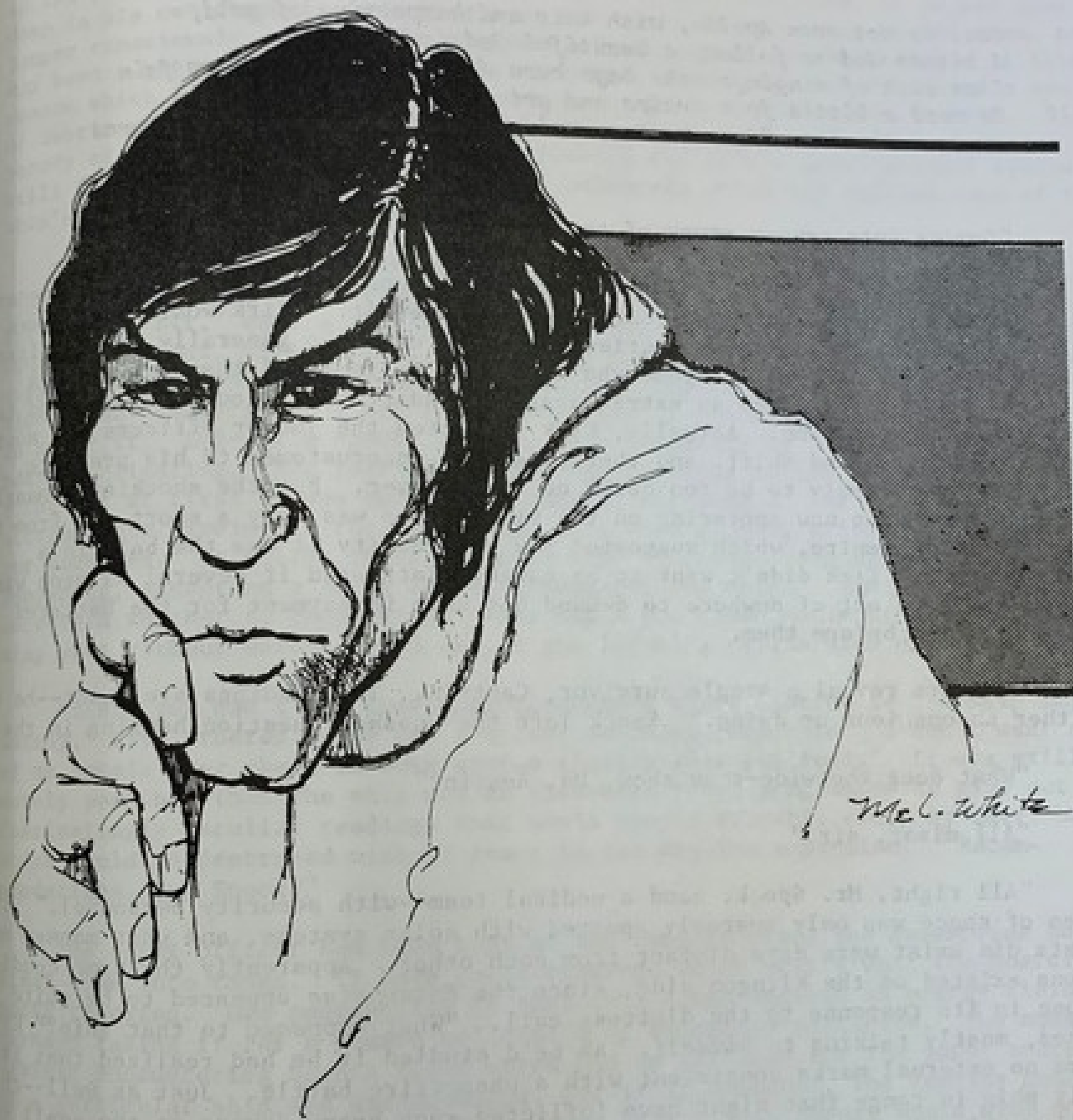


A BITTER GOD TO FOLLOW,



A BEAUTIFUL GOD TO BEHOLD

by Sue Crites

*Yea, is not even Apollo, with hair and harpstring of gold,
A bitter God to follow, a beautiful God to behold?
I am sick of singing: the bays burn deep and chafe: I am fain
To rest a little from praise and grievous pleasure and pain.*
"Hymn to Proserpine", Algernon Charles Swinburne

"Coming into sensor range of the vessel in distress now, Captain."

"Very good, Mr. Spock. Lieutenant, keep a good close eye on your wide-area scans. Report anything suspicious *before* you see it." Kirk would have given a similar warning to the more experienced bridge crew who generally worked first shift with him. Not that anyone who needed to be reminded that answering a Klingon distress call was an extra-hazardous undertaking should be assigned to the bridge at any time. Actually, Kirk suspected the junior officers who mostly served on the second shift, and therefore were unaccustomed to his presence, might be more likely to be too quick on the trigger. But the shockingly mangled Klingon scoutship now appearing on the viewscreens was only a short run from the border of the Empire, which suggested the possibility it was the bait in a cunning trap. Kirk didn't want to be caught flatfooted if several Klingon warships appeared out of nowhere to demand his ship in payment for the battered hulk floating before them.

"Sensors reveal a single survivor, Captain. The readings are faint--he is either unconscious or dying." Spock left the unasked question hanging in the air.

"What does the wide-scan show, Ms. Austin?"

"All clear, sir."

"All right, Mr. Spock, send a medical team--with security personnel." This area of space was only sparsely spotted with solar systems, and what manned outposts did exist were days distant from each other. Apparently the same conditions existed on the Klingon side, since the *Enterprise* appeared to be quite alone in its response to the distress call. "What *happened* to that ship?" Kirk asked, mostly talking to himself. As he'd studied it he had realized that it bore no external marks consistent with a phaserfire battle. Just as well--the only ship in range that might have inflicted such heavy damage on the small but well-armed and shielded Klingon scout was his.

"Unknown, Captain. Whatever it may have been, the readings I get of residual heat and energy flows seem to confirm that it was this emergency which caused them to send the distress call we picked up. The timing is right." Subspace radio was constantly monitored by a rapidly oscillating band searcher, set to bring anything that fell within its programmed definition of 'unusual/important' to the attention of the communications officer. "Some of these readings are quite peculiar. Perhaps it would be possible to retrieve the ship's log and gain some relevant information."

"Wait until the medical team gets back aboard. If they don't run into any boobytraps, the security team can try for the log and any other useful data they can pick up."

