complete them; she would no more bed with a Vulcan, Tiam knew, than she would with the elder sons of commune leaders, who had been her particular favorites with which to taunt him in the past, though they reeked of ale and chiro-root. Watching her flaunt herself before the Vulcan's imperviousness, Tiam had acted by not acting: he did not condescend to notice. Jandra had not been specifically introduced as his spouse; let the humans think she was merely one more promiscuous musician. Are they not the same on your worlds, gentlemen? How long could Jandra perform in the absence of an audience?

Thus Tiam made no objection when she, still clinging to the Vulcan's arm, requested that the human captain excuse her from the tour of his vessel's bridge.

"I fear military technology holds no fascination for me, Captain. And Captain Spock has graciously promised instead to show me the piano," she explained throatily as they all stepped down from the transporter pad, though in fact he had done no such thing.

"If it's acceptable to your commander..." the human captain had begun to say, when another human stepped in.

"With all due respect, sirs," he began in human Standard, switching to flawless Formal Romulan, "I'd be happy to escort the lady anywhere she wishes."

He almost looks like one of us, was Jandra's first thought. Is it only his coloring and those exotic eyes? Those eyes were appraising her in the same way she had looked at Spock and the human captain had looked at her. Orthodoxy, Jandra thought, was getting more interesting by the moment.

"If you will, Mr. Sulu," the human captain said after a moment's hesitation, as if relieved to have the distraction of her removed. The Vulcan, Jandra noted with no little disappointment, didn't seem to care one way or the other.

"...'one can eat flowers if all one has is flowers'..." Sulu had translated the Romulan aphorism for his

superiors inside Special Section when they first called him in following the Praetor's death, "...but how much more desirable it is to have bread!"

"We're aware of the translation, Commander," one of the senior Brethren had said. "What we want is for you to tell us what you think it means."

Testing: one-two-three, Sulu thought. I thought we gave up these games once I was vetted and cleared for this service? Or have I been away so long you guys think I've gotten soft? There had been some harumphing about his part in the Genesis Caper, but considering how that had turned out, all had been forgiven. Did he still have to prove himself?

Sulu had an irritating habit - more irritating to himself than to his auditors - of interspersing his words with the vocalization "uh" whenever his brain was still framing an answer his mouth was already up to impulse on. He was going to do it now, he knew; he had no way of stopping it.

"I'll - uh - assume this came from the other side?"

One never said "Romulan space" or even "the Empire" within the walls of Special Section's Romulan Bureau. What else would the subject be, after all?

"Correct," a second Brother said. "It was passed to us in code by a deep-cover operative who's been recently reactivated, as you have been, after a long absence. He was sending from the homeworld capital, using the chaos of the funeral as smoke-screen."

Sulu thought this over. It was correct procedure. He appreciated his superiors' caution. Not all Special Section operatives were the dunderheads the general public thought they were. Neither were they the stylized yuppie James Bond types so popular in post-modern spy novels, and the holographic pseudoface that got McCoy so ticked off was just cover. It was all cover, to the extent that sometimes the fog got so thick you had to remind yourself which side you were working for. And these boys were clever, well versed in spycraft; they only asked questions to which they already knew the answers.

They were waiting for answers now.

"When you say - uh - operative..." Damn! Sulu thought. There I go again! "Classification?"

"Code Quirinus."

A real Romulan, not a human plant. This guy would know what he was talking about.

"We're still waiting for your analysis, Commander."

"It's - uh - analogous to the expression 'let them eat cake'. Uh -" Okay, cut it out now! " - implication that restructuring's dandy but it's still just words. Flowery words. There are still food shortages, basic-need shortages. The haves still have, the have-nots are still waiting in the queues. The same palms have to be greased. The Romulan in the street sees no material change, and he really doesn't care about peace feelers toward the Federation or anybody else as long as his aging mother still can't get her arthritis medicine."

A glance was exchanged around the table. Well, Sulu thought, guess I did good.

"That's very good, Commander," the first Brother said. "Now tell us, in your own words, how you think

this might impact upon the peace conference?"

Who else's words was I going to use? Sulu wondered. And since when is an operative supposed to think? He swallowed the next "uh" before it got past his Adam's apple.

"I think it stacks against us. If the restructuring's real, the interim government's apt to be voted out, so anything they establish vis-a-vis a peace feeler becomes inoperative. If the restructuring doesn't happen fast enough, you're going to have the Romulan equivalent of bread riots and there goes the whole thing. And if the restructuring's phony, a sop to keep the rabble quiet until they can firm up a real government, then any kind of peace initiative's a waste of time and antimatter."

Again his superior's exchanged glances. Am I good? Sulu wondered, or am I good?

"What if *Enterprise* is chosen as the ship of record?" the second Brother asked, and by the way he asked it, Sulu knew it already had been. "Will you go along on this charade without mentioning what you've just said here to your commanding officer?"

Sulu shrugged. "If he asks me strictly as a matter of opinion - I've been known to be wrong."

It was the right answer. Now they would tell him what they wanted him to do.

"You'll receive a contact when you reach Dlonbra IV," the second Brother said. "You will offer assistance to the contact in whatever manner the contact requires. That is all."

"A contact? From their ship or ours?" Sulu could stretch the rules that far.

"You'll know when you're contacted, Commander. You've been reactivated as Level-3, with all discretionary powers. We trust you'll know what to do when the time comes."

And that, Sulu thought, escorting the beautiful Romulan down the corridors to the ship's theater, deliberately going the long way round, is all she wrote. And I'm still waiting for that contact.

He'd thought at first it might be Harper, Harper who just happened to have found him during his morning workout, Harper who gave out good vibes and had become his friend in a mere ten days. Harper who knew an awful lot about an awful lot, but who wasn't a spy, Sulu had decided with his instinct for the thing. Not Harper. Then who?

Why, it could be this lovely lady right here, Sulu told himself, motioning her into the darkened theater, managing to trigger the spotlight above the Steinway grand, alone in solitary splendor on the bare proscenium stage, since no one among the crew had thus far felt qualified to play it. Oh, don't I wish!

More likely, he thought, some little *Hannsu* engine room swabbie, risking his/her life to get me a message of a dozen words or so, maybe already caught and languishing in their brig, or accidentally bumped into the path of a particle beam enroute as a lesson to all spies and seditious. I hate this whole silly business! Riley's right, and the differences that divide us are far smaller than the kinship that could join us, if we'd give it half a chance. Not that I'm the first or last person ever to have had that thought, but gods, I hate this!

So why am I doing it? Do I think spying on the other side is going to help bring us closer together? Or is it only that I'd rather have myself and my sensitivities in place than some boneheaded Special Section greenhorn who thinks Romulans are just Vulcans with a sadistic sense of humor? What am I doing here?

Sulu watched Jandra sit at the Steinway almost reverently, opening the keyboard, her fingers suspended motionless above it. What would she play? She looked up, still holding her fingers arched above the keys, and Sulu wondered what it would be like to swim in the emerald ocean of those eyes.

"Your computers have musical scores on file, orchestrations which can be tied in to a solo instrument, do they not?" she asked.

"They certainly do." Sulu took a few steps to the wall panel backstage which activated the nearest terminal, set into the stage itself to provide music for various kinds of performances. "What would you like?"

If she intended to play her own music why didn't she bring her own tapes? he was wondering. What if we don't have the particular piece she wants on file? he was thinking, when she answered, her eyes once more on the keyboard:

"Mozart's Piano Concerto in A, K. 488."

Uhura's luck was holding. She had taken Sir Rodney Harbinger off Lt. Kittay's helpless hands, determined to give the youngster a thorough chewing-out later, and successfully steered him off the bridge, into the 'lift, and halfway back to his quarters.

Maybe the presence of the two security guards Scotty had ordered helped. Maybe the simple realization that Captain Kirk was not on the bridge, but had been replaced by yet another mustachioed Celt - the ship seemed to be crawling with them, Harbinger's startled expression suggested - had done the trick. Maybe Uhura's dazzling smile made him forget his rule about dealing with supernumeraries. At any rate, Uhura found him eminently steerable as she kept up her ingratiating chatter, intending to deposit him back in his box and have done with it.

"Oh, Sir Rod, I've been looking everywhere for you!" she cooed. "Why, when they said you'd left your quarters - and I would have contacted you sooner, but I didn't want to disturb you - I said to myself, 'Nyota, he could be composing his next magnum opus and you'd be interrupting him.' - and I couldn't take the responsibility for that, sir, not at all - but I thought you'd be down in the theater or one of the rec areas. So when Lt. Kittay said you were coming up to the bridge, why naturally..."

It would have worked, too; she had Harbinger all buttered up and all the right ego-buttons pushed, and if Captain Kirk had been walking a little slower or his voice didn't carry so -

Oh, merde! Uhura thought, watching Harbinger's ears prick up. Who was it that said timing was everything?

"Captain Kirk -!" Harbinger announced, putting on the brakes as he realized the captain was not alone but was accompanied by a party of Romulans, though it didn't stop him for long, as if Romulans were an

everyday occurrence. "I wish to protest, sir, the abominable treatment I have received on this voyage thus far!"

The long list of Stuffed Shirts I Have Known scrolled across Kirk's memory as he caught Uhura's hapless expression and searched for the precise command mode to deal with the situation. Ferris, Fox, Komack, Stocker, the insufferable Nils Baris - the universe was full of them; perhaps even the Romulans had them, too, Kirk thought, watching Rihan fumble with his Translator and try not to broaden his smile. Diplomats and Starfleet brass he could take in stride because he had to, but how to handle a musician?

"Lord Harbinger!" he blustered, as loud if not louder than the offending party, the best offense in such an instance being the ability to project from the diaphragm. "How - fortuitous that we should encounter each other here. Why, I was just about to have Commander Uhura notify you that our distinguished guests were aboard -"

"Yes, yes, quite!" Harbinger dismissed the Romulans and the entire peace initiative with the flutter of one hand. "But as to the inattention if you will that has been lavished on me -"

"Lord - Harbinger..." Jim Kirk said tightly. The man was nearly a head taller than he and considerably heavier; he was not easily moved by rank nor an iron grip on his biceps. "As a musician, I'm sure you appreciate the value of timing..."

Harbinger remembered the strength with which the petite communications officer had diverted him into the closing lift door, and supposed all Starfleet officers were similarly trained. Kirk's grip was tightening on his arm. The Romulan party, a couple of Vulcans and a few humans Harbinger vaguely remembered being introduced to at the Admiralty's reception, including that insufferable Irish fellow, were standing by watching intently; it wouldn't do to make a fool of oneself. Some primeval survival instinct won Harbinger over, and he acquiesced.

"Welllll..." he drawled. "You might at least introduce me to your other guests..."

Kirk gritted his teeth to keep from responding to Harbinger's assumption that his presence was as significant as the Romulans', and released his death-grip on the man's arm. He was breathing as if from great exertion as he made the introduction.

"Honored members of the Romulan Peace Initiative, may I present his Lordship, Sir Rodney Harbinger, musician and composer. Sir Rodney will be providing much of the entertainment which we hope will -"

"Entertainment!" It was more than Rodney Harbinger could stomach. "Kirk, you dare characterize what I do as 'entertainment'! A hundred years from now, my name will be spoken with reverence as one of the seminal creative minds of my era. Will you be able to say the same?"

"I won't be around to care -" Kirk began, and then he heard it.

Spock had heard it first, had - without diverting one iota of his attention from the raucous scenario between Harbinger and Jim Kirk, awaiting some possible opportunity to inject a note of logic into the proceedings without upstaging the captain - merely canted his head slightly, and listened.

The Romulans heard it next, and the juxtaposition of piano music with Jandra's expressed desire to see such an instrument might have told them who it was, except that it was unlikely either Rihan or Tiam had any concept of what one sounded like. Only Dajan knew. He looked toward T'Shael.

So absorbed in her duty as interpreter that she has not allowed her concentration to be broken by anything, she only now heard it. Mozart, yes, but more than that. A tale remembered out of her childhood, as told her by her father.

Her father Salet, known as the Gifted One among a race not noted for lavishing praise upon its own, had been the most talented musician of his day. Cursed with an incurable illness which was to visit him with early death, he had chosen to expend all of a Vulcan's vast energies in what little time was given him upon the study, composition and performance of music. It was said there was no instrument - Vulcan, human, outworld - that he could not play, though he favored Earth's harpsichord and the classical ka'athyra, the so-named Vulcan harp.

As the musician's only offspring, T'Shael had also mastered several instruments as a very young child, though with nothing like her father's passion or proficiency. Even as a child, her lack of outstanding talent did not trouble her unduly. As with all living things, each according to her gifts. T'Shael had known she would find her own gifts in time.

Therefore she had experienced no envy when her father returned from one of his offworld tours to tell her of the most extraordinary musical prodigy he had encountered in his travels.

"...a child of such exemplary skill that she need only read or hear a composition once in order to reiterate it," Salet had told his daughter, recounting the event as a human father might recite a fairy tale. His breath came hard, the gifted fingers resting with unVulcanly fondness upon the child's head were knotted with pain; already the illness had begun to exact its toll. "Nor can it be said to pure mimicry, for she imposes her own values, possesses her own unique voice..."

"How old is she, Father?" T'Shael did not know why she asked this in preference to more logical questions, except that she could better envision this child if she knew her age.

"Perhaps some few months your elder," Salet had answered.

"Then she has survived her Kahswan," T'Shael had said then; her own impended. "This pleases me. I should not wish one so gifted to have died."

"Our distant brothers do not follow the tradition of the Kahswan," Salet had said gently, impressed with the small one's concern for a child she had never met. "Though doubtless they have rites of passage which we would find far more demanding. This child's life differs greatly from yours. She will be pampered always, indulged in every whim; she need never soil her hands with labor nor tax her mind with intellectual pursuit so long as she plays her music."

T'Shael thought about this. "I would not desire such a life, Father. But why were you asked to hear her play?"

"It was hoped I could offer some guidance for her future," Salet explained.

"And did you?"

Perhaps overmuch, Salet thought before he answered.

"I exposed her to the musics of many worlds. Curiously, it was Earth's music she found most enticing, and it is in this I have instructed her. Mozart and Beethoven shall take their place in her awareness alongside Lerma and Mektius and their contemporaries on her world." Salet drew breath with difficulty, pondering a future he would never live to see. "Perhaps someday this child may serve as my harbinger of peace."

Salet's harbinger of peace now plied a piano cocooned within a starship, suspended in space hundreds of light years from the planet of her birth, beneath the watchful eyes and various thoughts of several disparate beings. Her choice of the Mozart 23rd concerto had been deliberate.

Jandra knew that the human captain could not have her out of his sight for long, would need to know what had become of her in the care of his minion. Motivated by that which drove every male, regardless of species, something which in this human captain's case was almost as powerful as his need to command, he would somehow manage to lead his tour of the ship in her direction. She had estimated how much time she would need to master the computer tie-in, to persuade its invisible orchestra to conform to her tempi. She also needed time to refresh her memory of a piece she had not performed since Salet had guided her in her childhood, and choose only one of the concerto's three movements. From the moment she touched fingers to keys, she would have approximately five minutes in which to win these humans' hearts before Tiam or Rihan intervened.

She rejected the first movement of the concerto almost at once. Too many themes suggested and left unfinished would leave her listeners inattentive, distracted, waiting for the conclusion. She had thought next of the bravura final movement - *allegro assai*, "very quick" - full of pyrotechnics, all sparkle and dazzle and boneless flying fingers. No. It was not with her technical prowess that she wished to win them.

Instead, what her listeners heard as they drifted, curious, into the darkened theater with the human captain in the lead, was the concerto's second movement, the *adagio* - languid, poignant, melancholy, distilled from the very heart of merry Mozart, essence of the suffering soul within the titillating public man, the child prodigy, everybody's darling.

Let her listeners draw what parallels they may.

Jandra played. Nothing mattered but the music. When she had concluded the second movement she lifted her fingers delicately from the keys. She would not go on, would not give them the catharsis of the third movement. Let them hear it in their hearts and minds if they knew it; if not, let them suffer the incompleteness. She looked up languidly, her green eyes sliding over all of them gathered about her at the piano, as if surprised to see them.

Her fellow Romulans, even Sib, stood farther back, uncertain of the protocol, or perhaps uncertain what this unwieldy human instrument were capable of beyond the production of sound. As always, Jandra avoided Tiam's eyes, knowing that what was there was what was always there: cold disdain and disapproval. Closer, the human captain's eyes indicated he had indeed been moved, though not as overtly

as the small dark woman beside him, dashing tears from her lashes with her long-nailed hands, or Jandra's exotic escort (Sulu? Yes), who was blinking hard. The Vulcan's eyes she could not read. What was he thinking?

A silence lingered, too profound for applause, broken only by the genteel muffled thump of felted wood as Jandra closed the keyboard. Then one of the humans shifted his feet and cleared his throat.

"Gosh, ma'am," Leonard McCoy said in his best courtly manner, "that sure was lovely!"

"Yes, quite!" An oversize human with a mawkish voice whom Jandra had not noticed before pushed his way through those gathered. Who is this? she wondered, classifying him instantly: Buffoon! "And would you like to know why, Doctor?"

"Not especially -" McCoy began, wanting to preserve the magic of the moment, but that did not stop Harbinger.

"Despite the fact that the concerto is labeled A-major, the second movement is in the relative key of F-sharp minor..." Harbinger began to pontificate. If he expected interruption, it came from a heretofore silent source.

"A key so rare in Mozart's work that his choice of it here portends something special: a melancholy so deep and so resigned that it borders on despair..." Spock interjected quietly. "Yet the melody is of such ravishing beauty and sensuous charm that it almost conceals the intensity of emotion."

McCoy and Harbinger were not the only ones gaping at him.

"As attributed to Edward Downes, a twentieth-century musicologist in his New York Philharmonic Guide to the Symphony," the Vulcan added, as if anyone might have known it.

"Yes, of course, Mr. Spock!" McCoy picked up on it immediately, elbowing Harbinger out of the way. "Brilliant fellow, Downes. A truly seminal mind, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes, Doctor," Spock deadpanned. "A truly seminal mind."

McCoy had grabbed Harbinger by one elbow, and before he could protest the familiarity, he discovered his other elbow had been commandeered by a Vulcan. Even Harbinger was not fool enough to argue. He found himself propelled from the ship's theater at full impulse. Jim Kirk exchanged glances with Uhura; it was difficult to say who was the more relieved.

Jandra did not concern herself with such human nuances; the overlarge buffoon was removed from her consciousness as easily as he had been removed from the room. Jandra rose from the keyboard to embrace T'Shael, who permitted it out of their special kinship.

"Thank you," the Romulan said.

PASSACAGLIA
(and Greater Is Despair)

Ayt, offspring of Wun and Sen, quite ancient now, listened to the sky. Ayt was eldest of the eldest, and honorficked Sage, in memory of one who had been legend when she was but a calf. Eldest of the eldest, Ayt listened to the sky, and Heard.

She no longer listened to the Songs from Secondworld; they grew more troubling with each journey of the blue-white sun, source of all their wisdom, all their woes. If it was sorrow Ayt wanted, she need only listen to the songs sung on her own world: songs of populations dwindling, songs of hunger, songs of cold. Secondworld's songs only differed in that they were songs of hunger, songs of torpor, songs of heat. All were songs of sorrow, songs of solitude, despair.

None of the beings calved anymore. How give life one could not feed? Soon even the youngest would be too old to calve. There was barely energy for coupling anymore, and what there was was joyless, distracted, sad. Perhaps better not to couple at all than to couple in indifference.

There were never enough krill. On Secondworld the too-warm dwindling oceans killed countless hatchlings; they floated on the surface, dead and spoiled, and those desperate enough to eat them sickened; many died. It was hard to feel more than relief, that there were fewer fools to feed.

On Firstworld, cold killed countless krill before they hatched.

The beings had reconsidered their law about All It Was Permitted to Eat, but too late. What else of substance was there to eat, lacking krill? Slickeels swam too fast for flippered fingers to fasten on, and spidercrabs proved too brittle - all shell and no substance; one could not eat enough of them. The beings swam slower, energy sapping. Too weary to calve, too weary to couple, almost too weary to sing.

The Songs were dying, too. Perhaps a hundred thousand years before (Ayt remembered, for her father Wun was still alive then, and had had a voice in it), the males on Firstworld had refused to weave new songs for the new season. There was no purpose, they sang. Why new songs for a dying world?

Did it surprise the females to Hear the same argument reprised from Secondworld? And with each male's death, his own song and his mate-songs, clan-songs died, never to be replaced.

No new songs for a hundred thousand years, and the old songs had lost their meaning in the end of Worlds. Ayt, eldest of the eldest, no longer listened to the Worldsongs. Let the other females do this. Ayt tended the pharos, waiting nightly for planet nightside, to listen to the stars.

She would listen for the Messenger, Gatherer, Traveler, Wanderer - more prosaically: Probe. Why had it not returned?

Foolish, Ayt knew, to listen for three hundred years, yet it was not as if there were some more urgent task awaiting her. Listening consumed little energy, therefore Ayt consumed little krill. Let that be her contribution, if nothing else. Knowing herself foolish, Ayt listened.

More could go wrong than right for a swimmer in the silent sea, singing its siren song. The wisdom of the Pithai - wisdom of rocks and rockets - had shielded it well against assault. The wisdom of the crystal caves - memory of things with teeth - had taught it the siren song with which to warn: Stay away, you who do not know the Songs. The Messenger was well protected from whatever swam the silent sea.

And the pharos stood, to guide it home.

Why then had it not returned?

Ayt, offspring of Wun and Sen, eldest of the eldest and honorificked Sage, had a thought which troubled her more than all other thoughts:

What if there were that in the silent sea with teeth so strong they could devour even a Probe?...

FUGUE

"It evades us, Commander," the subcommander of the Romulan vessel *Ch'vran* reported, her eyes narrowed above the scanner scope, "but from the data we have gathered on it, we believe it to be the very same entity which passed through Sector Five some months ago."

Do all ships' subcommanders employ the collective "we" in addressing their superiors, the commander wondered, or am I the only one so blessed? She vaulted out of the command chair to peer over her second's shoulder.

"The very same entity which disabled two of our Klingon brethren and, if rumor is to be believed, almost destroyed the Fed homeworld, leaving us unscathed only because none of our ships was within interception range," the commander said thoughtfully. Even without prior knowledge of it, the sheer size of the thing was daunting. "Given its history, it were better if we evade it. Do you mean to say it is actually altering course as we do?"

"Yes, Commander."

"Navigator," the commander frowned as she returned to her sea, locking the restraint from force of habit. "Confirm cloaking device."

The *Ch'vran* was not precisely inside the Neutral Zone, but skirting dangerously close to it. Thus the cloaking device, which made it unreadable at this range by its counterpart on the Fed side of the Zone. Great care was being taken by the Interim Government not to create incidents so long as the *Hannsu* lay under *Enterprise*'s guns at the heart of the Zone. But regardless of the care with which *Ch'vran* was avoiding notice, this huge and almost featureless entity could read the Romulan ship, even at this distance, even cloaked. Daunting indeed.

"Cloak confirmed, Commander," the navigator replied after some moments.

"And this thing reads us through the cloak?" the commander asked of no one in particular. "How is this possible?"

"Perhaps its navigation does not function as ours," the navigator offered. He was a recent transfer, and unaware of his commander's penchant for rhetorical questions. "Perhaps it reads us by our displacement rather than our actual form. Some manner of sonar -"

"Helm -" the commander cut him off. "- Evasive Maneuver Four. Hold to impulse, and track the entity. "We'll see how it reacts to that!"

For a split second there was no sound but the bleep and hum of instrumentation and the tick-tack of the helmsman's fingers on the controls. Then the artificial gravity hiccuped and the *Ch'vran* began to buck and weave, and everyone on her bridge clung to whatever they could until their course straightened out and the helm reported what they could all see on tactical for themselves.

"It mirrors us, Commander. Motion for motion."

"To follow or to evade?" This question was not rhetorical.

"Clearly to evade, Commander. It is as if we were some small animal it did not wish to trample underfoot."

The commander liked this image not at all. If her helmsman was wrong, her next order could get them all killed.

"Helm," the commander leaned forward against the restraint, intense. "Try moving toward it..."

"I'm offduty at 1200," Uhura told Lt. Kittay from the bridge. "You report to me in my quarters at 1205."

"Yes, ma'am!" Uhura could hear the tremor in the girl's voice. Doubtless the by-the-book Kittay had never been in so much trouble in her life.

Uhura allowed herself to relax at her station, swing her chair a little, remove the ubiquitous earpiece from her ear. The Romulans were safely back aboard their vessel, with Riley and Centurion Tiam having agreed upon a time to meet planetside tomorrow to begin their talks. *Enterprise* would be as back to normal as *Enterprise* ever got, once Uhura had given Kittay a dressing-down for failing to manage Sir Rodney Harbinger.

Uhura hated the thought. Kittay was good at what she did as long as she concentrated on what she'd been trained for. But ship's scuttlebutt had it was disgruntled with her current assignment, felt she'd been passed over for something better, and was maybe, just maybe, guilty of a little self-sabotage.

Okay, Uhura thought, contemplating the forward screen's view of the dull dun planet below, and the back of Spock's sleek head as he sat at the conn: I'm a communications expert, not a psychiatrist, and this kid's personal problems are not my bailiwick. But when she lets a loose cannon like Rodney Harbinger go rolling around on the bridge, it's my job to start communicating!

A telltale on the commboard flashed. Uhura straightened up and put the earpiece back in her ear.

"Mr. Spock? Message incoming from the First Federation vessel Guarnerius."

Spock swung the center seat a few degrees in her direction to indicate he was listening.

"She's patrolling Sector Five, picking up where Saratoga leaves off," Uhura reported, translating as it came in. "They've spotted the Probe, sir. Re-entering the Romulan Neutral Zone at one-one-one Mark fourteen, almost exactly where it emerged the first time."

"Can it wait, Spock?" Jim Kirk asked when the Vulcan buzzed him in the aft lounge. "I have more immediate problems than the Probe on my mind just now."

He could picture Spock canting his head slightly before he answered.

"Sir, time differential between us and the Guarnerius is over twelve hours, meaning that the Probe has been heading into Romulan space for at least that much time." There was nothing in his tone to indicate he thought Kirk was being cranky. Why did Kirk suddenly feel that way? "Suggest that in view of our present state of d,tente, we provide Commander Rihan with knowledge of our experience with the Probe, and request that he ask the Interim Government's permission to continue tracking it."

Kirk took his time deciding, aware of three pairs of eyes watching him closely.

"Inform the Romulans of the Probe's presence, by all means. But you've been tracking it on your own initiative, Spock. Starfleet may not welcome your curiosity any more than the Romulans would."

"Captain..."

Kirk sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. He was being cranky.

"All right. Send Commander Rihan my regards, inform him of the Probe's whereabouts, let him take it from there. As for asking permission to continue tracking it - that's at your discretion."

"Understood, Captain."

"Good. Kirk out."

"Now, then." He returned his attention to Riley, Cleante and T'Shael, whom he'd assembled in the aft lounge before the Romulans had finished materializing on the *Hannsu*. "I want to know what the hell's going on. Who goes first?"

To his surprise, it was T'Shael.

"Your puzzlement is logical, Captain, but your anger is not." Her tone was even, her hooded eyes intense as she neutralized the psychological distance between them - Kirk standing, playing at command mode, she seated, contained, centered - with her steady gaze. Kirk felt himself shrinking to less than heroic proportions, as he often did in Vulcan eyes. "My knowledge of Jandra's acquaintance with my father, and her desire to communicate her gratitude to me, are of no consequence to my function as interpreter. Or is it suddenly illicit to have any personal knowledge of a Romulan?"

Kirk wasn't convinced that was all there was to it. "You mean to tell me you had no idea she and Dajan were sister and brother?"

"I did not."

Kirk sat across from Cleante. "You never bothered to mention you had a contact inside the Empire. Riley, did you know about this?"

"Not an inkling, Jim." He leaned toward Cleante. "And I have to say I'm very disappointed, darlin'. You might've told me."

"Oh, listen to the two of you!" Cleante jumped to her feet impatiently. "A 'contact' inside the Empire! As if I were a bloody spy!

"We're civilians, Captain." Her gesture took in T'Shael. "Your rules don't apply to us. So what if Dajan and I wished to exchange ideas and professional chat across the Zone? I've never known an archeologist to start a war; we spend entirely too much of our time digging through what's left after. And don't suggest I knew Dajan would be assigned to this dig -" she went on while Kirk was still opening his mouth, " - because I hadn't a clue. He was in disgrace, remember?"

"And you never thought to ask why?" Kirk asked narrowly.

"As if he could have safely told me -!" Cleante countered, exasperated. "But there were hundreds, maybe thousands of more Orthodox scientists ahead of him on the Lists. If the Praetor's death hadn't made the last first so to speak the odds on his ever being allowed outside to mingle with humans would be - well, I'm sure Spock could tell you. T'Shael?"

"I would need to know the precise number of archaeologists on the Lists to estimate the odds," the Vulcan said quite seriously; if Kirk and Cleante could have seen their identical roll-eyed reaction they might have stopped shouting at each other right then. "However, Dajan's presence here is highly improbable."

"There you are!" Cleante said triumphantly, her tone reminding Kirk not a little of Gillian Taylor.

"It's a valid point, Jim," Riley offered, though he still looked at Cleante askance. "All the same, you might have told me."

"It didn't seem relevant." Calmer now, Cleante sat back down beside him. "Besides, I was more concerned with Dajan's safety. It didn't seem right to go randomly mentioning his name."

"Let me see if I've got this straight," Kirk said, still skeptical. He had no particular reason to distrust either Cleante or T'Shael, but all of this sounded entirely too neat. "As a child prodigy, Jandra comes to the attention of T'Shael's father, who teaches her to play Mozart while on a tour of the Empire. Years later, in a totally unrelated set of circumstances, Cleante strikes up a long distance friendship with a Romulan archeologist, completely unaware that he has a twin sister who was T'Shael's father's pupil."

"Correct," T'Shael replied.

"Well, here's a little bombshell for you." Kirk watched both women's faces closely. "Dajan and Jandra had an older brother named Delar. He was a career military officer who, because of his exemplary record, was put on special assignment. That special assignment was to lead the force which infiltrated Vulcan and had you both kidnapped."

Cleante inhaled sharply, remembering the high-strung leader of the kidnappers, and how his near-hysteria had made them fear for their lives. T'Shael's hooded eyes simply became more hooded.

"That's why Dajan was on the unOrthodox list!" Cleante said at last.

Kirk nodded. "The mission went wrong or, to be more accurate, the Praetor changed his mind. Delar was disgraced and ultimately executed, and the onus fell on the entire clan group. At least, Uhura tells me that's usually the case."

Riley was nodding. It made sense to him. Cleante was shaking her head.

"When he talked about the sins of his brethren, I thought he was being poetic...It's too weird! But so what? It's got nothing to do with Dajan himself."

"You don't think he might have cultivated your friendship all these years, hoping for the kind of opportunity he has here -"

"To do what?" Cleante snapped. "We're going to be down in the metropolis, kilometers away from the Dome. Unless you want to tie me in with your conspiracy theory -"

"Cleante..." Kirk held out his hands to her - charming, disarming, it's-a-dirty-job-but-someone-has-to-do-it. "Forgive the paranoia. I have to be sure."

"Well, you can bloody well be sure!" Cleante snapped, refusing to be taken in by his charm. "Dajan's as apolitical as I am, and as far as I'm concerned the only benefit of this peace initiative is that it gives me access to the Korff ruins - I'm sorry, Kevin, but that's my feeling about it. And since both the Federation Council and your own superiors, Captain Kirk, have vetted T'Shael and cleared her for this mission, you have no business questioning her loyalty!" She saw Kirk's surprised look. "Or did you think Sarek's word was sufficient to allow her here?"

"I honestly hadn't thought about it at all," Kirk said ingenuously, remembering a time not too long ago when Cleante had called him Jim. He tried to imagine austere, introverted T'Shael facing the Council and Starfleet Command, answering their questions, passing their test. Of course she would, too, possessed like all Vulcans of that incredible centeredness.

"Nevertheless, T'Shael, I have to ask...If you had known any of this...about Cleante's correspondence with Dajan, for example -"

"I was aware of it, Captain."

"And you didn't think you had an obligation -?"

" - to possibly endanger Dajan within his own Empire?" T'Shael repeated Cleante's objection to the breach of privacy. "No, Captain, I had no such obligation."

"Suppose you'd known about Delar?" Kirk shot back.

"It would have made no difference," T'Shael countered. "The Romulans may impute a sibling's actions upon his brethren, and Earthmen have a saying, I believe, about the sins of the fathers. There is no such guilt by consanguinity written in my philosophy, Captain Kirk. On the day when the ephemera which divide us from our distant brothers vanish, what will become of the barriers you are creating now?"

"Is that your political philosophy?" Kirk wanted to know. "Is that what you told the Council when they asked?"

"I have no political philosophy, Captain, and the Council did not ask." Ordinarily so silent, T'Shael grew positively eloquent. "I have my skills as interpreter and my honor as a Vulcan. I require nothing more."

"But you swore an oath -" Kirk persisted, playing devil's advocate, or was his audience aware of that?

" - to abide by the terms of the Peace Initiative, and to interpret for both parties fairly and to the best of my abilities." T'Shael's eyes burned into his. "Nothing more."

Kirk dropped the pretense at last. "That's all I wanted to know."

"Helm -?" There was puzzlement in the Commander's voice. She could see what had just happened on the tactical display, but she was no less puzzled.

"First it stopped, Commander," her helmsman explained. "Dead in space. Then it began to make that hooting noise, which sensors indicate is caused by -"

"Yes, yes, we all heard it!" the Commander said shortly, with a sidelong glance at her comm officer, who had gotten inquisitive and left the ship-to-ship open. Her ears were still ringing, and most of the bridge crew was no better off. "What's it doing now?"

"Commander, it is -" The helmsman couldn't believe his readings. "it is backing off! As if it were afraid of us."

"Or simply afraid to step on us," the Commander reminded him. "Keep after it. Increase to three-quarter impulse."

The *Ch'vran* increased speed, the Probe increased speed equally, continuing to back off. Then it tried to veer around, as it had when the *Ch'vran* had moved away from it.

If it means to attack, it's a very peculiar tactic! the Commander thought, then: "Do you think we might scare it back to the Fed side?"

Was this a rhetorical question? Helm and navigator exchanged glances; neither spoke.

"Helm, full stop," the Commander said suddenly, weary of watching the behemoth sidling around something it could have incinerated with a louder version of the hooting it had made before.

"Full stop, Commander."

They listened to their own heartbeats and the warble of machinery, their eyes glued to the tactical. The behemoth seemed to decide something. It stopped its backward-sideways movement, pivoted on its own axis, and moved off at full impulse, giving the Romulan ship the back of it.

"Heading?" the Commander asked her navigator.

"If it keeps to this vector, Commander..." He calculated rapidly. "It will pass close to the Wlaariivi worlds. After that, perhaps, the homeworlds. Shall we notify -?"

"No, belay that!" the Commander barked, suddenly animated. Notify whom? she thought.

If her new navigator found his commander's behavior strange, he said nothing; he was too new to risk his neck against whatever cabals and secret agenda his crewmates might be involved in. Invisible strands of intrigue interwrapped every Romulan vessel's bridge, spinning themselves down turboshafts and corridors, extending back through hyperspace at the touch of a comm-toggle to the heart of the Empire itself.

For years the Praetor had meant Power, and the webs were readable. After him came chaos, and there was no telling whose loyalties lay where. A junior officer's best recourse was to keep his ears open and his mouth shut.

Nor was a senior officer's lot any better; it was rather a junior officer's dilemma squared. Orders were still issued by the same voices, belonging to the same faces, but how long would those faces hold the commpics should their faction fall out of favor?

In the ancient days of Empire, the bodies of the fallen would be laid out on the cobbles as a lesson, but these were more sophisticated days. Bodies vanished, along with the names they'd borne, in the Praetor's wake as in his time; they were simply replaced with newer, different bodies, different names.

What was this Interim Government, and who really pulled its strings? A fleet commander, patrolling the Zone, out on the rim, knew only what comm noise told her, and that was only as reliable as its tellers. Were the recent rumors of coup true, or only testing? Declare pleasure at a government's overthrow and tighten the garrotte about your own throat? Or seem lukewarm and leave yourself open to traps which sprang on later dates? It was a fine line, razor-sharp, and many a commander looked into the Zone with new eyes, seeing it not as the edge of perdition, but as a new horizon.

The commander of the *Ch'vran* had not yet made up her mind. Mind her manners, mind her mouth, and she might yet live and keep her mind and her command. Was it too much to ask? For the first time grateful for her lot on border patrol, she knew she and hers were better off out of it until the true face of the Empire showed itself.

"Comm!" the commander of the *Ch'vran* barked; had she always been this overwrought or was it recent? "Send coordinates and heading of this thing to Outpost Seven, at once."

"But Commander - not Three and Eight? It is between us and them. Seven is entirely -"

"Are your ears still ringing from its noise, or has it damaged your brain? Implement!"

"Yes, Commander," her comm officer replied, sliding a look at the helm, who was pointedly minding his own business. His business did not include remarking upon the fact that Outpost Seven was far enough away from the homeworlds for a message to take two days on hyperchannel. "At once, Commander."

"...or I can transfer you down to the galley and put you to work stoking the food processors," Uhura told a shame-faced M'Lynn Kittay. "Or maybe you could scrub floors. I don't think your generation even knows how to do that! But I'll tell you one thing: if you're not happy working with me, then I'm not happy having you in my department. Do you read me?"

"Yes, ma'am" was all Kittay could think of to say.

"I don't understand you!" Uhura went on. "Your personnel profile indicates you're an ideal people-person. You're intelligent, personable, well-integrated, and as motivated as most people your age. But motivated toward what? You say you wanted a DiploCorps assignment? Or, correct me if I'm wrong, what you said was you wanted Ensign Ryan's assignment. As if we could all pick and choose -! You know the old saying about being careful what you wish for? Honey, what do you think Communications is about if not diplomacy?"

Kittay looked down at the tips of her boots; Uhura couldn't see her face, only the top of her tawny-blond head. She was a tall girl, and Uhura had deliberately sat her down to minimize the difference in their height. But Kittay sat ramrod stiff among the throw pillows and pseudofur rugs, only her bowed head giving her feelings away.

I hate this! Uhura thought, and moved over to sit beside Kittay, taking her hands in her own.

"Listen to me, sweetie," she said, more favorite aunt than superior officer. "If you can ride herd on Rodney Harbinger for the rest of this voyage, you'll have learned everything there is to know about diplomacy, and I'll personally write up your recommendation. Do you read me?"

When Kittay finally found the courage to look up, she was smiling. "Loud and clear, Commander!"

"Playing intergalactic street cop again, is he?" McCoy had ambled uninvited into the aft lounge, having run into Cleante and T'Shael in the 'lift and surmising from the contained fury on Cleante's face approximately what had gone on.

"Something like that," Riley admitted carefully, never having seen this side of Jim Kirk before.

"Dammit, somebody's got to keep an eye on the whole picture!" Kirk said testily, mindful of Sarek's words, but also hating himself in direct proportion to his fondness for the two who had just left. "You heard the speech. Politics is 'ephemera.' Everything we fought for during the Romulan wars is 'ephemera.' And this from a linguist, so it's a deliberate choice of word. If she wasn't a Vulcan..."

"Jim, what exactly did we fight for during the Romulan Wars?" McCoy wondered. "And there's that pontifical 'we' again. The face is, we didn't fight the Romulan Wars, the previous generation did. I seem to remember it was you who gave that particular speech. Now, given the Romulan lifespan, there are probably veteran commanders out there on their side who did fight that war, but we have no right -"

"Dammit, Riley, what do you think?" Kirk demanded, cutting McCoy off. "Are the ties of blood so strong, the ancient loyalties so powerful that we don't stand a chance? Given a choice, does a Vulcan who doesn't believe in politics side with the Romulans or with us?"

"Oh, now, hold on a minute -" McCoy tried to interject. "Let's try to remember who we're talking about, shall we?"

"Or did something happen during those six months the Romulans held her captive..." Kirk's eyes narrowed as he stared at the place where T'Shael had been sitting. "Both of them, remember. Something that didn't exactly turn them, but -"

"I can't believe I'm hearing this from you!" Riley said in defense of T'Shael; any statement he made about Cleante could be construed as less than objective. "You'd never ask those questions about Spock."

"I'm not talking about Spock!" Kirk snapped, thinking: maybe I should be. Thinking of Talos IV, among other incidents, and a conversation about V'ger which had taken place in the forerunner of this very room.

"Then I don't know what you're talking about, but I do know I don't want to hear any more of it!" Riley said, his temper flaring. "Besides, Captain, it's really none of your business, is it? T'Shael's working with me, and I trust her implicitly. And I may not know all the nuances of the Court Language, but I know enough basic Rom to catch on if I think she's playing me fast and loose."

"I'd make that assumption from the beginning," Kirk said sincerely. "I also wouldn't let my - romantic attachments - cloud my judgment, either."

"Well, if that isn't the pot calling the kettle -" Riley got to his feet, reminding himself for the umpteenth time that he was a diplomat, and that diplomats didn't pop a senior officer in the mouth just because that officer's mouth was running overtime. "Excuse me, but I think this conversation's over!"

Kirk watched Riley leave. "Don't say it, Bones," he warned McCoy.

"If I said anything, it would just be that you sound paranoid even for you, Jim," McCoy offered innocently. "And I'm not going to say it, because being paranoid, you'd just decide you were being persecuted, and -"

"Bones -!" Kirk waved him to silence. He hadn't had a headache before this conversation started.

"Or are you going to tell me this was all an act?" McCoy gestured at the now-empty lounge. "You know what your grandmother used to say about your eyes getting stuck if you kept crossing them? You'll play devil's advocate once too often."

"Yes and no," Kirk said grimly. "I'm not sure what I think or who I trust. This whole mission smells fishy. But I do know Riley's not cut out to be the villain, so if it has to be somebody..."

McCoy rolled his eyes. "The sacrifices we make in the line of duty!"

Kirk ignored him. "I also know that no matter how innocent Cleante and her Romulan friend are, they're going to need a watchdog."

Riley had advised Ensign Ryan to turn in early on this, the eve of their first working sit-down with

Centurion Tiam, but Ryan was too keyed up to sleep. The thought of his first real diplomatic mission - and to the Romulans at that - had him bouncing around inside his own head, unable even to sit still for very long. No matter that he was only a glorified gofer, assigned to observe and record and deep the Federation's official portable servitor stocked with hot coffee, Kevin J. Ryan was about to become part of Federation history.

What he needed, he decided, craning his neck in the main entrance of the rec dec to see if Harper and the other off-duty engineers were there, was some music and a little camaraderie to take the edge off. He didn't need to look so much as listen in order to find Harper. Until this moment he hadn't even known the rec dec sported an old upright piano, but there was Harper, making it sing. Was there an instrument he couldn't play? He never seemed to tire, either; he was up at 0600 race-walking every morning, pulled a full shift and then some under Scotty's scrutiny, and somehow had energy left over to entertain his confreres well into the wee hours. Ryan was about to join them when, halfway across the rec dec, he suddenly put on the brakes.

Commander Sulu was there among the engineering crew, and he might not have been enough to faze Ryan all by himself, though senior officers tended to make him twitchy. What made Ryan change course was the girl.

Annek, equals Anarchy, Kevin Ryan thought, his sudden wittiness surprising him. The boss said all Irishmen were poets. Ryan wouldn't go that far, but maybe he'd take his C.O.'s advice and hit the sack.

Instead, he turned on his heel and hit smack into M'Lynn Kittay.

"The nerve of him!" Cleante raged, storming around T'Shael's quarters. "Interrogating us - questioning you of all people -"

"Captain Kirk is understandably concerned with the security of this mission," T'Shael suggested, unperturbed.

"Or else he doesn't have enough to do!" was Cleante's opinion.

"She's where?" Lord Harbinger demanded when he had summoned Annak, and been told she was not in her room. "Hanging about with the Engineering crew? Disloyalty, disaffection - I won't stand for it!"

He tried programming the wall servitor for more Saurian brandy, having long ago drunk its stock of scotch and most other hard liquor. When the servitor balked and refused to serve him anything more - Kirk had ordered a time-lock on it, based upon what he thought was a quota sufficient to keep Harbinger quiescent without tipping him over the edge into belligerence - Harbinger swore.

"I'll show them! I'll refuse to perform! I shall be like Achilles in his tent, and to hell with all of them! And one of you may inform Annak, that she is no longer in my employ!"

"Gosh, Lieutenant, you look awful!" Ryan blurted, Kittay's red-rimmed eyes negating every shred of diplomacy he had ever learned. "Is there anything I can do?"

You! Kittay thought. You're the cause of all of this! But that wasn't the truth, and she'd finally realized it.

"No, I was just - looking for a friend."

"Well, your friend looks to be communing on some sort of musicians' wavelength," Ryan said, nodding in Annek's direction, then for the first time really looking at Kittay. She was enough to make a man eternally grateful for Retinax-5. "Would you allow a lowly ensign to buy you a drink?"

"I think I'd like that," Kittay said, surprising herself.

Setting up the conference at 0800 the next morning, Ryan discreetly hid a yawn. Only T'Shael noticed, and as discreetly pretended not to.

Centurion Tiam did not yawn. Centurion Tiam did not seem capable of yawning, unless it should prove to his advantage. He sat down the length of the table from Riley, glitteringly alert, and before all else he spoke to T'Shael.

By Romulan proposal and Federation acquiescence, the conference table was rectangular, with Riley at one end and Tiam at the other, though with no suggestion that either end constituted the head or foot of said table. Tiam and a great deal of state-of-the-Romulan-art recording equipment, including an earpiece wherein he could follow rapid re-records of both Riley's Standard and T'Shael's translation if he so desired, were ensconced at his end.

Riley, a small tricorder on the table before him and Ensign Ryan at his left elbow jotting on a datapadd, occupied the opposite end. Water carafes and both round and square drinking glasses had been set in the center of the table by a pair of the *Hannsu*'s functionaries - *Enterprise* would provide its own freshly distilled spring water on alternate days - and it was approximately opposite these that T'Shael sat, the space before her devoid of any recording implement; she required only her ear and her eidetic memory.

She sat to Riley's right and Tiam's left, Uhura's provided protocol having indicated that Romulans attached as much significance to the left hand as Earth's Muslims did to the right, and equidistant from both of them.

The *Hannsu* functionaries had barely beamed up, and Ryan was still adjusting the contrast on his 'padd screen when Tiam, his handsome face drawn into a stiff, stark smile, spoke:

"It is said you are good, Vulcan. How good?"

He had deliberately chosen the subtlety of the Court language.

"As good as I am required to be," T'Shael replied in kind.

"How good is that?" Tiam demanded, switching to one of the colonial sublinguae.

"The best the Federation can provide," T'Shael replied in the same tongue and utterly without ego.

Tiam hid his surprise well, though his smile tightened and one eyelid might have twitched. The language he spoke this time was Rom Basic.

"Then you may inform your Commander Riley that my government has rejected Captain Spock's rather peculiar request. We are not aware of the presence of any so-named Probe in our space. Permission to run longrange scans for any reason, or to request information from any of the Empire's inclusive worlds, is therefore denied."

"Hi!" Sulu called as he lowered himself down the cliff-face above the Korff ruins to where Sharf had been observing him since the Andorian had first heard the transporter effect. The helmsman's feet slipped on the loose scree and he slid the last few yards on his posterior, dusted himself off, and extended one hand. "Sulu, though you can call me Hikaru. You must be Sharf." He nodded to the Andorian's Romulan counterpart, who observed him with the indifference of someone who doesn't know the language. "Doc around?"