As the minutes crept by, the junior officers tried very hard not to fidget in the presence of their captain. They needn't have bothered, as he was sunk longer consciously aware of the presence of the others on the bridge. If this had been a battle, it would mean that someone, somewhere, had developed a new weapon which left none of the usual traces--a most effective one to boot. Bits of debris winked in and out of sight as they circled the ship in a grotesque parody of planetary rotation. This indicated the ship's gravitational system still functioned, despite the breach of bulkheads which had spilled some of the ship's contents out into hard vacuum.

The signal of an incoming communicator message sounded and Kirk answered it from his chair, glad to have his thoughts interrupted for a moment. "Lieutenant White here, sir," came a slightly fuzzy voice. *The distance between the two ships isn't that great, Kirk thought. Something must be interfering with the transmission.* "Sir, in my judgment the panel this log is wired through is set to blow at any tampering. I can't guarantee you'll get anything usable if I go in after it. And--it's spooky, things keep happening by themselves over here--boards activating, then going dead, and the lighting system has a weird flutter. I thought at first it was only power surges, but some of the wallplates are sitting here glowing in the dark, and we're even getting glitches in some of our machines. It's like there was some kind of closed-loop miscircuiting feed happening, except on a large scale, throughout the ship." She paused, as if uncertain whether to continue. "We've had a few close calls with doors slamming shut without warning, and one of the lighting panels blew up when--"

"Since you can't get that log, Lieutenant White, return to the ship immediately," Kirk ordered. "We can continue scanning from here. I don't want any of my people over there if some system finally goes critical." It was still remotely possible that the ship was an elaborate trap, programmed to give out fascinatingly peculiar readings that would keep a starship close by until both ships could be destroyed without trace in one massive explosion. "Recommendations, Mr. Spock?"

The first officer had been busy at the sensors since the *Enterprise* had first come into range. "I have noted readings which verify what the boarding party reported. One possibility is that this scout entered an energy field, perhaps taking it for a common collection of energized particles. The odds against encountering such a field which had an affinity for the power systems of a particular ship are astronomical, but if it happened, the results could easily have created the destruction we see here. This theory would also account for the unusual traces of random power activity still present."

"Could the *Enterprise* be in danger?" Kirk asked instantly.

"Unlikely, Captain. The field, if it was a field such as I have postulated, seems to have been more or less dispersed in its encounter with the Klingon vessel." Kirk settled back in his chair, relieved, and Spock added, "I suspect that if the field did have an affinity for the *Enterprise's* circuitry, it

would have been attracted to our ship as soon as we cut warp drive."

"Are you telling me that to make me feel better, Spock?" A nervous giggle from one of the bridge stations was quickly stifled. Kirk pretended not to notice. "So, what we have here is a broken up scoutship, with maybe one survivor. I think we'd better take them both the the nearest neutral outpost, as a neighborly gesture." Spock canted an eyebrow at the breezy tone Kirk was taking. "Well, we can't leave it here as a hazard to navigation, and I suspect we'll be way ahead of the game if we can hand it over to the Klingons exactly the way we found it. If we destroy it, they may think we had a hand in getting it into this condition in the first place."

"The survivor can tell them what happened."

"Maybe. If he makes it. If he even knows what happened--which reminds me, I'd like to talk to him in person when he comes around." Kirk swung his chair back towards the screen. "Mr. Llewellyn, lock on a tractor beam and chart us a course for the nearest neutral outpost station."

"Already charted and laid in, sir. Tractor locking now," the young officer answered briskly.

"Mr. Spock? Will you inform Doctor McCoy I'd like to chat with our guest as soon as it's practical?" The first officer turned to the com unit and was interrupted by Kirk's sudden thought. "Speaking of Klingons, I think we'd better take steps to minimize the loss and damage that may occur when we take that scout under tow. I don't want to drain our power by extending our shields over it. See if Engineering can rig a portable field around it, maybe throw a seal over the breaches in the hull. And tell the damage control party that does it to see to it everything in reach outside gets shoved back in. If this turns out to be some kind of attempt at creating an incident, I want us to come out looking like shining paragons of virtue."

It was a whisper of sound, perhaps nothing more than the brushing of skin against bedfabric, that woke him. His brain magnified it, matching its volume to the last sounds he had heard, maddened alarms and the thud of explosions, backed by the shrieks of electronic systems gone wild . . . and those of men. Kutai shut his eyes reflexively and drew back from the memory, feeling a flash of pain as he dug his shoulders into the mattress beneath him. All was silence around him now, he realized. Where was he?

His mind clearing as his senses sharpened, Kutai began to examine his surroundings. The small room was white, well-lit, undecorated except for a few control plates and the bed he lay in. There was nothing to substantiate his mounting suspicion, but somehow Kutai felt sure this was not a vessel of the Empire. His clothes were gone, replaced by a loose fitting single-piece suit of smooth, shiny black material. A Klingon physician might have ordered him re-garbed, especially if he had needed surgery, but it would have been unthinkable for them not to place his *haraktae*, the leather pouch he always wore, at his side--on a table next to his bed at the most.

Horror, outrage, and half-a-dozen similar emotions surged through him without producing more than a weak echo of his usual strength. It took intense concentration to sit up and sweep the covering off his legs and onto the floor. A wave of dizziness threatened to drop him back to the bed. Ignoring it, and a pain that was beginning to throb slowly across his back, shoulder, and side, Kutai swung his shaking legs over the edge of the raised bed. The door to the room suddenly opened, and he tensed, gathering himself to spring at the man--an Earther!--entering. Then two formidable-looking guards, weapons at the ready, stepped in behind the first Earther. Kutai stopped, clinging to the edge of the mattress with both hands, hoping he would not fall and disgrace himself before the enemy. Stupid not to have realized they would have him under surveillance. He would have to make the second move in the conflict, rather than the first.

"You aren't in any shape to be getting out of bed," the Earther who led the trio informed him testily as he moved to study a readout panel on the wall over the bed. "In fact, you're lucky to be alive." Kutai knew immediately that this one must be the physician--he had never yet met a medical practitioner who did not have an overblown appreciation for his own healing skills. The man confirmed his guess by continuing, "I'm Doctor McCoy. Our rescue team found you a fair toss from a fried-out bank of controls--looks like you were in the wrong place at the wrong time when it blew." Kutai ignored this obvious attempt to ply him for information. "Anyway," McCoy continued, "you broke your arm, shoulder, and a couple of ribs. We also thought for a while that you might have a concussion, but the readings there seem stable now. Have you noticed any injuries we might have missed?"

There must be a translating machine operating in here, Kutai thought, abruptly aware that he ought not to be understanding the language of this alien. "I am well enough," he responded coldly, having no intention of giving the Earthers the least advantage over him which they did not have already. The dizziness was ebbing, though the feeling of great weakness was not, and he decided that whatever drugs they had given him were probably wearing off. To turn the questioning away from him, Kutai demanded, "Where am I?"

"The sickbay of a starship," McCoy answered, looking up with a faint frown at the readout panel. "Why don't you just lay back down there and take it easy? Our captain will be here shortly to ask you a few questions, and maybe he can answer some for you as well."

The Klingon did so after a moment's natural rebellion, reluctantly admitting to himself that he should lie down before he collapsed. There was no sense in giving them an easy excuse to drug him again. One thing was now abundantly clear to him--his situation was serious.

Memory of the last scenes he had witnessed came back to him, brought on by the Earther's words. He had been in his cabin, sitting on his bunk and considering whether to do his stint of exercises now or later, before he went to sleep. An alert siren had sounded, followed by a second and then a third. The clamor had died before he could do more than try to recall the emergency procedures he had been given, making him think with relief it was an error or a drill. But then all three alert horns resumed at once as an explosion somewhere in the ship shook the floor and walls. The door to his room had flown open to admit an agitated crewman, who had thrown him a pressure suit and an explanation which made no sense.

Kutai had struggled into the unfamiliar outfit as the lighting began to flare on and off in counterpoint to the dimming and blaring of the klaxons. Ships couldn't go mad--they weren't alive--yet it was just as terrifying to be faced with the mechanical madness of his surroundings as it would have been to be assaulted by an insane person. He had tried to cram all the effects he was carrying into one parcel, so none would be lost in the evacuation process--if there was to be one, he had thought--then out in the hall--several men dead several ways--and he was attempting to get . . . get where?

Not here. But here is where he had ended up. Kutai looked at the Earther physician and then at the wooden-faced guards. No one could have survived for long aboard that vessel. So if the Earthers had been near enough to capture him while he was still alive, they had been near enough to attack the ship and cause the disaster they claimed to have come and saved him from. It would be best, he decided, not to tell them anything, so as to be sure of not telling them the wrong thing--such as information about the effectiveness of their new weapon.

"I know nothing of the operation of the ship, or the cause of its destruction," Kutai said into the conversational void, hoping to sound as if he had been considering the consequences of silence and had cravenly decided to cooperate. Perhaps if they believed he feared them they would also believe his protestation of ignorance and not press him for details. He ignored the entrance of another Earther in a gold shirt as he continued, "I doubt that I can answer any of your questions. I am a priest, not a ship's officer."

A glint of amusement passed between the newcomer and the physician, which Kutai did not understand or appreciate. "I am James Kirk, captain of the *Enterprise*," said the newcomer. "We picked up a distress call, traced it to this area, and arrived," his emphasis came clearly through the translator, "to find your ship a near-total loss. There were no signs of any other ships in the area. Naturally we are concerned that whatever did this to your ship might pose a danger to other ships on both sides of the border. So if you know anything about . . ."

"I know nothing of ship's operations," repeated Kutai. "You will have to ask one of those assigned to it. I was only a passenger."

"Unfortunately, you are the only survivor." Kutai examined the Earther's face, searching for emotional clues, though he knew he had little chance of interpreting them with any certainty. So the statement could be truth, or a lie for some unguessable purpose.

Perhaps if he assayed some questions of his own he would at least make strategic gains, even though he couldn't trust the veracity of the Earther's answers. "There are . . . objects on board I must retrieve. I need to go back to the ship."

"I'm sorry, but that's impossible, even if McCoy were to release you from sickbay. No one can go back there now," Kirk said, adding privately to himself, *and no one in his right mind would want to. Has he left something valuable behind, or is he planning to activate the self-destruct? We still haven't ruled out the possibility that the Klingons were testing a new weapon that backfired.*

Kutai had paled at the Earther's callous revelation of their destruction of the scout ship. McCoy frowned and made a signal to the captain, who nodded almost imperceptibly. This exchange went all but unnoticed by the Klingon priest, who was putting all his concentration on what his next actions must be, in the light of the shocking information he had just been given.

"Doctor McCoy feels you should rest now," Kirk said, still half fretting to himself over whether or not he ought to send a second boarding party to the Klingon vessel, now that he had reason to suspect it held some kind of vital clue this man in the bed would re-risk his life to get to first. "If there is anything . . ."

Snatching at the unexpected opening, Kutai interrupted, "Where are my possessions?" How to indicate their importance without encouraging the Earthers to steal . . . if they had not already? "I only had . . . my clothing, and" He hesitated, then chose to describe, rather than name it. "A leather pouch, with a long strap? I was wearing it inside the pressure suit, that I do remember."

Kirk turned to McCoy, who looked slightly flustered, as he always did when he had been forced by regulations to do something he ordinarily wouldn't have dreamed of, such as turn a patient's personal property over to someone he knew might not return it intact. "Uh, Security has it, checking it for . . ."

"You dare to touch--" Kutai shouted, attempting to leap from the bed in fury. He failed, ignominiously held back by the old physician's instant reaction to an agitated patient. His chest heaved, rekindling the pain, and he forced himself to become still, laying quietly under the repulsive alien touch until the Earther took his hands away. "I am a priest," he said again, hoping to din it into their feeble brains by repetition if nothing else. "That which you took was a sacred object."

The Earthers exchanged glances, and Kirk spoke. "I am truly sorry; we didn't know. But I'm sure you must understand that a starship is an enclosed environment, and everything that enters it must be cleared first, to make sure it will cause no harm. If it makes you feel any better, the examination is conducted by scanning devices, so the security people won't have needed to open it. Nothing will get lost, and you'll have it back as soon as possible. Providing, of course, that nothing turns up in the check which could pose a danger to the ship or my people."

The explanation made sense, Kutai was forced to admit, though he still did not have to like it. Thinking of aliens handling the *haraktae* made his flesh crawl and a knot form in his internals. He knew nothing about the Earther religion, so could only hope theirs fostered some kind of respect for holy objects. As he studied the Earther captain, he decided it was a slim hope indeed. But on the chance that he would have the *haraktae* and its contents returned to him in exchange for good behavior, he would have to maintain his composure, even if it meant sacrificing his personal pride. No matter how they affronted his sense of honor or debased him by encouraging him to make requests for them to refuse, he must endure it until he got the *haraktae* back. It was all he had left now.

With quiet resignation, Kutai crossed his hands over his chest, hiding his distaste at the slithery feel of the clothing they had provided. The physician

interpreted this correctly, as a sign that he would prefer to rest alone. "I'll bring your . . . er, item . . . in, as soon as I get it back myself," McCoy said, trying to sound reassuring. The two officers departed, leaving Katal alone with his grim thoughts.

Once safely out of earshot in the outer sickbay office, Kirk tapped both hands against his chest and said aggrievedly, "Why me? Don't I have enough to worry about, towing a ship back to the Klingons that looks as though it tried to fly through an asteroid? Why did a priest have to get involved?"