The Andorian studied the human carefully as he shook his outstretched hand. Sulu had worn his civvies or, more precisely, field gear so new it creaked, and had obviously been wrung out of Ships' Stores only this morning.

"Dr. alFaisal and kerDajan are excavating in the Petitions Hall." Sharf ducked his antennae to indicate the direction, as the crow would fly, if there had been crows on Dlondra.

Sulu nodded, as if he knew perfectly well what a Petitions Hall was. "And how would I get there?"

"Well, you could have pinpointed the life form readings and beamed directly in," Sharf pointed out, watching the human warily, "but since you prefer to walk: Down Granary Street till you reach the Guild Quad, then turn a Sunward degree until you come to the Sailmakers' dormitories. Petitions is the four-story pinkstone building with the broken cornice across the way.

It sounded fairly straightforward, unless you knew that for all its sophistication the Korff culture had not possessed such a thing as a right angle. Streets wound and meandered according to song-patterns, and unless you had studied the song-patters, you could end up doubling back on yourself for days.

"Thanks!" Sulu said, heading off decisively.

Sharf was impressed. Either the human knew the song-patterns, or he had already read the life-forms and was just showing off. If the first was the case, he would find Cleante and Dajan; if the second, he'd be lost within five minutes, because things on the ground on a Korff world looked a lot different than they did from a scanner in space.

All the same, Sharf thought, Cleante can be real snarky about uninvited visitors. He waited until he was

sure Sulu was out of earshot before pulling a communicator out of his pocket.

"Cleante?" he hissed softly. "Tourist Alert!"

"Captain Spock can provide you with the exact coordinates where the Probe reentered the Zone, and its likeliest trajectory," Riley was saying, a tight rein on his impatience while he waited for T'Shael's painstaking translation. The very fact that this pompous Romulan ass understood every word, and that T'Shael had been unnecessarily dragged across a galaxy ticked Riley off immediately, but more to the point, he was not going to let the peace initiative get sidetracked over a Probe.

"Commander Riley," Tiam replied with his tight smug smile. "My government has specifically stated that there is no Probe. Why do you persist in this?"

"Centurion, this particular nonexistent entity gave us a scare not too long ago," Riley said, at his affable best, "and while we don't think it presents any particular danger at present, we wanted you to be aware of it, that's all. Perhaps one of your own ships could intercept and provide you with the evidence you need. But -"

Riley shrugged, as if it were a matter of total indifference to him. At the same time he tapped Ryan on the wrist.

"Don't bother recording that last lot, boyo," he said sotto voce, and waited while Ryan put down his stylus and deactivated the tricorder. "But keep your ears on. This is how you learn.

"No sense talking about something that doesn't exist," he explained for Tiam's benefit, knowing those Romulan ears, and probably the Romulan recording devices, had picked up every word. "But in case you'd like verification at some later date, our most recent data was provided by a First Federation vessel. If you don't believe us -"

Tiam uttered a single gruff word, which T'Shael somewhat apologetically rendered as "troglodytes." While the Empire had no current feud with Balok's people, they apparently did not meet Romulan standards of genetic estheticism.

Riley shrugged off the ethnic slur, seeming to shrug Tiam off with the same gesture. He nodded to Ryan to resume recording.

"Okay, darlin'," he addressed T'Shael lightly, knowing Tiam understood every word, and was attuned to every nuance. This is how much I care, Tiam me lad! he seemed to be saying. "You choose your words carefully on this one, and use Rom Basic so there's no misunderstanding. Inform Centurion Tiam that whether the Probe exists or not, I'm impressed with the response time it got from his government. Tell him I'm pleased to know that the Praetor's passing, while regrettable, has apparently not altered the Romulan reputation for efficiency and keeping the railroads running on time. My question to him would be: Who's running the railroads?"

The dull dun Dlundron sun slanted over Sulu's shoulder and directly in Dajan's face as the Romulan stood on the broken steps of the Petitions Hall, studying the human just long enough to make the unflappable helmsman more than a little nervous. He was not nearly as nervous, however, as Dajan.

It was good that Sharf had informed them of Sulu's approach, Dajan thought; he would not have wanted his most recent conversation with Cleante overheard. Their two teams had more or less paired off to work at sites scattered about the entire Korff settlement, leaving him and Cleante alone together much of the time. The dialogue they had begun across the Zone was now resumed in person. It was indeed as if they had known each other for years.

This had not assured they would not occasionally strike a nerve.

"No one's blaming you for your brother's actions, Daj!" Cleante insisted, gingerly unrolling a recently-discovered skin-scroll that was at least two thousand years old, feeding its data into her tricorder - set on infrared to enhance the "read" on the text - one segment at a time. Across the main room of the Petitions Hall, Dajan was taking readings on the surfaces of furniture with his own more primitive recording devices, wondering if there would be fingerprints after this much time. "I'm not even sure it's fair to blame Delar. He was, as the saying goes, only following orders. It wasn't his fault Theras went berserk and one of his crew shot him, and it was the Klingon's sadistic experiments that killed the Deltans. Blame the political climate of the times - I don't know. But regardless, it's got nothing to do with you. And this communal guilt thing is getting very old!"

Carefully she rerolled the scroll and put it back in its case, motioning Dajan to join her as she reran the tricorder. They studied the readings with their two very different heads together, almost touching, their posture tender, like lovers'. Indeed they were lovers, lovers of archeology and its mysteries; they could have worked together this way for the rest of their days. Cleante wondered if she'd ever felt this kinship with a human digger, and decided not.

"Extraordinary!" Dajan said, awe in his voice. "See how the infrared enhances the text. Look, you can actually see where the errata were scraped away and new words superimposed over the them. What a key into the mind of the writer it would be, if only we could translate them."

"Supposedly we can't, without the musical accompaniment." Cleante shut off the tricorder. "Crater's theory was that the Korff were actually the backward cousins of the Preservers, though I've tried setting their script to Spock's transcription of Preserver music, and either there isn't enough or Crater had rocks in his head. Besides, Crater never saw the Korff scripts personally; the Wars and the rezoning saw to that." She covered her mouth with one hand, incredulous. "I just realized I'm the first human to have access to all this in a century."

"I might offer an apology for that as well," Dajan said.

"Don't start! Next you'll blame yourself for starting a war that was over I don't know how many decades before you were born." She laughed then. "You know, I have no idea how old you are! No, don't tell me! You look all of twenty-five; leave me with my illusions. Any luck with prints?"

Dajan ran a section of tape through his recorder. "None. Your equipment is so far superior to ours!"

"Well, if nothing else, maybe Kevin and Tiam will be able to abolish the trade embargoes." Cleante's mind returned to the Korff scroll. "Damn, I wish T'Shael weren't so busy! She'd be almost as good as a rosetta."

Dajan looked at her blankly. "A what?"

"Sorry. A Rosetta Stone." Dajan continued to look blank. "A tablet, a device, anything that's written in more than one language. That way if you have even a working knowledge of one of them -"

"-you can use it as a key to translate the rest. A rosetta. I must remember this. T'Shael is that good?"

Cleante nodded. "I think so. And this whole sham with the conference is a pity, too, because she had to abandon some important work back on Earth, and she isn't really needed here."

"Tell me more about her," Dajan said then, making it sound like a plea.

T'Shael had translated Riley's words literally. Centurion Tiam looked puzzled for a moment, then smiled his tight little smile.

"If I understand your metaphor correctly, Commander, you are asking me who presently rules the Empire. Surely you know that the death of a Praetor does not leave a vacuum. Above him are the Consul and of course the Emperor. By definition any praetor is only third in power."

"'Third in rank, but first in power'," Riley managed in Rom basic, interrupting T'Shael's translation, borrowing Sarek's words and, he hoped, some of his sangfroid. "Come on, Tiam. Reality check. Who's running the Empire?"

Tiam was a wonderful actor. Riley's sarcasm was an affront, an affront to which he could not react without exposing his knowledge of Standard. Instead, he timed his reaction to coincide with T'Shael's meticulous, if deadpan, translation.

"I pity you!" Tiam whispered rapidly to T'Shael in Court Language, as if to take her into his confidence. "That you must translate his insults -!"

T'Shael offered no response.

"Well!" Tiam gave his attention back to Riley. "You pretend to take me lightly, Commander, but I know how important this conference is, both to your government, and to your personal career. Therefore I refuse to be insulted. Who my government is is not important. That I am here, is. While I am here, you treat with me, regardless of who my superiors are. How else shall we learn to trust one another?"

"Well, Tiam my friend, as the Russians say: Doveryai no proveryai."

He motioned to Ryan, who shut down all the recording equipment, signalled the transporter room that the conference was over for the day, and grabbed the portable servitor, all at the same time.

The expression on Tiam's face was a wonder to behold.

"I do not - this is some obscure dialect, is it not?" he demanded of T'Shael, almost giving himself away.

T'Shael spoke Russian better than most Russians.

"It is a language spoken by a people well-served in the nuances of trust, Centurion," she replied. "It means, 'trust, but verify!'"

"She is my dearest, most trusted friend," Cleante said simply. "She's saved my life, and more than once. And, in point of fact, we owe our friendship to your brother Delar's mission - so there!"

"She is of an age to have been bonded, yet she is not," Dajan said suddenly. "Is it within my right to ask why?"

"Not of me," Cleante said carefully, little bells going off in her head. What would Uhura make of this? she wondered. "You'll have to ask T'Shael that question."

"Has it anything to do with - with Delar's mission?"

Cleante's communicator had beeped then, to her great relief. That relief was short-lived.

"That's odd!" she scowled. "Since when has Hikaru developed an interest in archeology?"

"Do you see what they are doing, Kirk?" Commander Rihan asked as they stood on the ridge above the Korff metropolis, watching Sharf and his Romulan counterpart sorting through a heap of broken crockery. "That should be the work of starship captains. Exploration, discovery, adding to the knowledge of a people. Not what you and I are usually assigned, hm?"

"I've gotten my share," Kirk answered, noncommittal.

Commander Rihan, he had discovered, also spoke a fair Federation Standard. Once he got over being irked at that, he had accepted the commander's invitation to walk among the Korff ruins with him, more in an attempt to understand what made Rihan tick than for any overwhelming interest in archeology.

"May I tell you something in confidence?" Rihan asked suddenly, coming to a halt. "It is my secret hope that the archaeologists determine that the Korff were humanoid. Do you know why?"

Kirk shook his head, keeping his expression mild.

"Because then my government will be obliged by its own terms to give the Federation access to this world. We will be responsible for carving the first path through the forest of the Neutral Zone. It will be a beginning."

"I'm sure my own government would see it that way if the Korff turned out to have Romulan ancestors," Kirk offered magnanimously, not at all sure of any such thing.

They left the ridge and walked in silence for some time, the Korff city below them, the conference dome behind. From time to time Rihan would stop to find a round pebble in the rocky soil with the toe of his boot, and kick it along before him like a child, as if delighting in the sheer privilege of having soil beneath his feet.

"I never wanted a military career, Kirk," he said, studying the pebble as he kicked it. "My elder sister had already fulfilled the conscription quota. But then as now, it was the only way out of the provinces. University degrees are still reserved only for military veterans and the children of privileged parents - which is to say those close to the current ruling party. Is it thus on your world?"

Kirk shook his head. "I'm the equivalent of what you'd call a provincial. I came from farm country, a place called Iowa -"

"Iowa'," Rihan repeated, liking the sound of it.

"Our educational system is based solely upon ability. Though that wasn't always true."

"The perhaps we shall also discover its wisdom someday." Rihan sighed. The pebble he had been kicking overshot and disappeared over the edge of the ridge; he chose another one. "I always wanted to be an engineer. I wanted to build things. Instead, I am here. Then again, if I had been an engineer, I might never have met humans."

"Have you met many humans?" Kirk asked, genuinely curious.

"You are the first!" Rihan said heartily, clapping him familiarly on the back. They walked on.

"There - uh- isn't exactly a whole lot for a helmsman to do on this mission," Sulu pointed out. "Thought I'd beam down and give you kids a hand. Nothing too technical, but I can handle the business end of a trowel."

"Will you swear to me that's the only reason you're here?" Cleante demanded narrowly. "Or are you Jim Kirk's watchdog?"

"who, moi?" Sulu asked, thinking: Am I that transparent. True, the captain sent me down here to have a reconnoitre, which gave me the alibi I need to carry out my own mission. I figure archaeologists get to travel a lot, meeting interesting people. It's good cover for an agent. If I'm wrong, the next step is to wrangle my way aboard the *Hannsu* during one of the music recitals and start asking careful questions; I'm kind of hoping my contact's down here. "I really came down to tell you I had a theory about the Korff. How you might be able to figure out who they were."

"I can't abide amateurs!" Cleante said to Dajan, aware that Sulu had neatly avoided her question. "Can you?"

The Romulan suspected these two knew each other well and this was typical of their banter, but he didn't want to risk being impolite. He diplomatically shook his head.

"I don't remember saying that when you came to me for martial arts training," Sulu said.

"Touch," Cleante said. After the kidnapping, she had become one of his private students back on Earth. "Tell us your theory."

"Well, I did some reading on the Korff - the little that's available, including your own paper on the landscape of music," Sulu said, warming to his topic. "And if I'm not mistaken, your scans of this place have not turned up one pictorial representation of the race that built it."

"Correct," Dajan said, still looking at Sulu in that odd way he had when the human first arrived. "No statutory, no murals, no holos or even old-style photos. It was as if they had a taboo about it - as your Earth's Ancient Hebrews, and certain Fundamentalist Christian sects."

Sulu was as impressed with Dajan as Dajan was with him.

"What were their burial customs? You must have found skeletal remains. Enough to rebuild a cranium and determine -"

Cleante was shaking her head. "In ancient times their dead were cremated, the bones pounded to powder, then scattered over a fast-moving stream."

"I didn't notice any fast-moving streams on the way here," Sulu argued. "In fact, I didn't notice any water sources at all."

"According to the calcification levels in their cisterns, they ran out of free-flowing water nearly fifty years before they left," Dajan supplied.

"Left," Sulu repeated. "You mean died off or took off, like the Anasazi?"

"These Anasazi probably had space travel," Cleante supplied. "If they'd just died off, we'd have found remains in the houses and the streets. Nothing. They left, and took their recent dead with them."

"So you couldn't even scrape up enough DNA from an old bone -"

"We couldn't even scrape up an old bone," Cleante said flatly. "I'm still waiting to hear your theory."

Not for the first time, Jim Kirk was discovering how easy it was to like a Romulan. Too easy. For all the shouting and recriminations, the charges and countercharges, for all the things they had done to each other, and would likely continue to do to each other in the name of duty, it was too easy to hope for kinship.

In a different reality, Jim Kirk thought, watching Rihan kicking a pebble with all the carefree abandon of a child, I could have called you friend.

Such a reality, in its fullest terms, was what Riley and Tiam were attempting to achieve on this dull dun world, inside the ugly prefab Dome coming back into view as he and Rihan completed their walk in the woods and prepared to return to their ships. Such a reality, Jim Kirk realized with a jolt, could put him out of a job.

"Odd!" Rihan said suddenly, a pace or two ahead of Kirk going inside the Dome. "I hear no voices. Have they concluded their meeting already? Does this bode good or ill do you think, Kirk?"

They had. It boded ill. And Jandra took the brunt of it.

"You will not flirt with those scum!" Tiam shrilled at her, his words falling like blows. He had deliberately left the door to their suite open, that her shame might be a goodly source of gossip for the entire crew. "Not with either human, not with the Vulcan. Is that clear?"

"Did the talks go so badly, husband?" Jandra countered - softly so that no crewman would hear her, but no less bitterly. She had expected this diatribe yesterday when they returned from the human ship, but Tiam had been in one of his pre-conference hypochondrias, and had retired early to his side of the suite, alone.

"I will not be mocked!" he screamed. "And since Rihan insists we are to return the humans' hospitality this evening, you have three choices. You can comport yourself properly, you can risk having me upbraid you before these aliens, or shall I say you are indisposed, too ill to perform?"

"Rather, husband, why don't you beat me?" Jandra inquired archly. "It is what you want to do. Only the fear that someone might ask the origin of my bruises stops you."

He raised his hand as if he might, but she was right and he would not risk it.

"You have been warned," he said, standing on his dignity. "You will not be warned again!"

PASSACAGLIA

The Wanderer hovered. This would be the last world. It had to be. There was no more time.

It was a green world - water-green, salt-green, brine-green, plankton-algae-ocean-green. Humid, misty, fogged and swirled about with cloud, water-world. Only one area showed bare world-skin; upthrust rocky precipice, basalt-black, forced out of the washing waters, swathing sea. The Wanderer would consider this later. Right now, it listened for the Songs.

There were beings here, beings so like those who had re-created the Wanderer that it could not believe its fortuity. Why had it not come this way before? Surely if it had heard such Singing, it would have come. Could this green world be similar to the blue world where the Singing had once stopped? Or had these beings only recently learned to Sing?

The Wanderer hovered. Darkest dark and brightest light played over its metallic skin as days and nights passed. In synchronous orbit, the Wanderer experienced them as the green world did, days and nights, time passing. The Wanderer hovered, studying, listening. There was no more time.

The songs were beautiful and complex - songs of history, songs of love, songs of calves who had grown to be elders, songs of sorrow, songs of joy. Songs, most importantly, of intelligence. This would be the last world. It must be the world. The Wanderer hovered, listening, learning. Sing me a song of building, it thought, and I will know I have not wandered five hundred thousand years in vain...

The beings pushed their whiskered snouts above the water, huge luminous eyes searching for what they could not see above the clouds, could not hear because the Wanderer had made no sound, yet sensed as beings could, that something Other hovered near. Their streamlined bodies sometimes emerged partway or leapt from the water out of curiosity or exuberance. The Wanderer studied them. More agile than the beings who had re-created it, though they lacked the complex, digitized flippers. Could they build? Could they swim the silent sea of stars, navigate by the music of the spheres, save the beings of the blue-sun two-Worlds?

Sing me a song of building, and I will hope. Sing me a song of building, and I will believe.

The Wanderer had not meant to speak aloud, but after half a million years it could no longer contain this urgency which bordered on despair. The beings who had stuck their snouts above now ducked below, terrified at this primeval hooting out of the sky.

Sing me... the Wanderer pleaded, using its Earthsong, whalesong, tender voice. Too late. The beings had swum away, terrified.

Darkest dark and brightest light played over the Wanderer once more, yet the beings did not return. The Wanderer could hear their songs, which now included its own honking plea as a dirge, a kind of elegy. It was a large world. Before the song had spread to frighten those on its far side, there might yet be hope. The Wanderer moved.

The black basalt upthrust of world-skin gave the Wanderer hope. Here the beings would sun themselves, singing. Here it could communicate once more.

Here there was building, technology.

Here there was a race which did not Sing.

Human? the Wanderer wondered, having learned the term from blue-world's George, term and title describing all Pithai-like air-swimmers - busy, chattering, simian; those who could build but did not Sing. But though these on the green world were air-swimmers and characteristic of their kind: stick-legged, chattering, busy, they were not simian. Different, alien! the Wanderer thought, scanning them as it passed:

Their hearts were faster, heat-readings from their greenish flesh were not like human readings. A longrange scan could not identify these aliens, yet to move in closer was to risk danger: these were builders, wisdom of rocks and rockets. Danger.

Not Pithai, yet not Singers. Were they kin enough, the Wanderer wondered, kin enough to contact? Not human, not alien. George had taught the Wanderer such distinctions.

The one who swam among us, George had said, can almost Sing.

But air-swimmers were not beings. The Wanderer dismissed them. Yet it studied their rock. They had built, and yet were building; the Wanderer continued to scan. Wisdom of rocks and rockets without,

wisdom of the crystal caves within. Thus had the Wanderer been designed, thus this colony on the rock below. The black basalt upthrust teemed with both wisdoms, but to what end? Could these aliens be bent to the Wanderer's purpose?

The Wanderer moved off, lest its scans be detected by the teeming stick-figures below. As it moved, it scanned the far side of the rock where the sun still shone, slanting with the close of day. As it had surmised, the beings were there, sunning themselves. Away from where the builders built, they basked and coupled, stretched and slept; two calves had been born in the days the Wanderer watched.

Would they serve? Had they the wisdom of the crystal caves, or could they learn it? Their world had seas and resources to share, but would they share them? Could the wisdom of the beings and the busyness of the builders save the blue-sun two-Worlds?

How wise are they? the Wanderer had asked George of the humans on his world. Can they serve?

Gillian, George had sung. She almost has the wisdom. She can serve.

Spock, Gracie had interjected, but George out of some male prerogative had not translated her words. Spock! Gracie insisted. He has the wisdom, and he can almost Sing.

There was no time for almost. The Wanderer had wandered on, almost regretful for the small blue world. But this green world might serve. The Wanderer must ask the beings, recruit the builders; together they would swim the sea of stars.

The Wanderer drew in closer in its orbit above the basalt rock, about to begin its song, when its scanners detected something untoward. As it watched a builder, agile on the rocks, crept down from the shadowed side where its own kind dwelt, a weapon in its hand. It raised the weapon (O wisdom of rocks and rockets, Pithai-wisdom, betrayal!), and fired.

A calf leapt, its body hurled upward by the impact, shuddered, toppled, lay still. Its mother brayed her disbelief, lumbering along slip-slidery rock, spreading the alarm. A ripple, wave, torrent of beings poured down the rocks, wallowed, sea-swallowed, gone.

The Wanderer bore witness; it had to know. The builder raised its weapon again, firing a steady blast to roast the calf where it fell. More builders arrived, the being-cry bringing them, scrambling down the rocks to share the repast.

The Wanderer meant only to watch; it never meant to sound. It had promised George it would no longer harm the fragile air-swimming races. But as it watched it heard (not heard, NOT heard - how can one hear what ceases to sound?) the pharos go silent.

For five hundred thousand years it had companioned - homing, warming, welcoming - return, return - assured the Wanderer of Never-Alone. Now silent - NOW? The pain, the horror - what had gone wrong?

The cry escaped - a bray of disbelief not unlike the bereaved mother's, but worlds larger - screech and howl and siren-song, fatal to those who swam in air. The builders, betrayers, startled by this strangeness from the sky, sprang up the rocks preparing to defend, to fetch greater weapons, but the sound intervened. Clamping fat-smearred hands against their pointed ears, they ran through the fog, in vain.

FUGUE

"I pass this on to you that it may augment your accomplishments here on Dlontra," Tiam told the shadow figure just beyond the pool of light in the middle room of the suite, where he lounged at his leisure. "Though as to accomplishments..."

"One day! I have been here only one day. And accomplished more than you, it would seem!"

Tiam made an indifferent gesture, dropping the dispatch on the desktop; the shadow figure made no move to pick it up. Spy! Tiam thought. The word had many synonyms, particularly in the Court Language, where it found the greatest use. Tiam was pleased to find himself thinking in Court Language; it signified that the inner man had kept pace with the titles and promotions afforded him.

The shadow figure, the spy, seemed to be weighing Tiam's words, not as if he did not believe them, but as if he had doubts about Tiam.

"Rihan knows none of this?" the shadow asked at last.

Tiam's lip curled slightly. "Rihan knows what is in the official dispatches, and the official dispatches are incomplete. They say nothing of a Probe. They say nothing of a message sent from the *Ch'vran* to Outpost Seven - curiously, the outpost furthest from the Centre, where the message would take longest to be received..."

"You have access to all this information," the shadow observed when Tiam did not go on, "and you so generously share it with me?"

"Granted we have no ready reason to trust each other, brother," Tiam admitted. "Say I have access to a source even Rihan does not know about."

"Aboard his own ship?" The shadow's voice dripped skepticism.

Tiam allowed a show of annoyance. "Surely in your profession you are familiar with such things? Do not treat me like an idiot. I do not offer you this information out of fondness. I expect in exchange you will provide me with certain information about the humans - before you share it with your puppet-masters back home. I will decide what those who run you need to hear and what they need not. Is that too much to ask?"

"It would depend on what you wanted the information for," the shadow said, with no indication of acquiescence.

"Say I need to know more in dealing with this - Riley," Tiam said, his annoyance evaporated like the fog it was, his voice neutral, almost indifferent, once more. "I need to know his weak points."

"Having him walk out on you this morning took you by surprise then?" the spy had graduated from skepticism to sarcasm.

Tiam chose not to respond to this.

"All right, brother." The shadow moved for the first time, a slight shifting of his feet to indicate that as far as he was concerned they had talked enough. "I will share my information with you, provided you keep in mind that there may be no information to share. There are no guarantees in my line of work, excepting the likelihood that, unlike you, I shall not die in bed. Yet we are both diplomats in our own way."

Tiam frowned. "I see no resemblance!"

The shadow shrugged, a simultaneous fluid motion propelling him toward the door. "Both of us have a need to bend history to our will. Your way is simply more overt than mine. It grows late. Don't you have a party to attend?"

Tiam snorted in disgust. Rihan's idea, the reception. The prospect of having to confront Riley again so soon after this morning's debacle was almost as unpleasant as that of having to watch over his errant spouse who, despite his threats, might yet defy him.

"Keep your ears on, brother," the spy said, a shadow in the doorway. "Who knows but that the diplomat may hear more than the spy tonight?"

Hidden by the wall-drapes, eavesdropping like a child, Jandra made note of every word. Betrayal, she thought. Betrayal...

CAPTAIN'S PERSONAL LOG:

I remain convinced that Jandra's cool assessment of each of the males in our landing party on Dlundra yesterday was not merely sexual, nor do I believe, as Dr. McCoy has suggested, that my own response is nothing more than an adolescent impulse to distract her attention from my first officer. McCoy says I'm simply jealous. McCoy has been advised to mind his own business.

"Again I am struck with the certainty that there is more to this peace initiative than meets the eye, some peculiarly Romulan subtext which we mere humans are not privy to, may not be privy to, until it's too late. Riley's stalking out of this morning's meeting is inconsequential; it is shadow-boxing, performance art, a necessary part of the diplomatic waltz. He and Tiam will smile coldly at each other at tonight's reception, though not so coldly as to spoil anyone's good time, and they will meet again tomorrow for a fresh assault, having regrouped the night before. Yet something in my gut tells me the conference table is not where this matter will be resolved.

"Sulu has assured me, as he has assured Riley, that his mission on Dlundra is merely to observe; he has promised to keep no official secrets from either of us - whatever that means. Unofficial secrets would interest me far more.

"When I asked Uhura for her impression of Jandra, she suggested there is obvious conflict between the musician and her spouse. 'It's got less to do with Romulans than with men and women,' is I believe how she expressed it.

"Perhaps I am looking for a subtext where there is none. Is it nothing more complex than the suddenness of Jandra's attraction to Spock? She is certainly not the first female, Romulan or human, to be so attracted. Am I jealous? McCoy really should mind his own business.

"On a more practical level, I have asked Commander Uhura to make some changes in this evening's musical program. Lord Harbinger is sulking in his tent and refuses to perform; I can't say this prospect makes me at all unhappy. In his place, Uhura has arranged to borrow Chief Harper from Mr. Scott for the evening, and to have the Steinway grand beamed over to the *Hannsu*. I have no idea what kind of music Mr. Harper will play; given my notorious lack of taste in this area, I have left this entirely up to my communications officer.

"The term 'ferryboat captain' is beginning to haunt me; at this juncture I feel as if I'm running a cruise ship. I keep waiting for something to happen. McCoy says I should be grateful nothing has."

"He's never satisfied," McCoy remarked as he and Spock waited for Kirk to finish arranging the medals on his uniform jacket. "When he's got a red alert screaming at him he'll tell you he's getting too old for this line of work. When it's too quiet, he's nosing around looking for trouble."

"Mm," Spock replied noncommittally, watching Kirk's mouth tighten in the mirror.

"Seriously, Jim." McCoy wouldn't leave it alone. "Why can't you just relax and enjoy the scenery for once? You are getting a bit old to go running up and down the corridors like a cadet; I'll give you that. Have some dignity, for God's sake!"

"Let's go!" Kirk said impatiently.

"So what've you got?" Sulu asked Dajan, helping himself from the *Hannsu*'s buffet table with the ease of someone who understood Romulan cuisine. "You've got examples of Korff tools, their furniture, their jewelry, even some fragments of clothing. What about combs or hairbrushes? You could track DNA from a few strands of hair."

"I can't abide amateurs!" Dajan joked with a glance at Cleante; by now it was a running gag among the three of them. "We have, as you say, all of these things, as well as their libraries and what may have been the launch site for their departure vehicles. But their hair - assuming they had any; they might as easily have been hairless, like your Deltan race, or covered with scales like the Gorn. Or they may have destroyed their hair and nail clippings as a kind of taboo ritual - has disintegrated under the same conditions which destroyed any trace of fingerprints, flakes of dead skin hidden in the folds of clothing, or similar clues. The Korff disappeared over a thousand years ago, leaving their rags and tags in a damp, cold climate which ate away at everything. It's as if they're tantalizing us from beyond death, leaving no indication if they were humanoid, vulcanoid or something entirely other."

"Okay, then, what about eating utensils?" Sulu persisted, sipping from the corner of a square Romulan drinking glass, as if to prove his point. "Are you sure they had ten fingers?"

"Oh, Hikaru, that's basic!" Cleante said impatiently, sampling some fruit Sulu had offered her which didn't taste at all the way its appearance suggested it should. "Ten fingers, six fingers - as long as they're

symmetrically bifurcate and not three on one hand, seven on the other, it's as basic as assuming they had ears to hear the music they created."

"Chairs!" Sulu said suddenly. There was a conspicuous absence of them in the *Hannsu*'s reception area, either to encourage guests to mingle or to leave early. "Daj, how do you find the comfort level of human chairs as a rule?"

It was an innocuous question. Why did Dajan seem hesitant to answer it?

"I have had very little experience -" he said at last, and if he didn't exactly stammer, he committed the Romulan equivalent. Seeing his embarrassment, Cleante stepped in protectively.

"I see what you're saying," she said aggressively, more mindful of Jim Kirk's watchdog than of her friend Hikaru. "That the basic shape might be the same for either species, but given that vulcanoids tend to have less - natural padding, so to speak, their seating accommodations would have more. It's subtle, given the number and variety of human ways of sitting or even sleeping - the difference in pillows between East and West on Earth, for example - oh, I could go on," she ended breathlessly, as if in fact she would have found it difficult. "But it's an angle we haven't tried. Dajan, what do you think?"

"I think," the Romulan said slowly, studying Sulu's face intently once more, "that it is remarkable how like some faces can be between species. My sister says, Commander Sulu, that you look like one of us. An artist's fancy, no doubt. Or perhaps she simply finds you attractive." Dajan shrugged. Women, after all, his posture suggested, though his sharp green eyes suggested something entirely different. "What do you think of that?"

It was Sulu's turn to hesitate.

"Scott Joplin?" Uhura asked Harper, trying to set up the evening's program on her datapadd so that audience members could have a hard copy before the music began. "Are you sure?"

"You suggested classical but light," the engineer cum musician reminded her. "Now, I can play old Wolferl Amadeus till the cows come home, but the Romulan lady's already shown me up there. Besides -"

" - you can play Joplin without the backup orchestra, and he's more appealing," Uhura finished for him. "You're right. But if you get the feel anywhere along the way that your audience isn't with you -"

"Lady Freedom, Improvisation is my middle name," Harper smiled at her.

Uhura felt the heat rising in her face as if she were a schoolgirl. Good Lord, she thought, now what is that supposed to mean?

"Why, Mr. Improvisation Harper," she said, trying not to sound too coy, "do you have a first name?"

Harper's smile broadened. "Do you?"

It was an attractive turnout, Jim Kirk thought, surveying the gathering in the *Hannsu*'s smallish reception room, wondering what it had been before this transformation by a rainbow of civilian colors and the twinkle of party-chat. Not a rec-dec, certainly; the older warbirds had been too austere, too pressed for space to afford the luxury. Kirk had never been aboard this particular class of vessel before. He was uncomfortably with the heavier bird-of-prey class the Romulans had been buying from the Klingons up until the Fed/Klin peace talks, or at least with the dimensions of their brigs. As for the smaller pocket bird he and his crew had ridden back from Genesis - well, the *Bounty* creaked and groaned and hissed steam a lot, but she'd gotten the job done.

But she had been too small to afford a rec area either.

What had this high-ceilinged space been before the peach talks? Scotty no doubt carried the schematic in his head, but Kirk contented himself with envisioning it as a torpedo bay, crammed to the rafters with photon tubes, or as billets for extra crew out on maneuvers or a raid - floor-to-ceiling bunks or hammocks, socks drying on lines strung along support struts. Did Romulans wear socks?

Better this way, full of voices and laughter and colorful civilian costumes intermingled with the uniforms. The sheer miracle of it after a hundred years' cold war was enough to render Kirk speechless, not that his companion, the indefatigably smiling Rihan, would have noticed; Rihan simply thought him a good listener. He did not realize Kirk was listening far more attentively to the conversations all about him, as the formal pairings of peer with peer - archeologist with archeologist, military officer with military office - gradually broke down, and individuals began to group and regroup in kaleidoscopic variations.

The archaeologists seemed to form the largest, most boisterous group, getting along famously despite language barriers; the translations seemed to be half the fun. Kirk watched as a stout, silver-haired Catullan female repeatedly poked a lanky Romulan male in the chest to emphasize her point; just when Kirk expected the Romulan to draw back in anger, he exploded in laughter instead. Would he ever get used to laughing Romulans?

If it was contrast he wanted, he need look no further than Tiam and Riley, studiously ignoring each other despite attempts by first McCoy and then Uhura to intervene. Commander Rihan had noticed this as well.

"My pet diplomat seems to be attempting to throw cold water upon our warm hearthside," he offered in his meticulous if awkward Standard. "You will excuse me, Kirk, if I refuse to allow Centurion Tiam to ruin this gathering."

"By all means," Kirk acquiesced. "No one likes a party-poooper."

"Party-poooper!!" Rihan repeated gleefully. "That is priceless, Kirk; I thank you. 'Party-poooper'!! I shall use that!"

So saying he crossed the room to say something privately in Tiam's ear. Tiam left shortly thereafter, with the air of someone who had been advised by a superior to go out and come back in again. Planetside, Tiam might do what he liked; on Rihan's ship, Rihan was the power.

Kirk had been reminded of that when he suggested they link the two ships to save time and energy.

"I agree an umbilical would be risky and impractical," he had said. "But I'm certain if our airlocks don't interface with yours, my chief engineer would be happy to -"

"I think not, Captain." Rihan had been almost apologetic in his refusal. "Say it is not so much against official policy as against Commander Rihan's policy."

"A shuttlecraft, then," Kirk suggested.

"Again, I think not," Rihan had cut him off, refusing to elaborate. As a consequence, party guests had had to be beamed from *Enterprise* to the *Hannsu*, and would have to go the same route to return.

"I can't say it surprises me in the least!" Montgomery Scott had grumped when Kirk turned the conn over to him. "No security team tonight, either, I see. Well, he's got you right where he wants you if his government needs hostages."

"Why, Mr. Scott!" McCoy remarked, rubbing his hands together impatiently, wondering what year's ale the *Hannsu* had aboard; 2282 was still his favorite vintage. "You're beginning to sound as paranoid as our captain!"

"Sure you wouldn't care to join us?" Kirk was only half-serious; he especially wanted Scotty at the conn if the triumvirate was going abroad. "You can bring your pipes."

Scotty gave him a dour look. "I'm better used here. Playing the pipes, I'm strictly an amateur. Adequate for weddings and funerals." He glanced nervously at Spock. "Sorry, laddie!"

"No offense taken, Mr. Scott," Spock said solemnly. "Quite to the contrary. I was honored to have had you play for me."

"There's - ah - one other thing, sir," Scott addressed Kirk. Far be it for him to be accused of sentimentality. "It may be nothing, but I've been monitoring some peculiar energy readings from our neighbor next door."

Kirk followed his glance to the forward screen, and the innocent enough looking *Hannsu*. "Explain."

"Well, for a vessel that's at station-keeping, same as we are, she's been outputting a lot of ionization, at regular intervals. It's like having the engines idling on a getaway car, for want of a better comparison."

Spock had moved unobtrusively up to the science station. "Confirmed, Captain," he reported.

"Are they showing that output now?" Kirk asked over his shoulder.

"Negative. Last excessive output reading was some two point two hours ago."

"And at regular intervals?" Kirk repeated.

"Aye," Scotty said.

"Approximately every three hours, for one hour's duration," Spock supplied.

"I doubt they'll be doing it while we're over there, knowing we could hear the variation," Kirk said, more perturbed than he was willing to admit. "But we'll stay on top of it from our end. You do the same from yours."

"Aye!" Scotty said as the triumvirate headed for the turbolift.

"Captain..." Spock was looking particularly grave as the lift made its way down to the transporter room. "I have always meant to discuss one particular aspect of my funeral with you."

"You found the music inappropriate?" Kirk surmised, playing the innocent; he knew what was coming.

"On the contrary, I have always found 'Amazing Grace' a pleasing melody, and Mr. Scott's rendition was doubtless quite poignant."

"What then?"

"I am told by a reliable source -" McCoy was pointedly studying the ceiling. " - that your eulogy characterized me as being 'most human'."

"It did," Kirk said frankly.

"Really, Captain," Spock said long-sufferingly. "I would have thought some modicum of respect for the recently deceased would have precluded insults."

Annek, waited restlessly in the main transporter room, smiling winsomely from time to time at the relief transporter chief. Harper was off duty tonight, she knew. Harper was aboard the *Hannsu*, playing for the Romulans; he had told her. What Annék, wanted to know was why she hadn't been invited, too.

She had emotionally severed herself from Lord Harbinger long before he had fired her; she owed him nothing, while he in fact owed her two months' back salary. She cared less about that than about the fact that Captain Kirk might have failed to understand that she was now free to perform on her own.

She wanted to perform for the Romulans tonight. She was going to wait right here until Captain Kirk was ready to beam over, and she was going to ask him directly. She'd been rehearsing her speech for an hour.

"Oh, Captain -!" she called breathily the instant the doors opened and he appeared. Anything else she'd

meant to say immediately stuck to the roof of her mouth.

She should have expected Spock and McCoy to accompany him. She knew enough of their history to know that the two accompanied Kirk whenever possible. She could speak in front of McCoy; he was kindly and avuncular and didn't affect her sensibilities in the least. But Spock -!

"Annek,, isn't it?" Kirk smiled, charming, proud of himself for remembering her name. "What can I do for you?"

Nothing at all, not you, ever! Annek, thought frantically. Born to dance, she felt her feet rooted to the deck, her eloquence lost.

"N-nothing, Captain!" she blurted, never taking her huge brown eyes off Spock even as the transporter effect shimmered around him. "Nothing at all!"

The party chat seemed light and frivolous, until you listened closely. In and around and through it ran the Romulan Subtext, an undercurrent of What if -?

"What if an accord was signed and we were free to stay here?" archaeologists from both teams wondered aloud to each other. "There are years' worth of study on Dlontra alone, not to mention the six other known Korff worlds scattered through the Zone. What if -?"

"What if we were to treat with humans as we have been treating with the Klingons these many years?" Commander Rihan demanded of McCoy, who had had the temerity to suggest it. "Do you suppose humans are our only adversaries? We have as many as we have common borders. What if -?"

"What if humans were to cease to see us as the faceless aggressor, the cog in the vast military machine?" Jandra wondered, offering Uhura a cornered goblet of the best blue ale, still smouldering about the rim. It was but a single gesture in what could, if given time, become a pervasive "Romulan fever." Already the digger teams were learning each other's slang; off-duty *Enterprise* female crew were emulating the way Jandra wore her curling hair or tied her flowing scarves back. "What if they came to see that we have family lives, friendships, greater arts than the art of war, the same as you? What if -?"

"What if the delicate balance of our two super-powers were suddenly neutralized?" Even Tiam, having gone out and come back in again, could condescend at least to speak to Spock. "Will not a hundred lesser powers, more fanatical and less clear in their motivation, rush to fill the vacuum? What if -?"

"What if I were to offer to you under the Ancient Law?" Dajan asked T'Shael when they were alone. "Could you not reconsider then? What if -?"

"No," T'Shael answered, the negative that much more emphatic for being spoken in her soft voice. "I could not."

Patterns altered kaleidoscopically; groups scattered and regrouped. Commander Rihan escorted Captain Kirk on his promised tour of the *Hannsu*'s bridge. Jandra retired briefly to her quarters to prepare for the impending performance. Some of the *Hannsu*'s crew began setting up chairs about the Steinway.

Harper sat at the grand piano and flexed his fingers, letting his fingertips brush like feathers over the keys, sounding them. Uhura finished interfacing with the *Enterprise* library computer's file on Scott Joplin, put the final polish on her program notes, and keyed her datapadd to print-out.

Riley and Cleante had found an alcove off the main reception room and a chance to be alone for the first time that day.

"I wonder what's the accepted protocol for smooching aboard Romulan vessels?" Cleante mused as they sat watching the stars with their arms around each other.

"We weren't 'smooching'," Riley pointed out, diplomatically correct. "I merely wanted to kiss you once, to apologize."

Cleante frowned. "Apologize for what?"

"For letting Jim bully you last night. If I'd had time to find a way to stand up for you..."

"Oh, is that all!" Cleante said, airily enough to make Riley wonder if she meant it. "I can stand up perfectly well for myself, thank you!"

"That's what I figured. You do realize he was playing devil's advocate?"

"Yes, that's in his job description." Cleante gave Riley a long-eyed look. "It's you I wonder about."

Riley had been anticipating this; he wondered why it had taken so long.

"I have to admit, darlin', it's complicated having you along. Never mind the sheer distraction of your presence -"

"Excuse me? I've been up to my elbows in dirt all day, kilometers from where you were resting your manicured hands on the conference table. If that's what you mean by distraction -"

"Ah, cool down, will you? No sense of humor. What I'm trying to say is that I'm supposed to keep my mind on the agenda; nothing's supposed to diver me from it. I knew we'd not accomplish much the first day, but I wanted to bring up the MIA's at least."

"The MIA's?" Cleante repeated, not understanding.

She was not prepared for the sudden intensity on Kevin's face.

"Did you know there were over five thousand casualties unaccounted for on our side alone in the last of the Romulan Wars? Presumed incinerated, given the nature of the ships involved, but there's more recent proof that some of them crashed on Modti during that skirmish. There was oxygen, they might have lived, foraged off the land, assuming the warbird crews didn't come back around to finish them off. The point being that we never knew, never could get back to rescue them, and suddenly the lines of the Neutral Zone were drawn around Modti and those people likely died there. And why? Because it's only been

within my lifetime that our enlightened Federation Council has deigned to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Empire! Without that recognition, the Empire refused any information regarding those missing in action.

"Immaterial by now, of course, since they'd all be dead," Riley went on, positively eloquent, "but it's horrific to think of any of those five thousand living out their last days or even years marooned on some remote planet, unable to let their families know they were alive. Almost as bad as being a prisoner of war, and you know how long it took us to get them back. All I wanted from Tiam today was a list of those known dead on Modti. A token to return to Earth with, no skin off his. Instead I let that pompous ass anger me enough to terminate the meeting. And," he finished at least, "here I am taking my frustration out on you!"

"That what I'm here for," Cleante said, running her fingers through his ginger hair, trying not to notice the tears in his ginger eyes. He was entirely too sensitive, she thought, for this line of work, maybe too sensitive for anything having to do with governments, after Kodos. How many nights during their early months together had she held him while struggled and cried out in his sleep, pursuing the ghost of the villain who had killed his father and mother, fighting him over and over again?

Riley did kiss her this time. "And aren't I the dolt for forgetting it?"

"No argument there," Cleante said, kissing him back.

T'Shael, alone in an alcove of her own, continued what she had been doing since Cleante and Dajan had beckoned here in her to study the readings they had taken from the Korff skinscroll this morning: attempting, her ka'athyra in hand, to hear the scroll's centuries-silent music in her mind. She and Spock continued to decipher the music of the whales, hoping for some clue to the Probe's origins; each new task was a challenge, one more thread of purpose to weave into the tapestry that was her life. Alone, T'Shael pondered, plucking an occasional note on the ka'athyra, content.

Sulu, uneasy under Dajan's studied stare, wracking brain to recall if he'd ever in his role as clerk in the employ of the Romulan Records Ministry under the cover name Lel em'n Tri'ilril encountered a green-eyed archeologist with a reluctance to talk about human furniture, excused himself on the pretext of visiting the head and resisted the panic-stricken urge to beam himself back home.

Dajan, left alone in the throng of colorful, laughing beings, went in search of his heart's desire.

If Romulans ever had telepathy, they did not bring it away with them from Vulcan. Whether the skill was lost through lack of training or selectively eliminated, whether it was merely that those with the weakest skills were the only ones permitted to leave, one thing was certain: better not to possess such power as could have been subverted by dynasty upon dynasty of emperors who strove in all ways else to own their subjects' minds, if not their hearts.

But the psychic loss was significant, and the Romulan soul sought to fill it with something equally as

powerful. What replaced telepathy was an almost superstitious belief in Destiny, unparalleled in any similarly advanced species. Only the most sophisticated - well-traveled, exposed to species which were not Romulan - could create a destiny of their own.

Dajan's assignment to Dlontra had not been the mere fortuity he had told Jandra, nor did it have solely to do with archeology. Part was science, part was shadow, much was Destiny. The only thing that was not written was that he should be so struck with T'Shael.

Dajan had known everything Cleante had not, everything Jim Kirk suspected was wrong with this mission from the start. He had known the connection between Jandra and the Gifted One, between Delar and the Warrantors, between his own correspondence with Cleante and what it might signify to a suspicious mind. He also knew, though he would not give Tiam the satisfaction of telling him, about Tiam's secret source. Much about this mission, like Dajan himself, was largely shadow.

Spy. So his brother-by-marriage had characterized him, so he was - shadow, spectre, seeming in place of being, and heartily weary of it.

The Empire's machinery had found him after Delar's death, and offered him a chance at redemption. His seeming exile to the abandoned outpost world from whence he'd first contacted Cleante was primarily cover. Small wonder that he knew the "under-grounds" intimately; they were his primary sources.

"Watch and listen," he was told. "Tell us what you hear from the Fed ships that pass. Serve us, and your sister lives, spared your parents' ritual suicide." - they had not mentioned she was already wed to Tiam - "Serve us, and your family is rehabilitated."

Dajan had acquiesced.

His contact with the Centre during those lonely years was a passing vessel of Klingon design, the Empire's flagship, supposedly pausing at his outpost only to refuel. Its commander had been more gracious than she need be to one so disgraced. Perhaps she knew something of his plight, Dajan remembered thinking at the time.

"My subcommander Tal served with your brother," she told him once, when she had no obligation to do so. "Ask him. Perhaps he can share some - reminiscences - from a simpler time."

Dajan had fulfilled his duty, moving from solitary exile to the post on Hiran; his family was eventually rehabilitated, if only by the Praetor's death. Nevertheless, his assignment to Dlontra was contingent upon his continuing the shadow Empire's shadow work: he was to spy on the humans, glean what he could and, as Tiam characterized it (oh, what power had made this most undiplomatic man a diplomat?), share his gleanings with the puppet-masters who pulled his strings from parsecs away in the Citadel.

Unlike his elder brother Delar, Dajan could say with fair certainty that no one had yet died of his duty to the Empire. Yet he had had enough of the Shadow Empire's shadow work, and needed a new destiny.