"Maybe you don't live right, Jim. Maybe you should ask him about that," McCoy rejoined, then tried to wipe the smile off his face. "No, I shouldn't have said that . . ." The grin forced its way back and was removed again. "I feel sort of sacreligious--but the idea of a Klingon priest . . ." He managed to come to terms with the concept long enough to say, "Well, I'm sure they must have some kind of religion. I mean, why *not* a priest?"

"Can we be sure that this man really is one?" Kirk asked, growing thoughtful once more as the implications drowned out the odd mental images his mind insisted on producing.

"Frankly, Jim, I know very little about Klingon priests one way or the other, and the little bit I do know is from what's in our computer. Doesn't look like there's been a lot of cultural exchange in the religion department."

"That's not too surprising, all things considered."

"This one we've got has a few physical peculiarities that fit known facts, like the leather pouch he was carrying. And you probably noticed that he doesn't wear a beard, like most Klingon males do?"

"I didn't really pay any attention, but now that you mention it . . ."

"I don't expect he could grow one if he wanted to." McCoy paused to choose his words carefully. "He was . . . castrated at some point. Quite a long time ago and by surgery, not accident, judging from the scars."

Kirk looked like a man who had just had a brick dropped on his stomach. "Looks like," he finally managed to say, "someone was really determined that these priests wouldn't go back on their vows of celibacy."

"That's one way of puttin' it," McCoy agreed, trying to look reproving but not succeeding particularly well. "If they *have* vows of celibacy . . . we don't know for certain that the two facts go together, or even if he's a genuine priest."

"Let's make that assumption for now, and roll out the red carpet as far as possible," Kirk said as they were joined by a security guard who was obviously searching for Doctor McCoy and just as obviously somewhat puzzled.

"Here's the satchel we were given to examine," the guard said, presenting it.

Kirk took it, unable to resist looking it over a little himself. It was

about the size of two tricorders laid side by side, made of dark, heavy leather with few seams, sealed securely at the top with some kind of unfamiliar fastener. "What's in it?"

"Dirt, sir."

"Dirt?" Kirk's eyebrow rose in an unconscious imitation of Spock. "Plain old dirt?"

"Yes, sir. Just plain dirt. The only thing even slightly unusual is that it seems to be a mixture of dirt, as if someone had collected a little here and a little there from . . . anywhere up to several hundred different places. We didn't examine it for anything except disease organisms and other dangerous components, so I can't tell you any more details than that on the dirt composition." He seemed to remember something, and politely took the pouch back from the captain. "There's a sort of hidden sheath here, too, sir. Has a knife in it." He pulled it partway out to show the dark metal hilt and a thin stiletto-type blade which looked quite old and extremely sharp.

"That we keep until he's ready to leave," Kirk said decisively. "In Security storage will be fine," he added pointedly, and the ensign left, after handing the pouch to McCoy with a brisk nod. "So, Bones . . . I'm going to get to bed, *finally*. You can go give your priest his . . ." he swallowed the smile with an effort, " . . . dirt back, and I'll see you in the morning."

"Meaning you want me to be the one to explain why we've confiscated his knife," McCoy said sourly.

"Tell him you're the only person in sickbay allowed to handle sharp objects --no, that doesn't say much for the rest of your staff, does it?" Kirk smothered a yawn, prepared to look mildly apologetic if McCoy was going to take offense.

"Get to bed. You can't captain right if you're half-asleep," McCoy said in a gruff voice, shoving Kirk gently towards the door. "You certainly aren't making much sense now. . . ." Once Kirk had waved farewell and wandered off into the main corridor, McCoy grimaced at his burden, then entered the room where his patient lay. The one guard still on duty followed him, stopping to stand by the door on the inside.

McCoy handed the bag over, hoping he wasn't being irreverent in some obscure way, then stood clasping his hands behind his back. Dammit, he was as eye-blinkingly weary as Kirk was--what was he expected to say to this Klingon, anyway?

"Are you comfortable?" he asked, after it became clear the Klingon wasn't going to open the conversation.

"Comfortable enough," replied Kutai. He was obviously anxious for McCoy to leave so that he could investigate the contents of his pouch in private.

In the perverse way the mind has of focusing on trivialities so as not to have to dwell on more difficult matters, McCoy found himself wondering just how well and in what manner the Klingon knew the contents of his pouch. With an

effort he cleared his throat and said, "Uh, I hope this doesn't offend you, but we had to remove the knife--security regulations, you understand. It's in a safe place, and you'll get it back" He noticed--one of those glimpses of detail that sometimes come with great clarity during intense moments--that the Klingon's eyes seemed to have no demarkation between the pupil and the iris; the entire corneal areas looked black, like polished stones. The man's face had all the expression of a stone, come to that.

McCoy rubbed his hands nervously, trying to appear pleased at the quiet way the Klingon had taken the news about the confiscation of his knife, and took the opportunity to check the monitors. Indicators showed the priest was not taking it all that philosophically, but that was to be expected, really. "This all looks fine. Maybe you can get up and walk around a little tomorrow. Meanwhile, you should get some sleep, which is what I'm going to do. If you need anything--" Another awkwardness. But surely he knew he was being monitored? Probably he was even used to it, priest or not. "--give a call. There'll be somebody on duty all night, of course. And I'll see you tomorrow."

You will not, Kutai thought, as he watched the Earther walk from the room, and the thought surprised him. He hadn't realized he had come to a firm decision in the short time they had left him alone. His fingers slowly stroked the familiar surface of the *haraktae* as he contemplated the disastrous course of events which had led him here, methodically going over it all once more before committing himself irrevocably to what he already knew was his only real option. The ship *Ttashei* was gone; its crew killed in the unexplained disaster, their remains and the wreckage destroyed by the Earthers. He closed his eyes against the hollow feeling of horror swelling in him at the thought of the men thus left unconsecrated, unburied--separated forever from their families like the worst sort of criminals. Steeling himself against what he already knew he would discover, Kutai slipped the fastening of the *haraktae* and delicately brushed his hand through the unfilled space above its normal contents. Nothing. The personal effects he had been gathering up in his last moments aboard the dead ship were not there.

Easiest, he thought with a pang of guilt, *to believe the Earthers had stolen them when they had the haraktae in their possession*. But he had searched his memory and found no clear recollection of doing more than bundling the small packet. It was possible he had left it behind in the confusion. So . . . whether the personal effects of the dead had been stolen or destroyed by the Earthers, in either case he was bound to redeem them, as well as perform the ritual for the *Ttashei's* crew. It was clear that he had never had any other choice.