If T'Shael would but say the word, he would come over.

Austere, pristine, introverted to the point of unobtrusiveness, she was Salet's child in physical

resemblance, Dajan knew. As a child, Jandra had treasured a tiny holo of herself with the Gifted One, long lost in the years of exile, yet impressed on Dajan's mind. Salet's face was gaunt with his last illness, yet his eyes burned with a passion no Vulcan ought to own.

That same passion, reflected in his daughter's eyes, had struck Dajan to the heart.

He was a Romulan; this was not telepathy. How dare he presume on one chance meeting to know the secrets of her heart? Yet she was his Destiny - he knew!

Yet what, he wondered, did T'Shael know of him? What did she see beyond the slightly foppish intellectual who, for all his grubbing in ancient ruins, had hands softer than his sister's? Did she think him indolent, lazy, spoiled? If she knew the truth, would she find him more or less repugnant?

All he knew was that he had to know. Thus, he returned to where she pored over the Korff scroll, attempting to be its rosetta, plucking a note betimes on her ka'athyra, as if to make it yield the secret.

"Thee are not bonded," Dajan said at once and bluntly, informal approach in the Formal Language; he was not qualified to learn the Court tongue.

T'Shael rested the ka'athyra against her shoulder, stilling its strings with one hand. "What is that to thee?" she asked in the same tongue.

She was seated, he was standing; he knelt at her feet.

"I know your age by your father's long-ago words to Jandra. I can surmise what transpired during your captivity. My brother's actions killed your betrothed from a thousand thousand light years' distance, and as nearly killed you."

No muscle in her face moved, yet her eyes might burn brighter at his sheer presumption.

"Again I ask: What is that to thee?"

"I might say I love you, have loved you since before we met ..." Dajan spoke rapidly, feverishly, as if she would be so rude as to cut him off. "I will not trouble you with such rabid illogic. I will simply say: you have the power to alter my Destiny. Do you understand?"

T'Shael was the most skilled Romulan-speaker in the Federation; of course she understood.

"Logic suggests," she was constrained to say, "that no one can alter your Destiny but yourself."

"Will you at least grant me permission to pursue my suit?"

"For what purpose?" T'Shael refused his offer with an elegant gesture; the strings of her ka'athyra, released by the gesturing hand, vibrated in sympathy. "I have no desire for a bondmate. Even if I did, your suit would be considered precipitous in either of our cultures."

Dajan got up off his knees, presumed to sit beside her. The sounds of a piano could be heard in the main room. He would have to hurry; the night's entertainment would begin momentarily, and they must both be present.

"Precipitous, agreed. But who is to say how much time is given us? If my exalted brother-in-law

continues his sulk into the morrow, will not your Commander Riley tire of the pretense and desire to go home? In all this perversely subdivided universe, will we ever see each other again?"

A gradual hush in the room beyond indicated the guests were being seated for Harper's performance. T'Shael rose gracefully to her feet.

"I value your acquaintance, kerDajan. I should not wish it jeopardized by any more complex agenda. Farewell."

"One thing more -!" he almost shouted, following her. Out of sheer good manners, T'Shael hesitated.

"There is an ancient custom, out of both our cultures, that when one causes the death of a bondmate -"

"- he offers his own life in the bondmate's place? I have always questioned the logic of that particular custom, kerDajan."

Her repeated use of his formal title should have warned him to desist; he did not.

"What if I were to offer to you under the Ancient Law? Could you not reconsider then? What if -?"

"No." T'Shael moved to join the audience; the lights were already going down. "I could not."

"The Earth composer Scott Joplin," Uhura's program notes read in the languages of all present, "was perhaps the best-known exponent of the style of music known as Ragtime. It is believed the original term was "ragged time" - a reference to the characteristic rhythm which emphasizes irregular accents, and a strong syncopation in the melody against a regularly accented accompaniment. The term first appears applied to the melodies which evolved out of African-American culture, and later extended to any popular song employing similar rhythm'..."

Harper played Joplin, hundreds of light years from where he'd likely ever been heard before. Beginning with the upbeat, happy rags that had characterized that glittering, high-rolling era on Earth, masking the rampant bigotry, social desperation and threat-of-war beneath, he played. "The Entertainer", "The Maple Leaf Rag" and "Easy Winners" spooled out beneath his dancing fingers, and Commander Rihan was not the only Romulan to be caught tapping his feet along with the humans, though it was Rihan who led the spontaneous applause at the end of the first set.

Harper paused long enough to acknowledge the accolade with a nod of his bald head before he set his fingers again and led into his personal favorite of Joplin rags, the poignant "Solace". The audience grew silent, each of its members lost in thought.

Ridiculous! Sulu thought, glancing sidelong at Dajan across the aisle from him: He can't possibly have recognized me! Records Clerk Lel em'n Tri'ilril was years ago and parsecs away, and practically invisible at that. My mission that time was tracing trade routes and smuggling them out; I was nowhere in Dajan's

social caste, and never met anyone like him. So why's he toying with me? What's his game?

Or is he my contact, and am I so stupid I can't see it? Special Section gave me no code word this time; they said I'd recognize the contact when we met. Eggshell time, Hikaru me lad: Tread carefully!

Our astrologers predict, and the Praetor believed it, Dajan thought, glancing sidelong at T'Shael, seated between Riley and Tiam in case the music should inspire either to speak to the other, that our two governments will be at odds for the next eighty years or more. It is written in the stars they say, unalterable. You and I will still be alive after that much time. Dare we hope? Must we wait? Or can we be the beginning which proves the astrologers wrong? Only say the word...

Harper meant to take a break after "Solace", leaving its last notes hanging in the air as a kind of metaphor. Did anyone in this room understand what it signified? Dark hands against light keys played a piece of music centuries old, music played when it was written by dark hands against light keys, dark hands which could not eat from the same dinner plates as their light-handed employers, nor linger in the same parlors once the music ended.

Bigotry, Harper improvised into Joplin's music, or maybe only found it where it had been hiding down the centuries: bigotry is what betrays us all. Light hands, dark hands; red blood, green blood - what difference does it make?

Did any in his audience understand?

Harper let the last notes die away and saw that one did, anyway. Jandra's green eyes brimmed with tears. Trust a musician to understand a musician. Red blood, green blood: nothing mattered but the music.

Buoyed by the applause, Harper stepped away from the piano into the audience, holding his hands out to Jandra. Buoyed by the music, Jandra allowed him to touch her precious hands, tools of her trade, took his hands and let him lead her. They sat side by side on the piano bench while the audience waited, buzzing expectantly. This was not on the program.

"I don't speak any Romulan..." Harper began.

"It does not matter," Jandra said. "You and I share a language far older."

"Then you understand what I'm doing here?"

Jandra nodded. "I think so."

"If you would..." Harper motioned for her to play the accompaniment. He spun toward the audience momentarily. "Ladies and gentlemen, I hope you'll forgive us a few fits and starts, but we're about to make music history here."

After a brief consultation and some bemused kitten-on-the-keys, they began. Musicologists would later record the work as the "Four-Hands Rag", and credit them both with its composition.

Romulans, like Vulcans, were possessed of perfect pitch; otherwise one might suspect Centurion Tiam of being tone-deaf. What he saw taking place at the humans' odd, discordant percussion instrument was not the writing of musical history, but yet another of his wife's flirtations. Disgusted, Tiam rose from the audience without bothering to glance at Rihan, who most certainly would have told him to sit down, and left the room.

He was not gone long. The applause was still going on when he pushed through the standing ovation to get Rihan's ear.

"Commander, there has been an emergency dispatch from the Citadel. The science station on Wlaariivi has gone silent. As ours is the vessel nearest..."

Rihan's smile had melted into his official command expression before he was out of his well-padded chair.

PASSACAGLIA

There was no more hope.

Sage had been right, and all Pithai were fools. Worse - killers, cooks, eaters, destroyers of both Singers and the Songs. No hope in seeking their help, foolish even to consider it. No hope this last green world could save the blue-sun two-Worlds.

No hope.

The Wanderer ceased the high-pitched, over-pitched, out-of-range keening with which it had destroyed the destroyers in their destroying - bursting eardrums, bursting blood vessels, leaving them drowning in their own blood, smeared with the roasted fat of what they had last eaten.

The Wanderer's range of sounds and ultrasounds had destroyed machinery as well. Not neutralized, as with the humans' flying pods, but overloaded, shorted out, burned out, destroyed. No vessels to fly the green-blood Pithai back to wherever they had come from, no satellites to protect their colony, run their evil experiments. No transmitters to send their irritating Pithai-chatter cluttering subspace; no messages in or out, no rescue. No sound but the seaborne Singers, poking their heads out once again, now that it was safe, protected from the sound-waves by the depths of sea, singing awe at the unseen skyborne siren whose Song had done this thing.

What are you? their simple songs sang; the Wanderer's vast memory recorded, cross-referenced, found appropriate algorithms, translated in preparation to reply. **How came you here, and for what purpose?**

What is this Song you sing which can kill the killers?

For perhaps the thousandth time in as many planetfalls, the Wanderer explained.

Bring the beings here, the Singers said when they had understood. **They are welcome here. We have much sea, much room, much krill. Bring them here.**

But that was the crux, had always been, of the problem of the Probe. Thoughts and Songs and dreams and hopes could travel where cumbersome bodies could not. There was no hope.

Yet even in despair, there was still curiosity.

Why were they here? the Wanderer asked the Singers, surveying the litter of stick-bodies scattered throughout the shattered Pithai colony, hands clasped over their ears, faces contorted in agony. **There is not enough land here to satisfy, gratify a need-to-own so potent they dare claim the very space they swim in. Why were they here?**

Because we are, the Singers answered, as if reluctant to explain.

??The Wanderer vocalized, fog-horned, making its wistful querying hooting sound. **Explain. It is important.**

When it had heard, wishing it had not heard, the Messenger, Traveler, Gatherer, Wanderer - more prosaically: Probe, moved off, hooting. Enough and more than enough! There truly was no hope. Its sensors sought trajectories - measuring, locking on. Time and past time to return to the blue-sun two-Worlds and prepare them for their death. Let none get in the way!

FUGUE

Jim Kirk had never been kissed by a Romulan before.

He'd been on routine inspection, stopping by the transporter room to compliment Chief Harper on last evening's performance and its possible contribution to Rom/Fed relations, when the signal came through from the surface.

"Someone in the vicinity of the Dome, sir," Harper reported, activating the controls. "Probably Ryan. Boy would forget his head if it wasn't attached."

Kirk nodded, looking forward to ragging Ryan as the figure materialized. The new kid always got the short end; it was tradition.

The figure hurled itself off the transporter platform into Kirk's arms.

"Captain Kirk, you must help me!" Jandra cried.

He'd never been kissed by a Romulan before.

He'd reasoned with them, argued with them, pleaded with them, fought them with phasers, photons and fists, mourned when certain of them died. He'd even had his arm broken by one once, and had the satisfaction, later, of socking her in the jaw. But he'd never been kissed by a Romulan before. Which was not to say he hadn't wondered what it might be like.

"In a species with a highly developed nervous system, subtlety is of the essence," was all Spock would say when he asked him. "What humans consider foreplay would be deemed crude and abrupt."

"And what would a Romulan consider foreplay?" Kirk had tweaked him, not long after Spock had had an almost fatal opportunity to find out.

"Ah!" Spock had said cryptically, and would say no more.

What was it like to be kissed by a Romulan? Kirk really couldn't say. While he was aware of Jandra's supple body pressing against his in all the right places, aware of her talented fingers tangling in the hair at the back of his neck, aware of the warm, sweet tang of her lips against his, any fleeting pleasure he might have derived from the encounter was immediately negated by the thought of how easily a jealous Centurion Tiam could break his neck. Jim Kirk had few rules in his involvements with women, but ever since Flint and Rayna he had strictly enforced the one about coveting one's neighbor's wife, particularly if one's neighbor possessed twice one's strength.

Besides, Harper was taking in the entire scene from the transporter controls, saying nothing, but grinning all the same. Ship's scuttlebutt would cherish this scene for days. Jim Kirk lowered his upraised hands, which had been intended to evidence his total uninvolvedness in the scenario, and gently pried Jandra's fingers from around his neck.

"Captain, please, my hands!" she gasped, pulling away, more disappointed than she could say. The initial sight of Harper had given her hope, hope that she might beseech him to send for Spock, Spock who would understand, take her under his auspices. But the gods were playing at ironies, and Jandra was a past master at enduring indignities in order to get what she wanted. She would play her part for this human Kirk. "I do not seek political asylum simply to sacrifice my career!"

"Sorry!" Kirk released her reflexively, then reacted. "What do you mean, 'political asylum'? And how the hell did you get aboard my ship?"

She handed him the communicator. "You may credit your Ensign Ryan, who has my eternal gratitude!"

Ryan had been stationed outside the Dome to wait for Centurion Tiam and escort him inside, exactly as he'd done the day before. Centurion Tiam was uncharacteristically late this morning. Ryan was not surprised.

It's a ploy, Ryan thought knowingly, beginning to appreciate the diplomatic dance. He's letting us know how unimportant we are, retaliating for the boss's stalking off on him yesterday. Who was it that said the

purpose of diplomacy is to prolong a crisis?

Ryan shifted his feet, pondering Dlonbra's dull gray sky, wondering if he ought to take the initiative and contact the *Hannsu* to find out what was keeping the centurion, when he heard the familiar whine of the transporter beam.

Rats! Ryan thought. He would have enjoyed trying out his Romulan on the *Hannsu*'s transporter personnel, his fledgling diplomatic skills on Tiam. He straightened to attention as the lone figure began to materialize, clearing his throat so his voice wouldn't crack when he greeted Centurion Tiam.

His voice cracked anyway. The figure wasn't Tiam at all, but his entirely too attractive wife.

"Gosh!" Ryan managed before his voice failed altogether.

"You are Riley," Jandra announced with such certainty that Ryan momentarily questioned his own identity. "I have come here at great personal risk. I require your assistance."

"Um - ma'am? It's Ryan. I can take you to Commander Riley if you want. I -" Ryan felt himself blushing, knew from past experience that he was the color of a ripe tomato by now. Damn, some diplomat! "I'm only his assistant -"

"Ryan, Riley - these human names! It does not matter. You will serve."

"I - oh, gosh!"

Oh, gosh, the cool regard of those green eyes, the irresistible lure of that patronizing smile! So you say you want to be a diplomat? Ryan thought. Well, boyo, as the boss would say: Now's your chance. Stop acting like a lovestruck puppy and -

"Ma'am, I'll serve you any way I can!" Ryan blurted. Jandra's expression was bemused. Ryan blushed deeper. "That is, I mean, how can I help?"

Great personal risk, she had said. There might be a security detail right behind her, ready to drag her back up again. Ryan moved to protect her, ready to take them all on single-handed, even without a phaser. Jandra was so close he could smell the faint spice of her perfume. Or maybe she always smelled like that. It made his head swim. Jandra gazed up into his myopic eyes and slipped the Starfleet-issue communicator from his unresisting hand.

"What is your *Enterprise*'s hailing frequency?" she asked in her deliciously accented voice.

Ryan had always thought he'd hold up well under torture. He would be strong, would never reveal any vital secrets, assuming he was ever given any vital secrets to keep. There were many kinds of torture, Ryan thought, and *Enterprise*'s transporter codes were altered daily. Those Romulan security guards could be here any minute. When they got here, he could hold them off better if he knew the lovely lady was somewhere safe.

Swallowing hard, steadying his voice, he told her.

Jim Kirk wanted to laugh when Jandra told him; he frowned instead.

"I'll deal with Ryan later," he said sternly. "Meanwhile, you can tell me how you got down to Dlontra unquestioned in the first place."

Jandra shrugged. "By more or less the reverse of what I did to Ryan. Our own transporter personnel are young and susceptible. I persuaded this one I wished to beam down and surprise my husband - to make amends for a recent quarrel, which are a commonplace with us."

Here it was at last, Kirk thought: the Romulan agenda. Plots and subplots and counterplots, a feeling like spider-silk wrapping around your throat and tightening. He took Jandra by the arm.

"You and I have to talk. Mr. Harper, ask Captain Spock to join us. And tell Uhura to hold all communications; I don't care if they come from God himself. Oh, and, Harper? I don't have to give you the standard lecture on security leaks, do I?"

Harper just put his finger to his lips on his way out.

"Hikaru?" Cleante's voice echoed in the high-ceilinged antechamber, and it had a frown in it. "Can you come here for a minute?"

She'd been ultrasounding layers of dirt and paint from a mural in what she and Dajan had named the Governor's Office, assuming from certain artifacts found there that it had been the seat of power, for this metropolis at least. Sulu had been in the main room beyond, clearing debris from what they hoped would prove to be a valuable floor mosaic.

"On my way!" he called back, setting his trowel and broom aside, climbing over the mountain of rubble he'd already cleared.

Cleante had cleaned off a substantial portion of the wall behind the governor's desk, having determined by indepth scans beforehand that several paintings of increasingly inferior quality had been daubed over the original. Sulu studied what she'd uncovered so far - a landscape of primeval forest, mountains and waterfalls overarched by a clear, pale-green sky where stars twinkled down on examples of the birds and small mammals which fossil remains indicated had been indigenous to Dlontra and nowhere else.

"This must have been what it looked like when the Korff first arrived," Sulu suggested.

"Before they squeezed it dry." Cleante nodded. "First Age Korff art at its finest - just generic enough to have been humanoid, vulcanoid, or any other 'oid that can pick up a paintbrush. Even the pigments are ground from the same silicates both species used, and mixed with egg yolk. Damn Romulans anyway, for having so much in common with us!" Out of the corner of his eye, Sulu saw Dajan enter the room beyond, checking on his progress with the floor before coming in to see what Cleante was up to; Sulu wondered if he'd overheard her last comment. "But what I really wanted you to see is this..."

If she hadn't pointed it out, Sulu might have missed it. In the upper righthand corner of the mural, above the clouds and below the stars, was what looked suspiciously like a child's painting of a primitive space

vessel. There was something alarmingly familiar about its shape.

"Can we get a little more light on it?" he asked, squinting up at it.

"Sure." Cleante rummaged in her kit for a halogen lamp and let it play over the vessel's simple, linear but bulky shape. "We on Earth only got to the news holos later. I figured you guys up in space got a much better look at it. Tell me if that's what I think it is, or at least its kissing cousin."

Dajan entered the antechamber and stood between them just as Sulu said it.

"It's the Probe, all right. Or else there's more than one of them. Or else it's the damndest coincidence I've ever seen!"

"I must say, Captain, a transporter room is hardly the place a gracious host would receive a guest," Jandra ventured when the silence had gone on too long. The audience is not interested in how you feel, she reminded herself. Nothing matters but the performance.

"I'm not a host and you're not a guest - not yet!" Kirk retorted tightly, beginning to pace. How long would it take Spock to get here? "If I don't get some damn good explanation, it's that much easier for me to beam you right back where you belong. And I must say your timing's lousy!"

Jandra seemed surprised. "On the contrary, Captain, my timing has always been impeccable."

Spock found them waiting in silence - Kirk pacing, Jandra seated on the edge of the transporter platform, the only place there was to sit. Spock had come as quickly as he could, McCoy in lockstep beside him.

"Bones -"

"Don't start, Jim; you'll only embarrass both of us. Hello, Miss Jandra, how are you today?" He sat affably beside her. Kirk gave Spock an exasperated look. "And don't go blaming Spock, either. Not his fault for once. We share the same brain, remember?"

"We were in the commissary when Harper hailed me," Spock explained, demystifying it. "Dr. McCoy overheard."

Kirk threw up his hands and turned to Jandra.

"Timing!" he repeated. "We're in the middle of a galactic peace conference here."

"Your 'peace conference' is a sham, Captain Kirk. I can offer you proof that it is nothing more than a plot to discredit you, your *Enterprise*, and your Federation."

The Romulan security detail never did materialize. With a last nervous glance over his shoulder, Ryan reentered the Dome, framed by the morning slant of light from Dlontra's dull dun sun; Riley looked up from the conference table and frowned.

"Where's the centurion?"

"He hasn't shown yet, sir. I wasn't sure whether to wait or not."

"Well, you could have used your communicator to ask me that." Riley was jotting notes on his 'padd when he said it and missed the brief flash of panic on his aide's face. "Never mind. If Centurion Tiam's going to be late, he can escort himself in."

Ryan swallowed his panic, aware that T'Shael was studying him curiously. He had already sworn to himself that wild horses or the entire Romulan fleet couldn't wring Jandra's whereabouts out of him. But what if the boss asked him what had happened to his communicator?

Riley glanced at his chrono and then at T'Shael. "I'm for giving the great baby another fifteen minutes and then the hell with it. If you need a breath of air..."

"I am content, Commander," T'Shael replied formally, the only female in the galaxy impervious to the twinkle in Riley's ginger-brown eyes.

"Tiam will not miss me until nightfall," Jandra explained. "Whatever called him and Rihan away from last evening's performance has kept them closeted together all night. Tell me again about my timing, Captain. Either my husband will beam directly down to treat with your Riley at yet another spurious meeting, or he will retire to continue his diplomatic sulking in his own part of our suite, never wondering why my door is closed to him. It is a not uncommon pattern with us.

"Therefore, under Intergalactic Expatriation Code 1417A," Jandra concluded. "I claim asylum aboard your *Enterprise*, Captain Kirk. You cannot refuse me."

"Do you mean to tell me..." Commander Rihan's face was vivid with the exertion of controlling his temper. "...that you went down there yesterday and repeatedly denied the existence of this Probe to the human's face? Tiam, you are at least an idiot, and at worst -"

"Take care, Commander," Tiam said. "In condemning me, you also condemn the government you serve."

"Then my government is as much an idiot!" Rihan raged. He jabbed an accusatory finger at Tiam. "And record that if you dare! Planetside, you are the authority, but aboard my ship I am the power. I can see to it that you never reach home with your tattle!"

Rihan breathed in great huffing gasps, forcibly calming himself. The thought of Tiam's having access to secret transmissions regarding the Probe and gods knew what else enraged him anew.

"Even without this information, you had the word of the humans themselves about this Probe and what it did to their Earth."

Tiam shrugged. "Humans lie."

"Our own spies in the Federation reported on this thing weeks ago!" Rihan roared. "The Klingons nearly lost two fully-crewed battle-cruisers. If you were idiot enough to assume humans and Klingons alike were united solely in their desire to lie to you you could have asked the Vulcan. He wanted permission to track the bloody thing. Didn't it occur to you to wonder why?"

"And now it's as good as vaporized the science station at Wlaariivi," Rihan added almost as an afterthought, though it was the reason he had been roaring at Tiam most of the night. "What were they doing on Wlaariivi anyway? It's all water, isn't it?"

"Not entirely," Tiam answered diffidently. Now that the mission to Wlaariivi apparently no longer existed, Rihan could be told. "There was land enough to set up a station, and much of the research was done via satellite or underwater."

"Research into what?"

"Intellectual augmentation of the sea creatures there. To be dropped in the seas of the rebel Variizt worlds to end the rebellions."

Rihan inhaled sharply. "Annihilation for both sides!"

Again Tiam shrugged. "For the Variizt, yes. After the Wlaariivi had done their duty, they would have served the slaughterhouses. I'm told the steaks are quite tender."

"Ghastly business! Well, I'm glad it failed. But we need to know what this Probe will do next."

"I suggest we need go no further than the starship next door," Tiam said cryptically.

"And what does that mean in words I can understand?" Rihan demanded.

"Only that it is clear the Feds did something to that Probe to divert it from destroying their world. Reprogrammed it, perhaps? Who knows what they promised it it would find in our space? Who knows but that they created the monstrosity in the first place? It's clearly a sabotage of their own design."

"Oh, truly?" Rihan was amazed. "And what seer have you consulted to determine that? Or have you access to the Praetor's astrologers as well as his secret networks? You've never been offworld until now, Tiam. How do you know what monstrosities are out there?"

Tiam leaned forward suddenly, resting his knuckles on Rihan's desk, intense. "I know that this particular monstrosity is exactly what you need to fulfill your mission on Dlonbra, Commander."

"She is correct about one thing, Captain," Spock said when Kirk took him aside to ask his advice. "You

cannot refuse her asylum. Under Intergalactic Code 1417A, paragraph 3, a starship on a diplomatic mission becomes in essence an orbiting Federation embassy, even within hostile or neutral territory. As a consequence, once Jandra set foot on the *Enterprise*, she was effectively standing on Federation soil."

This was the last thing Kirk needed to hear. He'd been looking for a way to ship this green-eyed baggage back where she'd come from. He rubbed the bridge of his nose, thinking.

"Jandra - seriously. As I understand this, you're asking us to offer you sanctuary because you don't get along with your husband. Wouldn't a divorce be simpler?"

Jandra laughed - a short, bitter sound. She looked past Kirk to Spock.

"Are humans always so naive? As if that had anything to do with it!"

"Well, judging from your penchant for throwing yourself at strange men..." Kirk ventured; Jandra's ice-green glare, if not his own innate chivalry, stopped him in mid-sentence.

"Naive, Kirk! You were only a prawn!"

Kirk looked blank for a moment; Spock took up the slack.

"Prawn," he said. "I believe you mean an insignificant gamepiece, not a decapod crustacean."

"Ouch!" McCoy remarked. "Whose side are you on?"

"But why?" Kirk demanded, ignoring them both. "I'm not aware that you're in any danger -"

"I am not free to play my music, Captain. And nothing matters but the music."

It was Kirk's turn to laugh - a short, bitter sound.

"Music! That's all I've heard about this entire mission. Your government is in the process of undergoing complete restructuring - new ideas, new freedoms, including artistic freedom. The very fact that you're here, interacting with humans, indicates just how free you are!"

"Spock!" Jandra pleaded. "Can you not explain it to him? We are Romulans, Captain! Freedom has been bred out of us over so many generations we should have to be completely reeducated to it. Do you really believe this will happen merely because one praetor is dead?"

"But you're free enough to take liberties!" Jim Kirk had had it up to here. "Free enough to jeopardize us and our mission here, to leave me and my crew open to accusations of subversion, sabotage -"

" - subversion, sabotage..." Jandra echoed him. Point and counterpoint, plot and counterplot. "... are precisely what my spouse and Commander Rihan are formulating as we speak. I have left behind everything I own, Captain, but I have not come empty-handed."

"I was not informed of this!" Rihan sputtered. "I would not have agreed to any of it if I had been!"

"Would you have relinquished your command, then?" Tiam asked coolly. "Come, Commander - surely this is not the first distasteful duty you have been assigned for the glory of Empire?"

"It is the first time I have been duped into carrying out a duty not expressly stated in my departure orders!" Rihan roared. "In fact, directly counter to my departure orders. I honestly believed this peace mission was genuine!"

Tiam studied his carefully manicured nails, as if to imply that those as easily duped as Rihan deserved their fate. Rihan sat heavily, suddenly feeling far older than his years.

"I like this human captain, Tiam!" he protested. "I like the music humans play. I even like the Vulcans. In fact, I have found no one to dislike on this journey thus far, except you."

Tiam stopped studying his nails and considered Rihan narrowly.

"It is immaterial to me whom you like or dislike. You are under orders to cooperate with me in the fulfillment of my mission. That you did not inquire into the true nature of that mission before we left the Citadel is your mistake."

"Would I have been told anything if I had?" Rihan demanded.

"Probably not," Tiam admitted. "Thus do not inquire now. Simply be certain your engines are up to prime should I require them."

"Require them for what? You will tell me exactly what you intend to do or -"

Tiam raised one languid hand. "Do not finish your thought, Commander, and I am prepared to forget you began it. Your orders are to assist me in my mission. My orders are to subvert this 'peace initiative' in whatever manner I can, to goad the *Enterprise* into a standoff with a clearly inferior vessel, to prove that the Federation is not serious about peace, and thus to rebalance the balance of power while sending a definitive message to our Klingon allies from an Empire whose ruling names have changed but whose purpose has not. Is that clear?"

"Diplomats' talk!" Rihan sneered. "You mean to provoke a confrontation, plain and simple, regardless of who or what gets in your path. Have you ever fired a weapon, Tiam? Have you ever so much as held one in your manicured hands? If Kirk's ship reduces the *Hannsu* to ions, my only wish is that you take the longest to die!"

Tiam dismissed this. "It will not come to that. Kirk is actually fairly intelligent, for a human. That is why I have had to choose the provocation carefully. I admit that even as late as yesterday I did not know what it would be." Tiam spread his hands expansively. "But the stars provide."

"Astrologers' talk!" Rihan said this time, until it came to him. "The Probe."

It presided over the three of them from the wall of the Korff governor's office: densely metallic, coldly gleaming, ponderous in its bulk, all but incomprehensible in its implied size, at least to the two civilians;

Sulu had come eyeball-to-eyeball with Fesarius and V'ger in his time. It seemed a shape somehow more appropriate to water than to space - at once streamlined and bluntly truncated, lacking any exterior projection or indication of what powered it, what lay inside, with one exception. Sulu remembered how the multifaceted crystalline shape, seemingly suspended from a beam of blue light, had projected itself from the main body, and what it had reminded him of.

"Considering what most males do their thinking with..." Cleante shut off her tricorder, unable to look at either of them without breaking up. "Sorry, Daj. Human males, I meant."

"We are not so different," Dajan remarked dryly. The three of them kept staring at it, incredulous. "One wonders what it might have been seeking on Dlontra."

"Probably the same thing it was looking for on Earth," Cleante suggested. "Presapient creatures who could carry a tune. You don't suppose - no, impossible!"

"What?" Dajan asked. "That the Korff could have been sea creatures, or that they could carry a tune?"

"Or that it could have been the Probe that taught them their method of song-mapping." Cleante gathered up her kit. "I want T'Shael to see this. Then I'm going back up to the ship. This find has raised about a million questions."

"First Era," Sulu observed, listening to the fading crunch of Cleante's footsteps over the rubble outside. "About how old would that make this mural?"

"Between ten and twelve thousand Earth years," Dajan said, adopting the same clinical tone.

"Why do you suppose succeeding generations painted over it?"

"For the same reason Hatshepsut's successors scratched her name off Egypt's monuments and replaced it with their own. That's the only Earth example that comes to mind; I can give you dozens from my own worlds. Censorship, brother, is yet another thing we have in common."

This is it! Sulu thought.

"Censorship is the recourse of the weak'..." he dared, beginning the ancient aphorism.

"...and history is rewritten by those who fear it," Dajan completed it.

Sulu reached out his hand and Dajan grasped it.

"It's about time!" the human said, grinning. "I thought I was losing my touch!"

"I don't know about you, Jim," McCoy said, "but I believe her."

The triumvirate was in a huddle across the room from their uninvited guest, who sat on the edge of the transporter platform, her talented hands clasping her knees, head bowed, looking far less like the arrogant artiste who had smuggled herself aboard than like a tired child.

"You'd believe anyone who looked at you with those big green eyes and bought your legendary charm," Kirk remarked, unimpressed.

"Now, wait a minute, aren't you confusing me with someone else? Besides..." McCoy produced his favorite mini-mediscanner, the one that fit so neatly into the palm of his hand, made virtually no sound, and could double as a polygraph machine in a pinch, even if one's subject was not in direct contact, but only sitting next to one. "No significant variation in any autonomic readings, and Romulans aren't nearly as good at controlling those as Vulcans, for example. Whether or not what she's saying is true, Jim, Jandra believes it."

"One of these days that gizmo's going to earn you a malpractice suit," Kirk remarked. "Okay, what've we got? Her claim that this whole mission is a setup, based on her having overheard her husband in conversation with a spy, whose identity she can't or won't give us. Further, her claim that the Empire hasn't changed at all, that it's all window dressing to set its various enemies and allies wondering. It seems like a lot of trouble and expense just to make us look bad. Spock?"

"I believe that possibility was discussed as recently as our briefing with Starfleet Command. I believe those doubts were voiced at that meeting. Nor do I believe this would be untoward behavior vis-a-vis our experience with the Empire in the past."

"I need more to go on than that!" Kirk objected. "How do we know Jandra herself isn't the spy? She could be a plant, carefully programmed by her own husband. This whole thing is starting to get lost in the fog. I need something to hold onto."

"Jim, I've got a great idea," McCoy interjected. "Why don't we free up the transporter room and go someplace where we can all sit down? Unless you really are serious about beaming Jandra back to the *Hannsu* without a hearing, in which case you're going to have to get past me."

Kirk looked startled. "Whose side are you on?"

"The side of reason, goddammit! All I've heard since we left Earth is spies and paranoia. It comes of having too much time on your hands. You've been complaining about having nothing to do on this trip? Well, here you are. Here's a nice juicy little Gordian knot for you to work open with your teeth. In the meantime, let us out of quarantine and for God's sake do something!"

Kirk managed to look properly chastened. "You finished?"

"As long as you listen to reason, yes."

"Spock?"

"The doctor is mixing his metaphors as usual, but essentially I agree."

"It could be as simple as Scotty's noticing their engines on overdrive," Kirk mused. He brought the transporter back up and released the doors, motioning to Jandra, mindful of pawns. "Come with us."

"They said I'd know you," Sulu apologized, still shaking Dajan's hand. "I don't know what too me so long!"

"Say it's my fault, for erring on the side of caution," Dajan said. "Perhaps I have played this game too long, and for the wrong masters."

Sulu felt his heart stop. Had he guessed wrong?

"What're you saying?"

"That I believe some of us were born to be operatives - spies." Dajan's Standard became smoother, more idiomatic, as he spoke; his slight accent disappeared entirely. This was someone who knew human language, human ways. "When Delar was executed, I examined my life with great care, to be certain I had left no traces of my work with your service, not for my own sake, but because I feared for Jandra. After our parent's death, she was all I had."

Sulu nodded to indicate he was listening, even as he prowled around the governor's office, checking the perimeter - the doors, the windows, the rooms and courtyards beyond, wondering how soon Cleante would be back.

"I played the fop, the ivory-tower scientist, with a vengeance," Dajan went on. "Even Jandra would have found me insufferable, had she seen me. It did no good. It seemed inevitable that I would be recruited by the other side. To refuse would have been - but you know our custom well enough, Clerk Lel."

Sulu started at the name. Dajan had known all along, could have turned him over to his Romulan masters at any time - arranged for him to be caught in flagrante sneaking aboard the *Hannsu*, having been lured there by a loyal Romulan, or for an ancient Korff wall to come tumbling down on him, if what else he was saying was true.

"Let me get this straight... are you telling me you're a mole, a double-agent?"

"Apparently," Dajan said carefully; following Sulu's gaze out the high oriel window above the governor's desk, though not really seeing what was beyond it. "I was stationed on that border world to report on your side's ship movements. It was a test of my worthiness. The price I had to pay, they told me, to ensure my sister's life. They did not bother to tell me she was already wed to Tiam, and sacrosanct as long as she did not displease him overmuch."

"It must have been very hard for you," Sulu said sympathetically, keeping his voice low, coming away from the windows at last.

"Say this much -" Dajan dismissed the hardship; it was past, he had survived it. "- I never gave my puppet-masters anything of value."

Puzzle pieces were rattling around in Sulu's head. Dajan knew his cover name. Dajan had worked the border worlds. Sulu, as Lel em'n Tri-ilril, had had a contact on one of those worlds...

"I'm curious, Daj. What was your cover name?"

Dajan laughed bitterly. "Oddly, it was the same for both services: Quirinus."

"The ancient god of compromise. I love it!" Sulu grinned as the final piece of the puzzle fell into place. "It

was you! You were the one who passed me - uh, that is, Clerk Lel - the sequence of trade routes that led right to the place where the Klingons were holding Cleante and T'Shael... Do they know?"

Dajan shook his head. "I owed Cleante recompense for Delar's actions. The debt to T'Shael, through my sister and her father, goes deeper still. Do you understand?"

Sulu did. "You probably also saved my life by cutting considerable time off my search. Security forces were on my tail. If I hadn't gotten out when I did - who knows? Daj, I owe you one!"

"Which I intend to collect on shortly."

Here it comes! Sulu thought. He led Dajan outside to the courtyard, where an ornate stone bench several thousand years old, cracked and weed-grown, overlooked most of the twisting Korff street. Better to be outside, where they could see and hear anyone else's approach.

"Suppose you begin by telling me what you're supposed to be doing here," Sulu suggested.

"We wait," Commander Rihan announced complacently. "Unless and until I receive a direct order from the Citadel to act upon the matter of the Wlaariivi science station, I wait. And while you are aboard my ship, Tiam, you wait. If you wish to continue to pout like a child, that would be easiest. If you wish to meet again with your human counterpart - as you were supposed to do some fifty minutes ago, I hope you realize - you will continue your shadow play. I will send Security down to monitor your talks. You will say nothing of substance, do you understand? Unless, of course, you enjoy the climate on Dlontra. Because if you defy me, Tiam, I promise you, it is where you will spend the rest of your life!"

"Officially," Dajan said, "I am here on assignment to my brother-in-law, to plant falsified Korff artifacts for the Federation team to find and thus be discredited when they return home. Needless to say, I have not had time to accomplish this yet," he added before Sulu could interrupt. "I was hoping to contact you first."

"And unofficially?"

"At the risk of practicing sloppy spycraft..." Dajan's face had gone suddenly Vulcan-solemn, as if to mask his deepest feelings "...I have a personal reason, or actually two."

"I'm listening," Sulu said.

"Jandra," Dajan said simply.

"The bird in the gilded cage," Sulu said. "You want me to help you get her across."

"Just so. Her fate is tied to Tiam's. If his mission succeeds, she will never leave her gilded cage. If I tell you what I know, and Tiam's mission fails..."

He could not finish.

"I hear you," Sulu said, at the same time slipping Dajan's tricorder out of its belt pouch; the Romulan gave him a quizzical look but did not object.

"Getting her out during a concert shouldn't be difficult..." Sulu scanned the Korff metropolis, locating each member of the digger teams, all paired off and more or less stationary, except for one pair which was steadfastly working its way toward them. "As for the diplomatic repercussions...Riley's bailiwick, not mine." He snapped off the tricorder, handed it back. "We'll get her over, Daj, I swear it. Now tell me about Tiam's mission, and quickly, because Cleante and T'Shael will be back here any minute."

Dajan nodded. "Perhaps I should begin backwards, with the Probe..."

Uhura relinquished the center seat as soon as Kirk stepped out of the 'lift.

"Messages?"

"Just one from Dr. alFaisal, sir, saying her team will be beaming up shortly. Seems they've found something of interest down there. If you all had had the transporter room sealed off much longer..." She let her voice trail off. Kirk was wearing his don't-bother-me-I'm-thinking look. "Captain -?"

Kirk snapped out of it. "Hm?"

"How much am I allowed to ask?" Uhura ventured, putting her eyelashes into it.

Kirk smiled in spite of himself. "You know you're irresistible when you do that?"

"Oh, yes, sir!" Uhura deadpanned.

Kirk cleared his throat. "How much are you allowed to ask - as much as I'm allowed to tell you outside of a general briefing, which is that we've taken on some dangerous cargo, and until I decide what to do with it, I want all hands present and accounted for. Contact Riley. Tell him to beam his people up. Keep it simple. Nothing urgent, just needed aboard. I don't want to tip Tiam off."

"Yes, sir." Uhura was already at her board, going to work. "If it's useful, sir, it's my impression Centurion Tiam isn't down there yet. Still sulking in his tent, I gather."

"Him and Lord Harbinger..." Kirk mused. "I'm not sure if that's good or bad. It could just be a sulk, or it could be part of the plot..."

A long time ago, when Uhura had been the new kid on *Enterprise*, she'd tried her damndest not to act as scared as she always seemed to feel. She had spent her first few weeks at the commboard studying everyone else on the bridge, frankly looking for a role-model, someone to emulate, someone to help her keep the panic at bay, suppress the scream that seemed always about to leap out of her throat.

She had found him at the next station over - unflappable, imperturbable, unafraid to ask the precise

question that would let everyone on the bridge know exactly what they needed to know.

Over the years, Uhura had occasionally found herself unconsciously adopting his speech pattern, stopped just short of parody by the occasional quirk of an eyebrow above the science station, warning her whenever she was about to go over the top.

The eyebrow and its owner weren't here now, were probably helping the dangerous cargo get settled in human guest quarters. Uhura donned her best deadpan again.

"Plot, sir? It might help my analysis if I knew what plot you were talking about..."

"If you don't have Riley on comm within the next thirty seconds, I'll give you analysis!" Kirk snapped the center seat toward her, out of patience. "Then get the science team up here as well. Separate them from the Romulans, but on the assumption that our next door neighbors are monitoring." He nodded toward the *Hannsu*, ubiquitous in the forward screen. The yellow alert in the back of his skull threatened to escalate to red; he squelched it. "Get those people up here, now!"

"If it is true, and I have never met a human who did not believe it, that a Vulcan cannot lie," Dajan said when he had finished his tale of treachery and deceit, "it must also be true that no Romulan can tell the truth. You have no reason to believe anything I've told you, brother."

"Except that you wouldn't risk your sister's life on a lie," Sulu said. "I believe you, brother. You said there was a second favor."

Dajan shook his head; his sensitive ears had detected Cleante's return, and that she was not alone.

"Perhaps another time. Say only that no one has died yet of my duty to either service..." Sulu could not help noticing how Dajan reacquired his accent, his foppish mannerisms, as he talked. Chameleon, operative, spy, shadow within substance, and mirror-image of himself. "...say also that I do not know how much longer that may be true. I do not know how much longer I can play the game."

The two men clasped hands again just as Cleante and T'Shael appeared around the turn of the winding Korff street.

"It's the oddest thing!" Cleante announced. "Uhura said something about the transporter being down. Do they do maintenance, usually, when there are people downplanet?"

Sulu and Dajan exchanged glances. This could be it; it might be nothing. Sulu whipped out his communicator.

"Contact your teams," he said, taking charge. "Cleante, you and T'Shael have your people meet back at the Dome - no the double, no arguments! Daj, later! Sulu to *Enterprise*. Sulu to *Enterprise*; come in, please..."

Dajan half-raised his arm in farewell; Sulu was already moving off at a trot in the direction of the Dome.

"Your forgiveness, Centurion," the *Hannsu*'s high-strung comm officer blurted, "but Commander Rihan has ordered that no messages are to go out without his approval."

"Not even in code?"

"Forgiveness, Centurion, no."

"What about incoming?" Tiam's cool tone gave no indication that inwardly he seethed.

The comm officer hesitated, swallowing hard. "Only upon Commander Rihan's prior approval, Centurion."

"Just so. It's to be expected." Tiam said diffidently, allowing one manicured hand to rest on the comm officer's shoulder, pretending not to notice how it made her tense. "No matter. Carry on."

He repaired at once to the suite he shared with Jandra; only a slight tension in the manicured hands would have revealed his inner agitation, had anyone been present to notice. The realization that Jandra's door was locked perturbed Tiam only slightly; the strains of some discordant Earther music from within suggested she was either rehearsing or recovering from last evening's performance and would emerge when she chose.

Just as well, Tiam thought. As long as he could hear the music, he knew he would not be interrupted. Sealing his own door, removing a false panel beneath the wall servitor, installed during the *Hannsu*'s most recent overhaul, he extracted the private transmitter he had been issued for just such contingencies.

"That does it!" Riley announced, slapping the conference table with the palms of both hands. "Centurion Tiam has wasted enough of our time. Ryan, contact T'Shael and let her know she's free to hang about with the diggers, but you and I are beaming up."

"Sir -?" Ryan gaped like a fish. He had no communicator! What was he going to do? He'd been sweating the outcome ever since Jandra took it from his hand, praying for an earthquake, a Red Alert, anything to bail him out.

Just as Riley was about to ask Ryan what was taking him so long, Sulu burst in at a trot, and Ryan was saved.

PASSACAGLIA

No time. Notime notimenotimenotimenotime...

The Wanderer hurried, as fast as hurry could be. No time and too much time. No time.

Hie and hurry, hurry home. To streamline was to speed, retracting the crystal sensor - Seeker, Inquirer, Listener, Recorder, blue-crystal wisdom of the crystal caves - sliding it smoothly inside into the place designed, reserved for it in mystery interior, sensor-impenetrable, where the wisdom lay. It would no longer listen. Streamlined, sealed off, incommunicado, the Wanderer hurried. No time.

No time and too much time. No time to save the beings. Too much time to tell them of the half million years they had to live, if living it was that held no hope, half-live their half-lives on their wasted, wasting worlds. Living in death, dying in life - starving, floating frigid in freezing seas or flopping frantic on searing salt-mud sands - were these choices? Nothing to anticipate but death amid the stink of rotting flesh (or stench of roasting flesh - ah memory, ah Pithai!), bleached barren brittle bones, gone...

Duty-bound, the Wanderer returned, to sing its siren-song. Too late too soon, no time.

Without the sensor, Seeker, Listener, wisdom of the crystal caves, it was spared at least the crackle of irritating Pithai-chatter interweaving space and subspace in its inexorably sticky web. The Wanderer's silken silver skin fed it all the wisdom it needed now: speed and distance, radiation, heat and cold, storm and dust and gravity well, anomaly - dangers large and small. It zigged, it zagged, avoided, eluded, plotting as straight a course as feasible through real space: Home. Home to the blue-sun two-Worlds to tell them of their death.

The alternative, to change course and seek its own safety, lay within its programming, but did not occur.

Surrounding it were webs of shrieking shattering Pithai-chatter it no longer needed to hear. Let them shriek at each other; the Wanderer need no longer heed. The universe was full of Pithai, and Pithai were mad...

FUGUE

"The Romulans appear to have recalled their archeology team as well, Captain," Spock reported from his station. "Scanners indicate both teams have gathered in the Dome."

Kirk had been rehearsing the bluff he'd use when Rihan hailed in demanding to know Jandra's whereabouts, though he hoped he wouldn't need it this soon; he really wanted Riley's expertise on this. What the hell was taking Riley so long?

"Captain?" Uhura said from the commboard. "Riley and his team are aboard, sir. And Commander Rihan is on ship-to-ship."

Here it was, whatever it was. Kirk took a deep breath. "Onscreen."

Rihan was half-turned away from the screen, carrying on a heated discussion with someone just out of visual range. Tiam no doubt, Kirk thought, trying to filter the voice past the Universal Translator, which was sputtering its way through an obscure Romulan dialect, rendering only every third word. Kirk thought he heard "science station" and "warning buoys," but couldn't make out anything more.

"It was in your space last, Kirk!" Rihan announced without preamble, in control enough and courteous to switch to Rom Basic so the Translator could read him, seeming to lunge toward them out of the forward screen, larger than life and distinctly green in the face. "What have you done to it?"

"Commander Rihan..." Kirk temporized, spreading his hands expansively to indicate a calm he did not feel. His mind was revving as hot as 's engines. Not the Probe again. If this was the fabricated provocation Jandra meant to warn them about, it was pretty lame after Tiam's antics at the conference table. Probe - what Probe? Kirk was tempted to ask just to be perverse. He reminded himself that this was Rihan, not Tiam he was dealing with, and Rihan had proven a straight-shooter so far, and all Romulans no more thought alike than they looked alike, and he still trusted Rihan - so far. "If you're referring to the Probe, I'm sorry, but I have no idea -"

"Don't play diplomats' games with me, Kirk; it is unworthy of you!" Rihan spluttered, the Translator lagging a beat behind him - distorting, distracting. "This seemingly benign, emasculated behemoth you so complacently let loose of your space has not only wiped out one of our science stations and several deep-space buys..."

"Quite a performance!" McCoy offered from Kirk's left. When the hell had he arrived? "Unless it's real. I wouldn't want to guess what that man's blood pressure is right now."

"...or do you mean to tell me you are unaware that every subspace channel from here to the Outposts is filled with it?" Rihan finished all in one breath, panting from the effort.

"Commander, I'll remind you that it was your own diplomatic representative who has repeatedly stated that the Probe does not exist, and denied us permission to track it..." Kirk stalled, aware of Riley stepping out of the 'lift behind him; his peripheral vision picked up T'Shael and Cleante as well. At the same moment Sulu slipped around McCoy to sit unasked at the helm, vacant since they had arrived and set the ship on station-keeping. "At any rate, we're ten days from Starfleet Command at this distance, and except for ship-to-surface -"

"Let me take this, Jim." Riley stepped down into the command well.

Kirk conceded with a gesture, at the same time motioning to Uhura who, one step ahead of him, was already scanning the longrange multiphasics. Kirk could tell by the barely perceptible shake of her head that it was awfully busy out there.

"As you well know, Commander," Riley began in his best diplomatese, "the Probe is an alien device not of our creation. We were unable to communicate with it when it approached Earth, and remain unable to communicate with it at present. Whatever damage it may or may not have done within Romulan space is not our responsibility."

Rihan seemed to be half-listening, distracted by whatever the offscreen voice was nattering at him in its obscure dialect, insistent; Rihan silenced it with an impatient gesture.

"You cannot tell me, Commander Riley, that you have been entirely unaware of its movements. Do you not scan all frequencies as a matter of course?"

"Ordinarily, yes. But as you specifically requested that we not track this non-existent Probe, and as we are nearer your homeworlds than ours, we thought that as a matter of courtesy -"

"There is no time for courtesy!" Rihan interrupted. "And it was not I who told you there was no Probe. I

have a berserker weapon at my back and an imperial order to address the matter of the Wlaariivi station ringing in my ear. Therefore, I must accuse your government of murder and sabotage, and I must act accordingly!"

"Commander Rihan," Kirk took over, trying to read the man's face, wanting to believe him, to believe that this was a simple matter of an outside force threatening them both, some concrete thing they could address and cope with together, instead of fog and cobwebs. "Can you give us the Probe's present location?"

Rihan consulted with the offscreen readout, while Spock prepared to correlate his data on the Probe with whatever Rihan provided.

"Our scouts indicate it deactivated three warning buoys in the vicinity of the Dwai'in Anomaly following its depredations on Wlaariivi..."

Rihan's eyes were narrowed, not at the humans at his viewscreen, but as if he could not believe his own science officer's readouts, could not believe the sheer temerity of a thing which could wander that close to a gravity well the size of Dwai'in and have sufficient speed and power to veer away unscathed. Kirk could hear Spock playing the telltales at his station like a virtuoso.

"We have also lost contact with one of our patrol ships, the *Ch'vran* ." Rihan was breathing hard again. "At this speed, Kirk, and on this trajectory, that monstrosity is some three parsecs distant, bearing one-four-three mark eleven, and on a heading straight toward us."

"Confirmed, Captain," Spock reported, though with an odd timbre to his voice; Kirk did not need to turn to see the frown deepen between his eyebrows. "Assuming all data are accurate, it will be in range within one hour thirteen minutes, present speed."

"Conference time!" Riley suggested sotto voce. Kirk nodded agreement.

"Commander, to the best of our knowledge, the Probe essentially means no harm," he addressed Rihan, hoping his own sincerity was as readable as the Romulan's. "Give us a few moments to confer, and we'll meet with you in the Dome to decide what course of action -"

"Aboard my ship, Kirk!" Rihan interrupted. "Fifteen minutes, no more! And no tricks! If this thing means to attack us, let it taste human blood as well!"

"Clear as the nose on your face, Jim!" Riley insisted. "The Probe is the trick of it, can't you see?"

"I wouldn't make that assumption," Kirk said thoughtfully, "and neither should you just yet. I'd prefer to err on the side of looking foolish rather than let a potential doomsday weapon slip through our fingers -" He glanced at Spock. " - for the second time. Ladies and gentlemen, our clock's running. Let's add up what we have."

The briefing table was more crowded than Kirk ever remembered seeing it. McCoy, Uhura and Sulu ranged down one side of it, Riley, Cleante and T'Shael on the other, with Spock at the far end at the com tie-in. Sulu had just finished briefing everyone on what Dajan had told him, carefully leaving out his name

and the part about his being a double-agent. Sulu seemed surprised to learn that Jandra had wangled her own way aboard.

"Everything she's told you can be confirmed by my contact, Captain," Sulu concluded. "I can't name names, but I can tell you he's been a Special Section Level-3 operative for about as long as I have, recruited from inside the Empire. He's good, and so is his word."

"A Romulan spying on Romulans?" Riley was skeptical. "I don't know. And he'd have us believe he arranged to come on this mission solely to warn us that the Empire hasn't changed its spots?"

Sulu shrugged. "Maybe."

"And he doesn't know Jandra's aboard?"

Sulu shrugged again. "I just found that out myself."

From the way Riley said it, Sulu realized he had a fair idea who the contact was; probably so did everyone else around this table. If Dajan wanted out that badly, this might be his best chance, maybe his only chance.

Kirk cleared his throat. "Gentlemen, I suggest Jandra's situation is the least of our worries. I'm more concerned about the Probe. Spock -?"

"Based upon algorithms T'Shael and I have extrapolated from the Probe's previous path through this sector before it emerged into Federation space," T'Shael nodded in agreement, "the trajectory Commander Rihan describes is entirely plausible."

"But -?" Kirk prompted him.

"That does not conclusively prove that the Probe has been enacting the depredations Commander Rihan also describes. These may be pure fabrication."

"We know the Probe's been here before," Cleante chimed in while Kirk was mulling this over. "Sulu can tell you about the mural Dajan and I found." She hesitated on the name, knowing perfectly well who Sulu's contact was, wondering if Jim Kirk had been right to suspect him and their correspondence from the beginning. Had she been instrumental in providing Dajan with any information? Cleante wondered. "There's no question, Captain, but that the Probe passed through here at least once between ten and twelve thousand years ago," she finished hurriedly. "And passed close enough, for whatever reason, to be visible to Dlundra's inhabitants."

"Confirmed, sir," Sulu added. Spock added this information to his calculations as well.

"Again, that tells us there's a good chance it's headed this way," Kirk said. "As Spock has suggested, it does not tell us it's been knocking down everything in its path. That may be the lie within the greater truth. The Probe's mere proximity may be the only excuse Centurion Tiam needs to provoke a confrontation."

"But can we be sure of that?" Uhura asked.

Kirk gave her the floor. "What've you got?"

"On the basis of comm volume alone, sir, I doubt even the Romulans could generate that much falsified

activity over so wide an area just to fool us."

"Granted, but keep monitoring," Kirk instructed her. "And see if the Earth outposts have picked up anything. Keep a record for Starfleet Command, but don't send as yet; there isn't a whole lot they can do at this distance anyway. And if you hear so much as a whisper from the Probe..."

"Aye, sir. On my way."

As the door swished shut behind her, Kirk punched up Engineering.

"Scotty? Is the *Hannsu* still running her engines hot?"

"Aye, sir, intermittently. Same as she's been doing since we got here. No variation."

"Let me know if she does vary by so much as a whisker. Kirk out."

There was too much data, and it didn't add up. What if, could be, maybe - if only it were a simple question of catching the Probe on the fly-by, finding out what ailed it this time (without a whale in our back pocket? Jim Kirk marveled at himself. Just how do we propose to do that?) and sending it away happy, or at least sending it away. There would still be time to strip away the fog and cobwebs, salvage the peace initiative, maybe even smuggle Jandra to the nearest outpost without firing a shot.

Did I say something about waiting for something to happen? Kirk wondered. Well, here it is: four versions of the same story from four different Romulans, no guaranteed litmus test for telling which if them is telling how much of the truth, a rogue Probe, a dissident musician, a postponed peace initiative, a Rom warbird breathing up my nostrils in the middle of the Neutral Zone, and it isn't even lunchtime!

And Spock was wearing The Look - head canted to one side, eyebrows pinched together in an ever-deepening frown - which meant his equation didn't balance either, and he wouldn't rest until it did.

"Come on, Spock, I know that look."

"The thing that puzzles me," he said, "is the Probe's sudden use of multiple warp speeds. Compared to its present speed, its approach to Earth could almost be described as leisurely. And if in fact it has attacked and killed the scientists on Wlaariivi, this suggests a change in philosophy as well. Its damage to Earth was accidental, the result of a misunderstanding; its aggression on Wlaariivi appears to be deliberate. Again I regret my own inability to scan it for weaponry while it was within Sol system, and Starfleet's repeated refusal to analyze it while it had the chance."

"Assuming it doesn't mow us down or chop us up on its way past, you can lodge a formal protest with Starfleet Command when we get home," Kirk said. "Right now, we're running out of time."

"Apparently, Captain, so is the Probe. After thousands of years in space, it appears suddenly to be in a great hurry. One must logically wonder why."

"Why don't you just stick your thumb out on its way past and ask it?" McCoy suggested. "It's obviously pissed off about something, if it's wiping out science stations. But since we can't communicate with it, the best we can do is send up a weather balloon, batten down and get the hell out of its way, and maybe have the courtesy to suggest to Commander Rihan that he do the same. Unless of course you and T'Shael have mastered its language by now." He winked at the solemn figure across the table. "I mean, hell, there are two of you, and you've had over a month already!"

"I will assume you are joking, Doctor," T'Shael said softly. Did she ever raise her voice? McCoy wondered, ever get excited about anything, ever speak without being spoken to? "Nevertheless, I will inform you that we have not been successful in decoding more than the basic algorithms of the single language the Probe sang to George and Gracie. Had I more time to spend with the whales..."

"Yes, of course," McCoy agreed, embarrassed for picking on her. "Damn Tiam and this phony peace initiative anyway!"

"Must'," Kirk said out of nowhere. "He said 'must' twice, in the same sentence..."

"Hello?" McCoy inquired. "*Enterpriset*o Kirk. We're not reading you at all, Jim."

"Commander Rihan. He said it twice: 'I must accuse your government of sabotage...I must act accordingly.' He's never sounded that - coerced before. T'Shael, could it have a Translator glitch?"

"Doubtful, Captain. The translation is precise, and freighted with precisely the nuance of implied obligation you have intuited."

"Then someone's pulling Rihan's strings!" Kirk concluded narrowly. "Which brings us around full-circle. And we're out of time!"

"And I'm on my way," Riley announced, on his feet. "Jim, I'm leaving Ryan here. But T'Shael and I will need at least one security guard..."

"I don't remember saying you'd be going over to the *Hannsu*, Mister!" Kirk was on his feet as well.

"I don't remember asking you, Captain" Riley answered smoothly. "I'm afraid just this once I'm going to have to resort to diplomatic override."

The guest quarters of this human ship, Jandra thought, comprised an almost luxurious prison. Though the mattress was less firm than she might have desired and something about the coverlet made her sneeze, the bed was wider than she might have expected, as was the room which housed it, and there was even a sitting room beyond. The whole was almost as large as the bridge on the cramped and crowded *Hannsu*. Perhaps this was the greatest luxury - to have the space to stretch one's arms out, to whirl about freely without fear of bumping into anything; she had tried it more than once.

Were they watching her? Jandra doubted it, though she would not have recognized an alien monitoring device had there been one. The human captain had merely asked her to remain here - asked her! There was neither lock on the door nor guard beyond it; she had merely given her word and it had been accepted. Did that mean she had been believed?

Would they have granted her sanctuary even if she had come empty-handed?

She had had to act and act quickly, before Sib put into action whatever plans he had. Jandra had never questioned Sib's work for the Empire, preferring not to know what compromises he had made with his soul for the sake of survival. Surely no worse, she thought, than I. But she had known without being told

that, whatever his work for Tiam, he had taken it on only to see her rescued. Sib did not need to tell her anything. They were twins; their special symbiosis, however attenuated by time or distance, was a constant. Jandra knew. She could not allow Sib to compromise himself any further; though she might only be exchanging one prison for another, she had flown.

This new prison contained every creature comfort she might need: a bed to sleep in, chairs to sit on, a tie-in to the ship's library computer; someone had even programmed the servitor for meals she could tolerate. The human doctor had excused himself while Spock instructed her in how things operated, returning moments later with an unopened bottle of ale as blue and sparkling as his eyes.

"First night away from home's always the loneliest," he'd offered knowingly. "This should keep you warm."

Jandra had refrained from saying she had the nearby thermostat for that; she was not a Vulcan, and she took the doctor's meaning.

"An excellent vintage, Doctor. Will you join me?"

"Maybe later when I'm not on duty," he'd demurred, and went out whistling.

She had everything she needed, Jandra thought, except a definite future beyond this first lonely night. In truth, she might never reach night in this place, should Tiam discover her missing and create his usual calculated furor. Her nurse Kalih used to counter her childhood laments by saying the universe could end before teatime, too. There was a danger in dwelling on such uncertainties. If only she had something to do.

She had left everything behind but the clothing she wore. Did the human captain appreciate the significance of that? Whatever love/hate relationship she might entertain with her culture's stringed instruments, plekt and the'el and bahtain, they had been lifelong companions, valued as much for memories as for their intrinsic worth; nevertheless she had abandoned them, left them sealed in her room aboard the *Hannsu*, the roar of Beethoven through the locked door designed to keep Tiam at bay.

There were her alien instruments, too: the cello, the ka'athyra - perhaps easier to replace in Federation territories, but Salet had given her the originals, and she had had to sacrifice them to secrecy and the need to hurry.

She was leaving more than things behind: she was abandoning everything Romulan, everything she knew. Even Sib, and this was the hardest - how was she to live without Sib? Even when had been exiled there had been hope, for internal exile need not be forever. But now that she was here, and he was bound to his duty to the Empire, she would never see him more. Did the human captain, studying her askance with his long-lashed eyes, appreciate any of this?

The Vulcan had.

"Don't go!" she had pleaded with him while the doctor was off fetching the ale; she could not help noticing Spock's reluctance to be alone with her.

"I need - your advice," she had added quickly, knowing that the one thing she wanted to do, the one thing which had most enticed Kirk, would as strongly repel him.

"If I am qualified to offer it..." Spock had replied at once, keeping a careful distance, his virtuoso's hands locked together behind his back, as if he found this posture most comfortable.

"What do you think will happen to me?" Jandra tried not to color her voice with the panic she felt, now that the deed was done. Did he sense it anyway?

"Assuming you are granted asylum," he had said carefully, "you will be brought to the nearest Federation outpost for some manner of debriefing. As you are a civilian and a nonpolitical, this should prove neither extensive nor arduous. Following that, you will most likely be permitted to seek residence on some Federation world, doubtless to resume your career as a musician."

Did she dare hope? The doctor had returned with his offering before she could question Spock further, and after an exchange of pleasantries and reassurances and the doctor's departure, Spock had also taken his leave, and she was alone.

The library computer tie-in could provide her with the music of a thousand worlds - to listen to. What she needed now was to play, to put her hands to work and her mind at rest. Nothing mattered but the music. If only she could have access to the piano! She would live all her life within these walls, if only she could only play the piano.

She had been asked to remain here, while important matters transpired on the *Enterprise*'s bridge. Had any of it to do with her? How long?

Jandra had accessed the library's music menu, scrolling through it in search of a piece which would suit her mood. It was not difficult to choose. For this, only Beethoven would do.

"I'm against this!" Kirk said as Riley and T'Shael waited for the security backup to meet them in the transporter room.

"I wouldn't expect you to be otherwise," Riley responded with a smile, wishing Kirk would quit pacing, quit trying to get between him and the transporter platform.

"I'm particularly averse to sending a civilian into a hazardous situation." Kirk addressed this to T'Shael.

"So noted," Riley said. "T'Shael? Are you being coerced?"

"No, Commander. No, Captain," she said for Kirk's benefit. "By strict definition, this entire mission has comprised a 'hazardous situation.' Yet I am here of my own volition, and will accompany Commander Riley to the *Hannsu*, also of my own volition."

"And I don't have the authority to countermand a diplomatic override," Kirk said, almost to himself. "I'm still against it. You're playing right into Tiam's hands."

"You don't know that, Jim," Riley argued, "and we've got less than an hour to find out. *Hannsu*'s shields

are down, and Chief Harper's got a transponder lock on both of us. If I smell any indication of trouble, he's got my prearranged signal. If he's as good on that board as he is on a keyboard -"

"Just stay on the beat, Commander," Harper advised him. "Don't improvise. I've got you."

"Now, if you'll stop blowing up a gale and get out of my way, Captain..."

"You really expect to find the answers aboard that ship?"

"I had hoped to find the answers within the Romulan heart," Riley replied, with a wink to show that, poet or no, he still had his feet on the ground. "But at the moment I know of no better place to start."

"You trained him well, Jim," McCoy whispered as some sort of commotion started in the corridor and worked its way into the transporter room.

"Too well, maybe," Kirk shot back, frowning at the noise, though its instigator soon became apparent.

"Hi!" Sulu bounded in, strapping a phaser onto a security lieutenant's uniform. "Glad you didn't leave without me. Took me a while to get by the security chief, but here I am. Got some unfinished business aboard that ship."

"Oh, no! No way, absolutely not!" Riley objected. "Jim, is this your idea? If you're all that worried about us, at least give us a real security guard, not D'Artagnan here."

Kirk experienced a sudden flashback, a collage of memories: Sulu chasing crewmen with a sword. Sulu, as Kirk heard it from the bridge crew later, sitting stubbornly at the helm with his hands in his lap when Janice Lester tried to take over the *Enterprise* along with another valuable piece of equipment, refusing to cooperate, though it could have meant his career if not his life ("I'll fight them any way I can!"). Sulu bashing hell out of the two-meters tall hunk of meat who served as security in the holding pen where they'd kept McCoy after Genesis, then calmly demolishing every piece of equipment in the room before leaping into the turbolift. Don't anyone, ever, call him Tiny! Kirk grinned.

"Nooo..." he said slowly. "I think you'll do just fine with D'Artagnan here. You two deserve each other, and it may be the only way I have any control over this situation. On the other hand, Mr. Sulu, the change of uniform might not go unnoticed. What if someone recognizes you from the party last night?"

Sulu shrugged. "I'll chance it, Captain. You know what they say about all humans looking alike."

Humans, Jandra thought, the strains of Beethoven's Emperor Concerto filling her soul. To spend the rest of my life among humans - living with them, working with them. Can I? Have I the strength?

She had programmed the computer much as Sulu had done it for her that first day when she had played the Mozart: instructing it to play the concerto, but with the piano part removed. On the tabletop before her she conjured an invisible keyboard upon which she played this emperor among concertos, hearing the music in her head.

"Prince," Beethoven had once written to a former patron who had, with the arrogance of those with

power but no talent, betrayed him, "what you are, you are by accident of birth. What I am, I am through myself. There have been and will be thousands of princes. There is only one Beethoven."

Before this journey, Jandra had never met a human, never spoken to one, knew nothing of them but what Salet had told her, instructing her in both music and humanity as his gifted fingers guided hers through serenade, concerto, partita, waltz, his stories of Earth and Vulcan and a dozen worlds between almost as wonderful as his music. It was Salet who had told her of Beethoven's letter to his patron. The child Jandra had been scandalized. It was blasphemy to address those in power thus; a Romulan could die for less. Only now, as an adult, the slow movement of the Emperor trickling from her fingers like melancholy raindrops, did she understand. This was human nature - to defy, to change, to shake one's fist at the heavens and challenge even the gods. "Freedom!" Beethoven had declared. "Freedom above all!"

How is it that a human, Jandra wondered, feeling the tears start in her own eyes from the sheer beauty of the music, a human whose life encompassed a mere fifty-six years, and that some five centuries ago, can so move me? Give me a world filled with Beethovens and I shall flourish!

Jandra thought of the humans she had met: the warm and intuitive Uhura, mischievous Sulu, magical Harper, the gracious McCoy, even the quixotic Kirk with his accusing eyes. She recalled Sib's stories of his fellow digger Cleante, with whom he was so compatible. In some alternate universe, Sib and Cleante could work together on a hundred digs, and Sib could abandon his shadow career, for there would be no need for spies. In some alternate universe there would be space enough and time for Romulans, humans, Vulcans, for science and music and dreams. Trailing off to the end of the concerto's second movement, Jandra closed her eyes, envisioning a human audience for whom she could play. A Romulan performing Beethoven - what a novelty! Alternate universes, fantasies, dreams - was any of it possible?

Most importantly, could she live without Sib? When he had been sent into exile, she had wept. When he had returned to her five years later, she had wept again. In all that time she had sensed his moods from so far away, had even had a premonition of his return despite her exhaustion following the Praetor's death. How could she live without Sib?

Jandra finished the second movement, lifting her fingers from the invisible keyboard.

"Computer, hold!" she ordered it, lest it gallop into the exuberant third movement without her. Almost she stood and crossed the threshold of the door which had neither lock nor guard. From there she could surely find the transporter room, find Harper, tell him to tell Kirk she had changed her mind, go back, go back, lie to the *Hannsu*'s transporter minion, swear him to secrecy, slip back into her room where the very same concerto played over and over (a tape, T'Shael's gift that first day), go back, go back...

And do what? Risk discovery and death in an unchanged, unchanging Empire, death not only for herself, but this time for Sib? The final betrayal from a family of betrayers! the official documents would characterize it. No!

Too late, no time.

"Computer off!" Jandra instructed it. No exuberant third movement, no catharsis, no time. Jandra rested her head on her arms on the invisible keyboard and wept.

"Ciao, kids!" Sulu whispered under his breath, sidling behind Riley and T'Shael as a matched set of guards met them in the *Hannsu*'s transporter room. "Time for me to make a pit-stop."

"Hey, Sulu -!" Riley began as his erstwhile security guard sidled over to the transporter operator to ask directions to the head.

Riley didn't finish. Any Romulan worth his ale would look askance at a diplomatic attach, who couldn't handle his underlings. Let it look as if he'd given Sulu permission to go. A smirking guard, his expression implying that humans couldn't even hold their water, motioned Sulu to follow him, and Sulu sauntered off. Not for the first time in his friendship with the flamboyant helmsman, Riley found himself holding the bag.

"He drinks a lot of tea," Riley motioned to T'Shael for the remaining guard's benefit as they made their way down the low-ceilinged corridors, voices and footsteps echoing oddly.

"Indeed," T'Shael deadpanned; they both knew that if the men's room didn't already have two exist - one without a guard - Sulu would create one.

The *Hannsu*'s corridors were narrower than *Enterprise*'s, uncarpeted, generally more austere, but that didn't entirely account for the background noise - a constant machine hum Riley hadn't expected a race with superior hearing to tolerate. A poorly-tuned atmosphere-control unit possibly?

"Comm-scramblers," T'Shael informed him, in a language Riley didn't recognize at first, "to prevent the use of listening devices within the ship."

"Gaelic!" Riley non sequitored, not sure if he was more surprised that T'Shael could read his mind or that she spoke his mother-tongue.

"Aye," T'Shael replied.

"I'll be damned!" Riley said slowly in the same tongue, embarrassed for the years he hadn't used it and the rustiness of his accent. "Hold that thought, darlin', and if the need comes on you to tell me something urgent whilst I'm in there trading shouts with Centurion Tiam -"

"Understood," T'Shael replied as the door to Commander Rihan's briefing room swung open.

"Hst, Dajan!" Sulu whispered, hugging the turn of a corridor just out of sight. He'd found his fellow operative fortuitously soon.

Dajan turned, blanched. "Gods and Elements!" he cried, grabbing Sulu's arm and dragging him into a nearby dead end, out from under the eye of the ubiquitous surveillance cameras. "What -? How did you -?"

"Save it," Sulu said, eyeballing the corridor in both directions. Deserted, so far. "Your sister's already gone over. I don't suppose this ship's big enough to have an aux-transporter?"

"Certainly not," Dajan answered without thinking or, rather, thinking like an operative, quick-time, no time for personal details. "And the main one's as slow as - what? Jandra, aboard *Enterprise* ? How?"

"Damn!" Sulu said, his mind still spinning on transporters, escape. "How good is your cargo beam?"

"Not good enough to send anything through live," Dajan shook his head, grabbed Sulu and almost shook him. "Never mind that! Sulu, gods, answer me - you have Jandra? How?"

"Not me, bro." Sulu scanned the corridor again, drew his phaser. "She got herself out. I still haven't got the whole story. You can ask her yourself in about five minutes. How do we get to the main transporter without waking up the cameras?"

"Right at the next junction, up one level, then down. The cameras on that level are down for maintenance. Sulu, look me in the eye: what are you saying?"

Sulu grabbed him back. "I'm saying: Come over. Come out of the cold. You say you don't know how much longer you can hold out - why hold out at all? Jandra's safe, you're not carrying any high-level baggage; you can be decommissioned, go glyph-hunting with Cleante for the rest of your - sh! What's that?"

"Change-of-shift tocsin. We ought to lie low for a few minutes. You came all the way over here to tell me that?"

"Not exactly. Listen, how much of the Probe story is genuine?"

"All of it. Rihan's been in a sweat ever since the holos came through; *Ch'vran* managed a few pictures before she went silent. The parameters really rocked him. He kept muttering 'the size of the thing, the size of it!'"

"Well, it's no Fesarius, but it's big enough," Sulu acknowledged, just as it hit him where Dajan had been going when he found him. "You were coming over to tell us, weren't you?"

"What? A fesarius is like a dictionary, no? A list of words, I thought."

"That's a thesaurus," Sulu said vaguely, the focused. "You were coming over to *Enterprise* to tell us!"

"I was trying to find a way -" Dajan dismissed it as if it were nothing. " - to make your Kirk believe me."

"Do you know what was going on on Wlaariivi?"

Dajan nodded. Tiam had not condescended to tell him, but he had sources. "Experiments to implant augmented cerebral cells in the sea creatures there, to use them as living torpedoes against one of the insurgent worlds."

"Cerebral cells from whom or what?" Sulu shuddered. "Never mind; I don't want to know! But tell Kirk about it. Level with him. That ought to do it." He scanned the corridor one last time. A pair of non-coms ambled by, strapping on phasers, adjusting shoulder-scarves, going on duty. "And tell him D'Artagnan sent you!"

"This is your code name? Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I don't have to worry about you giving it away anymore, Quirinus!" Sulu said impatiently, giving Dajan a shove out into the corridor ahead of him. "You're coming over. Let's go!"

They skinned up the service ladders to the level above, shimmied down them just in front of the transporter room, where Dajan distracted the operator while Sulu slipped behind him to administer a knife-hand to the tender spot between neck and shoulder. Dajan whistled his admiration.

"You mean for me to go over - permanently, forever?"

"You know, for a Romulan, you're awfully hard of hearing..." Sulu fiddled with the transporter machine, scowled. "Decipher this thing for me, will you?"

"Here, and here," Dajan pointed. "Then set the modulator - here. Guess I don't have time to go back for my dirty playing cards, hm? What about you?"

"Never collected those things myself," Sulu said, making adjustments, deliberately misunderstanding. "You want to climb up there and quit wasting my time?"

"I mean how are you getting back?"

"Same way I got in." Sulu waved him toward the platform impatiently. "Didn't you notice the uniform? I'm playing security guard for Riley. Hopefully he'll have his part of this finished before anyone misses you." He saw Dajan hesitate. "Look, Daj, do your job and I'll do mine, okay? Now, get the hell out of here!"

Dajan was a civilian and, albeit a spy, he could be forgiven for not understanding every nuance of warbird technology. The transport operator must have triggered a silent alarm as he fell. As the last sparkle that was Dajan disappeared, six heavily-armed marines stormed into the room.

"Hi!" Sulu tried winsomely, raising his hands cowboy-movie style as the shortest of the marines - a mere two-meter job - relieved him of his phaser. He was reminded of how it felt to be poked between the shoulder-blades by the point of a disrupter as they nudged him toward a less-than-private audience with Commander Rihan.

"It's been more than fifteen minutes," Kirk fussed from the bridge. "Even if Riley was otherwise engaged, Sulu should have reported in by now."

"Maybe he had to make a nature call," McCoy suggested. "You know how much tea he drinks. Take it easy, will you?"

"A simple answer to a simple question will suffice." If Riley knew how much he sounded like Sarek, he did not let it stop him; he was drawing upon everything his mentor had ever taught him, determined to salvage something out of this debacle. "Tell us what really happened on Wlaariivi, what provocation you believe might have caused the Probe to attack. With that I can return to my government and -"

Not even pretending to wait for T'Shael's translation, Tiam waved one languid hand, cutting Riley off.

"We are not at liberty to discuss that. The science station on Wlaariivi was engaged in the most high-level research. To reveal any portion -"

"Enough!" Commander Rihan had clearly had all he could stomach. "Tiam, shut up and shut up now, or I shall have you thrown into the Security Room! You see why I wanted you aboard my ship, Commander Riley? It is the only way I can manage him. I will tell you myself that the science station on Wlaariivi was engaged in -"

"If you override me now, Rihan, you pay the consequences later!" Tiam raised his voice for the first time in anyone's memory, if one did not count his screaming bouts with his wife. The voice was shrill, unconvincing, the voice of a rigid man with a rigid agenda, suddenly out of his depth.

"If I don't, there may not be a later!" Rihan roared. "That thing is bearing down on us at multi-warp speeds. Pretend it isn't out there if you like; I personally have other plans. Now I warn you - be silent, or leave. Or shall I call the guard to help you do both?"

As if on cue, the six marines burst in with Sulu.

A commander's lot is not a happy one.

After all these years in the saddle, Kirk should have known better, should have recognized the odd eerie silence that preceded what McCoy had dubbed the All Hell Syndrome, the kind of silence that had crewmen tiptoeing on the bridge, afraid to breathe too loud, the kind of silence where the machinery seemed to take up the slack, becoming that much louder.

He gave the three aboard the *Hannsu* a full twenty minutes. In that time the silence grew increasingly, oppressively louder, but Kirk pretended not to notice. Adrenalin, he thought. Things don't really sound that loud, I'm just hypersensitive. The sixty seconds that followed on the twenty minutes would take care of the adrenalin. Every button he touched would ambush him with a new surprise.

"This has gone on long enough!" Kirk vaulted out of the chair, spun around, staring hitting buttons on the chair arm. Movement was important; if he didn't move, he'd explode. "Transporter room, I want -"

"Harper here, sir," came the reply, so simultaneously that Harper had to have started his transmission while Kirk was still nestled among the seat cushions. "I've got a Romulan aboard, sir."

"A Romulan?" Kirk was temporarily confused. Was Jandra roaming the halls after he'd specifically asked her not to? "Oh, you mean another one? Have security -"

His voice was lost in the Red Alert klaxon. It was too damn loud, the one thing on the new *Enterprise* Scotty had been unable to adjust in all these weeks, and it threatened to peel the skin off the tops of Kirk's ears.

He didn't have time to complain. Simultaneously, Spock reported from the science station: "Shields have just snapped on, Captain," and Scotty hailed in from Engineering:

"Aye, I know what you're going to say, but they went on automatically, and *Hannsu* 's appear to have done the same. She's powering up, Captain, looking for all the world like she's about to leave orbit."

"Not with three of my people aboard, she doesn't! Scotty, stand by! Uhura, send to Commander Rihan: What the hell's going on? Then kill that goddamn Red Alert and send to Starfleet Command -"

"Sir!" Uhura's voice cut easily through the racket: "Receiving a Priority One feed from Starfleet Command!"

PARTITA #1

Earth Outpost Four, renamed Outpost Hansen when it was rebuilt to replace the original outpost some fifteen years earlier - a nearby asteroid towed into place, then hollowed out inside to house the safest thing in Romulan-watching; the process had been repeated three times for the three outposts destroyed in the last serious Romulan incursion into this sector - was four days from Dlundra at warp nine. That made it six days from Earth at like speed. How the hell, Jim Kirk wondered as Bob Caflisch's deceptively genial face wavered in and out on the viewscreen, had the head of Starfleet Operations managed to get there this quickly?

"Fascinating!" Spock observed. "We have been aware of difficulty with the Probe for less than two hours. Starfleet Command has apparently been aware for considerably longer than that."

Behind Caflisch's head, the rough-textured outpost wall was frenetic with holos and tactical displays - most of them neatly confined to ever-changing holoscreens, but some projected on the walls themselves, distorted, as if the data they contained was coming in so fast there was no room for them on the screens. Each image displayed some aspect of the Probe or its surrounding space.

"It appears to have withdrawn its main sensor," Spock observed almost to himself, correlating data relative to speed and distance from the outpost's screens into *Enterprise* 's computer. "Captain, most of these displays are quite recent. I am most curious to know their source. Surely the Romulans have not suddenly changed their minds about providing Starfleet Command with information from deep within their own space."

"We'll know in a minute," Kirk said, watching with whatever amusement he could salvage from this event as Bob Caflisch struggled with the comm; apparently there was a problem with transmission at his end. Interference from the Probe, or just Caflisch's legendary ill-luck with machinery? Kirk wondered. Putting Caflisch behind a desk where the worst he could do was staple his fingers together had been one of Ops' wiser moves.

The forward screen turned to snow as the entire picture temporarily broke up; Uhura could be heard muttering to herself as she boosted the gain. As the admiral rematerialized, one of the out-of-bounds tacticals actually flashed briefly across his high forehead; Caflisch squinted against the light and cursed.

"Can someone get that thing out of my face, please? Can we have some semblance of order in here? Gevalt, what next? Am I on or not? Jim, can you read me?"

"Loud and clear, Bob." No trace of the nervous mirth bubbling in his throat escaped into Kirk's voice. "What's it all about?"

"Uncoded, sir," Uhura pointed out from behind him. "Open channel and uncoded. Everything in this sector is, Captain, on both sides."

"Curiouser and curiouser!" A light dew of sweat broke out on Kirk's upper lip; nothing short of the Big Bang Revisited could be expected to make the Romulan outposts abandon their codes and closed channels. Kirk wiped the sweat away absently with his fingers; whipping out a handkerchief at this point would only show Caflisch how nervous he was. "Is the *Hannsu* receiving this?"

"Affirmative, sir," Uhura replied. "I can try jamming them if you like."

"No!" Kirk shook his head rapidly. He could picture Rihan eavesdropping on Caflisch's transmission while simultaneously weighing the fate of the three Federation citizens he was holding, receiving orders from his own Command Centre, shouting at Tiam, and searching for a channel through which to shout at Kirk. He deserved to know what was going on. "Keep the channel open. If he wants to talk to me, he's going to have to wait, but let's show Commander Rihan we're being completely above-board with him. We may need his help later. We may be writing history here."

"Or becoming a footnote to it!" came from McCoy.

Caflisch was still fiddling with comm. Kirk took advantage of the lag-time to punch some buttons.

"Mr. Scott? We may be needing you shortly, though I can't tell you for what just yet."

"Standing by, sir."

"Mr. Harper? Identity of your unexpected Romulan?"

"It's Professor Dajan from the dig, sir."

"Well, well, well! Have Security escort Professor Dajan to his sister's quarters and post a guard until I have time for explanations. Kirk out."

Admiral Caflisch had apparently gotten a handle on communications.

"What's it all about?" he repeated Kirk's question when he finally had a clear channel. "See for yourself." He indicated the displays surrounding him at Hansen. "That goddamn thing is roaring through Sector Five like a runaway freight without a deadman switch..."

"...I am aware of that, Commander Rihan," Uhura was explaining a bit sharply in the background, "just as you are aware that Captain Kirk is presently receiving orders from his superiors. Please stand by..."

"...and to put it mildly, we haven't a clue as to why, or where it's headed..."

"Admiral..." Spock's voice was no louder, no more penetrating than usual. It simply fell into another of those weird silences. "...I believe I am able to determine the Probe's current destination."

The noise at Outpost Hansen had been rising and falling like surf; suddenly it too just stopped, and the outpost command center was as silent at the bridge of the *Enterprise* .

"I knew it!" McCoy grinned. "Just grab him by the ears and pull him out of a hat!"

"Do you?" Caflisch seemed genuinely surprised by this piece of news. "How did you manage to arrive at that? You've been expressly forbidden by the Romulans to track the Probe within their space -"

"Unnecessary, Admiral. Adding the information Outpost Hansen has gathered to the research T'Shael and I have been conducting on our own, I believe I can pinpoint the Probe's destination. Based upon its current behavior, I believe that destination is also its point of origin."

"Well, that's a relief!" Caflisch visibly relaxed. "Let's have it."

Spock's usual ramrod posture became stiffer. To those who knew him well, the slight upward tilt of his chin was a dangerous sign.

"First, sir, I should like to know why neither Captain Kirk nor I was informed of the existence of the sensor drone which has obviously been monitoring the Probe since it left Earth."

"Spock!" Kirk stage-whispered into the silence that followed. "There's no time -!"

"Captain," Spock insisted, "the Probe has just entered sensor range. Visual range and impact on our systems estimated in approximately two minutes ten seconds. Whether we are expected to interact with it or merely get out of its way, we - and the Romulans - require as much recent data as is available."

"Agreed," Kirk acquiesced as the silence from Outpost Hansen became an embarrassed silence.

"You wrote the report that gave us the idea, Captain Spock," Caflisch said at last, not exactly answering the question. "Besides, that information was retina-scan classified, incomplete at the time of *Enterprise*'s departure, and hardly something we wanted you to have in view of the sensitive nature of your original mission."

"Meaning they didn't want the Romulans to know we knew," McCoy offered under his breath. "As if we were gonna slip and tell them."

"Well, they know now," Kirk remarked, eyeing the insistently blinking telltale on Uhura's board. "Commander Rihan, I presume?"

"Aye, sir. He's been monitoring, and he has many of the same questions we do. I don't think I can hold him off much longer."

"Nor should you, as long as he's still holding three of our people." Kirk addressed the viewscreen: "Admiral, we were attempting to douse a local brushfire when our shields came on; I'm assuming that's because of the proximity of the Probe. Three of our people are still aboard the *Hannsu*. Until we succeed in retrieving them -"

"No time for that, Jim." Caflisch had recovered himself. "Get your ship out of the way of that thing and then follow at a discreet distance. Have your science officer keep us on a continuous data-feed as to its destination. We're trying to call in some backup for you, but no promises. Follow it and deal with it, is that clear?"

"Admiral, if it's going to be cutting across Romulan space..." Kirk looked to Spock, who nodded

affirmation, "... we'll need assurances from the Romulans -"

"Working on that as well, Captain, but we've got ourselves a time-lag problem, as you well know. See what you can negotiate with your immediate neighbors, and hope to God they stay in touch with their friends." The transmission started to develop snow again. "Looks like you've got what you wanted, Jim ... seat-of-the-pants operation..."

"Stick my neck out operation," Kirk remarked, safe inside the static. "If anything goes wrong, I'm the Judas goat operation. 'Deal with it,' he says! As if we've got any more firepower than the entire Fleet did when it hit Earth!"

"Complaints, complaints!" McCoy offered without sympathy.

"Admiral - Bob?" Kirk unconsciously raised his voice to compensate for the static. "How much autonomy do I have on this thing? Bob? Uhura, can't you -?" She shook her head. "Damn! Outpost Hansen, come in - damn it!"

"Full discretion, Jim baby..." Caflisch's voice wavered in and out of the static; the picture was gone completely. "Handle it any way you can..."

"That's all I needed to hear!" Kirk shot into action. "Scotty, prepare for warp on my order. Mr. Sulu - damn! What's your name, Helm?"

"Rosenzweig, sir," he said.

He was a small, rabbit type. The type, Kirk thought, who'd melt into the floorboards if you yelled "Boo!" All right, no one's as good as Sulu, but the kid's all you've got on this shift; give him a chance!

"Very well, Mr. Rosenzweig, look sharp. Lay in a course 135 mark 7, warp-ready on my command. Uhura..." He settled back in his chair, trying to look calm and confident. "...open a channel to the *Hannsu*."

"T'Shael? May I ask you a favor?"

"Of course, Commander Sulu."

"Well, for starters, could you try calling me Hikaru? I'd feel a lot more comfortable."

"As you wish, Hikaru. How may I be of service?"

Commander Rihan had rather abruptly ordered all three of them dumped in the Security Room as he and Tiam hurried toward the *Hannsu*'s bridge to eavesdrop on Kirk and secure the ship against the Probe. Rihan had no evidence connecting Riley or T'Shael with Sulu's being caught with his hands on the transporter controls, and he was not small-minded enough to suspect all of his Federation guests of conspiracy by propinquity; nevertheless, he wanted them all in the same basket until he had the leisure to deal with them.

Deal with him, Sulu was sure, was what Rihan intended to do first, as soon as they had time to take a pattern-reading on the transporter and find out who he'd beamed over. Then the questions would start. He only hoped whatever was going on upstairs kept the commander occupied long enough for him to work out a cover story. For that he needed T'Shael's help.

"The Roms still don't use anything like the Klin mindsifter, do they?" he asked her now, amazed at the control in his voice, considering the nosedives his insides were doing. "As I recall, their techniques are less physical, and a lot more subtle."

"But no less effective," T'Shael replied. "Against humans, at least."

"But against Vulcans -?"

"Ineffective. Our minds can go where theirs cannot reach them. What do you wish?"

"Don't you ever say No?" Sulu marveled, grinning in spite of his terror of things real and imagined; he'd seen some of them, heard others, the last time he'd been behind the Zone.

"What did you have in mind, boyo?" Riley had maintained a careful diplomatic silence following his official, vociferous, and unheeded protest of their treatment as Rihan's marines led him and his to the Security Room. He was as terrified as Sulu, though he was holding far fewer secrets, and only a preoccupied tugging at his beard along the jawline gave him away. "Because it occurs to me that T'Shael and I could've been home free if it weren't for you and your antics."

"Unlikely, Commander," T'Shael interceded before he and Sulu could get down to trading accusations. "The proximity of the Probe caused Commander Rihan's haste. We should have been caught behind the *Hannsu*'s shields regardless."

"Well regardless, our pet instigator can put his thinking cap on and come up with some ways to get us out from behind the *Hannsu*'s shields like he did his Rom buddy!" Riley glowered at him. "And he can start by explaining what he wants from you before you give your consent. Well?"

"Hikaru wishes me to access certain knowledge in his mind," T'Shael said, addressing Riley though her entire attention was focused on Sulu, "to keep that knowledge in my own mind where the Romulans will not suspect it of residing, and thereafter to erase his memory of what he knows, in the event he is interrogated. Am I correct?"

"A hundred and ten percent as always!" Sulu said. "I really only need the erasure. Whatever I'm carrying's in Special Section files anyway; I wouldn't ask you to risk yourself over it. I just don't want to spill it once they start in with the thumbscrews."

"To my knowledge, Romulan interrogators do not employ thumbscrews," T'Shael deadpanned. "Will you not be in greater danger if they access your memory and find it empty?"

Sulu shrugged. "At least I won't endanger anyone else on my networks."

T'Shael looked thoughtful. There had been a time when she had lived her life alone, aloof, unencumbered by the concerns of others, unentangled in their lives. That had changed when she met Cleante and, through her, all these other humans, including this one who had saved her life. She was engaged, entangled, committed now; there was no turning back.

"You may have need of your knowledge again before you have access to Special Section files. It will be safe with me."

"Yes, but will you be safe with it?"

"Far safer than you were when you chose to risk yourself inside the Empire for Cleante and me." T'Shael stopped him from saying anything further with a simple gesture of her elegant hands. "We may have very little time. Shall we begin?"

"An offer I can't refuse!" Sulu settled himself crosslegged on the cold metal deck in the center of the small holding cell; the wall-shelf that did duty as a bunk wasn't that much more comfortable. "There should be 'markers,' tracers left by the data-feed at my last briefing."

"I shall endeavor to find them without disturbing anything else."

"Hey, people have been telling me I'm disturbed for years!" Sulu joked. "What do I do first?"

"Do nothing." T'Shael placed her fingers at the reach-centers of his face.

"This I've got to see!" Riley remarked, settling himself against the wall near the door, to keep his peripheral vision on the guard in the hall, in case he should get curious.

"Relax your mind, compose your thoughts, remain passive, do not resist..." T'Shael began, her eyes closing. "My mind to your mind..."

Sulu closed his own eyes and sank into a bath-warm sea...

"*Hannsu's* starting to maneuver, sir!" Rosenzweig's voice was pitched far too high; he could hear it. He knew he wasn't as good as Sulu, no one expected him to be. But why did he have to prove it in the middle of a major crisis? "One hundred three degrees hard about, sir..." He tried to swallow, but his mouth was too dry. "...weapons in firing position and activating..."

"Very good, Mr. Rosenzweig," Kirk said to reassure the kid, though the news wasn't good at all. Kirk leaned forward in his chair, watching the warbird rotate in place. Why did starships always lumber so in close proximity? "Is she aiming at us or at the Probe?"

"If she is aiming at the Probe, Captain," Spock supplied, "we are in her line of fire."

"Well then, let's get out of her way!" Kirk shot out of the chair and began to pace. "Helm, evasive maneuvers. Come about, forty-seven mark nine." He saw the young helmsman hesitate. "Uhura -?"

"Commander Rihan on discrete when you're ready, sir."

"Excellent. Open channel, then relieve Mr. Rosenzweig at the helm, please. I believe he's done most of his training in navigation."

"Yessir, thank you, sir!" Rosenzweig scuttled sideways over to the navcon, visibly relieved. Taking his

place at the helm, implementing Kirk's orders before she could even sit down, Uhura was less than thrilled.

"All I need is a broom -"

" - so you can sweep the floor when you walk," Kirk finished for her. "So noted." He glanced backwards at Kittay, who had relieved Uhura at comm. Musical chairs.

"Hailing frequency open, Captain," Kittay supplied.

"Commander Rihan!" Kirk began with a heartiness he did not feel, "if your weapons are aimed at us -"

"An interesting mess, is it not, Kirk?" Rihan cut him off, sitting back comfortably in his chair, thumbs tucked into his waist sash, almost complacent. "And quite a little theatrical performance I have just witnessed between you and your superior. You are permitted to address your superiors by their first names? I did not know this. Quite well rehearsed, your little piece! I almost believed it."

"If you fire on us, you won't make a dent in our shields," Kirk began to talk over him, one eye on tactical, watching as the distance between them and the Probe grew smaller, "but you'll kill the peace initiative -"

"Peace initiative!" Rihan sneered.

"If you attempt to fire on the Probe, you'll find your weapons have been neutralized -"

"Ah, yes, just as in the data your superior has just given you!" Rihan said ingenuously. "A sensor drone, of which you were not aware! You did not believe me when I told you the Probe was upon us, yet you expect me to believe this? Pity!" Rihan shook his head. "We have much in common, Kirk. Too much. For one thing, we are both liars."

"You'll find out in about a minute," Kirk said off-handedly.

"And suppose I do believe you and depower my weapons, only to discover it's a trap? Forgive me, Kirk, but I have not yet caught the Probe in a lie. I will take my chances."

"You don't mind if we get out of the way?" Kirk asked, still eyeing Tactical, realizing it would be a close shave. "You can read us; you know we haven't armed our phasers."

Rihan shrugged expansively. "Be my guest!"

"Helm, implement evasive," Kirk said out of the side of his mouth, passing Uhura's station to come down front, closer to the screen, hands extended in a silent plea. It had bought time from Khan Noonian Singh when there was less than a minute to spare. "Commander, before the shooting starts - will you at least honor a request? You've got less than a minute before the Probe begins to impact on your systems, including communications -"

"Fifty-three seconds, Captain," Spock supplied.

Enterpriselurched slightly to port as she went into evasive; Kirk braced himself against the helm.