I wish, he thought, *it was safe to anticipate rescue by a warship. Then I could know the families of the dead men would at least be told that the ritual was accomplished. But I have no way of knowing what the aliens plan to do with me; I cannot risk them taking the haraktae from me again. Let the Earthers be lost*, he swore bitterly to himself, anger and a grief perilously close to self-pity rising up in him. Not an attitude that would strengthen him for what he had to do, he corrected himself, and settled down to make a minute study of the room.

He had located one surveillance camera, but he knew there might be more. Ignoring it could prove to be his undoing, because they would not be stupid enough to give him a second chance. Luckily, the lights had been dimmed when

they left. He knew that some kinds of cameras worked in non-visible light, but every possibility that might work in his favor was welcome at the moment. At last he concluded that the single camera in the corner of the room was the only one he had to hide from. Moving slowly, as was easiest with his still tender injury sites, Kutai hugged the *haraktae* to his chest with his good arm and rolled to one side, putting his back to the camera, with his head apparently pillowed on one arm. He lay still, trying to breathe normally so as not to set off the monitoring devices, gritting his teeth against the pains in his arm and shoulder. Nothing happened; no one came in.

Just one wrist, he thought. I cannot do both and still hold this position. He inched the pouch into a more convenient spot, wishing they hadn't taken his blade. It was somehow easier to violate one's flesh with an instrument than to force the body to turn against itself.

Filling his mind with thoughts of the crew's heroic struggles against their ship's destruction, all the acts he had seen in those last moments aboard the *Ttashei*, Kutai drew a determined breath, then forced his teeth to meet through the skin, muscle, and prominent vein in his left wrist. Blood spurted into his mouth, almost making him gag, but he carefully spat it into the *haraktae* as he laid his hand in a blessing upon the smooth soil packed inside. Closing his eyes to aid the illusion of slumber, should anyone be watching he sighed and relaxed as best he could.

Outside, the monitor remote let out a faint ping. The duty nurse came over to it, frowning. An increase in nervous system signals--pain starting to build again. Had Doctor McCoy prescribed additional sedatives for the patient? He checked the orders and saw none. It wouldn't be the usual thing, for a human, to give painkillers for the relatively mild reactions left after a boneknitting, but perhaps Klingons were different. If it didn't level off, the nurse decided, he would ask Doctor Arnold, who was standing his watch in the rec room down the corridor playing computer games with the other nurse.

As the nurse switched the screen back to the monitor readout, it seemed to come alive with noise, making him wonder for one crazy second if he'd somehow broken it. Then he picked out the problem--rapid rise in pulse rate coupled with falling blood pressure. "Rec room 7--Doctor Arnold, emergency!" he shouted into the intercom, waiting only to see an acknowledgement light flash before he ran into the Klingon's room, with a security guard close behind him.

His reactions slowed by his weakened condition, Kutai froze for a moment in panic and despair before rage overwhelmed him. Rolling to his back, still holding the *haraktae* firmly against his body, he lashed out with a kick that caught the nurse hard on the sternum, flinging him back against the wall to lie stunned and struggling for air. The human in the red shirt spun to the side in a reaction that showed he was a trained fighter, letting the nurse's body fly past without losing his own momentum forward or more than a split second of time. Kutai's second attempt at a kick was slammed aside, and though he managed to strike the guard's face with his right hand, it was an awkward blow that did no real damage. He found himself ignominiously pinned beneath a swearing, sweaty, and very angry human, unable to move. Darkness threatened and Kutai exulted at the approach of his victory as the room whirled. Then something hard pressed his arm. He felt a stinging sensation, and lost all awareness.

* * * *

Right on the second that marked the beginning of the primary shift, Spock walked into sickbay. McCoy groaned to himself and half-snarled, "Good morn-ing," in response to Spock's greeting.

"The captain will require a report on last night's incident as soon as you can compile it," Spock informed him, the social niceties out of the way.

"Tell me somethin' I don't know," McCoy snapped. "I had breakfast in here so I could work on it."

"Are there any complications with Lieutenant Hunter's injury?"

"No, he'll be fine. He's a little bruised up, but mostly he just got the wind knocked out of him. And LeMasters only has a black eye. All things con-sidered, our team came out ahead."

"All things considered, Doctor, we were very fortunate not to lose any personnel . . . or the patient."

McCoy half-bristled, then relaxed as he realized Spock was not purposely baiting him. "You're right. Half . . . no, three-quarters of my bad mood this morning is because I couldn't get back to sleep for hours las night after they'd called me in here. I was the last to see him before he made the attempt, and didn't even notice any signs of incipient suicide. I keep thinking there might have been something I could have done."

"I have yet to find a satisfactory method for predicting the irrationalities of others, and I have been searching for a considerable length of time." The smile that never surfaced glimmered for a moment beneath Spock's benign expres-sion.

"I don't like having to restrain someone like an animal," McCoy sighed, turning back to the console where his half-written report waited. "But I have enough people goin' and dyin' on me, without letting someone do it on purpose."

"Did he offer any explanation?"

"He won't talk to anyone. I haven't got the foggiest notion about what made him do something so . . ." Words temporarily failed the doctor, and he substituted a good snort of dismay. "I guess they pretty much feel about us the same way we do about them. Not exactly a cheering thought for starting out the day, is it, Spock?"

Ignoring the rhetorical question, Spock asked, "Would you object to my attempting to speak with him? It is unlikely, but perhaps I will be able to reason with him."

"Spock, make yourself at home in there. Offer to convert, if you think it will do any good. I haven't a prayer with him." Spock allowed a slightly pained expression to cross his face and McCoy felt somewhat cheered. He was grinning as he turned back to finish his report.

The guard moved to follow Spock as the Vulcan approached the door to the seclusion room, but Spock waved him back. With the prisoner restrained, there was no need for the presence of a guard, which was almost certain to further dampen any hope of a conversation.

Kutai's gaze was firmly fixed on the ceiling, and he did not move when he heard the door open. From the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of the intruder--a *Vulcan* this time! What next, talking animals? The Federation military had no standards at all, it appeared.

"I am Spock, the first officer." There was a brief spell of silence, which plainly expressed Kutai's deep disinterest in this fact. "I believe you may be laboring under some misapprehensions concerning us, and would like to take this opportunity to explain what we plan to do with you."

In spite of his vow to remain aloof, Kutai felt he must face down this . . . this pacifist who had come to offer him bribes and blandishments. "I no longer care what you do, Vulcan," he said, then added several phrases few people would expect a priest to have even heard.

As if Kutai had expressed interest instead of hostility, Spock went on smoothly, "We are en route to Outpost 336, which is, as you may be aware, a neutral space station where a good deal of open trade is conducted. You will be freely turned over to a representative of the Klingon government upon our arrival. Under these circumstances, I see no logical reason for you to repeat your actions of last night." He waited in vain for the Klingon to agree and promise not to reattempt suicide. When several minutes had passed in silence, Spock walked from the room.

As soon as the door closed, Kutai tried once more to fight the multiple restraints, furious that his body strength was slowly fading. He had refused the morning meal and his stomach was protesting at regular intervals. Everything was going wrong, everything! He had fully believed he was dying when he lost consciousness, and waking had been a bitter, bitter experience. Total failure--it would be an embarrassment now, to be turned over to his people. Somehow they had even managed to disguise the wound marks which would have proved he had *tried* to do his duty.

If the Vulcan was not lying; if he would eventually be given over to Klingon officials with the *haraktae* in his possession, he might yet salvage his tattered honor. But things had turned so thoroughly against him that he refused to comfort himself with a hope that might prove false.

In the sickbay office, McCoy was waiting with the report. "Come to any meeting of the minds?"

"Negative, Doctor." The phrase clued McCoy in. If Spock was using the strict military English construction, he was angry; the interview must have gone badly. "I assured him he had nothing to fear from us and that we were hurrying to reunite him with his government. He did not appear to believe me." Yes, McCoy could see that Spock was definitely angry. Even though the story that Vulcans could not lie was a myth, it was a myth Spock liked to think everyone believed, especially where he was concerned.

"So how long until we get to wherever we're taking Mr. Sunshine?"

"Another 2.4 days."

"Swell. Two days of extra work for the staff, making sure he doesn't die, starve, go crazy, or get bedsores. Just great."

"I have one other idea, Doctor." For a change, Spock looked somewhat confident and McCoy was immediately intrigued. "It is very unlikely to be a productive one, but . . ."

"What, what?" McCoy interrupted impatiently, unable to bear the sight of Spock being modest.

"As he does seem to be a genuine priest, perhaps you could arrange for the ship's chaplain to try and talk with him."

McCoy's jaw dropped. "Lindsey? Put Lindsey in there with him?"

"He is unable to harm her in his present condition," Spock reminded McCoy with some asperity.

"That's true . . . but I don't know, Spock, it sounds so . . . so useless and farfetched, and desperate. Frankly, it's almost insanely creative. I didn't think you had it in you."

"Have I mentioned before, Doctor, that you have a most peculiar way of framing a compliment?"

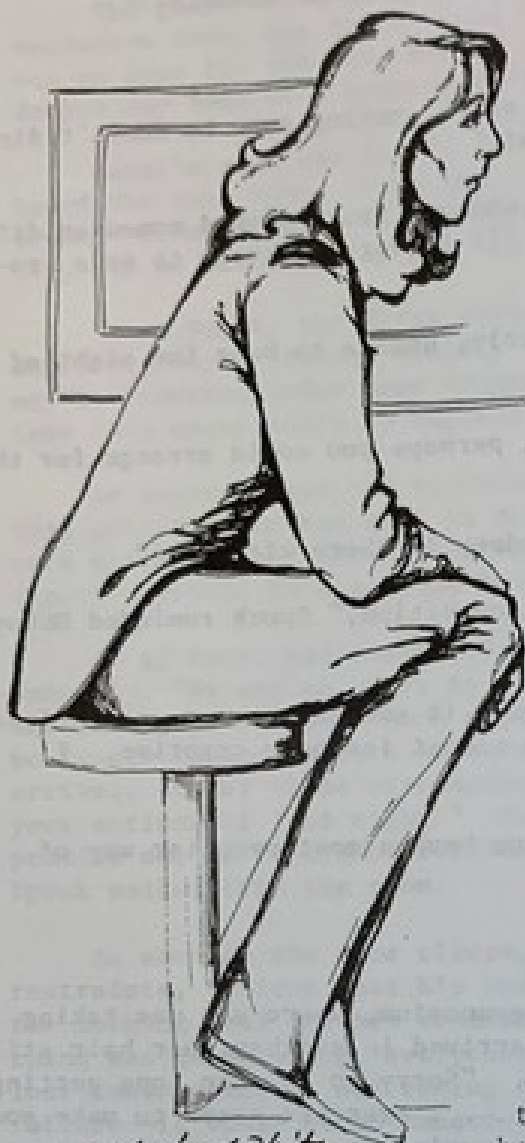
The chaplain was finally located in the gymnasium, where she was taking part in the yoga class. Some time later she arrived in sickbay, her hair still damp around the edges from being in the sauna. "Sorry to take so long getting up here, but I was held up talking to someone . . . exercise seems to make some people feel communicative, you know? As if loosening up their body loosens up the barriers in their mind." She dropped into a chair with the unthinking ease of someone who is welcomed, or at least invited to sit down, nearly everywhere she goes.

"Unfortunately, the man I want you to talk to can't go down to the sauna. He's under restraints because he tried to kill himself last night."

"No! Who is it?" Lindsey demanded, her eyes widening with concern, one hand half-drifting to her mouth to help cover her shock. She knew almost everyone on board, was at least partly responsible for their emotional well-being . . . if someone had been feeling that depressed without her having the slightest suspicion of it. . . .

"Not a crewmember," McCoy reassured her quickly. "The Klingon we rescued yesterday."

"We rescued him, and now he's trying to kill himself? Why?"



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"He won't say why. Claims he's a priest; we thought he just might talk to you about it. Like . . . I don't know . . . professional courtesy or something?"

"All ecclesiasts are cousins under the skin, you mean?" she asked wryly. Now there was a common belief. Not that there wasn't some truth to it, but on the whole, she sometimes felt there were more exceptions proving the rule than not, and that perhaps someone should change the rule. The thought made her smile, but she assumed a proper, dignified demeanor as she stood. "I'll do what I can, of course. Where is he?"

Entering the seclusion room, Lindsey paused in the doorway to accustom her eyes to the dimmer light. Was it turned down for a reason? McCoy hadn't said. Maybe they thought the patient would feel less threatened if he wasn't subjected to full illumination. He lay strapped to the bed like a biology specimen, lower body covered by a rumpled sheet, and she winced in sympathy for the indignity of it. His thin, hawklike face was turned to the ceiling, a look of impassivity upon it. Had he heard her come in? She politely cleared her throat to announce her presence, and his head jerked towards her in surprise.

Kutai blinked, not certain for a moment if he was actually seeing a woman in his room. He tested the restraints unobtrusively . . . he knew he would not dream himself into restraints. They were there, and therefore so was she, dressed in a trimly styled shirt--probably a uniform, because she wore an insignia like the others did--and pant set of some color too pale to distinguish in the gloom. Her hair was plae, too, falling around her face and over her shoulders like a delicately grained wooden frame. She was not, to his eyes, especially beautiful . . . did they think he would find her so, be attracted to her exoticness? The attempt to beguile him with a woman should have been an insult; instead, he could not help laughing at the Earthers' naivety. The sound it made in the quiet room was harsh, like the call of a bird of prey, and it was Lindsey's turn to jump.