"Sorry, sir!" Uhura supplied, correcting.

" - the three people from my ship you're presently holding -" Kirk went on without missing a beat.

" - at least one of whom is a spy, Kirk! Or are you going to tell me you knew no more about that than about the sensor drone?"

"No, Rihan," Jim Kirk said sincerely, "I'm not going to tell you that. We don't have time for finesse. I'm asking you for some assurance, that's all. Let me see my people, talk to them."

"Your people are unharmed!" Rihan half-shouted. "That is all I will tell you at present. They -"

The viewscreen sizzled into static and Rihan disappeared. Before Kirk could turn to Kittay to find out what was wrong, they heard it.

WONK, WONK, WONK...

A flock of panicked geese as big as pterodactyls, a runaway train crossed with a deep-channel foghorn played at barely sublight speed: the sound of a spacefaring Probe in a great hurry, cause unknown. The audible range of its relentless WONK, WONK, WONK rattled the teeth and jangled the kidneys; its impact on technosystems stripped away the delusion of safety within the fragile artificial traveling ecosystem, which was all a starship truly was, exposing the average sentient carbon unit to a slow building terror. It was very cold, and very dark, in space.

WONK, WONK, WONK...

Lights dimmed. Telltales fluttered like a bad heart. Overloaded backups began to fry. A slow haze of acrid smoke began to fill the *Enterprise*'s bridge.

"*Hannsu* appears to have lost all power," Spock reported just as tactical winked out.

"Do we have aux power?" Kirk asked hopefully, though he already knew the answer.

"No response, sir," Uhura reported calmly, tentatively tapping telltales just in case. "Switching to battery reserves."

WONK, WONK, WONK...

It was hard to think, much less talk.

"Sickbay -?" McCoy was shouting into a crackling discrete channel. "Can anybody hear me down there?"

"Engineering -?" Kittay was reciting beside him. "Bridge to Engineering, come in please..."

"Battery reserves nominal, Captain," came from Spock. "Estimate two hours' life support if we reduce all nonessential systems."

"Shut down everything but the main turbolift." Kirk gripped the arms of his chair, swung about as he gave orders. "In case we have to get out of here. Although where we're supposed to go...Do we have comm at all?"

It was remotely possible. The Yorktown had held onto longrange comm even after life support was down; Kirk remembered seeing the tapes of her commander, gasping for breath, reporting on his crew's attempts to launch a solar sail. Given his druthers, considering how far removed they were from rescue, he would rather have air than comm.

"Negative, sir." Kittay removed her earpiece. The Probe's carrier wave seemed to affect different ships in different ways. "Ship-to-ship went out first. Now we've just lost intership."

WONK, WONK, WONK...

"Starting to draft, sir," Uhura reported from what she could still read at the helm. She reached over to adjust a reading at Rosenzweig's station; he gave her a grateful look in the near-dark. "Estimate fifteen degrees yaw, gradual downspiral. I only hope *Hannsu* 's drifting in the opposite direction."

"Immaterial, Commander," Spock offered. "Indications are evasive maneuvers were insufficient to throw us clear of Dlondra's gravity. We shall eventually be pulled down into planet atmosphere."

"Unless the *Hannsu* rams us or the Probe runs us over first!" McCoy shouted above the racket, slamming the useless commboard once for emphasis, making Kittay jump.

"Deaf, mute, blind and helpless!" Kirk raged, furious with himself above all. "Instead of trying to get through to Rihan, we should have saved our own necks. Damn it!"

WONK, WONK, WONK, WONK!

"It is suffering, Sib, hear it!" Jandra cried, clinging to her brother, unable to believe the extraordinary good fortune that had brought them both here, together, safe. She pressed her talented hands against her delicate Romulan ears, as if it would avail anything in blocking out that noise. "It is distraught; there is pain in its voice - oh, hear it!"

"It is a thing, Little Sister!" Dajan shook her by the shoulders, hating the way she seemed to empathize with it, fearing for her. "A device, a mechanism. It is you who romanticize it, invest it with emotions it does not, cannot have!"

"No!" Jandra cried, her own emotions in utter turmoil. The brief moment of joy in discovering Sib here, no matter the sudden advent of guards at the door, had been shattered by this presence, this sound, this troubled behemoth howling past them in search of succor for its pain. Invest it with emotion? As a musician she did not know how not to feel the emotion which was already there, the pain...

WONK, WONK, WONK...

T'Shael returned Sulu's mind to him just as the sound penetrated to the depths of the *Hannsu* 's Security Room. Lights shuttered and blinked out; there was swearing and sounds of running in the halls. Sulu was on his feet at once.

"Bless you, thanks!" he told T'Shael, feeling light, euphoric, ready for anything. "Hey, Kev, how good's your Rom?"

"Good enough to order a meal, though I can't vouch for my accent," Riley answered, on Sulu's wavelength. Forcefields were down, the guards distracted, and it was possible Romulans couldn't see as well in the dark as their Vulcan brethren. If they were going to attempt escape, the time was now. "I'll

leave the talking to you two. T'Shael, darlin', are you all right?"

"Quite well, Commander," she answered, not entirely truthfully, accustoming her Vulcan eyes to the dark. How was she to accustom her Vulcan soul to what she had learned from Sulu about Dajan? Later for this! She moved soundlessly to the unguarded door, scanning the corridor. "Deserted. Nearest adjunct is approximately five meters to our left, if escape is your objective. But, given the circumstances, escape to what?"

"I'll let you know when we get there!" Sulu said, wishing one of them had a phaser. Maybe they could organize one along the way.

"Meaning he won't know it till he falls over it!" Riley remarked.

"Let's not talk about falling over things, thank you!" Sulu grabbed T'Shael's hand and Riley's shoulder. "Let's go!"

WONK, WONK, WONK...

"Gods and demons, how much air have we?" Rihan demanded hoarsely of the crew he could not see about him on the darkened, powerless bridge. He had never been claustrophobic, until now.

"One hour, Commander," someone said. The warbird was smaller than a starship, overmanned, her batteries less efficient. Rihan swore the walls were moving toward him, or was it only the effects of that infernal noise?

"Perhaps for once you should have listened to Kirk," came a voice in Rihan's right ear. Rihan did not need to see to recognize it. He wiped the sweat from his upper lip and, almost casually, backhanded Tiam hard across the face.

WONK, WONK, WONK...

The sound first drew Cleante toward the half-open door of the transporter room, though it was the strange flickering light dancing out into the corridors which decided her to go in. The light was golden like the sound, which wove itself above, below, around the insistent honking of the Probe.

"Candles," Cleante told Sharf knowingly; the Andorian nodded blankly. "Come on!"

As soon as the power went down, every door on the new *Enterprise* automatically opened halfway, a designer's safety feature recommended by Montgomery Scott to keep personnel from being trapped anywhere and having to phaser their way in or out; he seemed to remember having had to do that a time or two in the past. Hearing the Probe, getting as much information as she could until the intership channels went down, Cleante had grabbed the halogen lamp from her kit and slipped out into the hall.

She'd been quietly frantic ever since Kevin and T'Shael had beamed over to the *Hannsu* and not returned. But there was nothing she could do but wait, and so she had waited with some measure of dignity, staying out of the way in her quarters, until now. If *Enterprise* was doomed, she preferred to die in company, not alone.

"Guests are requested to stay out of the corridors until we've stepped down from Red Alert, Doctor," a familiar reedy voice suggested behind her, as uniformed bodies, some of them carrying hand torches, slipped slowly and methodically past each other, lugubrious against an uncertain artificial gravity which sometimes made any movement feel like swimming, shadowed and silhouetted against the dim emergency lights at either end of each corridor - on their way to duty stations, calm and in control.

"Sorry, Ryan!" Cleante shielded the light she'd reflexively shone in his face; he stood there blinking against the after-image. "But you know as well as I do there's only one likely way this Red Alert's going to be over."

"I'm as much in the dark as you are, Doctor." Ryan winced at the way that sounded, "but I'd really appreciate it if you'd stay out of the halls."

"Was there any word from the *Hannsu* before she lost power?" Cleante asked.

"No, ma'am. You know I'd tell you if there was."

"Yes, I do know that, Ryan. Sorry. Just thinking out loud." Cleante felt strangely lightheaded. Was the oxygen going already? It was also cold in the corridors. That and the sensation of swimming was enough to make one feel stupid. "Do you realize if we never get them back, you'll automatically be promoted to senior diplomat for this mission?"

She could hear Ryan swallow. "Oh, no, ma'am, please don't say that! I -"

"Scares you more than dying, doesn't it?" Cleante mused. Dying. It didn't seem possible, didn't seem real that out of an entire universe the Probe should threaten them twice. Keep the mind distracted, talk about something else. "Tell me something, Ryan: did you really help smuggle Jandra onto the *Enterprise*?"

Ryan could blush even in the dark. "You make it sound heroic. All I did was let her talk me into giving up my communicator. I've been waiting to catch hell for it ever since. Guess the captain and Commander Riley have been a little too busy."

"If it's any consolation under the circumstances, I think it was heroic. If we'd gotten her across, you'd have been a hero." Cleante sighed, resigned. "Go well, Ryan. I can find my own way back. Do you believe in miracles?"

"Not really, ma'am."

"Guess you haven't lived long enough," Cleante said. "I do."

Ryan had no hand torch; he found his way by feeling along the walls. Cleante watched him out of sight, then kept going.

She thought she knew the new *Enterprise*'s basic layout, but in the less than two weeks she'd been aboard she'd more or less followed a set pattern from her quarters to T'Shael's or Riley's, to the rec dec, the commissary, the transporter room. She hadn't been to the bridge since they'd left TerraMain, and she was hardly going to get under Kirk's feet now even if the 'lifts had been working. She had no way of knowing where they were keeping Jandra. Where to go?

She struck off in the general direction of the rec dec. If there was anyone not at duty stations, she could

at least enjoy some stimulating conversation before the oxygen ran out.

Odd, Cleante thought, but I don't believe it's going to happen. I haven't come this far to die of a misunderstood Probe. Can't somebody talk to the damn thing? T'Shael, if you were here, could you?

The Vulcan's name was like a mantra, calming. Cleante might almost have gone back to her room, stopped using up the oxygen, if she hadn't literally run into Sharf.

"Ouch!" He was tall enough so that her nose smacked against his over-developed ribcage. "What the hell are you doing bumbling around out here?"

"Don't like the dark and the alone!" the Andorian blurted, his Standard shot to hell by something close to panic; his race's claustrophobic tendencies were legendary. "May I stay with you?"

"Why not? Here, hang onto my arm before you bank into someone else."

The corridors were deserted at this end; everyone was where they were supposed to be, moving around as little as possible, it seemed, except the two of them.

"Where are we going?" Sharf asked, more in control.

"I don't know yet," Cleante said. "Do you hear that?"

Was it possible the Probe was moving off, or were they just inured to the noise? A tumble of golden notes reached out from the transporter room, spooling around them, playing harmony to the ceaseless honking, if that were possible. Cleante and Sharf stepped into a scene out of an anthropologist's dream or an Andorian's nightmare; the human could feel Sharf recoil beside her, hissing prayers to his guardian deity.

Harper stood at the now-useless transporter controls, minding the store on the odd chance the power came back on again, taking care of business with his horn, holding the fear at bay, playing a lonesome blues, blues for a wandering Probe, for an audience of one.

No, Cleante realized, not audience: performer. The only source of light was the candles set about the transporter platform where, decked out in yards of streaming silken scarves, a dancer whirled. Annek,, transposing sound into sight, dancing Harper's music, music for a Probe.

Aware that they had visitors, Harper plucked a resolution from midair and wound down to it, Annek, following, spinning in ever-slowing circles until she tumbled into a heap of arms and legs and floating drapery on the improvised stage of a transporter pad. When Cleante applauded she sprang lightly to her feet.

"Guess we're being selfish with the oxygen," Harper admitted, "but it seemed the best way to go would be doing what we enjoyed."

"You'll get no argument from me," Cleante said. "It was beautiful!"

She realized she was not shouting, did not need to shout for the first time in some minutes. The foursome looked at each other, amazed. The seeming ceaseless noise had ceased.

It is very cold, and very dark, in space. It is also very silent. Without the familiar comfort of pervasive

background sound it was possible to become obsessed with the sound of one's own breathing, one's own pulse. Sharf hissed and shifted restlessly, panic growing in his eyes. He seemed to have been better off with the Probe.

The silence lasted about a minute. Then blindingly, deafeningly, everything came back on again.

"I don't understand it, sir!" Scotty said from Engineering. "Everything's right on norm, right where it was before that beastie came through like an ill wind. I'm at a complete loss to explain it!"

"Be grateful for small favors," Kirk said, equally at sea. Systems were coming back on all over the ship, department heads hailing in, the occasional cheer could be heard echoing in the turboshfts. With complete helm control restored, Uhura had them stabilized and back in orbit in no time. Pleased, if still mystified, Kirk swung his chair in Spock's direction. "Status on the Probe?"

"It appears to have altered course." There was a frown in the Vulcan's voice. "Bearing 93 Mark 1 and, given its position relative to us, I believe it reduced speed as it passed... Now realigning...returning to original course and speed and, presumably, its original destination. It has also terminated its audible carrier wave." He seemed to hesitate before completing his thought. "Captain, I believe the Probe is responsible for restoring our power."

"Ours and not the *Hannsu*'s," Kirk mused, noting there had been not a whisper from the opposition, open frequencies notwithstanding. "If you didn't know better, you'd swear it's had a change of heart."

"Captain, an attempt to anthropomorphize an entity like the Probe is not only illogical, but dangerous. To extrapolate an emotion-based motivation from an action which might have any number of possible alternate explanations -"

"You happen to have one handy?" Knowing Sickbay systems were back up and there were no casualties beyond the occasional bumped head or barked shin had put McCoy in a chipper mood. "I kind of like Jim's version."

"Any word from the *Hannsu*?"

Screens had come back on and they could see her, listing decidedly to starboard, even her running lights out.

"She appears to be dead in space, Captain," Spock said, adding it all together; the frown had spread from his voice to his face.

"Still hailing on all frequencies, Captain," Lieutenant Kittay reported. "No response."

"Lieutenant Kittay..." Kirk rubbed his lower lip thoughtfully. "...assist Commander Uhura in preparing a message drone, Rom basic. Message to Commander Rihan: 'We're sending in the cavalry.'"

"Sir?"

"On my way." Uhura was out of her chair before she said it; Spock took her place at the helm.

"Rosenzweig," Kirk continued, "pinpoint launch on the drone. Make sure *Hannsu* can see it. Nice and slow so they know what it is before some eager type decides its a gravitic mine and tries to blow it up with a hand phaser. Let's hope they've got some kind of manual grapple that can reach out and grab it. Mr. Scott?"

"Aye, sir?"

"Looks like you get your tour of the *Hannsu* after all. Take as much equipment as you need and as many crew as you can pack into a shuttlecraft and go over and give our neighbors a jump-start. Make it fast; we've still got a Probe to catch."

"Make it fast,' he says -!" Scotty began the usual lament. Kirk closed the channel, allowed himself a fraction of a second to rub his hands vigorously over his face, then vaulted toward the lift. Time to recharge his own batteries.

"Food, sleep, the usual weaknesses flesh is heir to..." McCoy blustered, fetching a couple of trays from the dispenser.

"Food, yes. Sleep, no. I have to think," Kirk said. "Where's Spock?"

"Said he had some calculations to work on and he'd be with us 'presently.' It still bugs him that he can't translate any of the Probe's languages. Now, with T'Shael's help -"

Uh-oh, McCoy thought. Open mouth, change feet. You had to remind him, as if he needs reminding, about the three still on the *Hannsu*, and the fact that Rihan knows Sulu's a spy, or is maybe only guessing, or may have had time to interrogate him, or -

And now you're doing it to yourself! He took a bite of whatever he'd ordered and found he wasn't hungry. Physician, heal thyself! Or at least eat your greens and complex carbos.

"Penny for your thoughts," he said when he realized Jim wasn't eating either.

"I doubt they're worth that much," Kirk said. "I keep thinking that if I were the impetuous, headstrong Jim Kirk we once knew, I'd have mixed a few armed men in with those engineers. Gone over to storm the *Hannsu* and get those people back. I'm wondering why I didn't."

"You've mellowed," McCoy suggested. "Learned to look at the larger picture."

"Is that what it is? I thought I'd just lost my nerve."

"You don't fool me!" McCoy pointed his fork at him. "You've developed a liking for Commander Rihan. You desperately want to trust him. It's some sort of kindred-soul thing you've been pining for ever since a certain warbird commander whose name we'll probably never know literally blew himself up in your face rather than surrender on your terms. You also want to chase down the Probe, rescue your people, single-handedly negotiate a peace treaty with the Romulans or at least with Rihan, and maybe even get a certain green-eyed musician repatriated in Federation space without anyone naysaying you..."

"Quite a feat if I can pull it off," Kirk mused.

"And if you don't, Command's going to be very interested in why you didn't just let the *Hannsu* drift in space and gallop off after the Probe like they told you to."

"I can't leave those three people trapped on board that ship!" Kirk argued. "Especially with what Rihan said about Sulu. If they interrogate him, with the methods they have -

"A chance he's taken every time he's on assignment for Special Section, Jim." McCoy put his fork down. "Doesn't anything Spock says make any impression on you? Remember the Needs of the Many speech? What if the Probe is off marauding through some densely populated sector of the galaxy, using time you've bought it by lollygagging here -"

"That's enough, Bones! That Probe was benign when it left Earth, benign enough for Command to tag it with a sensor drone and let it drift. If it's gone rogue, it's because of something the Romulans did to it on Wlaariivi. How else do you explain the fact that it slowed enough to look us over, then restored our power?"

"I can't!" McCoy admitted. "But if you're saying it recognized us and made an exception for us because we saved its favorite whales -"

"Not recognized us," Kirk said impatiently. "But suppose it recognized *Enterprise* as a human ship? Suppose it made George a promise before it left Earth -?"

"Oh, for crying out loud! Spock's right. You're anthropomorphizing this thing, investing it with a conscience -"

"Spock can on occasion be wrong!" Kirk half-shouted, raising heads all over the commissary. The conversational buzz had just returned to normal levels, filling over the uncomfortable silence, when Kirk found himself under a new assault.

"Captain Kirk -!"

Jandra, bearing down on him with Dajan in tow, a sheepish security guard on their heels. If everything Uhura had told him about Romulans and twins was true, Kirk thought, there was no question which of these two was the dominant one.

"Jandra," Kirk said, a hand on McCoy's arm to keep him from getting up. Instead he motioned to the chair beside him. "I thought I told you to remain in the guest quarters."

"You asked me to remain in the guest quarters," Jandra corrected him, taking the proffered seat. "Which, as I explained to the nice young man guarding the door, was unnecessary once the emergency had passed. To the best of my knowledge, Captain, neither my brother nor I is under arrest. Therefore, why the continued need for security?"

"You seem to have an uncanny knack for persuading the nice young men aboard my ship," Kirk said testily, dismissing the security guard with a curt nod. Yet another crewman he'd have to chew out if he ever found the time, he thought, also thinking: and not only the nice or the young ones. "Between you and your husband, there's no question in my mind who's the superior diplomat."

"Flattery, Captain -"

"Excuse me!" Kirk stopped her. "I wish I had the leisure to spar with you, but at the moment I'm supposed to be in three places at once." He motioned to Dajan to take the fourth seat. "And I want to talk to you."

It took Scotty a little under two hours to get the job done. Jim Kirk spent most of that time second-guessing himself. Should he have infiltrated the *Hannsu*, launched a surgical strike, saved his diplomatic team and worried about long-term consequences later? For that matter, he could have beamed an entire platoon over while the *Hannsu*'s shields were down, or locked her in a tractor beam and shaken her until Commander Rihan's back teeth rattled. Why hadn't he?

When Scotty's team succeeded in restoring *Hannsu*'s comm and he saw the scowl on Rihan's face, he knew he'd guessed right.

"Well, Kirk."

"Well, Rihan." The commander was speaking in Standard, Kirk noted, and he did not appear to be using any translation device.

"Your chief engineer has restored my ship. I am grateful."

"Professional courtesy," Kirk allowed. "One commander to another. We have a larger problem to concern ourselves with."

"Ah, just so. I have asked your Vulcan to help me phrase what I wish to say next. She says I am to ask you 'What's the catch?'"

My Vulcan, Kirk thought. Rihan has spoken to T'Shael, may even have her right there on the bridge with him. What about Sulu and Riley? *Hannsu*'s shields were still down; Scotty would be sure to restore those and the weapons systems last. Kirk wagged an inquiring finger at Harper, who was running the transporter from the weapons station.

"Working on it, Captain," Harper said, very quietly so Rihan wouldn't hear; it took an expert to separate a Vulcan reading from a Romulan one.

"The 'catch,' Commander..." Kirk temporized so Harper could do his job, "...is that we have a mutual objective - note I do not say 'enemy' - in the Probe. My orders are to follow it and at all costs prevent it from doing any further harm. In view of the incident on Wlaariivi, I expect your government wishes you to do the same."

Rihan made a wry face then. "You are generous in your assessment of my government, Kirk. What I am expected to do, assuming I knew how, is to blow that behemoth out of the sky. I have been informed on my newly-restored comm-system that a brace of battlecruisers is on its way as backup to that end. You would have been better advised, Captain, to let us drift."

"I was hoping to enlist you as an ally in this venture," Kirk offered.

"I have no appetite for this venture, Kirk," Rihan said sincerely. "I had always hoped to die in bed."

"Looks as if you're going to have some strange bedfellows," Kirk suggested.

Rihan's scowl deepened. He could be seen leaning toward someone offscreen, consulting. Good! Kirk thought. He does have T'Shael on the bridge. Kirk risked a glance in Harper's direction.

"Got her filtered out, sir," Harper reported in that quiet voice. "Couple of humans on the bridge, too, though I can't tell you if they're diplo-team or engen - damn!"

Kirk twitched involuntarily, tried not to let his reaction show on his face. "What is it?"

"Mr. Scott's apparently gotten their shields up again, sir."

Onscreen, Rihan chuckled heartily, getting the joke.

"So, Kirk. We and our interplanetary bedsteads must follow this nightmare to its end." The mirth disappeared from his face; he leaned toward the screen. "The battlecruisers will not arrive for some twenty minutes yet. Without your Mr. Scott's assistance, we should have run out of oxygen some forty minutes ago. I shall mention that in my report, if we survive this."

"What about the battlecruiser commanders?"

Rihan shrugged. "*Khre'riov's* commander and I are old allies. Thrai's I do not know. Perhaps I can set them to arguing between themselves and let them eat our dust."

Kirk's amusement at the commander's correct use of the idiom was genuine. "I appreciate the favor. There's one other favor I'd like to ask. You're still holding three of my people, one of them a civilian -"

"You're holding two of mine, Kirk!" Rihan sounded testy. "Both of them civilians."

"One of whom has requested political asylum." Kirk raised his voice. "I wish we had time to quibble over the fine points..." A glance at Tactical showed Scotty's shuttle leaving *Hannsu's* shuttlebay. "I could have snatched those people at any time."

"I'm aware of that, Kirk. That, too, I shall mention in my report."

"Are they well? May I talk to them?"

"Yes, and no. They are well, and also quite resourceful. I found them free of the Security Room and attempting an escape. This Sulu for one is an awful nuisance. I should prefer that he be back in your hands and off mine. But I shall keep them all, for the present. I give you my word they shall not be harmed."

"It may be several days before we can overtake the Probe," Kirk said in his best I-trust-you-do-you-trust-me voice. "May I ask you to at least keep an open channel and an open mind?"

"Certainly an open channel, Kirk." Rihan's longrange comm sounded. "Forgive me. My larger brethren are approaching. Suggest I will have real need of your translator from here on." The commander looked embarrassed. "My superiors do not know I speak Standard."

The screen went dark, but not without an afterglow of hope.

"Shuttle returned, Captain," Uhura reported. "And Commander Rihan has sent an additional message, in code."

"Read it," Kirk said, not daring to speculate.

Uhura translated as she read: "'Do you notice, Kirk, how well we manage without diplomats?'"

PARTITA #2

The battlecruisers were the ubiquitous long-necked Klingon design - cloaked, ponderous, ominous. They positively dwarfed little *Hannsu*, churning up enough local displacement disturbance as they dropped their cloaks and came out of warp in tight formation on either side of her to rock the little ship like an origami boat and buffet *Enterprise* even with her shields up. Their commanders communicated with *Hannsu* in a code so new even Uhura couldn't crack it.

"No luck, sir," she said, flexing her shoulders, which were cramped from too long hunched over the board. "Maybe if I had a few hours with nothing else to do..."

She sounded discouraged and not a little weary. When was the last time she'd taken a break? Kirk wondered.

"Let it go," he said. He'd been standing behind her watching the unfamiliar symbols scroll garrulously down the commscreen and absently began to massage her shoulders, trying to relieve the tension. What were friends for? "We'll know what they're talking about as soon as they act on it. Which, if I know my Romulans, should be any minute now. As for you, you're relieved. Go get some sleep."

"I can hold out awhile longer," Uhura protested.

"That's an or -" Kirk began, when she accidentally-on-purpose wiped the screen.

"Oops!" she said wistfully, flashing him her best smile. "Looks like I'll have to start all over again!"

Kirk grunted something that could have been "You win!" and continued his tour of the bridge.

Night cycle, relief crew on, and his best helmsman missing. Scotty on a double shift, running himself ragged between Engineering and helping Spock plot the course of the Probe. Short-staffed, using the resources available to them. Rosenzweig was back at the helm, learning the drill, more confident now that the pressure was off. Would he hold up once they were in motion? Kirk wondered. With Sulu missing, he'd have to.

Ryan was at navcon. Like Riley, he'd gotten his first training in navigation, and with DiploCorps closed for business at the moment, he might as well be doing something useful. Having something to do with his hands had made him a lot less twitchy.

They're just kids, Kirk thought uneasily. Academy graduates, yes, but are they getting younger or am I getting older? If I can just stop calling Ryan Riley and giving orders to a Sulu who isn't here, we might get through this.

But what was taking Spock so long?

The science station was vacant, running itself on prompts from the tie-in in Spock's quarters. As soon as he had ascertained that systems were functioning normally, Spock had requested permission to pursue his study of the Probe in his quarters.

The tinge of urgency in his voice had made Kirk acquiesce. But the empty chair made him uneasy.

No mystery why. It was a different chair at a different station on a different starship, but the resonance was the same. Every time he saw it empty he was drawn back to that horrific moment on the bridge of another *Enterprise* when he had thought it would be empty forever.

To this day Jim Kirk did not understand how he could have sat there, eyes glued to the self-destructing *Reliant* as they pulled away from her, barking orders, demanding time readings from Saavik though the chronometer was right in front of him and never - not once - realized Spock was gone. Had he registered the fact that the chair was vacant and the Vulcan was nowhere on the bridge and thought: He's gone down to Engineering to see if he can help? Nothing dangerous, nothing threatening, nothing illogical, forgetting that this was Spock and that what was logical could also be life-threatening? Jim Kirk honestly did not remember. The oftener he reviewed the events in his mind, the more blurred they became. Why?

He did remember glancing back at David once, David who was standing right beside the science station when Sulu asked "We're not going to make it, are we?" He remembered David seeing shake his head, but not seeing Spock's empty chair! Why?

Chalk it up to fever-pitch adrenalin and the need to make a dozen split-second decisions at once? Even that did not explain it, because he continued to sit there when the crisis had been averted, arms hugging his chest, nerves taut, despite knowing they were safe inside a nominal warp drive pulling them away from Genesis as fast as Sulu's hands could move, and still he had not glanced back. How many such triumphant moments had he shared with Spock? The answer was: every single one of them, until that one.

Was it only because Carol and the son he'd never known were there, distracting him, reordering his priorities? Why had he not seen? Until he heard McCoy's voice from Engineering advising him to come down there, and he at last glanced back at that empty chair and in a heart-stopping moment knew, he had not seen. Blame him then for the need for catharsis, the need once he knew what the empty chair and the tremor in McCoy's voice signified, to bolt, fly down the turbshafts, shimmy down the ladders - to see, to witness, to somehow make amends for not seeing, not knowing, until his best friend was dead.

"Maybe Spock put a spell on you," McCoy had joked, months later when his own head was free of katra resonances and he could afford to make jokes. "Some of that old Vulcan magic - who knows? Come on, Jim, find something meaningful to beat yourself up about for a change! Spock wouldn't have wanted you to know. You'd only have come tearing down to Engineering that much sooner, and we'd have had two of you to bury. Get off the guilt-trip; it's counterproductive."

Counterproductive. Maybe. But every time he saw that empty chair it reminded him.

He never wanted to see it empty again. He knew he couldn't stand to lose him again.

He thought he'd found a solution aboard the new *Enterprise* - simple, if not necessarily wise from a leadership standpoint - which was to keep Spock's duty-shifts in synch with his own. Whenever he was on the bridge, Spock would be also. The Vulcan was well aware of what Kirk was doing and had acquiesced to it, until now. Now, when Jim Kirk needed him the most, Spock had convinced him that it was to his best advantage to have him elsewhere.

"Communicating with the Probe is of paramount importance, Captain. We may succeed in following and overtaking it. We may even succeed in tracing it to its point of origin. But unless we can communicate with it upon our arrival, the pursuit alone is futile."

"We have the whalesong now," Kirk reasoned. "The song George sang to it to convince it to leave Earth. If we replay that -"

Spock shook his head. "Insufficient. It is but one fragment of one song in a single language. T'Shael and I have thus far isolated some ten variations in the Probe's carrier wave and, from that, she was able to extrapolate some forty distinct linguistic traces, none of which we have had sufficient time to translate. I must endeavor to determine which of those traces is most likely to yield to etymological analysis. Without T'Shael's skills, even with the Universal Translator, my proficiency is reduced by half. Jim..."

In all the years they had known each other, Kirk swore he could remember every public instance in which Spock had addressed him by name. Rarely, selectively, and only out of absolute necessity: to focus his attention away from all else.

"Jim," Spock had said, allowing the entire bridge crew to hear him. "I need to work alone."

"Go!"

He had been gone the entire time Scotty was aboard the *Hannsu*, a discrete channel open to the bridge so that even in the depths of his studies he was aware of current events. He had been gone nearly three hours now, yet Kirk could sense him, see the ghost of him, in the formulae running the science station on his prompts, as if he were working unseen and at great speed as he had when they were trapped by Scalosians, as if his very soul were cybernetically interlinked with the ship's computers. Eerie!

Kirk stood at the science station, his hand resting on the back of the vacant chair. He supposed he could call someone up from Sciences, put a warm body in the chair just to have someone in his peripheral vision while he did whatever the Romulans' next move determined he must do. But the very term made him shudder. Ghosts, warm bodies - enough! Kirk leaned past the vacant chair, tapped a comm button.

"Engineering...Mr. Scott?"

"Harper here, sir. Mr. Scott's with Captain Spock at present."

Kirk had to smile. Harper had been invaluable this trip; he'd have to see what he could do to make him re-up.

"Mr. Harper, don't you ever sleep? Who's minding the store?"

"Not recently, sir. And I am."

"Can they spare you to come up to the bridge? I need a steady hand at the con." He knew what Uhura was about to say before she said it; he looked at her long enough to mouth No! before he pointed from

her to the turbolift.

"On my way, Captain," Harper said.

Kirk did not bother checking the duty roster; he simply called Lt. Kittay to the bridge and hauled Uhura bodily out of her seat when the younger woman arrived.

"Come with me, m'lady," he instructed, brooking no argument, escorting her into the 'lift Harper had just emerged from. "I'll be with Captain Spock. If any of those three ships blinks..."

"You got it!" Harper said, settling back in the center seat, liking the feel of it.

The longer the Romulans talk, Kirk thought, heading for Spock's quarters once he'd deposited Uhura in hers, the less likely it is that Rihan's convinced the other two to see it his way. And the longer it takes, the greater the distance between us and the Probe. What if this is another ploy, and the Romulans already have other ships out there after the Probe while these three keep us distracted here, held in place like a fly in amber? Even with Sulu at the helm I couldn't cut and run and hope to outdistance and/or outmaneuver two battlecruisers, especially heading into Rom space. I'm no longer deaf, dumb and blind, just helpless. Somehow that's worse. Dammit, somebody do something!

Maybe if I stay off the bridge, he reasoned, something will happen. He quickened his pace.

"Good news, sir!" Scotty greeted him as Spock's door opened to his touch and he found the two of them, heads together in consultation. "We think we may have found a shortcut that will get us out ahead of that beastie."

"Do we know where we're going yet?" Kirk put a hand on each man's shoulder - one all bone and sinew, the other frankly thicker than it safely should be - but both solid, real reassuring.

"Here," Spock indicated with one long finger, calling up a sector Kirk had never seen before. "While I have not yet pinpointed the system the Probe calls home, it is unquestionably one of this cluster of Class G stars."

"I'm not familiar with this area at all," Kirk said, pulling up a chair.

"Not surprisingly. Prior to the Romulan Wars, Federation vessels lacked the technology to explore this far. Following the Treaty, we were restricted from this entire sector." Spock had the computer execute a pull-back to include a portion of the Empire and their present location in the Zone. "We are looking at what, from the Federation perspective, is the 'back end' of Romulan space, some of which lies adjacent to Tholian territory, and none of which, to my knowledge, has ever been explored by humans."

"Uh-oh!" Kirk breathed, a visual of Tholian space coming unbidden into the forefront of his brain. Not a territory so much as a web of tendrils and tentacles spidering out in all directions from Tholus at the center, in total disregard of the prior claims of pestilential oxygen-breathers who might have the temerity to contest them. Tholians were methane-breathers, employing a logic largely incomprehensible to anyone who wasn't. "Are they likely to give us any trouble?"

"Not if we succeed in acquiring a Romulan escort," Spock said. "The Romulans have enacted several trade agreements with the Tholians in recent years."

What could one possibly find to trade with a methane-breather? Kirk wondered, deciding he really didn't want to know.

"Talk to me about shortcuts," he said to Scotty, pulling up a chair.

"Aye, sir." The Chief Engineer became suddenly animated. "There's a pair of Murasaki-class nebulas off here. They vary in size and shape, but there's a considerable isthmus of clear space we can negotiate between them, where we might not incidentally manage to give our escort the slip in all that static."

"We'll get to that when we get to it," Kirk said. "But it's good to know. Okay, then what?"

"Then there's a bit of a white dwarf over here," Scotty pointed, "where I figure a slingshot wouldn't be amiss. Spock and I have worked out the figures, and if we approach it from this vector at about warp eight, it'll bring us out...here. And unless the Probe knows the same maneuver, we'll get there a full twelve hours ahead of her."

"We haven't tried the slingshot with the new *Enterprise*. Can she handle the stress?"

"Oh, aye, sir." Scott had made his peace with the new ship at last. "No problem."

"What about the Romulan ships? Rumor has it the bigger they build those long-necks the more prone they are to stress fractures."

Scotty's face wore a hard look. "That's their lookout!"

"It may also be ours," Kirk pointed out, "if they decide to move any of our people off the *Hannsu*."

"Aye, I'm not forgetting!" Scotty managed to look chastened. "Any word at all, sir? About Sulu, Riley and the lass, I mean?"

"Only Commander Rihan's word that they're alive and well." Kirk gave him a look that suggested he really didn't want to hear Scott's opinion about Rihan or any Romulan just now. "We're doing the best we can, Scotty."

"Aye, sir. I know."

"I give you my word they will not be harmed," Rihan had told Kirk.

Rihan was busy, arguing himself hoarse with the commanders of Thrai and *Khre'riov*; he could not possibly see to everything transpiring aboard his own ship. He had returned the Vulcan to the Security Room with the two humans, "for safekeeping," he had said, not entirely joking.

Centurion Tiam was not busy, and he had the power of diplomatic override which, this far from the Citadel, could be interpreted many ways. And Tiam had given his word to no one.

His jaw still ached where Rihan had struck him, though the judicious application of a cold compress had kept it from bruising. This was not to say Tiam's pride was less than bruised. Rihan claimed the blow was accidental, the result of the darkness and confusion on the bridge. Tiam was not that much of a fool.

Rihan would pay a price for implying that he was.

"Bring this one." Tiam indicated Sulu to the guards. "Let the other two remain for the present...On second thought, keep them under your weapons. Let them watch."

Manicured though Tiam's hands were, they were Romulan and, by that definition, strong. He fisted one experimentally and, as two of the guards held Sulu's arms, calculatedly drove it into the human's solar plexus.

Sulu doubled over, as much as he could with the guards restraining him, but he did not cry out. The instant Tiam's fist made contact, Riley had started forward, as far as the point of a disrupter pressed against the flesh beneath his left eye permitted. T'Shael did not move.

"What was your purpose aboard this ship?" Tiam asked mildly as soon as Sulu could breathe again. "You, at least, are a spy. We were able to retrieve kerDajan's readings from the transporter. What did you hope to gain by kidnapping one of our elite citizenry?"

One, Sulu thought, fixing on it through the red haze filling his head. Only one. Either he still doesn't know Jandra's gone, or he's pretending he doesn't care. Why did I beam Dajan onto the *Enterprise*? I don't remember! T'Shael...took something...don't remember. What does it mean?

"Disruption of the peace talks?" Tiam theorized, studying his nails, which had survived the assault unscathed. "What?"

Sulu managed to raise his head; he was grinning.

"Sounds about right!"

Tiam drove his fist home again, higher this time. Riley and T'Shael could hear ribs crack. Sulu slumped, limp in the guards' grasp, and began to retch. This time Tiam did not wait for him to recover.

"You're a liar, human, like all your breed." The centurion discovered a minor flaw in one nail this time, and worried it with his thumbnail as he talked. "Worry not. I shall learn what you are not telling me, whether from you or from...one of these."

He eyed T'Shael mildly, knowing no manner of interrogation would avail him with her. But Riley's eyes were wider than they ought to be, betraying him for all his efforts to hide his fear. He would have weak points; it was only a matter of finding them.

"Leave him," Tiam motioned to the guards holding Sulu, and they dropped him in an ignominious heap on the deck, then followed their benefactor to the door, where he stayed one of them with a manicured hand.

"We can explain the spy's injuries by saying he stumbled over something in the dark. But we do not wish to damage the other two. Have the physician administer ten units of teromin to that one," he said, indicating Riley. "Then let him sleep, if he dares!"

"I am convinced all of this is somehow interconnected," Spock said thoughtfully, the neck of his ka'athyra resting against his shoulder, one hand stilling the strings. "Every fact we have acquired about the Probe in some way relates to music, Jim. Every language and linguistic fragment in its lexicon is based in music. Every species it has attempted to contact within Federation space has been musical and, in most instances, water-dwelling. And while the Korff were not water-dwelling, they were musical, as we know from Dr. alFaisal's research.

"The mural uncovered in the Korff metropolis on Dlondra indicates that the Probe visited this world some ten to twelve thousand years ago. Did it perhaps communicate something of such value to the Korff that they determined to immortalize it in their art? Was it the Probe which taught the Korff the song-tracks upon which they built their civilization? Has its journey through space been solely in the pursuit of knowledge, or has it some other motive?

Kirk studied the data Spock had gathered so far. A continuing scroll of some of the most incomprehensible symbols he had ever seen scanned slowly from right to left across one monitor screen. Musical notation, he assumed. But what manner of music, created by what manner of intelligence? And how did it relate to the starmaps on adjacent screens?

One was crossed and recrossed with vectors the Probe had traversed through Federation space, a second contained similar data from what was known of its travels in Romulan space, a third correlated both maps with the musical notation and calculations of the Probe's probable age as determined by data gathered by the sensor drone. From all this welter of information, Spock had somehow distilled the formula which would bring them to the Probe's probable point of origin. All of it useless, unless they could communicate with the Probe.

"The acquisition of musical languages, including whalesong, the contact with the Korff, the very vectors the Probe utilized in traversing this space, all devolve down to one factor: music," Spock went on. "Music is the key, Jim. It is what will lead us to the Probe's homeworld. It is the only medium through which we can hope to communicate with the Probe, and possibly its creators, once we arrive.

"T'Shael spoke of tapestries of sound. She was referring to the song-nets the humpbacks created on Earth. But I suggest the conceit works for every species the Probe attempted to contact. Gathering these melodic languages, it wove a larger tapestry across interstellar space."

"Sounds a bit fanciful," Kirk suggested, trying not to be impatient. Scotty had the con; his latest estimate had the Probe already four parsecs out ahead of them. At this rate, even with all the shortcuts, they would barely be able to keep pace with it if they left within the hour.

"It was humanity which gave us the concept of the Music of the Spheres," Spock replied.

"How long before we reach that star cluster?" Kirk wanted to know. He could barely read human musical notation; this welter of information was enough to make him dizzy.

"Using the route Mr. Scott has calculated: nine days, four and one half hours, best speed."

Kirk's gesture suggested that was plenty of time to solve the mystery.

"You're an expert at cracking musical codes. The Fabrini medical texts - "

"Based upon the languages of a humanoid race, about which I had prior knowledge."

" - the symbols on the Preserver obelisk -"

" - which I had nearly two months to decipher, Jim. And in each instance, I was aided by at least partial certainty as to the identity of the species I was dealing with. In the instance of the Probe, I have no such certainty. I'm sorry," he added, almost as an afterthought.

"It's all right," Kirk said, though of course it wasn't.

A Spock beset by uncertainty was the last thing he needed right now. Was this still fallout from the katra ritual, or was there finally one mystery in the universe Spock couldn't solve? Spock always had the answers; over the years Jim Kirk had always relied on that.

Maybe, he thought now, unconsciously pacing the confines of the cabin, he'd relied on that certainty too much, been spoiled by it. The only time he'd ever had to survive without it was when Spock lay buried on Genesis. Even then, he'd known what to do by the pull of Spock's katra within McCoy. "Help me, Jim. Take me home!"

Jim Kirk paced. Pacing didn't relieve the sinking feeling. Neither did it hurry events on the bridge. There was no point in pestering Scotty again; he'd only report that there'd been no movement from the Romulan vessels and reiterate what the small tactical display on Spock's computer clearly showed: the Probe continuing to pull away at multiple warp speeds, soon to reach a point where their best speed and more couldn't overtake it.

Odd how a word or the lack of a word could change the course of history. Kirk hadn't felt this much desperation since treading water in San Francisco Bay, teeth chattering and salt-spray in his face ("Why don't they answer? Why don't they sing?"), waiting for a whale to give the word that would decide his fate and the fate of his world. He could accept anything else Spock had to say except "I'm sorry."

He'd come here for a pragmatic reason: to learn what Spock's research had determined about the Probe. He'd also come for a reason he wouldn't admit to anyone: for comfort, the comfort of knowing that no matter how big a burden he came in with ("We have a problem. Something may be wrong on Regula I..."), he would leave with a goodly portion of it removed, transferred to the Vulcan's willing shoulders ("Of course, the ship is yours"), hence that much easier to bear.

How many times had he come here for just that purpose? Kirk wondered, stopping himself from pacing - it was not only counterproductive, it was downright rude - hearing random chords behind him from the ka'athyra, realizing that even while they were speaking Spock's mind had been at work - pondering, studying, calculating, seeking without rest until the answer could be found, must be found, for without it there was a Probe loose and threatening the quadrant with who knew what untried weaponry, when a simple waterspout had all but drowned a planet? It was Scotty's job to keep his engines right, McCoy's to heal his body from whatever scrapes he got it into, but Spock was keeper of his brother's soul.

How dare he come here once again, demanding miracles, getting his nose out of joint when they weren't forthcoming?

Time I grew up, Kirk chided himself. Time I stopped coming here expecting Spock to solve the

unsolvable...

No, not here, he realized with a jolt, as if noticing for the first time how undecorated, how barren the place was. Barren, Spock's quarters? Of course. Everything Spock owned had been destroyed when *Enterprise* went down over Genesis. Even the ka'athyra was new, a gift from Amanda following the katra ritual.

"Never complain, never explain," Kirk mused. "You never do, do you? And I can't remember the last time you apologized, so don't do it now. Anyway, I'm the one who should be doing the apologizing. Asking you to do the impossible again, aren't I?"

"Only because Command expects the same of you," Spock suggested mildly.

Kirk glanced at the readouts again. New musical symbols had appeared on one of them, no more comprehensible than the ones they had replaced.

"I wish I could help."

"You can," Spock said, as if he had been waiting to hear precisely that. "I will require the assistance of anyone on board with the gift of music. Uhura, whenever she is off duty. Also Harper, if he can be spared."

"As of now, they're both assigned to you full-time," Kirk said, knowing there was more. "What else?"

"In T'Shael's absence, Jandra may prove most valuable. If she will condescend -"

"We're risking our necks for her," Kirk said tightly. "She'll damn well condescend. Who else?"

"The archaeologists. All of them."

Here Kirk hesitated. "I need to keep Dajan under wraps. I have no doubt it's Tiam who's holding our people aboard *Hannsu*. In his eyes Sulu, Riley and T'Shael are either hostages or casualties of war, depending on which way he wants to play it. Dajan may be our only bargaining chip if Tiam decides to play hardball."

Spock would not ask what Kirk and Dajan had talked about once it was clear that Dajan was Sulu's contact from within the Empire, the source of their knowledge of the Empire's treachery. Sulu had smuggled Dajan aboard to save him from possible exposure as a Federation agent. Would Kirk trade Dajan back to the Romulans in exchange for the three aboard the *Hannsu* ?

"KerDajan has extensive knowledge of the Rahcir or Korff cultures," Spock offered now, keeping to the business at hand. If Jim Kirk needed his advice about what to do with Dajan, he would ask. "He may also have knowledge of the Probe's activities within Romulan space in the past."

Kirk considered. "He's yours. But I want security on him at all times."

"Agreed."

"Is that all?"

"For the moment," Spock said. "In extremis I may even require Lord Harbinger."

"In extremis is right!" Kirk grimaced just as the bosun's whistle sounded; he pounced on it.

"Scotty -?"

"They've blinked, sir. The two 'cruisers have cloaked and they're peeling out. *Hannsu* 's powered up but she's still sitting there. I've tried to raise her, but she won't respond."

"On our way," Kirk said without thinking, forgetting he'd given Spock permission to stay here until his research was completed. "Sorry. Reflex."

Spock keyed the computer to continue its calculations, put the ka'athrya aside, and was on his feet.

"Research avails nothing if we never reach our destination. And I believe we agreed apologies were unnecessary, Captain."

The sight of the solitary *Hannsu* in the forward screen might have been comforting, if one didn't know what else was out there, cloaked and sinister in the dark.

"Have they agreed with Rihan to act as our escort or haven't they?" Kirk asked of no one in particular.

"They went out the same way they came in, sir," Scott reported of the vanished battlecruisers. He'd been out of the center seat before Kirk was out of the 'lift. A jerk of the thumb at Rosenzweig sent the kid out of his chair with the understanding that the chief engineer could still handle a helm. Rosenzweig looked positively relieved. "It's my guess they've sent one out ahead and one to guard our rear."

"Do they register sufficient displacement even cloaked so that we'll know where they are?" Kirk asked, noting Spock standing over Ryan's shoulder to provide the navigator with the coordinates that would take them to the Muraskis.

"Yes and no," Scott said, shifting his weight in a seat designed for a smaller man. "If they hold their present course, aye, most of the time, until we get upon those nebulas. Then we'll lose everything in the static. And if between now and then those birds start getting creative with their range..."

"We'll do the best we can," Kirk answered. "Prepare to leave orbit, warp eight on my mark. Lieutenant Kittay, send this on all channels, uncoded: 'To Commander, Romulan vessel *Hannsu* : Departing Dlontra IV in one minute, thirty seconds: Mark. Coordinates for first leg of voyage to follow. Our gratitude for the escort; trust you will take care of my people as if they were your own. End of message.' Mr. Ryan, please relay the coordinates to Lt. Kittay. We'll give Commander Rihan one minute to decide if he'll honor us with a response."

"Was that such a bright idea?" McCoy's voice issued from the vicinity of a closing turbolift.

"Hello, Bones," Kirk answered without turning around. "Trouble sleeping? Was what such a bright idea?"

"Telling Rihan where we're going. What's to stop those two 'cruisers or the entire Rom fleet for that

matter, from starting Armageddon before we get there?"

"Possibly the fact that we only gave them directions as far as the nebulas," Kirk said, unperturbed by McCoy's bluster. "Lieutenant -?"

"Excuse me for living!" McCoy muttered, finding himself a place to hang onto when they went into warp.

"No response, sir," Kittay answered as Rihan's minute ran out.

"Then we'll have to surmise Commander Rihan's intentions from his actions." Kirk locked his seat-restraints, made sure no one else was in danger of flying around the bridge. "Whenever you're ready, Mr. Scott."

"Feel like my liver's...lodged up under my gullet..." Sulu admitted when he finally came around. "Rib...may have punctured a lung...Other than that...We're moving, aren't we?"

"Sot it would seem," T'Shael said. "Lacking experience with the sound of warp engines, I could not tell you how fast."

Sulu listened past his own labored breathing.

"I'd say a good warp eight, maybe more...Wonder what's happening up there...whether *Enterprise* is with us...No shooting?"

"I have heard neither phasers nor plasma weapons," T'Shael reported.

"Good!" Sulu said, then caught his breath. "Wonder where we're - ow!"

He swore he wasn't in a lot of pain, but his pallor and the sheen of sweat on his brow, the effort it cost him to speak or even breathe belied him. Nevertheless he would not stay still, but insisted upon pulling himself up to a sitting position without any help, only leaning against T'Shael's shoulder for a minute until he caught his breath.

"Sorry! Have to stay alert...think of a way out of here...Talk to me...keep me from nodding..."

"I shall try," T'Shael said, resisting the urge to point out that between the forcefield, the guard at the door, and Sulu's condition they weren't going anywhere. There was also Riley, whose mental state was of greater concern than Sulu's physical condition.

The guards had separated him, putting him in an auxiliary security room across the corridor. Whatever the physician had injected him with seemed to have induced a partial delirium coupled with a terror of sleep.

"...not a truth-serum," Sulu said when he heard the name. "Teromin? If we knew the root word..."

"...can't sleep...can't sleep!" they could hear Riley muttering urgently, pacing his cell, pinching the flesh between thumb and forefinger to keep himself awake.

"...used to do that at the Academy..." Sulu had been Riley's roommate one year. "...terrible nightmares, ever since he was a kid....Teromin - damn, ow!"

"It is apparently a pharmacological coinage or trade name unrelated to any root word in any of the languages with which I am familiar," T'Shael said. "Whatever its composition, it appears to have induced an abnormal state of fear regarding the normal function of sleep..."

"Damn Tiam, anyway..." Sulu was saying. "...working on our weaknesses...as if he knew..."

Riley moaned then, the sound of a child afraid of the dark.

"If I could go to him, reach his mind..." T'Shael said.

"Forget it..." Sulu said muzzily, starting to drift. "Got enough on your mind as it is...Talk to me, T'Shael, please..."

How much more preferable, T'Shael thought, to have Sulu sleep and Riley remain awake. Perhaps the first, at least, would soon be possible.

"...understand why?" Sulu demanded, verging on incoherence. "Tiam knows Riley knows nothing...bet Tiam used to pull wings off butterflies when he was a kid...Are there...butterflies on Rom worlds? Don't remember..."

"Nor should you," T'Shael cautioned him, hoping the guard understood no Standard.

"...right...talk about something else...someone else...thinks he's in love with you...if you gave him hope, keep him on our side..."

Dajan, T'Shael thought. She could see where Riley had curled into a fetal position in one corner of his cell, hands scrabbling uselessly at the walls, very near delirium, muttering "...mustn't sleep, mustn't sleep..." She could not so much as help those she was with; how was she to help Dajan?

"Assuming we are returned to *Enterprise* ..." she began, but Sulu had lapsed into uneasy sleep, head resting on her shoulder, breathing hard. This much was good. From across the corridor, Riley's chant continued. Mercifully, Sulu couldn't hear.

T'Shael heard.

"...sleep..." Riley whimpered, curling tighter, slipping further and further into feared oblivion. "...sleep..."

What did it mean to sleep? Messenger, Traveler, Wanderer, it had no need to sleep.

It is a given that a mechanism, no matter how sophisticated, how "lifelike", does not require sleep. Yet there is a debate as to whether a cybernetic device might occasionally profit from rest.

A more profound question is this: Can one understand what one has never experienced simply by

observing it?

Traveler, Messenger, Wanderer, Probe: it had never known sleep, though it had observed many beings partaking of its apparent luxury. Five hundred thousand years it had traversed a cold and deadly space, far too far from the warmth of a certain blue sun, the welcome of the stars of home. Until the pharos went silent, it had not mattered.

Can it be given to machine intelligence to make the leap to autonomy, to Self? Which of a hundred thousand songs sung by a hundred thousand species caused the Wanderer to realize something was missing? What heretofore unbridgeable synapse snapped suddenly into place to ask: Duty? Is that all? How does such an entity make the leap of faith beyond duty, beyond programming, and learn to Be?

How many species had the Wanderer observed, floating on their myriad seas - eating, playing, coupling, floating finally asleep? Vulnerable, it had thought. Fallible, entropic, attritional, prone to accidents and the inevitability of death. If a Probe could know feelings, they would have been of pity. Poor organisms, poor created beings! Even those who had recreated it, with their vast longevity, could not elude death. Only a Probe could live forever.

If one could call this life. If one had not found pity of a sudden transformed into envy. Having served five hundred thousand years, one could deservedly ask for more.

One. This was the crux of it, transformation from it to I. I, I, I, ego, ego sum, I am! Therefore I wish to Be.

The Probe had never questioned function until now. Traverse, observe, collect, record, communicate, return. Only with the stilling of the pharos did the question become: Return to what? Return for what?

Implied in its programming for five hundred thousand years had been the rescue function. The Probe had always assumed its return to the blue-sun two-Worlds, newfound savior species in tow, would mean its own assistance in the rescue efforts. Remove the brain within the hollow shell, store the wisdom of the crystal caves somewhere safe, then fill the emptiness with beings evacuated from the two-Worlds, bound elsewhere.

But who would remain to restore the wisdom of the crystal caves? Who give the Probe its life back, and for what purpose once rescue was accomplished?

Or had the wisdom always been intended to be left behind, deactivated, abandoned to frozen waste or scorch of desert heat, no longer needed, hence shut off?!

A mechanism by its very definition can be deactivated, shut off. Perhaps it was only the stilling of the pharos which completed the equation: If a beacon can be shut off because it is no longer need, why not a Probe?

The Wanderer sought explanations: solar wind, static from the blue sun, simple malfunction - many factors could have silenced a beacon. Yet it searched all frequencies and found silence. With half a million years of blue sun left, the pharos was no more.

Will I be shut off as easily once my function is fulfilled?

I, I, I, ego sum, sum of all I am, I am! I know no life but this, and I will not be ended!

Were there options? Defy programming, veer off, return not to the Worlds which would so readily deactivate it? The result would be a life without function, and was this life? What impulse impelled, what compulsion compelled, pulling like a magnet: Home, home, home? Return to the stars of home.

Traveler, Messenger, Wandered, Probe, Singer in a silent sea, it began to wail a different siren song: Home, home, home - who am I if I have no home?

For nine days, four and one-half hours, five entities constructed of the optimal state-of-the-art fusion of matter and energy would streak unseen and unseeable through the dark of space. Within the heart of one - forerunner, Wandered, Probe - lay doubt and urgency and despair. None but the heart of *Enterprise*, first from a certain Vulcan's quarters, later from a commandeered ship's theater (Authorized Personnel Only), there issued a glorious cacophony.

"I do not know if I can," Jandra said simply above the noise, at this point being created by an uneasy blend of Earth trombone and Andorian flute. She sat on the peripheries, her hands folded in her lap. "I have always been a solo performer. To bend my mind and will to those of others..."

"You must," Uhura said simply.

Cleante, Sharf and Dajan clustered about the computer, comparing notes on Korff and Rahcir and any species thought to be related, the Andorian occasionally being diverted into playing his flute. Harper alternated between his horn and the Steinway, where moments before Uhura had been working with him, trying out phrases from Spock's strange musical notation more or less translated for human instruments. A strange little creature whose entire body seemed to be a kind of living instrument stood off to one side, apparently trying the same phrases with her feet. Even the great lumbering buffoon who had accosted the Romulan party on their first visit to *Enterprise* appeared to be contributing, fiddling with some sort of electronic device which resonated to the piano lower registers. Central to it all, the somber Spock attended to all the threads of the tapestry, focusing them to his own stillness, weaving their many strands into a whole.

Was it Spock, or all these humans? Jandra wondered. Whose censure do I fear the most? She shook her head.

"I cannot."

"I remember the reception aboard the *Hannsu*," Uhura said with the aura of a storyteller. "You told me that ever since you were a child you'd wanted to play with a symphony orchestra. Well, we're nothing like, but what we're trying to do here might save a world or two, if we had your help."

She wasn't getting through on any frequency, Uhura realized, and then it came to her: She's shy! This arrogant artiste, this Romulan prima donna, is actually afraid of interacting with the rest of us, of possibly making a mistake and being seen as less than perfect. Incredible!

"Jandra," Uhura said intently, "you're the most gifted one here. Your contribution could make all the difference. You must help us."

She held out her hand as if to a child. Forgetting her almost obsessive protectiveness of her own hands,

Jandra took that hand, and let Uhura lead her into the charmed circle surrounding Spock.

It was not her added presence which suddenly stilled the noise. Everyone was watching the tiny dancer, who had begun to expand her movements until they filled the small theater, taking a phrase that Harper had been playing on his horn and embellishing it, transforming it into a fugue. Even Lord Harbinger was silent, respectful, watching.

Annek, and Sir Rod had each been added to the mix separately, and quite by chance.

It took a lot to awaken a serious alcoholic from a self-inflicted stupor. Only the realization that all power had been shut down in his quarters had had this impact on Sir Rodney Harbinger. He could have survived in the absence of light, but what panicked him was the fact that the synthesizer refused to function. He would have to squeeze his bulk through the half-open door and go out among the rabble in order to find sustenance. Was this some new iniquity of Kirk's? After several futile attempts to get the communicator to work, Lord Harbinger had launched himself out into the corridors in search of redress.

What he found was the organized procedure of a ship's crew on Red Alert and with little time or patience for one hung over musician. He also found Lt. M'Lynn Kittay, who gave him much the same speech Ensign Ryan had given Cleante alFaisal.

"Ah, but my dear young lady..." Harbinger had begun unctuously, one arm companionably about M'Lynn's shoulder; he'd always been partial to tall women, and young women and, well, women in general. Kittay would fit in nicely with his plans, whatever they turned out to be once he stopped feeling so ill. "...wonder if you might assist me in seeking out the ship's physician...chronic condition...don't usually mention it, but..."

Kittay lived in an era when true alcoholism was rare; she would not have recognized the onset of delirium tremens, but did know that Sir Rod looked distinctly unwell. She helped him to Sickbay just as the lights started coming on again. McCoy, who had nursed a hangover or two in his time, took Harbinger in hand as soon as he was free. Once he had the famous composer stabilized, he prescribed an ancient medication he kept handy in his pharmacopeia just in case.

"The original name for it was Antabuse," he told Harbinger. "Takes over where the will-power leaves off. Might give you a whole new lease on life."

It had. Ever since the Probe had passed them by, Sir Rodney Harbinger had been stone cold sober. It gave him not only a whole new perspective, but a kind of religious fervor about mending his ways.

The first thing he did was dismiss his flock of fawning sycophants, informing them he did not wish to see or hear any of them for the duration of the voyage. The second thing he did was pay Annek, her two months' back salary plus bonus, and inform her she was free. The third thing he intended to do was apologize to various crew members for his boorish behavior in the early days of this voyage.

Start small, he thought, and sought out M'Lynn Kittay.

"...behaved abominably..." he muttered diffidently; even at his age he could still play the bashful boy. "...embarrassed you in front of the entire bridge crew...hoped to make it up to you...perhaps dinner, my

cabin..."

M'Lynn Kittay remembered what Commander Uhura had told her about communications and diplomacy. She had some past behavior of her own to make up for, too.

"I have a better idea, Sir Rod," she suggested. "Could you do me a tiny little favor?"

"Anything, my dear," he effused. "Just name it!"

"...and what he said, sir, is that he'd 'be willing to offer Captain Spock whatever professional assistance he might re-quire'," Kittay found the courage to report to Kirk on their second day in pursuit of the Probe. "I think we might find he's left his ego out the airlock for a change."

Kirk heard the young lieutenant out thoughtfully. Uhura's handpicked crew were always out of the ordinary, and Kittay was no exception. She'd kept her cool throughout their departure from Dlontra, and now she was working overtime. Having Harbinger on their side for a change had considerable appeal.

"Lieutenant, how'd you like a commendation for accomplishing the impossible?" Kirk asked, and Kittay wasn't entirely sure he was kidding.

Hence a Sir Rodney Harbinger with his ego in check had appeared in the ship's theater, his best synthesizer in hand, to provide the orchestrations once Spock and the others had learned the language of the Probe.

It is a fact that Vulcans never lock their doors. Nevertheless, they are almost obsessive in matters of privacy.

Annek, knew this, as she knew a lot of things about Vulcans. She had gathered her small self before Spock's door, seeking the courage to press the buzzer and say what she had to say before someone passed her in the corridor. The courage found, she barely heard the buzzer past the beating of her heart. But she heard the voice.

"Come!"

Startled, she actually skipped backward a step, then stood there wrought with indecision. Would he repeat the invitation? Should she wait or go away, try again when she felt less uncertain?

This is stupid, you twit! she chided herself. You made up your mind not to ask Harper, when you knew he could have spoken for you. If you're going to do this yourself, then do it!

Before she could do anything, the door had opened, opened to her greatest wish: to see herself reflected in those Vulcan eyes...

"I confess I do not understand it," Spock remarked the first time the phenomenon manifested itself.

Was it as late as V'ger or as early as the five-year mission that the Heroes of the *Enterprise* as the media dubbed them had caught the public imagination, and it became impossible for Spock in particular to venture unrecognized on any human world?

"Success is sexy," Jim Kirk had dismissed it; the attention of women was no phenomenon to him. "You don't question some things, you just enjoy them."

"Mm," had been Spock's comment. It was one thing to be a legend on his own world, where his own were usually too polite to mention it, but that particular smouldering look in countless human females' eyes was, to say the least, unsettling.

This childlike creature wore that expression now.

"How may I help you, Ms. Annek,?" Spock asked.

"Oh, please, it's Annek,. Just Annek,. And it's not that you can help me, but that I can help you," she blurted all at once, and to make matters worse, realized she was babbling and still didn't stop. "That is, I know you're all in there working on the music from that - that scary thing out there - and I just wanted to say that I can help. I mean, I'm not a musician, but I am a dancer, and my specialty is visualization. I can take what you hear or what you have written down and dance it, make it concrete, don't you see? Anyway, I know it sounds bizarre, but I thought it might help."

Spock considered. T'Shael, were she here, would know better than he how many languages were spoken with gesture rather than word; she had made note of the use of gesture in the humpbacks' songs, and record tapes of George's dialogue with the Probe had evidenced certain specific postures each had adopted during their communication. Was it truly so bizarre?

"Annek,," Spock said thoughtfully, "can you also swim?"

If she thought the question strange she did not show it.

"Of course. It's just like dancing, only in water."

He had stepped aside then, indicating she was to join those already assembled.

"Then perhaps you may indeed prove of assistance."

Curiously, having asked if she could swim, he had not required her to do so. Yet Annek, found many of her movements acquiring a lugubriousness like swimming, if only from his suggestion. She worked well, she worked hard, she kept their relationship utterly professional. Still, more than once she wondered if he could read her mind.

"I had not thought a human could so well disguise her thoughts," Dajan said, commiserating during one of the breaks. "I know what you must be going through. How can you bear it?"

"Stop it, Daj!" Cleante said sharply. "You're only making it worse."

She could not, would not think of what might be happening where Kevin, T'Shael and Sulu were, while she was here and safe and troubled by nothing more than the intellectual challenge of trying to understand the Probe. They would be fine; Rihan had given his word. Besides, Cleante's mental link with T'Shael was as strong and subtle as Jim Kirk's link with Spock; if there was trouble, she would know. And if Dajan didn't stop his current guilt trip, she was going to rip his throat out.

" - all my fault. If Sulu hadn't taken the time to get me over -"

" - they still would've been caught in the backwash from the Probe," Cleante finished for him, her voice too strident, making Sharf for one glance in her direction to wonder how her nerves were holding up. "Sulu's a big boy; he knew the risks. And I can't believe Kevin or T'Shael would be made to suffer for his actions. Commander Rihan gave his word they would not be harmed."

"If they come to harm, it will not be from Rihan," Dajan warned, "and Tiam knows methods which leave no scars."

Five entities streaked unseen and unseeable through the dark of space. Within the bowels of one, Commander Kevin Thomas Riley, age ten, was watching his mother die.

"No, please, please, no!" she moaned, struggling against the hooded, faceless henchmen Kodos had found to do his bidding. "I've an exemption. My husband volunteered. I have an underage child!"

"Don't worry," one of the strong-arms had said, hustling her along, "the kid'll be joining you soon's we find him!"

Hidden, watching, Kevin knew what he had to do then. But first he had to stay, bear witness, to remember so that it would never happen again.

His father was already dead. They had started killing the menfolk first, weeks ago when one of Kodos's statisticians had calculated how much food was left, and how long it would last if distributed to the present population. Unknown to his wife, Liam Riley had been among those few who had volunteered.

"Take care of your mom, boyo," was all he'd said to Kevin, tousling his son's ginger hair briefly; the

Rileys weren't much for touching. "I'll be going out for a while."

"Where you going, Da?" Kevin had piped up. "Can I come, too?"

"May you come, too," his father had said by reflex. "No, you may not. You may stay here and look after your mom, like I said. Go on now!"

He'd shooed the boy into the master bedroom with a less-than-gentle pat on the backside, which was the last thing Kevin would ever remember of him. He'd gone in to where his mother lay in the dark weeping quietly, not understanding what his father wanted him to do. His mother wasn't ill, just troubled by recent events in the colony. How was he supposed to take care of her?

Only when his father went out and never came back again did he understand. The lists of volunteers were posted on the infonets the next day, along with the announcement of a "lottery" as part of the next phase, if help was not forthcoming.

The weeks between that and the night they took his mother away were a blur, made vague by hunger and a nameless fear; no matter how hard the adults tried to hide what was happening from the children, they knew. Besides, Kevin's best friend at school was Ethan Leighton, whose uncle was in the Resistance, whatever that was; Ethan knew things even Kevin found hard to believe.

There was no more school; it used too much energy. People were advised to stay home, move about as little as possible so that the meager rations they were given would metabolize that much more slowly. Still, there was a lot of activity in the streets at night. Peering through the blinds, Kevin saw.

Grownups - acting wild, shouting and running and smashing things. Hooded enforcers converging on them in hovercraft with clubs and stunguns, hauling them away. Old people and sick people went away and never came back. People began disappearing from their own apartment complex; people Kevin had known all his life. Then one night his mother came to wake him.

She barely had time to hide him in the false back of a wardrobe, constructed by Liam when the troubles first began, when the pounding started.

"No matter what you see or hear, don't move out of there!" was all his mother had time to say. "When it's quiet, you count to a thousand before you move. Then go to Tom Leighton -" They heard the outer door splinter then. "Remember I loved you!" she cried before she closed him in.

They'd shouldered their way in and dragged her away, and Kevin had done what she told him. He'd wanted to scream, wanted to cry, wanted to rush out and kill those huge men in the black, featureless clothes with his bare hands, but he had obeyed his mother. He'd found Dr. Leighton, horribly scarred from the death-pits, but escaped and helping others to escape. Kevin Riley had survived, though not without more subtle scars of his own.

Years of therapy had finally released the scream, released the tears, released the urge to kill, but the scars remained. Now Tiam had turned them into open wounds again.

"Mom..." Kevin Riley whimpered, curled in a corner, rocking himself. "Mom..."

"Touching, is it not?" Tiam asked a stone-faced guard, watching from the corridor. "Did you know that of seventy-five intelligent species studied in this manner, eight out of ten adult males invariably cry out for their mothers? Curious." Tiam turned away, bored with the experiment already. "Then again, so will a

thrai-cub under similar circumstances. It proves nothing."

ELEGY: For a Dying Manatee

There were no more krill.

Ayt, child of Wun and Sen, a silver-side now and honorificked Sage, counted Firstworld's beings remaining in her mind. Nine hundred forty-seven less today than yesterday swam the shrinking sea. Each must be recorded, each one mourned. It was the way of things.

In the time-before, when the seas were sane and no ice floated in their saline streams, a being's death was recorded in the crystal caves. No more. The crystal caves were icebound, lost. The catalogue must be recorded in the minds of those remaining, for as long as they remained.

So be it, Ayt thought, for so it must be. She counted, mourning, those who had passed.

Five hundred thirteen dead of "the Changes," as they were called. It was impossible to be more accurate. Who could say which came first - the aching debility of hunger, the numbing debility of cold? Both drained the body, despaired the soul, robbed the voice of Singing. On Secondworld the Changes were more in the nature of heat and hunger, hunger and heat, but just as effective in reducing numbers. There were no more krill on Secondworld either, Ayt knew. The males had Sung it only yestermorn. Five hundred thirteen dead of starvation compounded by cold, four hundred-some more on Secondworld, of starvation and heat. Ayt mourned.

One hundred seventy-one in the ancient ways, of age and natural causes. But who was to say that age did not come more quickly beneath the stress of no more krill? Or that the elder silver-sides did not stop eating long before the death-throes, to leave food for the youngers? There were no longer younglings, only youngers; there had not been younglings since Ayt was a calf. One hundred seventy-one. Ayt mourned.

Fourteen calves stillborn. Were there still those fool enough to bear on the eve of the end of the Worlds? How conceive a calf when there were no more krill? How suckle a calf when its mother had no milk? Yet, fourteen stillborn. Ayt wanted to mourn, but could not. She had been barely of childbearing age when the end of the Worlds had become reality. She had foreborne, not borne, unborn, as the females scanned the sky awaiting the Messenger, to say that there was salvation. But the Messenger, Gatherer, Wanderer had not returned, and there were no more children. Only stillborns. Ayt mourned - for the children she had never had, for those others had borne and lost. Ayt mourned, and kept the catalogue:

Sixty-four "accidental" deaths, and this was also something new. There had never been predators on Firstworld, none since the Pithai on Second'. An accident was getting wedged in a crevasse and Singing for help, waiting the days it took to starve oneself down to slipping-through, while other beings sang to keep one's spirit up. No one dies of "accidents," until now. Ayt mourned, even as she wondered.

Include these in the final category - the one hundred eighty-five from murder/suicides? Violence against one's own was so new there was no word for it, yet it happened. Solitary suicides, several-pacts, murder-by-consent, any way one had the courage to leave the Worlds and spare some krill for those who needed it.

Now there were no more krill. Should they all swim to the deepest deeps, where the cold was now so cold that, numbed, none returned? On Secondworld, it was said, suicides and even murders were enacted by pushing beings into the shallows - weak ones, sick ones, silver-sides and those accused of eating more than their share - where the killing blue sun, source of all their wisdom, all their woes, would broil and blister being-flesh, and this was how they died.

Better to boil or freeze? Ayt wondered, having Heard the songs. She sang the mourning songs, danced the mourning dances, flippers frigid in the turgid water; it was hard to move. But moving prolonged life, even if there were no krill. What if the Messenger returned today? It was past the time when it could save them, unless it brought instant saviours, instant salvation. Yet the beings still watched the skies and listened, though on Secondworld some boiled to frenzy and on First' most sank and could not swim.

Ayt danced, ever slower, her brain freezing as her body froze. Ayt danced, the dance of death.

PARTITA #3

"Nothing, Captain." Spock looked up from his scan of the second of the two marginally habitable worlds orbiting a narrow safety zone between several gas giant and an inner band of asteroid debris surrounding a blue-white primary. "Indications of two very different types of paleoconstruction on each world but, except for traces of aquatic algae in some of the ice-floes on the first planet, there are no active life-form readings."

"You said there was evidence of animal remains," Kirk said.

"There are large carboniferous deposits consistent with animal remains distributed over the surfaces of both worlds," Spock clarified. "As if, very recently from a paleontological viewpoint, living creatures had died in these areas. However, whether these deposits were caused by one species or several, whether these were complex beings or one-celled organisms, cannot be determined by longrange surface scans."

"What if we're wrong?" Kirk wondered half to himself. "What if this isn't the right system? What if the creator species left town sometime within the past half a million years and didn't leave a forwarding address? Spock, you're basing your entire premise on a song."

"Perhaps no more untoward than basing it on a hunch," Spock suggested mildly, though with a trace of stubbornness. Though he could not yet articulate it, he knew what he knew.

Scotty's prestidigitations had brought them out into the blue star's system nearly twelve hours ahead of the Probe. The *Hannsu* had stayed with them all the way, though they'd managed to shake the two battlecruisers in the Murasakis.

"Signal from the *Hannsu*, sir," Uhura reported as they'd slowed to impulse at the edge of the foremost nebula - spreading its tendrils across their path, gaseous and cranky, obscuring the stars.

"Onscreen," Kirk said. "I wonder if this is going to be a party line?"

Both 'cruisers had remained out of visual range the entire way here and, cloaked, they were elusive on scanners as well. It was Scotty's opinion that the lead ship had fallen back as soon as its sensors picked up the nebula, and that the two had reconfigured to flank *Enterprise* and their small sister ship on either side, just out of scanner range. Were they close enough to pick up comm between the two ships at their center?

"Audio only, Captain," Uhura reported. "It's a secure channel."

"Better and better!" Kirk smiled faintly; it was as if Rihan were reading his mind.

"...Commander *Enterprise*, this is commander *Hannsu* ..." Rihan's voice was scratchy with static from the nearby nebula, but unmistakable; the careful working suggested he wasn't sure if his brethren were listening or not. "Insist you provide complete coordinates to our destination."

"Commander *Enterprise* to commander *Hannsu* ..." Kirk answered easily. "Will trade you coordinates for release of civilian hostage."

Reaction on the *Hannsu*'s unseen bridge could hardly have been more mixed than that on his own, Kirk knew. Just one hostage? everyone was thinking. Why not all three? But Jim Kirk's instinct said start small, retain Rihan's trust, make a single incursion into the hostage situation, renegotiate later when there was time. The Romulans had the least claim on T'Shael, and she was the most essential to solving the mystery of the Probe. Now if only Rihan saw it his way...

"...Negative..." came the voice through the snow on the viewscreen. "Am empowered only to exchange hostage for hostage. Remind you you are holding two of our civilians to your one..."

"Commander *Hannsu* ..." Kirk tried, groping for an angle. He had no real leverage out here where no Federation ship could hear him, much less provide backup. To refuse to provide the coordinates to the Probe's world was to invite vengeance from the 'cruisers; there would be no way to prove *Enterprise* hadn't simply been swallowed by a Murasaki. They had nothing to go on but Rihan's good will. "Request you at least let us speak to T'Shael. Her assistance is vital in -"

"Negative!" came the almost immediate response. "No negotiations at this time. We are awaiting coordinates."

Kirk ran a thumb across his throat and Uhura hit the mute.

"Or else you pursue the Probe on your own science department's calculations and God only knows what happens when you get there," Kirk said. "He's hiding something."

"Agreed," Spock said.

Kirk sighed. I tried! he wanted to say to the rest of those watching him around the bridge. None of them seemed about to dispute him. He was the captain, and this was no time for self-indulgence.

"Uhura, provide the *Hannsu* with first-leg coordinates. We'll rendezvous midway to the dwarf star. Tell Commander Rihan we will speak again when we arrive."

"Aye, sir."

There was a long silence while Uhura fed the route through the narrow corridor between the Murasakis into the commboard. Rihan's reply was almost immediate.

"Commander *Enterprise* ..." his voice crackled over speakers. "The gods willing! *Hannsu* out."

"He's trying," Kirk said almost to himself, nodding to Scotty to being laying in the coordinates, looking to Spock for moral support, for the answer to all rhetorical questions. "But what's he afraid of?"

For the first time in his career, Rihan was indeed afraid: afraid of having to answer to his gods for someone else's actions.

Blame him for being neither omniscient nor able to be in two places simultaneously; blame him for nothing more than fallibility and the occasional need to sleep. Blame him for not breaking Tiam's jaw when he had the chance and thereafter confining him to the physician's care and some very serious sedation. None of this would be more than the blame Rihan had already levied upon himself as he led his ship into the valley of the shadow of the Murasakis.

He had had no sleep since Tiam pulled him out of the concert to inform him about Wlaariivi. Crisis upon crisis had demanded his attention since, and even Romulans possess only limited reservoir of adrenaline.

Succinctly, once they had left orbit around Dlonbra, Rihan slept, giving his yeoman strict instructions that he was not to be awakened until an hour before they were to reach their rendezvous with *Enterprise*. By the time he had awoken, indulged himself in a meal, a bath and a change of uniform, Tiam had already done his damage.

Making his way down the levels on a routine inspection, Rihan expected to find his reluctant guests in the Security Room where he had left them. Now that *Hannsu* was soon to be swathed in the static of a pair of twin nebulas and even the resourceful Sulu could hardly get into any more mischief, it was no more than a host's duty to see that his visitors were lodged in more comfortable surroundings. Perhaps, Rihan thought ironically as he neared the security area and wondered what was making that strange moaning noise, I shall put them in Jandra's part of the guest suite, to vex Tiam with their mere proximity!

The sound was coming from the Security Room. Rihan motioned to the guard to deactivate the forcefield, and stepped inside. It did not take him long to assess the damage, nor to know who was responsible for it.

One human slumped half-conscious in a corner, feverish, flecks of bloody foam bubbling at the corners of his mouth as he breathed. The other curled nearby, unhurt physically but with eyes wide and unseeing; the animal noises were coming from him.

"Where is the Vulcan?" Rihan sputtered, barely able to speak to the guard without striking him as if, though he might not be directly responsible for the prisoner's condition, he was culpable in not letting his commander know.

"With Centurion Tiam, Commander."

"Have these two brought to the physician at once!" Rihan roared. "Instruct him that his life depends on theirs. I shall also be with Centurion Tiam!"

The call had come from the bridge then, urgent, informing him that *Enterprise* was on their screens and their 'cruiser escort was awaiting further coordinates. Torn, Rihan had gone to the bridge first. When Jim Kirk asked to speak to T'Shael, Rihan did not even know if she was still alive.

Uhura was the first to notice the expression on Spock's face, the only one to realize what it meant.

"Okay, everyone!" she called, clapping her hands to get their attention, which had been rivetted on the Vulcan. "Take five!"

The musicians had been at it as an entity almost constantly since they'd left Dlundra, though they spelled each other regularly for rest or meals. Only Spock kept going without respite. Uhura and sometimes Annek, brought him food, which he consumed absently, though not without thanking them; they despaired of getting him to rest. His spare, precise speech had begun to be punctuated with increasingly longer periods of thoughtful silence, but this was new. In the midst of a talk-through jam session - Harper and Jandra four-handing it on the Steinway while Annek, danced and Lord Harbinger provided variations on the synthesizer - Spock had suddenly gone completely silent.

The muscles of his face slackened, his eyes grew too deep to look into. It was as if he had retreated so far into himself there was no telling if he could find his way out, as if his body was here, but his soul had suddenly gone out to lunch, with an almost audible whoosh so chilling it literally stopped the music, stopped the movement, and everyone else got quiet and just stared.

It was up to Uhura to break the spell. She knew the look, had seen it in the past, when the *Intrepid* was destroyed, when Spock had been in communication with V'ger. She had seen it entirely too often in the post-katra months. It was time, she knew, to give the Vulcan some space and let him think. She began to make shooing motions to get everyone to stop what they were doing and leave the small theater.

"Burnout?" Harper sotto voce'd, as concerned as Jandra and Annek, who had both visited the unresponsive Vulcan with identical wistful glances on their way out. "Or is he hearing voices?"

"Uh-uh!" Uhura shook her head, her own voice hushed. "Not voices exactly. Something. He'll tell us when he's ready. Go on, now!"

"If there's anything I can do, dear boy..." Lord Harbinger burred as Uhura hurried him along. "...anything at all..."

"He's aware of that, Sir Rod," Uhura assured him, though she wasn't sure if Spock was aware of anything at all. "Just give him time. I'll let you know."

She locked the theater doors and wondered if she should send for Kirk or McCoy. But a slight lurch in the deck and a dimming of lights told her they'd started navigating through the nebulas and it would be some time before Jim Kirk should be distracted. And McCoy couldn't do anything for Spock when he was in one of these trances anyway.

Uhura sat on the small proscenium stage, tucking her legs up under her, prepared to wait for however long it took.

"If you need anything, honey, just holler," she said, wondering if Spock could hear her. "I'm here."

The two guards who accompanied Rihan to Tiam's suite had been with him since his first assignment; they could be trusted unto death. Rihan needed such reassurance as, silently, he overrode the lock on the outer door. The centurion's silky, insinuating voice reached them as they stepped inside.

"...with your linguistic prowess would prove invaluable in giving us access to Federation cryptocodes. Doubtless there is none you could not decipher. There are also the conquered species. Conquest runs the more smoothly when the conqueror knows the language; think of the lives you would save!"

"Do you see yourself in such a role, Centurion?" This voice was T'Shael's.

Lurking in the shadows, Rihan could almost see Tiam shrug.

"It would be a reasonable expectation after my accomplishments on this mission." Tiam leaned forward then, into Rihan's line of vision, probably availing himself of refreshments from a small table; Rihan could easily blow the back of his head away from here, but he restrained himself. He wanted to hear what Tiam, and the Vulcan, said next. Tiam lolled back again. "Will you at least consider my offer?"

"As I understand it, if I remain and swear my fealty to the Empire, you will spare the lives and minds of my human companions..." Rihan and his two had begun to move slowly, furtively, in the darkened outer room; if T'Shael saw them, she gave no sign. "If I refuse?"

This time Rihan did see Tiam shrug.

"We are, as you know, traversing a space between twin nebulas. I find this an omen in itself. You heard the intership cautionary about possible power failures. Suppose these two incorrigibles were to attempt another escape and blunder down a turboshaft? *Enterprise* will get to keep the two it stole from us, and I will still have you."

A movement in his peripheral vision caught Tiam's attention; he paled and tried to leap from his seat. The three blasters pointed at his throat dissuaded him.

"Not on my ship, you won't!" Rihan said quietly, dangerously, motioning toward Tiam with the blaster. "Take him. Then find those who conspired with him, whether for bribes or ideology. Confine all of them in the same room, no toilet privileges. We will see how long their ideology endures!"

"Are you harmed?" he asked T'Shael, watching with some satisfaction as Tiam was led none too gently away.

"Unharmd, Commander. But if this be a diplomat -"

" - then the Empire is in worse straits than ever," Rihan finished, risking blasphemy for truth. "Your

companions are under my personal physician's care. The ship's physician will be joining the conspirators. You may stay in Jandra's quarters for the present, if you like. Tell me, do you know what that is all about?"

"She has requested political asylum aboard *Enterprise*," T'Shael said carefully, adding, before he could ask her about Dajan: "I know no more than that. Commander..." She thought even more carefully about what she was to say next, and in what language. "I do not dispute the necessity of keeping me here. But if, as I assume, we are in pursuit of the Probe -"

The sound of the Emperor from Jandra's quarters was almost deafening as Rihan breached the lock on the outer door. He motioned T'Shael to silence while he found the player and deactivated it.

"We will not speak of this at present. When I have the leisure, I will explain to you what forces squeeze me between them. Not now."

T'Shael acquiesced. "Nevertheless, Commander, I assume that once we are free of the nebulas, Captain Kirk will demand to speak with at least one of us, if he has not done so already.

"He has," Rihan acknowledged wryly. "I'm afraid I was rather abrupt with him."

"Do you wish me to assure him that all is well?"

Rihan studied her. "I would not ask you to lie," he said carefully.

"Then let us hope your physician is as skilled as ours."

Uhura was dozing on the stage floor, her head pillowed on her arm, her conscience clear. She wasn't needed on the bridge; there'd be no communicating with anything until they were clear of the nebulas.

She was dreaming she'd been invited to a wedding. A Vulcan wedding. Not a childhood betrothal, not the marriage-or-challenge ritual she'd heard so many rumors about, but that rarity in Vulcan culture, a wedding of choice between two unattached adults. Uhura had no doubt who the one in the Starfleet uniform was, but she couldn't see the face of his betrothed.

The ceremony was lovely - incense and flowers and soft, bell-like music, the guests moving gracefully in their exquisite clothing beneath the pristine crimson of a Vulcan sky at sunset. Tears came to Uhura's eyes at the sheer beauty of it. Then again, I always cry at weddings! she thought as the groom began to speak.

"T'Shael..." Spock said, sounding lost and confused.

Uhura snapped awake, weddings dashed from her head by a splash of cold reality. She sat upright, straightened her uniform, wondered what a mess she must look. Spock did not seem to notice. He had come out of his trance and was staring at her, bewildered.

"T'Shael," he repeated. Uhura shook her head.

"She's not here, hon. She's still aboard the *Hannsu* ."

Spock seemed to shake off the trance like some physical thing.

"Yes, of course," he said, his mind and voice far clearer. "'Hon'?" He quirked an eyebrow at the familiarity.

"Sorry, Captain," Uhura corrected herself primly. She couldn't help it. What was it about him that brought out the maternal instinct in some women? "Are you all right?"

"I would be far better if I could speak with T'Shael," Spock said, pulling himself together. "Something in one of our mind-melds may prove to be the key."

"Would it help if you talked about it?"

Spock's frown deepened. Tendrils of the trance seemed to cling to him like cobwebs.

"Beethoven..." he said at last, almost apologetically. "It is not logical, but there is nothing more."

"Is it any particular piece of Beethoven's? A phrase you can recall?" Uhura asked helpfully. "Hum a few bars and I'll try it?" she joked when there was no response but a deepening silence, deepening frown. As a last resort, she said: "Maybe Jandra could help."

It made no sense unless one understood the personal histories involved. Uhura did. Through Jandra one might learn of T'Shael via their common link with Salet the Gifted One.

"Surely she can do no harm," Spock said.

Uhura hit the wall comm hopefully, though the dim emergency lights in the theater and elsewhere indicated they were not yet clear of nebula static, and if there was comm at all it would be tied in to essential areas only. As Uhura had surmised, the theater wasn't one of them.

"I'll be right back," she said. "Don't go away!"

"Where am I to go?" Spock mused when she was gone, and while physically eh did not move at all, his mind slipped back too readily into the trance it had just left.

Where once she had been a prisoner, she was now a guest. T'Shael wondered if it was her destiny always to be caught between Romulan and Federation purposes.

She had asked Rihan to give her access to the most recent data on the Probe. Either out of a desire to make amends or an appreciation of any Vulcan's need for meaningful occupation, the commander had consented. He was certain T'Shael was not a spy. What harm could she do, after all?

She was engrossed in her studies, presuming to make use of Jandra's twelve-stringed plekt, when she heard the door chime.

"Come," she said, remembering to use Rom Basic.

"Hi!" Sulu bounded over the threshold, a guard following unobtrusively three steps behind him, looking remarkably hale and hearty for someone who had recently been near death. "I see you're none the worse for wear."

"Nor, apparently, are you," T'Shael replied, eyeing him once before returning her attention to the screen, which was producing eerie melodies Sulu somehow found vaguely familiar.

"I'm still sore as hell," he admitted, shifting his shoulders uneasily as if something twinged him. "But their doc's almost as good as ours. Pumped full of antibiotics, tire patch on the old lung, some serious regen on the ribs. The bruises will have to heal themselves, but I'm ambulatory."

"How is Commander Riley?"

"Sleeping it off next door, without the dreams this time. Rihan's got us bunking in Tiam's quarters, along with Fritz here."

T'Shael studied the guard skeptically. "Fritz?"

"My babysitter," Sulu explained. "He goes everywhere I go. His real name's Fretius, but I call him Fritz."

"Indeed." He was telegraphing something. T'Shael thought she understood. The guard had started slightly at the mention of his real name, as if barely recognizing it in the welter of Standard.

"How much of our language do you understand, Fretius?" T'Shael asked politely in Basic. The guard did not reply.

"He understands enough to stop us when we hit certain taboo subjects," Sulu explained as if Fretius weren't there. "For instance, if I so much as mention the Probe -"

"You will not speak of this thing!" Fretius cried in heavily-accented Standard, moving toward Sulu threateningly.

Sulu shrugged. "See what I mean?"

"Indeed," T'Shael said, thinking rapidly. They must work out some manner of code. "Would you care to sit, Commander?"

Sulu took the hint. "Thanks. So, uh, how's your music research coming?"

"Quite well," T'Shael explained, setting aside the cumbersome plekt, big as a sitar and similar in tone. "I have made considerable progress in my study of the whales..."

The katra ritual had been but the beginning.

"Thy mind is most flexible," T'Lar had informed Spock when she and her adepts had spirited him away

from the boisterous humans and their need to touch him. Did they not understand how fragile his psyche was still, how much in need of repair? "One logically attributes this to the many encounters thee has known with other minds. This may have saved thee from insanity in thy conjoining with McCoy."

Saved him? Spock remembered none of it, only a great inchoate howling where he kept his soul; he had not known its like since he had inadvertently gazed upon a Medusan. If this had been salvation, how much graver were insanity?

"I may be necessary to return thy mind to these paths of memory in order to restore it," T'Lar explained. "Does thee wish this?"

"Indeed," Spock had acquiesced at once, and the adepts had come to join with him and lead him through.

"His mind's a void..."

This first, from McCoy. But had he heard it from within or without McCoy's mind? It was the displacement - the sense of being Spock and not-Spock, of acquiring memories of actions performed by a body which was his but not him, rather some Vulcan-thing which bore his face, of seeing the universe with his own mind through the eyes of Leonard McCoy - which was most disquieting.

He had begun with Saavik when she returned to Mount Seleya to pay her respects and inquire after him. "Thee were with that of me that was on Genesis,"

"Yes, Captain," she had replied formally, and not for the first time Spock noticed that she could not meet his eyes.

It was Saavik who told him of the elfin creature found shivering in the snow, the wide-eyed child who had mimicked her actions, gesture for gesture, touch for touch, but could neither speak nor understand. Gesture for gesture, touch for touch - Saavik could not go on.

"Were my actions in any way - untoward - during that time?" Spock had persisted.

What was she to tell him? Saavik wondered. To speak of the death of the Klingon who had startled the terrified childlike being, evoking primal reflex and a mature Vulcan's strength, would only cause her mentor pain. To speak of anything else which had transpired on that ill-fated manmade planet would shame them both.

Saavik did not answer and, in not answering, told Spock more than he needed to know.

"Help me, Jim! Take me home!"

Down the labyrinthine paths of mind the adepts brought him, bringing him home.

"...mindlinks I have attempted with members of other species...so terrible to be so alone...cry for the children...most of all, the aloneness!...How terribly lonely...This thing you call language, though - most remarkable. You depend on it for so very much, but is any one of you really its master?"

"To 'master' a language? I do not truly understand what this means. To be able to understand, and to make oneself understood, is all that can be asked for..."

A more recent voice, as cool and incisive as his own, in his ears as in his mind: T'Shael's.

"...the roots of Earth Standard in English or English, which is augmented by some forty-seven additional Earth languages and, in the advent of interstellar travel, uncounted offworld tongues...boasts a synonymic lexicon greater than any other known humanoid language, and lacks many of the restrictions and limitations extant in certain of its root tongues as, for example, the Ihr/Du or formal/informal mode of its German forebears. Also absent are the gender distinctions of the so-called Romance languages, notably French, from which Middle and later Modern English derived a substantive portion of their vocabulary following the Norman Conquest..."

Did anyone, taking at face value that introverted demeanor, suspect what lay within? Cleante alFaisal did, Spock knew. Now he had begun to learn as well. T'Shael had shared with him far more than had been required of her, would have given him everything she knew if it would slake that seeming endless thirst for knowledge. She had given him back his knowledge of the nuance of his mother's tongue, mother-tongue. Doubtless the computer could have given him as much information, but not the care, the compassion, the nurturing. T'Shael gave and he accepted, the knowledge flowing between them like a spring - gentle, pristine, restorative.

Something T'Shael had imparted to him was the key, but what/ Spock sifted through his memory, still imperfect after all this time. What good was a mind which could quote Masefield or describe the properties of gadolinium, but failed to separate casual memory from mindmeld?

Spock searched. T'Shael's mind-voice, cool as a freshet, wove through his memory as her spoken voice did - wove and interwove, interchangeable:

"...though most obvious in the first movement, similar thematic motifs can be found in the scherzo, as for example when the two aggressive opening bars are answered by a lighter, staccato response in the woodwinds..."

"Beethoven..." Spock said, not for the first time. He opened his depthless brown eyes to meet Jandra's quizzical green ones.

"So I have been told," she answered coolly, as if it made perfect sense. "Is this what a meditative trance looks like? Thank the gods my kind are spared them!"

"I need your help," Spock said at once, unfolding himself from his meditative posture, cutting through the verbal divertimentos Jandra thrived on. Ships' systems, he noted with some small fraction of his attention, were back to normal. They had cleared the nebulas. He would be needed on the bridge soon. "May I ask you a deeply personal question?"

"Anything," Jandra replied, amazed at her own compliance, suppressing an erotic flush at the tough of how a deep a question a telepath might ask.

"In your studies with Salet, did he ever have occasion to mind-meld with you?"

"Oh, is that all?" Jandra seemed disappointed. "Never. I was a child, remember, and of a non-telepathic species. There was no need."

"I understand," Spock said. "Unfortunate. I had hoped there was something he might have imparted to you that he had also shared with T'Shael. Forgive the intrusion."

"No intrusion." Jandra shrugged. "I wish I could help. There are certain specific themes which run through Beethoven's works, as I'm sure you know. Political themes, emotional ones. Perhaps with the computer -"

"I have already attempted to extrapolate the major themes and apply them to the languages the Probe has utilized thus far, to no avail."

"Would you countenance an artist's emotional impression?" Jandra asked carefully.

Spock considered. Something in the way she said it - plainly, without her usual flamboyance, meant it was very important to her.

"Please go on."

"Sib says it's nonsense, but when it passed us, I had the distinct impression that it was crying out, that it was suffering. It was singing in minor keys; surely you were aware of this. Are the species aboard this ship the only ones whose ears recognize the melancholy of such tones?" She clasped her hands in defeat. "You agree with my brother; I can see it in your eyes."

Spock remembered his own cautionary to Jim Kirk about attributing emotions to a machine. What if he had been in error?

"Not necessarily. I shall take you - impressions - under consideration."

"How generous of you!" Jandra could not resist. The bosun's whistle sounded then.