Still sardonically amused, but beginning to feel a righteous indignation as well, Kutai chose to speak. "You are wasting your time trying to seduce me." As soon as the words left his lips he wished he could call them back. If he had pretended to cooperate, surely she would have had to release him from the restraints, giving him the opportunity to take her hostage. But perhaps she would only feel challenged by his words, and try harder to change his mind. He would let her attempt it, he decided, wondering momentarily whether he could convincingly act like a man being seduced.

"I hate to disappoint you," Lindsey said, moving to the bedside and pulling out the seat folded into the bed pedestal, "but you've got it wrong. I'm just here to talk to you." Kutai eyed her distrustfully, reconsidering his plan to speak with her. "My name is Lindsey Dubois, and I'm the ship's chaplain." She almost extended her hand, out of habit, then clasped them both in her lap just in time. It would be in the worst possible taste to offer to shake hands with someone who was tied up!

The translator, operating with a limited selection of religious terminology, translated 'chaplain' as the identical word Kutai used to describe his office. "A woman priest?" he demanded, shocked, not willing to believe even Earthers could twist fundamental realities so badly.

"Not exactly a priest," Lindsey reassured him, correctly guessing the translator was responsible for the potential misunderstanding. At least it seemed to be stimulating him to talk. "My denomination doesn't have priests. I am a minister."

That word came out 'care-giver', which seemed acceptable to his understanding. "What sort of care do you give?" Kutai asked, the edge of suspicion still lining his tone.

It was Lindsey's turn to wonder for a moment what he was getting at. Turning the word 'minister' from a noun to a verb took her a moment. Then she nodded quickly, pleased to be making progress of a sort. "Spiritual care, to those on the ship whose religious beliefs are similar to mine. You know, holding services . . . and emotional care to anyone who needs it. My secondary duties are personal counseling. I went back to school for a degree in psychology after my ordination." Relating trivia from her past sometimes encouraged others to do the same, giving them a way to lead up to the subject of their problems.

"I need no such care," Kutai said with finality.

How many times have I heard versions of that? Lindsey wondered, shaking her head a fraction. It was her first solid indication that there might be enough similarities between Klingon and human nature for her to be able to reach the man. "Fine, then. But I wonder . . . maybe you wouldn't mind telling me a little bit about your religion? You know how it is--get two professional anything together and right away they start talking shop." She laughed what was intended to be a light, social putting-at-ease sort of laugh, but composed herself without selfconsciousness when she saw it had no soothing effect on the Klingon. "Seriously, I am very interested in anything you might like to tell me concerning

your beliefs. One of the main reasons I signed up as a chaplain in Starfleet was because it gave me a chance to learn about the religions of different cultures. Some answers, you know, you can't get from texts--you have to talk to people who've spent their life considering . . . unknowns, and then start using what you've learned from them to search out the reasons for the questions. . . . " She shook her head with a faint smile as she let the sentence trail off. No telling how her extemporaneous monologue had come out after being recycled through the translator.

Kutai had understood, not only the words, but the drive behind them. He felt an eager desire to reach out in return and share his thoughts with someone who felt as he did--and it frightened him more thoroughly than anything he had experienced on the Terran ship until that moment. The idea that they had found a way to manipulate him, to touch the core of his mind, horrified him. It was his passion to comprehend the mysteries of existence which had dragged him from home and family into the priesthood. He wanted to talk with her now, and so he knew it was far too dangerous. "I . . . I do not wish to discuss it," he managed to say in a more-or-less level voice.

Lindsey nodded politely, her disappointment obvious. "I don't want to pry," she told him. "But if you change your mind, or feel like talking later, about anything--or if you need anything I can get for you, just tell the medical staff you want to see me, and I'll come."

Feeling betrayed and not understanding why, Kutai lashed out with bitter sarcasm, "You can get me my blade, and a few minutes of privacy."

To his astonishment, Lindsey accepted this as a serious request. "Tell me why," she said, a stern serenity suddenly molding her features into formidable lines he found strangely appealing. "I can make you no promises, but if you can make me understand, I may be able to intercede for you with the captain."

Kutai shifted uncomfortably under the straps across his body, seeking the snare in her words. Somehow, making no promise made him trust her more than if she had sworn great oaths to aid him. But could she help him? Was it worth the risks he would be taking by simply talking to her? At last he said slowly, "I will try . . . to explain to you. But you know nothing of our religion . . . I don't know where to start."

"Suppose I ask you questions--about your religion?" she said, throwing up a hand to forestall the suspicious retreat into mute obstinacy she saw in his eyes. "Nothing about anything else unless you volunteer it--that I do promise." Kutai considered her searchingly, then nodded his consent.

"Why were you shocked when you thought I said I was a priest?"

"Because . . . you are female."

"You have only male priests in your religion?"

"Yes. Because you . . . any female . . . has the capability of bearing children. . . ."

"You aren't saying that means all women should stay home to have children,

and nothing but that?" Practically a history text come to life, Lindsey thought, bemused and a bit annoyed.

"No, no--a priest . . . " Kutai stopped, searching for words to explain something so basic to him that he had never needed to verbalize it before. "A priest is the embodiment of death. How could a woman, who creates life, symbolize that? As the saying is, 'Death cannot reproduce itself.'"

His face was earnest, the logic almost reasonable to her. But the concept--"Are you telling me, then, that the deity you worship is . . . death?"

Kutai looked at Lindsey with the same blank disbelief, suggesting he too was wondering about the accuracy of the translator. "What is greater? But what do you worship?"

"We have many denominations, many different beliefs, and many names for the same thing. But I would call what we worship life, rather than death."

"Ah. But . . . the same thing, then," he replied, losing his sullen, uncommunicative look in the heat of the quest for consolidated knowledge. His expression urged her to pick up his meaning, a natural teacher reaching out to join minds.

"The same? How do you get that?"

"They are opposites. Neither could exist without the other. And so--the same thing." A light of comprehension broke over her face and Kutai grinned without realizing he did so.

"Oh, I wish Doctor Hu was here! He was the best Comparative Religion teacher I ever studied under . . . naturally, because he was a Taoist--"

"'Religion of the Way'?"

Lindsey shook her head in a laugh. "Who programmed this translator, I wonder? I'm beginning to fear it will be as much a hindrance as a help."

"Not so. Without it, we could not understand each other at all." Kutai meant it as a mere pleasantry, but the deeper implications of what he had just said made him pause.

Lindsey smoothly filled the gap with another question. "Do you have more than one religion in your Empire?"

"No. It is all one." She rubbed the bridge of her nose, considering this rather amazing example of solidarity. "There are . . . I do not know how the actual word will translate . . . groups with slightly divergent opinions? Still all of the same belief?"