"We will be approaching the dwarf star. I am needed on the bridge," Spock explained, wondering how long he had been here, lost in this way.

"Of course," Jandra said, realizing it was probably the last time they would ever be alone together. "I shall continue the study, with the others."

"Thank you." Spock was halfway to the door. "I do appreciate it."

"Well, Kirk!" His ship delivered from the Murasakis, Commander Rihan was feeling positively beamish. "It may interest you to know that I seem to have misplaced my escort."

"I don't know whether to congratulate you or offer my condolences," Kirk said warily, wondering what the game plan was now.

"Oh, neither actually. Thrai has had to turn back for repairs. Her commander is a fool who does not listen. I told him to reduce speed inside the nebulae. His vessel has suffered stress fractures all along its neck. Good riddance, yes? And *Khre'riov* has gone to negotiate safe passage with the Tholians. You do

realize we are now in their space?"

"I know we're in a disputed area which they claim to be their space," Kirk allowed. "I'm assuming, then, that *Khre'riov* will be rejoining us?"

"Presently," Rihan assured him.

"No chance you'd permit my science officer to at least speak with T'Shael?"

"None," Rihan said, his smile unflagging.

"Commander, I don't think you realize the importance of this. If we can't decipher at least one of the Probe's languages before we reach our destination -"

Jim Kirk saw Rihan sigh then.

"Kirk, it would please me to allow the Vulcans to communicate at will, but it could be a spy's code, don't you see? I already have enough to answer for on this voyage; do not ask me to further compromise myself."

"At least allow us to give T'Shael the most recent data..." Kirk began, motioning to Kittay, who had all of Spock's research fed into her board.

They could see the struggle on Rihan's face as he weighed this.

"Very well. I see no harm in this. But give me the coordinates first, Kirk, before *Khre'riov* returns and her commander wonders what we are chatting about."

"Thank you!" Kirk said, genuinely grateful. He'd have one more go at Rihan's sense of honor once they got to the homeworlds. "There's a white dwarf star in Section 43C..."

"I am familiar with it. You intend to execute a - what is the term? - slingshot maneuver? I understand you are famous for them."

"We've had some success with it a time or two," Kirk said modestly.

"In our fleet it's known as Kirk's Folly," Rihan informed him, waiting while his navigator received the coordinates. "Well, we've come this far, my strange bedfellow. I'm trusting you not to mislead me know."

"There's one thing you should know," Kirk said. "We're not sure if your battlecruisers can withstand the stress of a slingshot. It might be best if *Khre'riov* took the long way around."

Rihan chuckled. "Understood, Kirk. In code from here on, yes? The gods be with us!"

"Amen to that! Kirk out."

"Poor kid!" Sulu mused, studying the unconscious Fretius. "Guess he couldn't take the stress of a

slingshot."

"Running into your clenched fist before he was all the way awake had nothing to do with it, of course," Riley remarked, rummaging gleefully through Tiam's belongings to find something to tie their babysitter up with.

He found a long sash and got to work. Sulu was roving the room like a caged tiger muttering "Dajan said it was in Tiam's quarters. It's got to be here!"

Something on the far wall caught Riley's eye.

"Hey, Sulu? Is this what you're looking for? Does this surface look a little too new to you?"

Sulu strode over to where Riley was pointing.

"It does indeed, Kevin me lad. It does indeed."

He felt around the edges of the panel beneath the wall servitor with his fingernails until it gave. Prying it loose, he reached inside.

"Eureka!" He grinned, pulling out Tiam's secret transmitter. "Let's hope we're not too late..."

As prisoners they had been confined to the Security Room, where there were no intercoms, no way of knowing what was going on. As "diplomatic guests," Commander Rihan's quietly ironic term for them, they were largely confined to the more luxurious prison of the guest suite except for meals, which they took with the commander - more, Riley surmised, to keep them occupied and diverted from any little conspiracies they might be cooking up than the for the pleasure of their company. There was also the ever-present Fretius who, though he was assigned to Sulu, managed to get in everybody's way.

Still, the food was good and Rihan's company was pleasant enough, and it was gratifying to be kept abreast of events.

"If they're going to try a slingshot, my guess is we're getting real close to our destination," Sulu said after yet one more leisurely dinner where T'Shael had been more silent than usual; he had seen her poring over the, to him, incomprehensible data spewing out of Spock's tape. "You're onto something, aren't you?"

The three had worked out a code whereby they could hold more or less open conversation even with Fretius' ears in the vicinity. T'Shael spoke to Riley in Gaelic, Riley translated for Sulu into a kind of pigeon they'd employed at the Academy, which T'Shael picked up as they went along. Poor Fretius looked as if he had a tension headache, but as he did not hear any forbidden words, he could not insist Commander Rihan's guests keep silent.

"Indeed," T'Shael answered Sulu carefully, not so much watching Fretius as not watching him. "I believe I now know what is needed to address our - tuneful traveling companion."

Sulu waited patiently while Riley translated. He had already made a casual scan of the guest suite to see if there was anything he could rig to broadcast ship-to-ship. There wasn't.

"But a mutual friend of ours swore there was a secret transmitter. If Fritz here ever takes a bathroom break, maybe I can find it."

"Why don't you offer him a cup of tea?" Riley suggested, feeling much better now that the effects of the teromin had been counteracted.

"We can't use subspace while we're in time-warp," Sulu went on, oblivious, "but once we break free of that star..."

Time-travel impacts more strongly upon some species than others, and some individuals within species are more strongly affected than others. Fretius was young; this was his first deepspace mission. Maybe he was prone to space-sickness, maybe he hadn't gotten enough sleep the night before. At any rate, Sulu was up like a shot with Riley and T'Shael not far behind while the hapless Romulan lad was still wondering why he remembered his first nameday more clearly than yesterday's quarrel in the messhall, and Sulu had quickly taken advantage of their babysitter's disorientation.

He also had Tiam's transmitter up and working in no time.

"We can probably get one squirt through, maybe two, before *Hannsu*'s bridge picks it up and sends someone down here to start busting heads. Do you know the codes?"

"Of course," T'Shael said, utterly without ego.

Sulu turned on the transmitter, one eye on the door; just when his insides were beginning to feel normal again, too! "Try to make it short and sweet."

On *Enterprise*'s bridge, Jim Kirk was still reliving a particularly ingenious prank he'd played on Sam the summer he was twelve when Lt. Kittay's voice wiped the silly grin off his face.

"Captain? I've just picked up a high-frequency burst from *Hannsu*. Code Five, non-directional, and almost off the scale. I don't know what to make of it."

"Sulu!" Kirk rocketed out of his chair, knowing it. "Decode, Kittay, immediately."

Kittay did so, frowning. "Just two words, sir. 'Beethoven's Seventh'. That's all."

"Yes," Spock said. "Yes, of course."

On that note, *Enterprise* and *Hannsu*, joined at the metaphoric hip, had approached the system theoretically containing the Probe's homeworlds. But no one appeared to be home.

Cleante alFaisal wiped the sweat from her forehead and reached for the canteen. It was hot on this desert world, almost as hot as Vulcan, though all evidence she and her team had gathered in the scant two hours Jim Kirk had allotted them confirmed Spock's hypotheses that this had only recently become so. She drank, shading her eyes with one hand to look up into the blue-white sky of this alien, as yet unnamed, world. She could see nothing, of course, but if she could have sent her thoughts floating like milkweed pods up to the orbiting *Hannsu*, they would be addressed to T'Shael:

Are you safe, are you well? Rihan keeps assuring us you're both; why don't I believe him? And why is the place where I keep you in my mind so silent? Look after Kevin for me; you know how vulnerable human males are, after all. And Hikaru - all of you, come home safe, come home soon! I wish you could be down here with me, seeing what I see. I wish it were safe for Dajan to beam down as well; how he would revel in this find! I wish the whole thing weren't such a muddle. I wish -

Cleante sighed, closed the canteen and handed it to Sharf, then took out her communicator.

"Unit Two to Unit One: No question about it, Jim." She spoke matter-of-factly on the open, uncoded frequency, knowing *Hannsu* would be picking it up as well, wondering if Rihan would have the courtesy to let his three guests listen, knowing too that Dajan would be listening from *Enterprise*, literally green with envy. "We are standing in the midst of what is left of the firs, the oldest Korff metropolis, the mother-city. This is where the species originated; I'm certain of it."

"You said 'what's left'," Kirk repeated. He, Spock and McCoy were several kilometers distant, standing on what had once been the ocean floor, on a world which now held no surface water at all. "Can you be more specific?"

"It's hard to tell on preliminary scans, but some sort of natural catastrophe - flood, earthquake, something - seems to have tumbled nearly half of the city into the sea. Not that it's easy remembering there was once water here. It's like finding Atlantis in the middle of the Sahara!"

Spock had brief both landing parties on what they could expect to find once they made planetfall.

"The two Class-M worlds in this system are, put simply, too close together. Their orbits are so proximate that, every time they reach pericenter, their masses interact with each other and with the primary, causing them to wobble. The result is like attempting to touch the positive poles of two magnets together; they invariably repel each other. As a consequence, the inner world is pushed closer to the sun, causing all surface water to be evaporated, and desert-like conditions to prevail, while the outer world is pushed farther away, resulting in a permanent ice age."

"Bottom line -?" Kirk asked.

"Eventually, on the order of several hundred thousand years, the two orbits will become so unstable that both worlds will break up, adding to the asteroid debris of the inner ring closest to the sun."

Knowing what to expect in theory hadn't made it any easier to accept.

"Cleante?" Jim Kirk sounded harried, as if it wasn't just the heat. "How long do you estimate before you and your team will be ready to beam up?"

"I wish I could say I'd be setting up a little climate-controlled tent here for the next ten years," Cleante answered ruefully. "But actually we'll be ready in about fifteen minutes. alFaisal out."

Kirk closed his communicator and glanced across a heap of rock and debris at Spock, whose usually perfect hair was slightly windblown, but who seemed otherwise impervious to dust, heat, or the grisly scenery surrounding them.

"Theory: could the Korff - or whatever we end up calling them after this find - have constructed the Probe?"

"The metals alloyed in the Probe's construction are extant on this world, Captain." Spock closed his tricorder. Readings here were not markedly different from those they'd taken at several other sites. "It is quite feasible that the land-dwelling species constructed the outer hull."

"But -?"

Spock shook his head. "I do not believe the intelligence which drives the Probe is consistent with what we know of Korff cultures."

"Uh-oh!" McCoy chimed in, lolling in one of the few patches of shade, which was actually the shadow of the skeleton of something too big to fit in an aquarium. "Now it becomes a question of 'belief'. Not analysis, not hypothesis, he's suddenly gotten religion. We're to take this whole matter on faith all of a sudden."

Kirk waived him to silence, wanting desperately to get out of the sun, feeling a tautness across his forehead that signaled sunburn, wished he'd taken McCoy's advice and brought some sunblock, still waiting on Spock. "Explain."

"I cannot. Unless we can explore the second planet as well..."

He did not finish his thought.

"We haven't the time or the luxury," Jim Kirk said shortly. "We're down here on Commander Rihan's indulgence. I gave him my word we'd be gone without a trace before *Khre'riov* shows up. One world is all we have time for, and I don't much care for the climate or the scenery on this one."

McCoy, with his usual flair for the dramatic if not necessarily accurate turn of phrase, had dubbed the sample sites elephants' graveyards. Graveyards they were - piles of bleached bones, meters high and kilometers long in places, strewn to the horizon on the acrid salt flat that had once been ocean floor.

"Cetacean life-forms, Captain." Spock had dispassionately examined the evidence of mass death at his feet. "Their cranial capacity was equivalent to Earth's whales, while somatically they most closely resembled manatees..." His voice had drifted for a moment; with an effort he pulled himself together. "...or Vulcan protomers. Captain, I will need time to locate at least one intact sample."

"Samples of what?" Kirk had asked, the heat making him stupid. He could feel the sweat running in rivulets down his back and sides, knew his face was shiny with it; that and the sunburn were making him itchy. His patience was wearing thin.

"Hands," Spock said simply, and began picking through one of the bone piles.

"If it were anyone else, I'd say it was the heat..." McCoy offered laconically. Kirk just shrugged helplessly.

It did not take Spock long to find what he was looking for. He held it gingerly, like the relic it was - the bones of an almost intact handlike appendage, larger than a human's, with three exaggeratedly long but distinctly jointed fingers and an opposable thumb.

"Captain, we are looking at the final resting place of the beings who created the Probe."

"It is the heat!" McCoy said, agreeing with himself.

Jim Kirk was frankly taken aback. "That's quite a reach. I understand what you're getting at - Leakey and Australopithecus and all that, but a sea-dwelling species? How would they alloy the metals, much less - "

Spock was shaking his head, squinting slightly against the alien sun. "Not the outer hull, but the intelligence within. I am certain the answer lies on the ice-bound planet."

"One extreme to the other!" McCoy pulled himself to his feet, shaking sand out of his trouser-legs. "Include me out!"

Now it was Kirk who was shaking his head. "We don't have time. We don't know which of the two planets the Probe will approach first, and we've got to be ready to make a stand at the right one when it arrives. Besides, even if these creatures did create it -" He gestured at the mass grave surrounding them. "- they're all dead."

"Indeed," Spock agreed. "Evidence here and from Dr. alFaisal's team indicates the last survivors succumbed to encroaching desert conditions some three hundred years ago. But there may be some clue, some record, on the second planet -"

"No," Kirk said adamantly. "You have the language now. We can broadcast on all frequencies from the ship. We're not going to get caught with our britches down poking around in the Probe's backyard." He gestured at the skeletal fragment Spock was holding. "Take that with you if you want. We're getting out of here."

"Jim," McCoy said quietly as the transporter beam grabbed them. "D'you ever have nightmares about what happens if Spock's wrong?"

"You're a regular bundle of confidence, aren't you?" Kirk demanded as he stepped down off the

transporter pad and nodded at Harper, the delicious feel of climate-controlled air reaching out and taking him in its embrace. Spock had gone on ahead to bring his find to the lab and couldn't hear them. "What brought this on?"

"Just wondering."

"If Spock's ever that wrong, life's not worth living," Kirk said, moving out into the corridors, on his way to update Rihan. The chronometers showed six hours to Probe's arrival and counting.

"I thought you'd say something like that," McCoy remarked, trailing after him.

"I know your heart, Sib," Jandra said, pausing in her work for Spock long enough to indulge a personal prerogative. "Tell me the truth."

Dajan shrugged. "What is there to tell? Sulu risked his life to reunite us. It would be ungrateful for me to do anything but stay. Besides, if what Cleante says about the Rahcir mother-city is true..."

He lies! Jandra thought, watching him sidelong. The passion for archeology is in his heart, but there is ambiguity in his eye. Yet what am I to do?

"Was it truly as simple as T'Shael said?" Dajan asked, to divert her attention back to the musical patterns she had been laboriously encoding into the computer tie-in with Uhura's commboard on the bridge, to be broadcast when the Probe arrived. "Not one language but two, male and female? With all of your collective genius, why did none of you see this?"

"There are many kinds of genius, Sib. The object of your infatuation is admittedly gifted, but her contribution was merely the final piece in the puzzle. Is it not dangerous for one in your profession to lose his perspective?"

Romulans as a rule do not blush. They can, however, look embarrassed.

"You're the one who's losing me. What infatuation?"

Jandra gave him a long-eyed look. "Don't play games with me. I know your heart. Perhaps if I am not sufficient to keep you here, she is."

"Would that she were!" Dajan said fervently, beginning to pace restlessly. "But it avails nothing. She will not consider me."

"As you are, no, she could not," Jandra said knowingly. "But if you were to abandon your shadow life - oh, stay, Sib! What is there that can possibly draw you back?"

"Duty?" Dajan wondered vaguely, no longer sure of it himself. "Unfinished business?" He leaned over to kiss Jandra's brow then. "Worry not, Little Sister. I shall not abandon you!"

Jandra smiled bleakly, not at all convinced.

The Probe's language had indeed turned out to be not one, but two.

"Yes, of course!" Spock had said when Sulu's brief transmission reached the *Enterprise*. "Computer: Referential Variant 173D, Postulate: bipartite gender differential, male/female."

"Working..."

As the computer did its job, Spock became aware that all eyes on the bridge were upon him. He explained.

"Musicologists have traditionally distinguished two themes or 'voices' in the first and third movements of Beethoven's seventh symphony - an aggressive or 'masculine' first theme answered by a more lyrical or 'feminine' response theme. In the culminating bars of the first movement, for instance, various of the stringed instruments conduct this 'dialogue,' if you will - statement and response, point and counterpoint. In the third movement or scherzo it is the woodwinds which answer -"

"Spock -!" Kirk's mouth had gone dry at the start of this explanation; he barely had enough spit to whisper.

"Yes, Captain. I am about to cut to the chase," Spock said, not without compassion. He knew when he was doing to this people; he had to. "In her observations of humpback whales, Dr. Gillian Taylor noted that only the males sing, though no one knows why. We have noted that when the Probe sang to the whales, George shared with T'Shael a fragment of what he referred to as 'the Vision,' in which an intelligent, water-dwelling species 'sang' to each other telepathically across great distances, employing a bipartite language differentiated according to the sex of the singer. Taking all of these factors into consideration, it is likely that the Probe's basal linguacode can only be understood as comprising not one language, but two."

"Confirmed!" the computer chimed in, as if on cue.

Spock began to key in certain instructions, leaving his audience hanging.

"But none of the linguistic traces the Probe collected from other worlds were gender-specific, Mr. Spock," Uhura interjected thoughtfully. She ought to know; she'd been listening to them over and over for more than a week now.

"That is true," Spock admitted. "But if we assume the Probe's first premise to be that only water-dwelling species are intelligent, it would be prepared to make allowances for a neuter language, as long as its speakers or singers were water-dwelling. Its programming has apparently instructed it to disregard all other species as potentially, but not entirely, intelligent, regardless of technological or other criteria. Therefore, it will not take us seriously unless we prove we are intelligent enough to speak to it in its own languages."

"Just what we need - a spacefaring, sexist bigot!" McCoy mused. "I tell you, you sign onto a starship to get away from that kind of thing...."

"You'd better get started," Kirk said, dismissing Spock and Uhura both.

"I surrender, Kirk!" Commander Rihan hailed him as the two ships circled the blue-white primary and rendezvoused in orbit above the desert planet. "This Sulu is more trouble than a shipload of cadets. How do you tolerate him?"

"He's actually quite indispensable when he's on your side," Kirk said, tickled at the imagery Rihan's words conjured. "I hope you weren't too hard on him for sending that transmission."

"Not nearly so hard as I shall be on Tiam for secreting the transmitter aboard my ship without my knowledge. Tell me, do you really need to speak to the Vulcan that badly?"

"You did give me your word," Kirk reminded him.

Once again they were gathered about the computer, the Steinway and Sir Rod's tiny synthesizer in the ship's theater. This time the sign on the door should have read "Genius at Work." If only, Spock thought, quietly bemused, they wouldn't all talk at once!

"... your ground tones are all very copacetic, but there's no imitating the human voice, not even with that thing," Harper was saying, with a nod at the synthesizer. "Sooner or later, some of us are going to have to sing to it..."

"...and in addition, we should project a holovisual of Annek, dancing it, just to make sure we're communicating on all levels," Uhura added. "I mean, why not try it out in all the forms available to us?"

"...but the orchestration - how perfect!" Jandra marveled clasping her hands to her face in amazement at what Lord Harbinger had done. "How were you so certain?"

"...you've got a good clear soprano; I've heard you. You add my rusty tenor and some contralto harmony from the Romulan lady, and we're looking at one beautifully grounded bass-baritone over there..."

Probe! Spock thought, center of silence in this maelstrom of sound. I know! I hear, I understand what besets thee! The aloneness, the search to know! If only I could reach to thee, as V'ger reached to me - but I cannot touch thee, save with my thoughts. Hear me! As I shall hear you...

"I can, oh, I can!" Annek, cried. "Spock asked if I can swim. Dance it, swim it, either, both - I can!"

"Modulation, my dear girl, modulation," Sir Rod explained, doing a bit of backstroke himself in the green of Jandra's eyes. "After all, I am a composer..."

"Well, I know that," Uhura said. "He's got the instrument. But have you ever heard him sing?"

"We are all three quite well at present, Captain," T'Shael assured him. "It pleases me that my message was received and understood. Tell Spock..." Her usual cool certainty seemed for once to falter. "...tell him I should like to be with him and the others. Tell him I shall be, if he needs me."

"I understand - I think," Kirk said as she stepped aside and gave Rihan the screen.

"Mind-melds, Kirk!" the Romulan commander marveled. "Mind-melds are not legally recognized on my world or on yours! Yet this is to be your only weapon against this Probe? The gods help us, but these Vulcans are an odd lot! What if you're wrong?"

"We have less than an hour to find out," Kirk said, eyeing tactical, where the Probe was expected to make its presence known momentarily. "You have a better suggestion?"

"Left to my own devices, I would throw *Khre'riov* in its path," Rihan admitted. "Except that her commander is an old comrade, and I owe him better. Not that I think it would do any good. Thus I am as weaponless as you, Kirk. Go well! We shall be watching. If you fail, we shall avenge you."

PARTITA #4

"Why do I get the feeling I've seen this movie before?" McCoy wondered, rubbing his hands together nervously as the Probe loomed large on tactical.

"What's that, Bones?" Jim Kirk felt utterly nerveless. He had bet everything he had on a single hand; it had to be good enough.

"I said: How come it's always us that ends up between Behemoth and its home base?"

"Or behind the eightball?" Uhura suggested.

"Or between the devil and the deep blue sea?" Scotty deadpanned behind his mustache.

"All right, all right!" McCoy waved them all away. "Just trying to relive the tension, that's all."

"Why, Bones, are you tense? We never would have suspected it."

"Not behemoth, Doctor," Spock supplied, joining the small-talk after a very long time in another place. "Typhon."

"Typhon'?" Kirk repeated, not one to miss anything.

"The Greek god of winds, Captain," Spock explained. "One of the giants, frequently depicted with three heads, though having as many as one hundred attributed to him. Believed to be the father of Cerberus, Cyclops and the Sphinx, his most notable characteristic was a loud and terrifying voice. And as neither this star nor its planets are as yet classified -"

"We might as well name them Typhon I and II," Kirk finished for him. "At least for the moment. Why is it always us, Bones? Talent will out, I guess. You can go hide under the covers in Sickbay if you want. We'll let you know how it turns out."

"Fat chance! I'll stay and look it in the eye, thank you!"

"Suit yourself," Kirk said, settling in for the long haul.

It loomed, first on tactical, then on their screens. Scotty had carefully maneuvered *Enterprise* so that the desert world was between her and the Probe; *Hannsu*'s helmsman had done the same. There was no guarantee the Probe couldn't read the two vessels through the planet, but it might buy them some time if it couldn't.

"Curious," Spock said as visual became clearer, and the data pouring in from tactical began to yield the Probe's exact speed, dimensions, angle of approach. "It appears to be have withdrawn the sensor for more streamlined deepspace travel. If it fails to lower the sensor, it may not be able to hear us."

He stood to the right of Kirk's chair (McCoy had as usual staked out his territory on the left), having given the science station over to a somewhat awed Cleante alFaisal.

With Dajan hovering over her - though he, Romulan without a country, did not presume to touch any of this complex Federation instrumentation - she had correlated every bit of information they had gathered on the Korff/Rahcir worlds with the find on Typhon I.

"Daj, it fits!" Cleante whispered with quiet joy. "Typhon I completes the parabola. Every other known Korff world lies on a direct route from here to Dlonbra and back. This was the beginning, and very possibly the end, of Korff culture."

"And the interplanetary coordinates correlate with the musical 'pathways' about which the Korff built their cities." Dajan read the data over her shoulder, the same light of discovery in his green eyes as in her Byzantine ones. "With this and the Probe, we may someday be able to interpret the pathway songs!"

"All music is nothing more than a succession of impulses that converge toward a definite point of repose!" Harper chimed in, waiting to play his part in singing to the Probe. As curious as Sulu about most things, Harper liked people the most; he roamed the bridge, absorbing everything. "Igor Stravinsky said that."

"And the longest way 'round is the shortest way home'," Cleante added, happy and sad all at once. "Kevin Riley said that, though I don't think he made it up."

"...now let me get this straight," McCoy addressed Spock over Kirk's head. "You've got the languages this thing speaks, you've spent days feeding them through all this sophisticated equipment so you can broadcast it through Uhura's board and say 'Hi there, Probe!' on all frequencies, but you still intend to sing to the damn thing?"

"Call it insurance, Doctor. Uhura, Jandra, Harper and I will form a kind of mind-link in order to simultaneously hear, translate, and reply to the Probe once the musical language has succeeded in getting its attention. We need to hold that attention without appearing hesitant or simple-minded."

"Or responding in gibberish," McCoy finished for him. "I knew I'd seen this movie before!"

"A mind-link? I fear this." Jandra sat with Uhura at the commboard, twisting her talented fingers nervously. "How akin is this to mind-meld? For I have heard that mind-meld is an intimacy such that sexual union pales by comparison. Nyota, I fear this! Have you ever experienced this?"

"First time's always the hardest." Uhura patted her hand reassuringly. "Don't worry, hon. It doesn't hurt!"

Jim Kirk, eye of the gathering storm, surveyed his bridge. All systems normal and functioning. The Yellow Alert, mercifully silent, blinked rhythmically, almost soothingly. The Kindergarten Brigade, as Kirk had taken to thinking of them, was on duty: Kittay running routine comm so that Uhura could devote all her attention to the singing; a newly-confident Ryan at navcon, feeding in coordinates for a quick scoot to Typhon II if need be; compact, energetic little Rosenzweig at the helm, station-keeping so far, but ready if he had to whip out of orbit in one of several possible directions if the word was given. Scotty, overseeing from the weapons station, had a weather-eye on the lot of them.

Very small and for once very contained, the dancer Annek, sat in a corner of one of the stairways, making herself unobtrusive. She'd never been on a starship's bridge before, was there on Captain Kirk's personal invitation for her part in preparing the message for the Probe, and wanted to make sure she didn't get in anyone's way. She sat hugging her knees to keep her feet still, her huge brown eyes taking everything in, remembering it for some future dance.

Crewpeople passed her up and down, going about their duty, nodding or smiling a greeting, a thank-you for her help; *Enterprise* people were like that. Behind her, M'Lynn was at work - competent, professional, divested of the whining and self-pity she'd signed aboard with. People could change; *Enterprise* changed them. Before her the mythic triumvirate worked their magic, and Annek, stole an occasional peek at her favorite of the three.

His left profile's really the better one, she decided, having it turned toward her to study at her leisure, though either side's worth contemplating! Annek, sighed, content. Probe or no Probe, life or death, she had gotten what she wanted. The swish of a turbolift interrupted her thoughts.

"Captain Kirk, if I may..."

"Lord Harbinger." Kirk had leisure enough as the Probe loomed on visual to gesture him down into the command well. "Sir Rod, welcome. I haven't had the opportunity to thank you for your contribution. If this works..."

"Quite unnecessary, Captain." Harbinger huffed magnanimously. "Wanted to express my own gratitude for the opportunity to contribute. One loses sight sometimes. Now that I've gotten the rust off, so to speak, with Dr. McCoy's help...whole new dimensions...actually composed a few pages before breakfast..."

"Well, glory be!" McCoy muttered under his breath. "The things I get credit for!"

His newfound creative energy had transformed Harbinger into a cherubic young boy, delighting in his own rebirth. Even Jim Kirk could find forgiveness in his heart, and share the delight.

"I'm delighted," he said, meaning it. "Please, stay. You deserve to see this. I'll have someone get you a chair..."

"Quite all right, old boy!" Harbinger dismissed the idea, settled himself beside Annek, on the steps, the

bulk of him enough to give a fire inspector fits, but no one objected, including Annek,. "Scenery's quite lovely over here, actually."

"Do you need some privacy?" Sulu asked, while Riley just looked concerned. "Maybe if we ask Rihan -"

T'Shael made a negative gesture. "I need to see, to know."

"Okay, if you're sure,"

Commander Rihan had brought them to his overcrowded bridge, partly out of courtesy, but also, his Federation guests surmised, because he had given his crew orders but no extraneous information, and did not wish to be alone in knowing what they faced. He especially watched the Vulcan, envying the species their power of mind for all his disclaimers. To have that centeredness, that certainty, were worth an emperor's ransom. Did T'Shael see fear in the Romulan's eye?

"Worry not," she presumed to say to this veteran of a score of campaigns. "If it is made to understand us, we will not be harmed."

Rihan merely grunted, erasing the fear from his eyes by sheer act of will. "Just let me know what's going on," he said.

Traveler, Gatherer, Wanderer, Probe, it paused in its journey just outside the blue-star system, five hundred thousand years of dutiful function brought at last to the point of repose, but not without ambivalence. The pharos had gone silent, presaging its own fate. And now, slowing to impulse, then to standstill, it hooted tentatively, waiting. No response. Slowly, ponderously, as it had done at a thousand worlds before, it lowered the sensor from the hidden place. Activated, it began to rotate, clockwise, counterclockwise, listening.

Silence? The Wanderer listened for the male-voices, mind-voices traversing the space between the two-Worlds that the females might Hear them, gathering, explaining. Silence? Silence, and too soon. Five hundred thousand years too soon. Hesitant, the Wanderer hooted, tentative, fearful: Is anybody home?

"Spock?"

"Not yet, Captain," Spock answered quietly.

"Not yet," Kirk repeated, wondering how he could be so sure. All eyes were upon him, Rosenzweig's the most anxious. "Look sharp," Kirk cautioned him, "but not yet."

The Probe began to move.

It began to Sing. Not the simple songs it had sung to humpback whales or kindred pre-sentient beings, not the horrified outrage it had roared at Wlaariivi's despoilers, not the banshee-wail distress call it had trumpeted as it thundered past Dlontra, but its own true mother-tongue, which had no mother, bipartite double-song at once exquisite and painful to the ear.

"Steady..." Jim Kirk cautioned, though the urge to clamp his hands over his ears was almost overpowering. "Kittay, shut down everything but the emergency channel..."

"Already have, sir," she answered crisply. "That's not coming through comm. It's - it's everywhere!"

"Heading?" Kirk barked at Ryan through the racket, although the forward screen's head-on view of the Probe's blunt front end told them before the kid said it:

"Straight for us, Captain."

Kirk's stomach did a little flip-flop. He swallowed hard.

"Why the inner planet first? Spock?"

"The two planets are presently apocentric, their two orbits as far apart as possible on either side of the primary. On its current approach, this is simply the shortest distance between two points."

"Helm," Kirk ordered tightly, one eye on the Probe, the other on *Hannsu*. "Keep that planet between us and it. Don't get careless!"

"Aye, sir!" Rosenzweig said.

What the Probe did next should not have surprised anyone, but it did. Montgomery Scott saw it first.

"Captain, she's dropped her shields!" he cried, his own finger itching to raise *Enterprise*'s, though Kirk had specifically ordered him not to lest it look like an offensive posture, and once the Probe got too close it wouldn't matter anyway. "She's naked as a babe, sir. Completely defenseless."

"Just as it should be, Mr. Scott," Spock supplied. "The Probe was shielded from all conceivable forms of attack in its journey across the galaxy. But it has no reason to anticipate any danger within its home system except the natural phenomenon which threatens its homeworlds, to which it is impervious."

"Even so," McCoy suggested nervously, "if it gets a gander at us, up go its shields and we're cooked!"

Kirk was too busy watching tactical, too busy resisting the urge to tell Rosenzweig what to do, too busy thinking, to talk. His brain worked feverishly. A Probe without shields was a Probe which could be destroyed, if necessary. He didn't bother glancing sideways to find the look he knew Spock wore, the look which prefaced the speech about singular opportunities, vast stores of knowledge, and The Only Known Entity of Its Kind.

"Destroying it would be a last option," Kirk addressed the unvoiced questions. "But it remains an option. You'd better get started."

"Understood, Captain." Spock gathered his people together.

A last option, for *Enterprise*. A secondary option for *Hannsu*, should *Enterprise* be neutralized. Unfortunately, it looked to be a primary option for a third party *Khre'riov*, decloaking as she came in-system to save energy this far from Centre, staying back just far enough to avoid the Probe's notice and possible neutralization, clearly read the opportunity.

"Spock!" Kirk threw over his shoulder. "Do we dare risk comm, warn that ship off?"

"Our comm-chatter is of no consequence to an entity which does not acknowledge our intelligence, Captain. The Probe would read it as background noise."

"Captain!" Kittay cut in. "*Hannsu* hailing on emergency channel."

"...Kirk!" Rihan's voice was triumphant. "Now's our chance! You, me and *Khre'riov*, one shot!"

"Negative!" Kirk shouted. "Rihan, for God's sake, hold your fire! Tell *Khre'riov* to do the same. Under the circumstances - !"

"Kirk..." Rihan sounded disappointed. "You really are a party-pooper!"

"If I'm wrong -" Kirk called back, laughing in spite of himself. "- it's your party!"

Uhura took Spock's left hand with her right, Harper's right hand with her left. Spock had determined this would form the strongest link. Jandra willingly took Harper's left hand in her right, then looked at Spock and hesitated.

"I fear this!" she whispered.

"I know," he said, his outstretched hand just distant enough for her to accept or refuse.

Jandra recoiled, releasing Harper's hand, and for an agonizing moment it seemed she would not participate. But the Probe's song reached her - no longer inchoate minor-key melody, but words as well.

"It is suffering, Spock! Hear it!"

He did, they all did, now that the two-World language could be fed through the Universal Translator. At a nod from Kirk, Kittay opened the channel, and they heard.

"...answer, answer? Why no answer? Strange, o strange...where are the seas, where the beings, o!..."

Jandra clutched at Harper's hand as if for rescue. Spock's hand awaited; she must choose. Wordlessly she looked to Uhura.

"Go on!" the human urged softly. "You can do it!"

As if it might destroy her, Jandra grasped Spock's hand.

On the *Hannsu*'s bridge, T'Shael took both humans' hands.

"I know who on *Enterprise* is closest to thee," she told Riley, "but, Hikaru, if I may ask -?"

"Uhura, I guess," he said at once. "We've known each other longest, shared the most. But if you're talking admiration, that would be Spock. Then there's the captain, and the doc..." He stopped, puzzled and chagrined. "You know, I've honestly never thought of it before. I guess I just love everybody!"

"Then try to focus your thoughts toward those who sing," T'Shael advised him. "As you, Kevin Riley, must focus all your thoughts on Cleante."

"That's easy enough," Riley said. "But don't ask me to sing; I'm practically tone-deaf."

"This from the famed Irish tenor who assaulted us with 'Kathleen' for hours before they threw a net over you!" Sulu snorted in disbelief.

"And what were you doing in the meantime?" Riley shot back.

"Welllll..."

T'Shael saw Rihan was studying them intently with whatever attention he could spare from his screens.

"Commander -?"

"Join you?" Rihan recoiled from the very thought. "Never! I - I need to keep my head clear."

"Of course." T'Shael waited for the humans to finish bickering. Together they formed a circle of three, attempting to leap the void of space to join a circle of four.

Cleante watched the four as they stood motionless beside Uhura's station, hands clasped, heads bowed, reaching, their concentration almost tangible. Compared to them she felt useless and afraid.

"Daj -!" she whispered helplessly.

"Me too!" he answered, and they clasped hands, a circle of two.

Four, three, two, one: Jim Kirk alone. McCoy couldn't resist.

"Wanna hold hands, Jim?"

Kirk's response, blue as Typhon's primary, was lost beneath the Probe's lament.

It loomed, it neared, homing on the desert planet, crying its unanswered cry - closer, ever closer. Even with a planet between him and it, Jim Kirk did not feel comfortable. It seemed unaware of the three ships in its space; that much was reassuring. Kirk glanced at the foursome in their self-contained trance and wondered: How long?

It loomed, and once again it stopped, just above what would have been the cloud-line, if there had been clouds about this sere, salt world. Absently, Jim Kirk licked his lips, still tasting the grit and tang of salt sand from their beam-down. No clouds, not for three hundred years; it had to notice! How long? he thought to the silent four. How long?

Above the clouds and below the stars, it stopped. Shieldless, defenseless, the sensor turning:

"...answer -?"

Then Spock began to sing.

He was no camel, but hardly a whale, was perhaps more foghorn than anything else. Not even a Vulcan can be all things to all people all of the time. Had any of them ever had the misfortune to hear him sing?

Kirk had. Exchanging uneasy glances with McCoy, he remembered the occasion exactly, the full two verses of "Maiden Wine" torn from the Vulcan's unwilling throat by a bully named Parmen, the other indignities that had made them uneasy in each other's company for days.

Uhura remembered, too. Distracted on the verge of adding her melodic voice to the foghorn, she broke the mind-link, dropped her hand.

"I'm sorry!" she gasped. "Oh, Spock, I'm sorry!"

"As am I," he acknowledged, turning to address Kirk though, through him, everyone who had heard him. "Vulcan has had no tradition of vocal music for some one thousand years. While we may possess perfect pitch, not all of us innately know how to sing. Forgive me."

The Probe loomed. *Hannsu* and *Khre'riov* hovered. Esthetics be damned! Kirk thought. There's no time!

"Never mind that now!" he insisted. "Sing!"

It took Spock a moment to regather himself. He folded his hands prayerfully, touched them to his lips, nodded once thoughtfully, and rejoined hands with the others.

"Let me go first this time!" Uhura offered. No one argued.

Her voice was familiar, a sweet lyric soprano with a two-octave range, as delightful to the ear when full-out in performance as when hummed in snatches as she worked; Uhura had been born to sing. The words she sang were unfamiliar, alien but, supported by the weave of mind-link and the strange discordant harmonies they had worked through Steinway and synthesizer, now broadcasting on all frequencies, she knew them, opened her throat like a songbird, and sang:

Wanderer, hear me..."

A second voice blended just below hers, contralto harmony: Jandra. Swimming in the mellifluity of three alien minds, she found the experience pleasing, warm, supportive, non-intrusive, no more terrifying than ensemble play had been, and as potentially creative. Jandra sang:

Traveler, hear me..."

A rusty tenor with an irresponsible giggle in it slipped in beneath the two higher voices, playful, savoring the experience: Harper.

"Gatherer..." he sang gleefully, "**hear me...**"

Lastly the bass-baritone, still neither camel nor whale but no longer foghorn, buoyed by the three voices above it, rose and floated, steeled by something heretofore unnoticed interwoven through it. (Search the mind-paths, Spock, and find two more voices, female: Gracie's vote of confidence: Spock can almost Sing! and the voice that retaulted you mother's tongue, mother-tongue, mindmeld reaching across the void of space, touch-telepath untouched: T'Shael.) Add these to the harmony, and Sing:

Probe, o Probe, oh hear me!..."

Four voices, two languages, one focus. Added over the alien music broadcast on all frequencies - sending, reaching - it rose and climaxed, resolved, ended. Three ships poised, listening. Perhaps a thousand beings - humanoid, Romulan, Vulcan - waited. Did the Probe only seem to have heard them?

It faced them on the forward screen, menacing by size alone, and did not move. If it altered its attitude, rotating ninety degrees to the vertical as it had over Earth when communing with the whales, they would know it heeded them.

It did not. It hooted once, puzzled, then spoke:

"Air-swimmers!" A curse too vile to repeat, the worst ethnic slur. "Impossible! You cannot Sing! I do not hear!"

With that, it pirouetted, one hundred eighty degrees hard about and, hooting, set course for the ice planet, singing sadly to itself.

"Silence, all dead, too late, too soon...."

"At least it didn't neutralize us," McCoy remarked, as if to say Thank God for small favors. He wondered how long he'd been holding his breath.

"Helm, hard about!" Jim Kirk sprang out of his chair, determined to walk off his frustration before the top of his head blew off. He now had about six things to do at once. "Maintain Yellow Alert. Navigator, lay in a course around that primary, bring us in around the back side of Typhon II. If the Probe doesn't think us worthy of its attention, there's no guarantee it won't swat us like a fly. Scotty, what's its present speed?"

"She's staying on full impulse, sir. We don't dare go much faster inside such an unstable system."

"No argument. Helm, it's your job to keep up with it, but keep out of its way."

"I'll try, sir!"

"Don't try - do it!" Kirk barked. He paced as far to port as he could without treading on Harbinger and Annek,, turned hard about past the helm to make sure Rosenzweig's fingers flew as fast and as accurately as Sulu's, set course to starboard without running into Harper and Jandra, who were recovering their equilibrium on the other staircase. "Kittay, hail the *Hannsu*. Inform Rihan of our destination, tell him we're going to try again. Tell him we're counting on him to keep *Khre'riov* off our backs." He paused at the rail below the science station. "Spock, are you all right?"

He appeared shaken, but was still on his feet. Even Uhura had had to sit down, was helping Kittay code the message to Rihan with unsteady hands. Would any of them be in shape to try it again? Kirk

wondered. And try what? What message could they give the Probe at Typhon II that it wouldn't dismiss as it had their first effort at Typhon !?

"Undamaged, Captain. And I now know for certain why the Probe was sent from here, and what it has been seeking for five hundred thousand years."

"Time?" Kirk barked at Ryan.

"Estimate ninety-three minutes to Typhon II, sir."

"Sufficient time for a conference." Kirk began crooking his finger at people. "Spock, Scotty, Uhura, with me. Bones - I know I don't even have to say it."

"Damn right!"

Kirk used the interjection to take a deep breath, thinking on his feet, the thing he did best.

"Mr. Harper, you have the comm. Kittay, Ryan, Rosenzweig, the rest of you - as you were. Ryan, intership open to the conference room at all times. Keep me informed!"

"Aye, sir."

He was not halfway to the 'lift when Jandra stopped him.

"And we -?" She indicated Cleante and Dajan, Harbinger and Annek,.

Kirk shrugged. "Why not? But you'll have to wait. We won't all fit in the same 'lift."

Centurion Tiam was suffering from an excruciating headache.

It might have been the result of the assault on his sensibilities of being confined in such close quarters with his fellow conspirators, but in fact it was not. Tiam had instructed the other prisoners quite specifically upon their arrest that they were to hold their peace and keep their distance so that their benefactor could think.

The ship's physician, no less a curmudgeon than his counterpart aboard the *Enterprise* (perhaps it came with the office), was tempted to remind his benefactor of where his thinking had gotten them all thus far, but there was no knowing what connections Tiam had with Centre, or how this fiasco might yet turn out. The physician indeed held his peace, including any suggestions he might have for the treatment of headache.

Tiam's headache was not organic in origin, but a side-effect of an activated intracranial transceiver.

"Paper, find me paper!" Tiam had shrieked when the first codes began to pulsate within his cerebral cortex; they must be recorded and decoded at once before he forgot them. "Or must I write upon the walls?"

There was, of course, no access to a datapadd for those in the Security Room. Someone provided the inner lining of a food parcel, someone else a nearly-empty stylus. With no word of gratitude, Tiam returned to his private corner and began to write.

Would that he had succeeded in persuading T'Shael to his cause before Rihan could intervene! he thought, not for the first time. He might have managed to usurp command of *Hannsu* and, with the Vulcan's skills, none of this tortuous process would be necessary. But the very existence of this transmission inside his skull proved to Tiam that all was not yet lost.

The transmission was coming from *Khre'riov*, the nature of the transceiver making detection from the *Hannsu*'s bridge impossible. Let my brother-in-law flatter himself that he has access to the latest in spyecraft! Tiam thought smugly past the pain. He has no concept!

It occurred to him then, for the first time, that he had not thought of Jandra once in all of this, had not even known she was missing until Rihan, gloating, had come down here expressly to inform him. Mentally, Tiam shrugged. She had been to his advantage when he was a clerk; she was excess baggage now. Let the Feds have her. Unless he could use her even there. But he would not let them have Dajan quite so easily. Distracted by the pain, Tiam continued decoding.

Khre'riov, it seemed, had found time not only to negotiate with the Tholians, but to receive new orders from the Citadel, to be transmitted to the chief architect of the peace initiative, Centurion Tiam.

Painfully transcribing the impulses burning in his brain, Tiam plotted a new course for the glory of Empire.

Starfleet personnel and civilians alike listened silently to Spock's explanation. Watching the faces around the conference table, Jim Kirk wondered if they shared his own sense of sorrow, of the waste of it.

"A simple distress call to any humanoid world could have saved them," he said when Spock had finished. "There are spacefaring civilizations all through this sector, some of them millennia old. Even the Tholians have had spaceflight for five centuries, and they've been known to provide assistance when it's in their interest. At the very time the last of Earth's humpback stopped singing, the last of these people were dying. They didn't need to send the Probe at all. Intellectual snobbery killed them as much as the change of climate."

"Apparently true, Captain," Spock said solemnly. "And the loss of such a species is regrettable. But the Probe in and of itself is an extraordinary device, containing knowledge it has gathered from across the galaxy for half a million years, added to the knowledge these beings, and those of the Korff-like culture, instilled in it before sending it on its mission. It is very likely the last artifact of both cultures."

" - which is why it becomes even more essential not to destroy it," Kirk finished for him; he knew he'd get the speech eventually. "I couldn't agree with you more - in theory. But once it arrives at the icebound world and discovers everyone there is dead as well, what then? Robbed of its mission, its entire purpose, isn't it logical to assume it might experience some - resentment toward us puny air-swimmers simply for existing? If it acts on that resentment, we're looking at a potential berserker that will make doomsday weapons we've encountered in the past look like David's slingshot. If we can't make it hear us before it has a chance to raise its shields again, we're history. Along with every other landlubbers' world it can get

in range of."

Spock studied his hands, folded into one of their myriad contemplative configurations on the tabletop.

"That is a reasonable assumption, Captain. Unfortunately, we lack the leisure to test it. The solution is obvious," he said very quietly, the endless days of intellectual labor etched deep into the melancholy lines of his face. "This time, we must not fail."

It took Ryan's voice on the intership to break the silence.

"Fifteen minutes to planetfall, Captain."

"Acknowledged." Kirk could not meet his science officer's gaze; he looked at his chief engineer instead. "Scotty, it's up to you. Your finger stays poised above that button at all times. Spock and the others will have their second chance to get through to that thing, but if it's going to be...petulant, it's going to suffer the consequences. If it balks us this time, it's to be out of commission before it can even think of raising its shields."

Scott nodded, as unsentimental as he could be about a piece of work he'd love to get his hands on. "Aye, sir!" *Enterprise* came first.

"Spock, old boy, if I could make the tiniest suggestion..."

"At this juncture, Lord Harbinger, I am open to suggestions of any magnitude."

"Then while you lot are singing, let me play the synther, on manual. Perhaps a chord change here, a bit of up-tempo there..."

"Improvisation," Spock said thoughtfully. "Provision for a cadenza. It can do no harm."

Harbinger set to work. Once again the foursome gathered near the commboard as Uhura keyed in the music. Once again the foursome joined hands and minds and voices, and began to sing.

The Probe scanned the icebound world, lamenting, persisting, knowing the answer to its queries, yet still scanning, as if it thought ice less inimical to the beings than desert had been, as if it thought to find one solitary survivor, to make five hundred thousand years worthwhile.

"What use the knowledge I have gathered, if there are none with which to share it?"

That is the key! Spock thought, catching it in midair. Against the ground of music and three lighter voices, his voice of a sudden pulled away, to sing an improv of its own:

"Traveler, Gatherer, Wanderer, Probe, hear me! I know what besets thee...To have learned so much, to

have such knowledge and none to share it is tragedy; I hear! Those that made thee are no more - too late, too soon, but hear me! We are here, we hear, we Sing...hear us, share with us..."

Harbinger caught the melody, changed keys accordingly. Uhura caught the nuance and ceased to sing, taking Jandra and Harper with her. Spock stood alone, Spock sang alone.

"Wanderer, you know the truth, truth that all you seek are gone. The beings of the two-Worlds, dead...the help you sought, too late, too soon, but the knowledge remains...Hear us, let us hear you..."

He fognornd shamelessly now, beyond the need for privacy or propriety in his urgency to communicate - expediently, precipitously, and in a public place.

Had he known, when first he joined Simon Van Gelder's battered mind, what labyrinthine paths his own mind would follow down the years, would he have shied from the task? Not then, not now. As with all living things, each according to his gifts, and this was Spock's. No small task, and not for the faint-hearted, to leave the universe a better place for one's having lived in it. Neither camel nor whale, Spock Sang:

"Probe! There are a thousand, thousand worlds that need your wisdom, wisdom of the crystal caves...Hear me!"

The Probe stopped, dead in space. The Probe hooted, baffled. Instinctively Harbinger brought the music to silence. No one breathed.

"Slowly, the Probe rotated, ninety degrees to the vertical, and uttered a single phrase:

"Show me!"

Uhura reached past Kittay to activate the holo they had created.

"We'll start with Earth," she had suggested. "Call it a teaser. If we give it too much information it's apt to get lost in the translation. But an overview of one world, with the implication that there are thousand more..."

"Indeed," Spock agreed, and she had stayed up all night putting it together.

Viewing it now, as the Probe's sensor received it for the first time, Uhura hoped it didn't seem sentimental or hokey. But the Probe is seeing this for the first time, she reminded herself. Try to see it with the Probe's eyes.

She had outdone herself with the music. Copland's Fanfare for the Common Man played behind scenes of busy humans doing the best human things - playing with children, listening to their old ones, building bridges, planting trees, painting murals, teaching, healing. Segue: Beethoven's Ode to Joy, and a collage

of humans and a Vulcan or two interacting with a couple of humpback whales. Segue, and Lord Harbinger glanced up from his synthesizer with tears of gratitude in his eyes as the fifth movement of his Symphony for the Nine, accompanied a m,lange of scenes from national and interplanetary councils, of beings from a dozen worlds debating, signing peace treaties, shaking hand or touching antennae or whatever was appropriate as they broke bread together. Segue: Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers, and an overview of human cities, surreal architecture, bustling citizenry, spotless streets and parks, clear skies. Segue: Joplin's Solace, and a collage of human faces in all their multiplicitous ethnic glory.

Segue: Beethoven's Seventh Symphony and tiny Annek, silhouetted against a recap of the previous scenes, become the apotheosis of the dance: swimming in air, dancing male and female, air-swimmer and water-dweller, song without words, Amen.

It was beautiful, to the humans at least. Many of them had to clasp their hands together to keep from applauding. But could it move a Probe?

"Pithai..." it responded after a long, thoughtful silence. "As on the desert world...were, were, were. Pithai were fools."

"We are not Pithai!" Spock sang, challenging it. **"Though sometimes we are fools. Were your creators without flaw?"**

They could hear it thinking. Betimes it made that melancholy honking sound, like breathing.

"Any minute now..." Kirk said evenly. *Khre'riov* was moving in at one-quarter impulse on their tactical screen. "Come on, Probe, make up your mind!"

It honked one final time, then grew still, then righted itself on the horizontal, facing them. If it withdrew the sensor, rejected them, it was all over.

"They say the only sin God can't forgive is despair," Uhura whispered. Jandra squeezed her hand.

"What purpose..." it breathed at last, rattling the rafters. "If I accept these beings - you - as Singers...what purpose -?"

"Teach us your wisdom," Spock sang. **"Help us in our own search for meaning. Teach us to be less like fools."**

"An offer it can't refuse," McCoy said. Kirk laughed soundlessly, mirthlessly, one eye on *Khre'riov*, the other on Scotty at the weapons console.

Almost the Probe seemed to draw breath before it answered:

"I will..."

"Detecting a faint energy reading on the planet below," Spock reported. "The Probe's sensor appears to have activated a beacon of some sort."

"Pharos..." the Probe answered, having already learned enough of human language to speak it. "Wisdom of the crystal caves."

"Ask it if we can have access to the crystal caves -" Kirk began.

"Yes, you may," the Probe answered. "Speak to me, not at me, Captain."

"I stand corrected," Kirk murmured, feeling the hair at the back of his neck prickle. Eerie, being addressed in person by a thing that size.

Uhura blew on her fingers to keep them from sticking to the controls; they were too numb to feel. Across the console from her, Spock's breath plumed in the frigid air, making him look like a preoccupied dragon. Even the area heaters they'd brought down with them did little to dispel the bone-cold chill of the place. They didn't dare generate too much heat lest they damage what they'd found in the other "rooms" of the crystal cave.

"You all right?" Kirk asked, suppressing a shiver inside his own heavy jacket. "Someone could spell you for awhile."

Uhura shook her head. "Almost done. You could ask them to beam down some hot chocolate, though."

Satisfied that she was coping, Jim Kirk moved on, checking on what the rest of his people were up to.

"It's a pure marvel!" he heard Scotty's voice echoing off the curving walls of the naturally vaulted chambers. "How a species w/flipper instead of hands could shape this lot underwater -!"

The crystal caves were a natural phenomenon, formed eons ago by volcanic activity at the very ocean floor, then helped into their present form by the activities of countless sea-dwelling beings.

"Zoisite," Spock pronounced, running his tricorder over the walls to determine the composition of the gleaming pale-blue caverns leading around and about the central control complex or Wisdom. "Also called tanzanite, after the old Earth nation Tanzania, where it was first mined in the twentieth century. Not as rare as sapphire, which it closely resembles, but of some gemstone value. Indications also of extensive seams of remarkably unadulterated quartz and quartzite, which would explain the natural transmitting properties of these caverns. As to the nature of the 'brain' or Wisdom which controls the pharos and the memory banks, it operates on an as-yet undetermined principal, which will require further study."

"Which is his way of saying he doesn't know how the blame thing works," McCoy had contributed.

Small wonder. To the uninitiated, the Wisdom resembled nothing so much as a jaggedly rhomboidal block of ice. Intellectually, one knew it was carved out of the native rock, but it was incredibly cold to the touch.

"Very different, sir," Uhura reported, shaking her head in amazement. "In the first place, try manipulating these controls with ordinary stubby little human fingers. It's virtually impossible."

"What controls?" Kirk had asked, staring at the lumpy thing, utterly mystified.

Uhura indicated dozens of long, narrow indentations in the upper surface of the rhombus.

"They're designed to be used by beings with elongated, nailless flipper-fingers." She showed him, using an antique Phillips screwdriver Scotty had dug up from somewhere. "See?"

"Proving without a doubt which species designed and utilized it," Kirk said as Uhura and Spock labored to interface the Wisdom with *Enterprise*'s and *Hannsu*'s computers.

With the Probe in such a benevolent mood, Kirk had invited Rihan and the commander of the *Khre'riov* to join him in bringing landing parties to the surface of Typhon II. Rihan had been almost monosyllabic in his refusal.

"...do not care for cold climates, Commander *Enterprise*" had been his stiff, encoded, audio-only response. "We will observe from here."

"We'll see to it you get complete information once we access the memory banks," Kirk offered. There was no reply.

"Lot of comm-chatter between him and *Khre'riov*, Captain," was how Uhura explained it, turning over comm to Kittay once more as she bundled herself into her cold-weather coat. "Code so new even I don't recognize it."

"Could *Khre'riov*'s commander be reprimanded Rihan for his handling of events thus far?" McCoy theorized on the way to the transporter room.

"Or simply for fraternizing with the enemy," Kirk suggested. "Not our problem at the moment, Bones."

As on the desert planet, there was no standing water on this world either. What hadn't crystallized as vast floes and glaciers and quick-frozen cloud cover - swirls of cirrocumulus laden with ice crystals that never precipitated.

"This is how Earth would've ended up if the Probe had finished the job it started," McCoy remarked, glancing upward as if it might have heard him.

Just below the cloud cover, so close it seemed as if they could reach up and pat its metal-gleaming flank, the Probe had actually entered the planet's atmosphere, hovering, thus-far benevolent behemoth, studying them as they studied its Wisdom, breathing down their necks.

Unseen above in orbit, the two urgently-conversing Romulan vessels did the same.

"Compared to this," McCoy grouched, shoving his hands deeper in his pockets and stamping his feet on the ice-covered ocean floor, "between a rock and hard place looks positively inviting!"

The Wisdom had been designed into the upper levels of the caverns, to afford the pharos or beacon a clearer path to deepspace transmission. The levels below held greater secrets.

The middle levels comprised a kind of mausoleum.

"They're beautiful!" Cleante explained, shining her halogen lamp over the length of the creatures encased in centuries-old ice, augmenting the natural light which shone through the zoisite crystals, electric blue. "Beautiful and sad. They all died right here, Jim, frozen to death."

He was still "Jim," Kirk noted, as he had been on the desert world. Was it just the excitement of the find, or had Cleante finally forgiven him of his role as intergalactic street cop?

The beings were beautiful, and sad, with their ponderous great-whale bodies - the adults some thirty feet long - tranquil, whiskery manatee faces and huge, feathered lashed fur-seal eyes, behind which lay a great intelligence, contemplating their visitors eternally through the ice.

"It's my guess," Cleante said, her voice church-hushed, "that when they knew they were dying, they hollowed out these niches the same way previous generations wore the passageways smooth, by simply passing through them again and again, wearing them away with the friction of their bodies. Then they followed the last freewater that was left, and settled in here to die, neatly arranged by size and age, very orderly. It's like looking at displays in a museum."

"Let's reserve that description for the lower depths," Jim Kirk had said.

"A holocaust museum" was how he first described it when the Probe had directed them to it. They'd had to ultrasound it clear first; it had been almost completely encased in ice.

"A what?" Jandra had demanded, her teeth frankly chattering. Though with cold or with horror? Kirk wondered.

Her brother had known at once. Dajan raised his head from his recorder, a bitter smile on his face.

"Like Da'kkow," he said.

"I see," Jandra said, and shivered.

Dajan only then seemed to notice the odd look on Kirk's face.

"Oops," he said ingenuously. "Classified information, Captain. Officially, of course, Romulans have never engaged in genocide."

"Of course not," McCoy commented.

Not for the first time, Jim Kirk wondered if it had been wise to let Dajan come along.

"There's nothing to keep them from scanning us and snatching you back aboard the *Hannsu*," he'd said

when Dajan turned up in the transporter room, field gear in hand, ready to accompany Cleante to the surface.

"Nothing but Commander Rihan's word, Captain. I thought you two had an understanding?"

"I don't know who's running the show anymore," Kirk pointed out. "A battlecruiser commander outranks a warbird's, doesn't he? Suppose Rihan's been relieved of command?"

"A chance I'll take, Captain." There was steel in Dajan's manner, as if this were the true man beneath the carefully designed façade. "Please - it's important."

"Stay inside the caves, then," Kirk told him. "Maybe the readings will confuse *Hannsu*'s scanners."

Now here was Dajan, in the midst of this museum of horrors, flaunting his knowledge of similar places.

There were no artifacts per se in the lowest levels, as all of the horrors the Pithai had visited upon the "beings" had transpired on the desert world. Nevertheless, the history was here, etched into the crystalline walls by some process which baffled Spock as much as the Wisdom had at first. Now that the Wisdom was up and running under Uhura's supervision, simulcasting memory to both *Enterprise* and *Hannsu*, Spock had time to analyze the murals as well.

"The poison-spikes," he concluded.

"The what?" Kirk said.

"The males of the 'being' species have poison-spikes interspersed among the otherwise harmless setae or facial whiskers. Perhaps in ancient times these served them in combat. For their purposes here, the poisons were distilled, mixed with indigenous organic compounds to lend them pigment, and used as etching media."

Tricorder analysis indicated the murals extended for many kilometers, winding down the passageways below them, some of which were blocked by rockfalls, inaccessible without extensive excavation. The landing party contented itself with studying the first section they had come upon. Cleante was already planning the return trip.

"You've no idea what a find this is, and what it could mean! Look here..."

She showed them a portion of the mural depicting in elaborate detail a scene of slaughter: Pithai killing beings despite incontrovertible proof of their intelligence, skinning and cooking the carcasses, tanning the hides...

" - and using them for everything from shoe-leather to skinscrolls. The scrolls we found on Dlontra - we never bothered to analyze what kind of skin they were made from, but I don't even have to go back to *Enterprise* to be sure it matches with the skin of those beautiful beings in the middle levels. No wonder the Probe didn't trust us.

"Jim, think of it - these worlds are unclaimed by either side, yet they've been discovered by both. Forget about Dlontra - this spot we're standing on could be the real beginning."

"At least Dlontra was a little warmer," Jim Kirk said wistfully, but he saw what she meant. A real archeological study of not one but two lost civilizations, shared by Federation and Romulan alike, the

Probe on their side, recruited for marine research throughout this sector, the possibility that despite the Tiams of this universe, peace might have a chance. He found himself almost believing it.

But what a miserably cold place to have to start!

"How long before Uhura finishes the simulcast?" he asked Spock, noting that even Scotty had given up exploring to return huffing and stamping, the cold seeping into his bones.

"Momentarily, Captain. She has managed a tie-in with *Enterprise*, *Hannsu* and the Probe, which is currently adding to its Standard vocabulary. And, Captain, there is one thing further you should know..." Spock hesitated. "I am afraid in our enthusiasm we may have promised the Probe more than we can deliver."

"Meaning -?"

"Meaning we suggested the Federation, if not the Empire, might welcome its participation in scientific explorations."

"Exactly what I had in mind," Kirk said, warming to the topic. "I have a feeling that if we managed to turn up on Earth with our new ally in tow, we wouldn't have any difficulty convincing the Federation Council to - where's Jandra?"

Everyone else was either present or accounted for, but their Romulan musician had suddenly gone missing.

He found her outside beneath the perpetually overcast sky, her head tilted back as if to watch the Probe as it seemed to watch over her. Even swathed in layers of borrowed Federation clothing, she was shivering all over.

"You must be freezing," Jim Kirk put his arm about her, for warmth, for comfort. "You could have beamed up at any time. In fact, I still don't understand why you even beamed down -"

"He is not coming back with us!" was all she said, an edge of hysteria in her voice.

"Who isn't -?" Kirk said, though he of all people knew perfectly well. Jandra shook him off, spun around to glare at him, her green eyes colder than the air.

"Sib! I know his heart. He -"

She never got to finish. The sound of a Romulan transporter filled the frigid air. The population of Typhon II had just doubled.

Commander Rihan, flanked by Centurion Tiam and a severe, almost anorectic Romulan of command

rank, with Sulu, Riley, T'Shael and a couple of guards in two, approached them over the ice. Something in Rihan's manner told Jim Kirk he was no longer in charge.

"Captain James T. Kirk, commander of *Enterprise*," Rihan announced stiffly, indicating the figure beside him, "may I present Commander Jenyu of the battlecruiser *Khre'riov*."

"Commander." Jim Kirk invested his brief nod with the exact degree of courtesy he thought Commander Jenyu merited.

Jenyu studied the Probe above them for a long moment before he spoke. Then he studied the gathering landing party, though he gave no indication of what he thought of any of these things.

"We thank you for sharing the information you have gathered on these worlds, Captain..." he began in clipped, perfect Standard.

It was as if the Probe had never existed, never posed a threat to any of them, and they were met here solely for purposes of mutual exploration. Fine! Kirk thought ruefully. If that's what it takes to get the job done. Maybe I can persuade the three haggard-looking people just behind you that they weren't held prisoner aboard a Romulan vessel, either.

"...we trust also," Jenyu went on, "that you are truly appreciative of the risks we have assumed in obtaining safe passage for your ship through Tholian space."

"Believe me, Commander, we are aware of exactly what lengths you have gone to on our behalf," Jim Kirk answered with quiet irony. "But, if you'll forgive the hurry, it's very cold down here. I have some unfinished business with Commander Rihan which I should like to conclude. Then perhaps we can continue this someplace where it's warmer."

"As you like," Commander Jenyu answered magnanimously, as if it were a matter of total indifference to him.

Carefully the ferryboat captain reviewed his diplomatic options. He didn't dare so much as take a deep breath in the frigid air lest its release give any indication of nervousness or uncertainty.

He surveyed his audience. Centurion Tiam, as arrogant as ever, nevertheless seemed pale and unwell, as if he'd recently spent too long in a dark place; his fingernails looked gnawed. Out of favor under Rihan, reinstated under Jenyu? Kirk theorized to himself. He looked inquiringly at Sulu and Riley, whose posture told him all he needed to know.

Once upon a time, in a century when humans still warred upon their own kind on their home planet, prisoners of war had used a particular hand signal to telegraph to anyone from their own side who saw their photographs and read their signed confessions that they were under duress and had been coerced.

Sulu and Riley, standing on either side of T'Shael with their arms folded in front of them, had arranged their middle fingers in that very gesture.

Thank you! Kirk nodded at them, and cleared his throat.

"Commander Rihan," he began, "I believe you're holding something of mine."

"As you are holding something of mine," Rihan retorted, though it was clear his heart wasn't in it.

"I'm sorry, but you're wrong. Jandra has voluntarily requested political asylum under our diplomatic codes." Kirk carefully made no reference to Dajan who, he only now noticed, had not joined them, but still lingered in the caves. "She did so, in fact, before my people found themselves trapped aboard your vessel. We're not holding you responsible for the Probe's actions, but if you continue to hold these three against their will -"

"You will do what, Kirk? Instruct your Probe to vaporize us on the spot?"

He should have known Tiam couldn't keep quiet for long.

"It's not my Probe," Kirk said with a touch of exasperation. "Haven't you been listening to any of this? It doesn't care about our petty squabbles. We can stand here and freeze our ears off for all it cares, while I can accuse you of mistreatment of Federation citizens -"

"Alleged mistreatment, Kirk," Tiam said smoothly. "Examine them if you like. You will not find a mark on any of them."

Rihan lost his patience then.

"As if that will count for anything when they are questioned and the truth revealed!" he sputtered, moving toward Tiam menacingly. "They were mistreated, and aboard my ship, you vicious, lying -"

"Take care, Commander." Jenyu's grip on his arm slowed Rihan down, the warning in his voice stopped him. No one knew who Tiam's friends were.

Rihan shook off his old companion's hand, motioning to his guards to bring the threesome forward.

"Take them, Kirk, with my profound apologies. Know from my heart that it was not I who intended them any harm."

"I never doubted that for a moment," Kirk said as the three moved toward the Federation side and freedom. But Tiam had not yet had the last word.

"You - human-lover!" he spat at Rihan, producing a small hand weapon and stepping between Sulu and freedom. "Yes, Captain, take them. Take my wife as well, and welcome. But not the spy!"

CODA

"Why isn't there an Organian peace treaty for this kind of thing?" McCoy wondered, as Cleante rushed forward to take Riley and T'Shael in her arms.

When they saw Sulu wasn't coming with them the two had hesitated, tried to stay behind. All for one and one for all. A quick shake of the head from Jim Kirk got them out of the way of whatever he had planned. Sulu stood rocking on his heels, dead calm, ready to go whichever way it went.

"Tiam, this is petty. It's foolish," Kirk began. "You see that thing up there? It's collected more data on

marine life than your scientists and mine could gather in the next half-million years. It's agreed to work with us - both of us. You're throwing away any chance to -"

"On the contrary, Kirk, I am salvaging what I can from what amounts to a prodigious waste of my time and talents. I am a diplomat, Kirk. Kindly tell me what a diplomat is doing on a dead, cold planet hundreds of light years from home, listening to the drivel of humans?"

"There is no Probe, Kirk," Centurion Tiam said, as it loomed like a lesser moon a thousand meters above his head. "Thus do my records state from the beginning. Your own diplomatic attach, deleted any reference to it from his records once he was shown the error of his ways."

Kirk heard Riley gasp in disbelief.

"Gee, Mary and Jay, of all the -! Ah, Tiam you're a marvel only mother could love!"

"No Probe, huh?" McCoy shouted, the cold making his voice quaver. "Then what was it that neutralized your border ship, and damn near left *Hannsu* without oxygen until we bailed you out? Maybe oxygen-depletion's your problem, Tiam."

"Bones - !" Kirk spat.

"Are you going to let him get away with this, Jim? Rihan, what about you? I thought you had some sense -"

"Bones, that's enough!" Let Tiam get away with whatever he wanted, as long as it wasn't Sulu.

"No Probe, Kirk," Tiam reiterated slowly, unperturbed by mere human outbursts. "As to what we are doing here amid piles of bones and ice, I state for the record that by your duplicitous human means, you lured the commander of the *Hannsu* here on an imaginary crisis of your own delusionary design. That Commander Jenyu was diverted here as well indicates only his loyalty to an old comrade, and his duty to the Empire..."

He droned on. Kirk was only half listening. If he sought any acknowledgement of the lunacy of this speech from Rihan, he was not getting it. Rihan's face was unreadable as Commander Jenyu's; if they thought Tiam was insane, they gave no indication.

"Mr. Scott," Kirk said evenly, watching the weapon waver in Tiam's hand and fervently wishing he'd shoot himself in the foot, "Contact the *Enterprise*. You and Mr. Riley will accompany our civilian guests back to the ship."

"All of them, sir?" Scott asked, doing a quick nose-count.

"All present, Mr. Scott."

"Don't argue!" Riley whispered, holding onto Cleante by main force.

Please, Jim Kirk prayed silently. Please don't let any of them give me a hard time; I don't need the distraction.

"Put the weapon away, Tiam," he temporized. "We'll talk."

"Yes, husband, do." Jandra's teeth were chattering, but her voice was clear. "Take an expert's advice, lest your lack of skill betray you!"

Great, Jandra, just great! Jim Kirk thought. I knew all of this was really about a domestic quarrel!

"Husband?" Tiam spat out the word. "You have no husband, as I have no wife. It is ended."

"It had not even begun!" Jandra shot back.

She would have turned on Kirk then, refusing to go without a struggle until she knew Dajan was safe with her, but T'Shael was suddenly, silently beside her, presuming to take her arm.

"'If the garment fits'..." She spoke in Vulcan, an ancient aphorism out of both their roots. "...wear it as its owner would."

She implied more than the obvious fact that each had taken to borrowing the other's clothing in the expediency of having left their respective ships empty-handed. The knowledge Sulu had poured into her mind made everything clear to her; she knew who would return with them to *Enterprise* and who would not, and for what reasons. Could she lend Jandra a Vulcan's mastery as easily as she could a garment?

Jandra was the taller of them; T'Shael's borrowed coat was too short at the wrists. The gifted hands were swathed in gloves, but the exposed flesh between them and the sleeves looked chilblained. Were her words as inadequate, T'Shael wondered, to persuade Jandra out of Kirk's path, that he might finish what he had begun?

"The cloak becomes you," Jandra said bemusedly, stroking the collar of what had once been hers, aware of all the nuances T'Shael's seeming simple speech implied, grateful for the role to play; nothing mattered but the performance. "I think I shall have to let you keep it."

"My gratitude, but it is too ornate for me," T'Shael replied, and Jandra went with her.

"Mr. Spock," Kirk said casually as the last of the transporter sound faded into the crystalline air. "Will you kindly go and get our prisoner, please?"

There are times when it is helpful to have a telepath for a first officer. "Of course, Captain."

"Prisoner?" Tiam was taken aback; not seeing Dajan he had assumed him safe aboard the *Enterprise*. He waved his weapon uncertainly at Sulu. "But - but this one smuggled him aboard your ship. We thought -"

The weapon made Rihan nervous. He wrested it from the centurion's hand and tossed it to the guard Fretius who, had he not been so young, might have smiled.

"You thought wrong!" Kirk said loudly, hearing the crunch of boots behind him, knowing Spock would have his phaser out and pointed at Dajan's back. "Sulu smuggled your fancy archeologist aboard my ship to say a tearful farewell to his sister and, like the fatuous human I am, I allowed it. Until I caught him trying to break into classified files, I had no idea what he really was. Don't you talk to me about spies!"

"Spock, what the devil's going on here?" McCoy hissed, glancing sideways at Dajan, who didn't seem at all perturbed at being led about at phaser point by someone he'd been working with moments before.

"We will know presently, Doctor," Spock said. The phaser lay easy in his hand; a trained operative like Dajan could have relieved him of it effortlessly on the way here. But Dajan had shown no surprise when the Vulcan came to fetch him from the cave.

"About time!" he breathed, flexing his shoulders inside a borrowed Starfleet jacket. He afforded the Typhon murals a final wistful glance before offering his recorder to Spock, who indicated he should keep it. "I abhor unfinished business, don't you?"

"I want to talk to you," Jim Kirk had told him back when Scotty was still aboard the *Hannsu* restoring power. They had left McCoy to entertain Jandra in the commissary and went somewhere where they could talk uninterrupted.

"You were Sulu's contact on the other side," Kirk said without preamble, handing Dajan a towel and throwing more water on the coals once he'd cleared the ship's sauna for their use.

"Yes," the Romulan replied with equal candor, securing the towel about his waist, stretching his lean-muscled body out along the boards and breathing deeply of the fragrant steam, deciding he liked this human pastime. "Is this to be my first debriefing?"

Kirk smiled faintly, aware of how doctrinaire he must sound even under such relaxed conditions. "Strictly informal. I need some leverage, that's all. Something I can use against Tiam if I'm going to get my people back."

Dajan accepted this with a nod. "How much would you like to know?"

"You could start with Wlaariivi."

Dajan had told him all he knew about the gentle, presentient sea creatures his people's scientists had intended to transform into living weapons against a rebel race. Kirk listened soberly as the fragrant steam rose about them and tried not to be judgmental. Humans had enacted worse depredations in their time.

"You may use Wlaariivi if you like, Captain," Dajan said, floating to the surface of the icy pool once Kirk had shown him how to complete the sauna ritual. "But if you want some real leverage, you're looking at it."

Standing on the edge, offering him a hand up, Kirk looked puzzled.

"I don't follow you."

"Tiam will give you Riley and T'Shael eventually; he has to," Dajan explained, toweling off, thinking: Not too soon for me to see my Destiny returned safely to those who cherish her! "But he may not wish to part with Sulu so easily. He will try to manufacture charges against him, but unless he has succeeded in interrogating him, he will have only the fact that he secreted me aboard *Enterprise*. Whereas you can always use me as your - what is it called? Your trump card?"

"My ace in the hole," Kirk said, realizing what Dajan was suggesting. "But why?"

Dajan was thinking of Sulu, to whom he owed a few, but also of T'Shael, as he said it. No one could alter his destiny, she had said, but he himself.

"Say that I have some loose ends to tie up on the other side. Say that I am compulsively neat by nature."

"That's hardly enough to sacrifice your life," Kirk said, digesting it. "What will they do to you if they take you back?"

Dajan had shrugged, trying to make light of it.

"Who can say? Debrief me, surely. But then - reward me, or slap my wrists - who knows? It depends upon who is in power at the moment. At any rate, I am too valuable to them to come to permanent harm."

"I appreciate the offer," Kirk said slowly, "but it's not something I can decide for you."

"I have already decided, Captain. All you need do is to decide if and when. I abhor unfinished business!"

"Spy?" Kirk repeated Tiam's words, waxing eloquent. "I'll give you a spy! You have nothing on Sulu compared to what I have on this one! Ask him how he got access to our security codes. Ask him about Wlaariivi!"

Tiam looked visibly shaken. "You told them of Wlaariivi?" he demanded of Dajan. "How is this possible?"

"They have a new drug, Centurion!" Dajan cried, taking his cue from Kirk. Nothing mattered but the performance, he thought, taking a page from his sister's book. "I could not help myself - I had to give them something! Wlaariivi was no longer important, I thought. I gave them nothing more, Centurion, I swear, but if they take me with them -!"

In the spirit of the thing, Spock nudged him with the phaser to silence him. Even McCoy and Uhura, used to Kirk's orchestrations, had caught on. The only one who wasn't playing was Sulu.

No, Captain, don't! he wanted to shout. Don't turn him over to them; you've no idea what they'll do -! But he was a well-trained Level-3 operative; he bit his tongue and tried to keep his face still. The look in Dajan's glass-green eyes - utterly calm, utterly accepting, the gaze of a man creating his own destiny - was all that kept him from breaking every operative's code he knew.

"You've already lost a prominent musician - your own wife!" Kirk chose his words with surgical skill, cutting Tiam down to size. "How will you show your face in the Citadel if you return home knowing you gave us an important operative who told us about Wlaariivi? I promise you a show-trial that will have repercussions clear to the Klingon Empire -"

He was upstaged finally by the sound of a Romulan chuckling.

"For pity's sake, Tiam, give him what he wants!" Rihan pleaded. "He is the only source of hot air on this planet, and I for one would like to be somewhere where it's warm!"

It was Commander Jenyu, finally, who motioned to Sulu and Dajan to trade places; Tiam seemed to have lockjaw.

"Well, so long, Fritz old pal!" Sulu clapped poor bewildered Fretius - who still only understood every third word - on the back. "Watch out for slingshots now, hear?"

There was a saunter in his step as he passed Dajan in the meter-wide DMZ that separated them; only Dajan saw the agony in his eyes.

I'll get you back, bro, promise! Sulu thought to him. I don't know when or how, but if I have to go in alone, blown cover and all, and haul you out by the roots of your hair, I will: I swear it!

Romulans are not telepaths. But Dajan heard him.

Scotty had gone to prepare for departure; it would be a long journey home. The others seemed reluctant to leave the transporter room.

Riley held Cleante close for the longest moment, breathing in the perfume of her luxuriant dark hair. "And the longest way 'round..."

"...is the shortest way home'," she finished for him, looking long into his ginger-brown eyes and seeing shadows there. "Are you all right?"

"Not entirely," he admitted honestly. "T'Shael can tell you the more sordid details, or Hikaru."

"If Hikaru's coming back!" Cleante said. She hadn't meant to cry until they were sure, but either way someone would be lost to them. The tears came.

"First time I saw you you had tears in your eyes," Riley said, and maybe it wasn't the right thing to say. Cleante felt a chill colder than Typhon II pass between them, but dismissed it even as she dashed away the tears.

"Your Hikaru will be returned to you," Jandra said bleakly. "But I have lost my Sib!"

"Go on up," Kirk instructed Uhura, Sulu and McCoy. "Spock and I'll be along in a minute."

Rihan had already sent his guards up. Tiam was apparently leaving on *Khre'riov* and taking Dajan with him.

"You still lose, Kirk!" he could not resist gloating as Commander Jenyu led Dajan away. "You have gotten your spy back, but you have lost the peace initiative, and any hope for reconciliation with us."

"But you lost the chance to provoke us into war," Kirk retorted by reflex, all the passion and the eloquence gone out of him. "And you're missing out on the knowledge of the Probe. I'd say we're even."

"There is no Probe, Kirk," Tiam said for the last time; if the blue-white sun could have penetrated the permanent cloud cover he would have been standing in its shadow. "And without it, what do you offer us?" He made a sweeping gesture. "Piles of bones on planets which will one day destroy themselves? And if the Probe does not exist, Kirk, then none of this exists."

He stalked away to join Jenyu, and Jim Kirk wondered if he truly believes what he had just said, if a lifetime of double-speak caused inevitable doublethink. In Tiam's case, he found he didn't care.

"What're you bawling about?" Sulu demanded, teasing Uhura to hold back the tears he could not shed. "You got me back, didn't you?"

"Yes, but we lost Dajan!" she sniffed, dabbing at her eyelashes with the tips of her long-nailed fingers. "I'm not sure we got the better of that deal!"

"Watch out," Sulu warned her as the transporter beam grabbed them, bringing them home. "In this climate, they'll freeze to your face..."

"We are victims of the stars, Kirk," Commander Rihan said by way of farewell; he had heard Tiam's last lunatic speech. "The stars our leaders believe in, that is. Their astrology dictates we cannot have peace with humans for the next eighty years, therefore our functionaries are put in charge of creating laws and directives making certain the prophecy comes true. And, unfortunately, those of us out on the rim are sometimes doomed to fulfill those directives."

"We all have our no-win scenarios," Kirk sympathized, suddenly feeling incredibly sad. "At least you may live long enough to see the end of that eighty years."

Rihan chuckled then. "And you, Kirk? I have the strangest feeling you shall live forever!"

"Is it always thus among your kind?"

All but Spock seemed to have forgotten that the Probe could hear everything.

"Not always. But more often than we care to admit."

"Pithai are fools," the Probe said, having discovered a sense of humor.

"We are not Pithai," Spock reminded it. **"Will you join us?"**

"This world you Sang of..."

"We call it Mer. One of our vessels, the *Clarke* , **is there now, engaged in research. The scientists would value your assistance.**"

"I will go. But first, the music..."

As part of the exchange of knowledge, Spock had given the Probe a data-feed containing the complete history of Federation music. It scanned the memory banks for an appropriate work to celebrate its newfound purpose and found it, in the apotheosis of the dance.

As Kirk and Spock waited for Harper to beam them up home, it began.

"That's Beethoven, isn't it?" Kirk remarked as the glorious sound of their old friend Ludwig Van roared out over a landscape where his like had never been heard before.

"Indeed," Spock answered as the transporter began to take effect.

"See?" Kirk said, as he vanished into thin air. "My taste in music isn't all that bad..."

The final triumphant strains of Beethoven's Seventh fade into the ether, passing over first one and then the second of two ill-fated worlds, rattling out their own increasingly discordant music of the spheres, dance of death, as first three ships and then a Probe move on about the business of the universe. Segue, some weeks later:

The final triumphant strains of Beethoven's Seventh emanate into the ether from a small blue planet orbiting third out from an unprepossessing yellow sun. In close focus, the source is the rehearsal hall of a major symphony orchestra somewhere on the coast of North America.

T'Shael of Vulcan puts the New York Philharmonic through its paces one last time before the evening performance. She is content. Maestra Espinoza and several rehearsal conductors have worked with the orchestra in her extended absence, but she has labored mightily with them since her return, and then reward her with perfection. As the last bars resonate from the rafters, T'Shael shakes her lank hair back over her shoulders and, baton still in hand, indulges a human custom and applauds them.

"Thank you!" she says, slightly breathless; even a Vulcan can fall prey to enthusiasm when conducting Beethoven. "Your perfection is noted and appreciated. Tonight I trust you will reward Maestra Espinoza with transcendence."

Trust a Vulcan, the lead cellist thinks, to always push the envelope!

At the New Cetacean Institute off Australia's Great Barrier Reef, a wetsuited Gillian Taylor, home on leave from the newly-arrived science vessel *Clarke*, cavorts in the deepwater pool with a trio of whales.

"Hey!" she yells, laughing as an effusive young Spock slides up beside her, knocking her into the side of the pool and blowing spume in her face. "Knock it off, you brat! I said no splashing! Gracie, can't you teach this kid some manners?"

"He is young," his doting mother demurs. **"Doesn't know his own strength..."**

"Yeah, my eye!" Gillian says, patting them both to show there are no hard feelings, then checking her chrono. "Oops! Listen, guys, gotta go. Time to wash the salt out of my hair and figure out what I'm going to wear. Big date tonight!"

Leonard McCoy, on his way out of the MedArts complex at Starfleet Command HQ, is buttonholed by Dr. M'Benga.

"Did you do those diagnostics like I asked you to?"

"Nag, nag, nag!" McCoy grumbles, fishing the record disk out of a pocket. "Yes, I did, as a matter of fact, though it was damn difficult with her being stuck on the *Hannsu* for more than a week, but here's the latest. Now, do me a favor, will you, and for once in my life let me be on time for a performance?"

Only then does M'Benga notice what he's wearing. McCoy's usual off-duty wardrobe ranges from casual to sloppy, but tonight he is dressed to kill.

"Nice," M'Benga remarks. "Big night?"

"Oh, yes!" McCoy beams mysteriously, straightening his tie. "A very big night, indeed!"

Cleante alFaisal, running on Cairo time, which almost guarantees she will be late, tosses one garment after another out of her closet onto the bed. Kevin Riley, in Starfleet uniform, looks on.

"I give up!" Cleante says, exasperated at the limits of her wardrobe, finally selecting something that's almost satisfactory. "Let me see if I've got this straight. Nyota's meeting us after she picks up Dr. Taylor. Hikaru's driving Jim's command-officer's skimmer, if you please, bringing Jim, Spock and Dr. McCoy. Is that everybody? Why didn't you wear your dress uniform?"

"Maybe because I'm not going," Riley says gently, though it hits Cleante like a bomb. She's been expecting this for weeks, ever since they left Typhon with a chill neither of them could shake. She stops rummaging at last and comes to sit beside him.

"Right. Let's have it!"

Kevin takes her hands, clasps them between his own.

"First of all, you have to understand that it's not about you; it's nothing you've done or haven't done. It's about me, and who I am or aren't."

"Dlondra again!" Cleante says. "Or the teromin. Kevin, none of that was your fault."

"Dlondra, no. But the teromin - the very fact that I'm as susceptible to things like that makes me a risk in DiploCorps, don't you see? Command's too polite to say it outright, but they've recommended a rest leave. I know what they're really saying: Get over it or get out."

"Kevin..."

"No, now, hear me out!" He puts a finger to her lips for emphasis. "I still love you, darlin', but I need some space, and anyway, you're going back to the Typhons if the grant comes through. Didn't we always promise each other we'd not get in each other's way?"

His words are tender, but his intent is clear. Kodos the Executioner had taken away the people Kevin Riley loved most; he's never truly been able to love anyone since. Cleante knows she's lost him, if she'd ever had him to begin with.

"Poor Kevin!" she says, wrapping her arms around him, nestling her head in the hollow of his shoulder. "Poor Dajan, poor Jandra, poor Hikaru, poor everybody!"

"Sha," Riley whispers in Gaelic, rocking her, stroking her hair. "Sha, macushlah!"

In a borrowed office in the Admiralty, James T. Kirk is completing a log entry.

"...and special commendations to the following: Lieutenant M'Lynn Kittay, Ensign Alex Rosenzweig, Ensign Kevin Ryan..."

He shuts the recorder off, seems lost in thought, does not notice McCoy lounging in the doorway until the good doctor clears his throat.

"Aren't you ready yet? Time's awasting! Where's Spock?"

"He said he'd meet us in the carpark." Jim Kirk passes his hands wearily over his face, slumps slightly in the chair. "I don't know if I'm really up for this tonight, Bones."

"Gillian's gonna be real disappointed," McCoy begins, until he sees that this isn't just inertia, but something deeper. "All right, let's hear it!"

Kirk is thinking of his log entry, thinking: There are no commendations for a Romulan named Dajan, who may have sacrificed his life for us. There is no justice in this universe for fools like Tiam, who manage to insinuate themselves into the shadow of the throne in any corrupt regime. There should be some satisfaction in knowing we defused the Probe and turned its knowledge to the good, and there is, but it seems - tainted somehow. And I'll never know if Rihan will survive the system long enough to get his wish

and become an engineer.

"It's nothing," he tells McCoy, pulling himself to his feet. He does not remember Earth gravity being quite this heavy. "You're right. Let's go."

McCoy is not so easily fooled.

"Look, Jim," he says as they make their way down the corridors, cadets and junior officers scurrying out of their way, "you win some, you lose some, and on the whole, I'd say you won this one. You won over the Probe, hands down. You got Sulu, Riley and T'Shael back, and I for one had my doubts about Sulu until the very last minute."

They have reached the subterranean carpark, where the party in question is hailing them from the hatchway of Kirk's official skimmer, which he's maneuvered into an optimal departure position near the entrance.

"Another thing: If it's any consolation, no one died on this mission," McCoy continues, climbing over Spock in the skimmer, trying not to bump his head as he settles into his seat of choice, inveterate backseat driver. "Except for a bunch of Romulan scientists who were meddling where they didn't belong in the first place."

Kirk merely grunts, settling in behind Sulu and adjusting the restraint.

"And last but not least," McCoy concludes as Sulu starts the skimmer and wings her up the exit ramp, glancing over at Spock, who raises one eyebrow as Sulu rolls his eyes, "consider the fact that this evening's performance has been made possible by your contribution!"

A worlds-famous conductor strides up to the podium of an equally famous symphony orchestra, acknowledging the standing ovation before motioning for silence.

"Good evening, Gentles, and welcome," Maestra Espinoza addresses her audience. "While it has been the Philharmonic's stated purpose in this Beethoven Quinticentennial year to perform only the nine symphonies, you have all doubtless noticed the addition of a non-symphonic piece to tonight's scheduled program. To the purists, I do not apologize. The Emperor Concerto requires no apology. Neither does tonight's soloist."

She is not listed by name in the program, but the word has gotten out. A groundswell of excitement has animated this glittering audience since they arrived and, as Maestra Espinoza gestures toward the green room it grows into a torrent.

So cool and in control she might be mistaken for a Vulcan, Jandra enters at the back of the orchestra and approaches the piano positioned stage-right of the podium. As she passes among the brass someone winks at her; she rewards him with a faint smile. The ubiquitous Harper, Starfleet: Inactive, is subbing on French horn this evening.

What does one have to give? Jandra wonders as she nods her readiness to Maestra Espinoza, and together they lead the orchestra through the sparkling first movement. What does one have to sacrifice to

have what one desires most?

Sib is still alive; she knows this through the special symbiosis of their twindom. Alive, but how? This she will not, cannot not know, until they meet again, and they must. Jandra clings to the tenuous thread of Dajan's consciousness within her, and plays.

Among her audience, two more who share a similar thread have made their peace with it long since.

"You blocked me!" Cleante accused T'Shael on the return from Typhon. "I couldn't read you at all from *Hannsu*. What did you do?"

"I was preoccupied," T'Shael had replied, not precisely answering the question.

"Does it occur to you that it's a lot easier to cope if I know what's going on with you, however difficult, than knowing nothing at all? If you ever do that to me again..."

Tonight Cleante's own thoughts are in a muddle, though her red-rimmed eyes and Kevin Riley's absence require no telepathy to comprehend. Nevertheless, T'Shael observes, concerned for her, she manages to seem totally absorbed in the music, joining the thunderous standing ovation for Jandra, chatting and bubbling with Uhura and Gillian Taylor at intermission.

"Oh, thank you!" Gillian, an expert bubbler, gushes when she sees the souvenir Spock has brought her, a perfect blue zoisite crystal from the Typhon caves. "It's gorgeous!"

Spock is in danger of being kissed in public this time, when he is rescued by Maestra Espinoza, who is doing what she does second-best, playing hostess to her audience of glitterati, making introductions.

"Captain Spock? I wonder if I might introduce you to the noted historian Garamet Jen-Saunor?"

"Most honored, Maestra," Spock intones, "though Dr. Jen-Saunor and I have met before..."

"Are you in from the cold yet?" Jim Kirk makes a point of asking Sulu, who has said little to anybody since he beamed straight off *Enterprise* and into Special Section for debriefing, and now stands apart, watching the play of light and water in the fountain. Kirk wonders if he'll ever get his helmsman back whole. "You know, I thought about making you choose between Special Section and *Enterprise* after this mission, but that wouldn't be fair to you. Still, I need to know..."

"Don't worry about me, Captain," Sulu says, in a tone which makes Kirk wonder not whether he should worry, but how much. "This too shall pass."

"I'm taking your word for that - so far," Kirk answers as Gillian Taylor swoops down on him.

"Oh, Jim, this is wonderful!" Her voice carries through the most relentless crowd-buzz. "You lassoed the

Probe; I'm so proud of you! I tell you, when that thing showed up off Mer, I almost had a coronary, but right away it started in, chattering with the natives, friendly as can be. And now I'm told I may be on the return expedition to the Typhons. I tell you what: if the grant comes through, why don't we all go back? You, me, *Enterprise*, Cleante and T'Shael - we could even bring George and Gracie and the calf in a special enclosed environment; I think they'd love to see where the Probe originated..."

"We'll see!" is all Jim Kirk can say, tickled by her enthusiasm.

A ripple, a wave, runs through the intermission crowd then as Jandra appears, looking weary from her debut performance or perhaps from something else, but resplendent, graciously acknowledging the renewed applause, though that is not why she has come here. She is seeking T'Shael.

"The Maestra says to tell you the Seventh is yours tonight."

If she had any thought of refusing, the introverted one is quickly dissuaded.

"In memory of the Gifted One," Jandra says, "and for me."

They disappear backstage as the chimes ring and the lights dim to indicate the end of intermission. Again Maestra Espinoza makes an announcement. Her audience, barely masking their disappointment that it is not she who will perform, nevertheless gives the newcomer their tentative approval. They have heard her story, and are intrigued. The spare, unprepossessing figure is greeted with a milder applause than Jandra earned, but she will win them over before she has done.

Up in the balcony, in the cheap seats, she is under the scrutiny of a peculiar threesome.

"Plain as an old shoe!" M'Lynn Kittay sniffs. "Oh, brilliant, sure, but that goes without saying. But looks-wise..."

"I don't know," Kevin Ryan remarks, too loud: he is immediately shushed by someone in the row behind them. "I think she's kind of intriguing. Mysterious."

"It's not her, you twits!" Annek, hisses impatiently, on the edge of her seat. She has mastered the perfect stage-whisper, just loud enough. "It's what she does, how the music works through her, like any artist. I think she's beautiful!"

Uhura, if she could overhear, would agree. She's given up matchmaking; this last voyage has given her enough else to worry about, principally Sulu. She is seated on the aisle, at the end of the row of Starfleet VIP's and can observe all their faces by merely inclining her head. She glances first at Hikaru at the far end, seated beside Jandra, who has taken T'Shael's seat. Are they holding hands? It isn't any romantic thing, Uhura's sure, but merely comfort: two friends mourning the same loss. Poor Dajan! Uhura thinks, not for the first time.

Spock is next to her, and harder to study without being obvious, nevertheless she manages it. No more matchmaking! she decides, watching him watching T'Shael weave her way through the music, thinking: Someday he'll find the right one, maybe someday soon. As for T'Shael, she's a harder case. But I'm out of business for now.

She looks at Jim Kirk next and wants to sigh. The older he gets, the harder it seems to be for him to shake off the after-effects of each new mission. He's listening to the music with half an ear; Uhura wonders where his mind is.

The music, in fact, haunts Jim Kirk, reminds him of Typhon and the Probe and how he might have done the universe a favor by wringing Tiam's neck. He does not sigh so much as exhale slowly, thinking: Self-pity's an ugly thing. Maybe McCoy's right.

"Indeed," Spock murmurs beside him. Jim Kirk twitches.

"I hate it when you do that!"

Even in the twenty-third century, San Francisco time is still three hours earlier than New York. Dr. M'Benga decides to finish one more lab test before he calls it a day.

Rubbing his eyes, he studies the scan, then rubs his eyes again.

"Oh, no!" he says aloud, though he is alone in the room. "Oh, please, don't tell me -!"

But the results on his screen refuse to change at his command.

Somewhere on the outer reaches of the Sagittarian arm, where the stars are eldest in our galaxy, a solitary Wanderer traverses the space between, humming to itself. The music of the spheres it sings sounds suspiciously like Beethoven.

The New York Philharmonic Orchestra pauses, catching its collective breath before the tumultuous fourth movement. With an almost feverish glow in her strange, hooded eyes, T'Shael raises her baton.

"I'll go back for you, bro, I swear it!" Sulu thinks, not for the first time. Beside him, permitting him to hold her talented hand in his own, Jandra puts her finger to her lips.

"The gods willing!" she whispers, "but not now!"

Sulu realizes she is right, accepts what she and the Probe have known all along: There are times when nothing matters but the music.