"Oh, I know what you mean," Lindsey agreed. "A number of our religions have those too. Groups with a different idea of how to implement their beliefs in daily life, or a different slant on interpretations of the holy writings they subscribe to."

"How many different religions do you have, in the Federation?"

"Thousands," Lindsey told him, a little ruefully. "Fortunately, about 95% politely agree to disagree on theology. One large reason for the continued existence of so many varied systems is that many people like to continue the same traditional worship ceremonies that their ancestors used. On the whole, we all try to maintain an awareness of a higher level of unity." Kutai's eyes flickered momentarily and Lindsey paused, imagining he had something important to say. But he didn't speak, and she went on, "The public consensus is pretty much that we are all God's children . . . not to say that there isn't a little sibling rivalry felt from time to time. . . ."

"Your belief is in a God as Parent?" Kutai asked, completely forgetting that the idea of this conversation had been for him to tell her of his religion.

"More strictly, as Creator--though that is more than a little because of traditional historical beliefs. You might better say we believe--as a whole--in a God Who either is, or caused to be, the power that sustains the ongoing universe." Kutai's expression was intense, as if he was struggling to make a connection between his concepts and hers. Recognizing his need to grope after these ideas, Lindsey asked him, "What is your deity-concept?"

"Like yours, our . . . deity is the Power and . . . substance of the Infinite. Our religion simplifies, by symbolism. Death is the aspect of the All which has the most relevance for living creatures."

"Not life?"

"Living creatures already have life. Even when we are joined together in our families, and as one people, that is only a poor approximation of the Unity that we will all join in after death."

"You do believe in an afterlife, then?"

"Of course. Any fool can plainly see energy transfer has taken place when a living thing becomes a dead one."

"Well, yes. I'm afraid, though--speaking just for Terrans--we've had doubters for centuries who refused to accept *any* theories on what that phenomenon meant until *one* could be irrevokably proven." Kutai sneered his disgust. "Yes, I know. But it's still the prime bone of contention between believers and non-believers." Speaking of non-believers somehow reminded Lindsey she was supposed to be trying to find out why this Klingon priest had tried to kill himself. "Well, knowing you believe in an afterlife gives me at least the beginning of an understanding about why you . . . tried to end your life last night."

"Does it?" he rejoined, suddenly defensive again.

"Only in that it is, from one point of view, a practical way to get from someplace you don't want to be, to someplace you do."

Kutai shook his head as vehemently as he could, for being held so firmly against the mattress. "Then you do not understand. I did not do it for myself."

It was a . . . holy action?" She looked puzzled and he tried a different word. "A sacrament?" This time she nodded encouragement, her brows knit together as she leaned forward to concentrate on what he was saying.

It was very difficult, trying to explain something so important to him to an alien, even one so interested, and predisposed to understand him. "A priest's main duty," he finally said, speaking in fragments, sorting through years of experience to recall the words of explanation given to children, "is to perform ceremonies for those who have died, so to give comfort to the families still living. We travel constantly; the inhabitants of clansteads will get a visit for these ceremonies once a year if they are a large family, less often for small ones." She still seemed to be with him and he branched out into a revelation that was, to him, an offering of deeper intimacy than mere body contact could ever be. "The leather pouch which has been taken from me? We wear them at all times, or nearly so. When we arrive at a clanstead or town or anyplace where our people have gathered, we take a small handful of the soil and put it in with the rest of what we carry. When we leave, we scatter some--our many worlds are One, in this way--our many people are One. As we will someday all be One."

Lindsey attempted to smile so that she would not cry, putting one row of fingertips across her lips in an attempt to stop them from quivering. "That is a . . . beautiful concept," she managed to say. She did not add that half her inclination to tears was because she was overwhelmed to discover an aspect of basic Klingon nature that was not only admirable in general, but personally enlightening to her. It was a stark vision of universal brotherhood, but to find it there at all. . . . Her old vague ideas, what she thought of when she thought of the infinite roster of fellow souls, were humbled in comparison.

"Home and family--they are very important to my people," Kutai continued, his voice sounding rough with the emotion he sought to contain. "Most Klingons own a . . . a small device or ornament which is a family symbol. They carry it with them for life, and pass it on to the next generation when they die." He closed his eyes as he proceeded to the revelation of his failure and shame. "When someone not . . . castout . . . dies offworld, these things are sent home, and some small portion of the body as well. It is a priest's duty--MY duty--to make this round of travel to outposts among the stars, to make the ceremonies for those away from home--to take the absent ones back to their families, so their loss is not so deeply regretted." He paused to stare at Lindsey, not wanting to include her in his anger at the actions of the other humans, or seem to accuse her of the sacrilege they had committed by destroying the scout ship and all that had still been aboard it. "I can do only one thing now for the men who were on the destroyed ship. I am a priest; I was with them at the last. If I mix my blood with the native soil in the *haraktae* . . . to us, it is the same as if they have completed their journey," the last he added in a whisper, "and I my duty."

His true meaning was lost in the literalness of the computer translation. Lindsey interpreted what he had told her to mean the Klingons thought the joining of souls with their One Power could not take place for those people who had died in space, and she was shocked and saddened at the waste of individual potential and life. How many priests had killed themselves to satisfy the spiritual needs of the families of those lost in space battles? These Klingons had a level of commitment to their calling she found awesome, and a little frightening. But now her path was clear. . . .

"You haven't told me your name," she said, holding back from what she had to do for just a few more moments.

"Kutain," he answered, mystified.

"Kutai, I'm going to go talk to . . . whoever I need to--Captain Kirk, if necessary. If you feel you are required to . . . to sacrifice your life in order to fulfill the requirements of your office, then they have no right to stop you. And I'm going to see that they don't."

He grimaced, refusing to acknowledge the quick flare of hope her quiet assertion gave him. "I do not think I could command a Klingon captain against his will, and priests are much respected. Will your captain bow to your orders?"

"If he doesn't listen, I'll file a protest--take my complaint to a higher authority. I believe I can prove it is against our laws for him to deny you the right to practice your faith as you feel is best."

Kutai shook his head, once again at a loss before the complexity of the aliens' beliefs and practices. "I will not try to hinder you," was all he found to say. Nothing in his experience could even suggest that Lindsey's attempt to intercede for him would be successful. But she seemed sadly convinced that her request would be granted.

"I'll be back to see you," she told him as she rose from the stool, and nodded a calm farewell, with an ache already beginning to show in her eyes. *Do the right thing, then hope to God you can live with it*, she said to herself as she walked out to her first battlefield, McCoy's office.

McCoy was making no attempt to hide his curiosity. "Did he talk to you? You were in there quite a while."

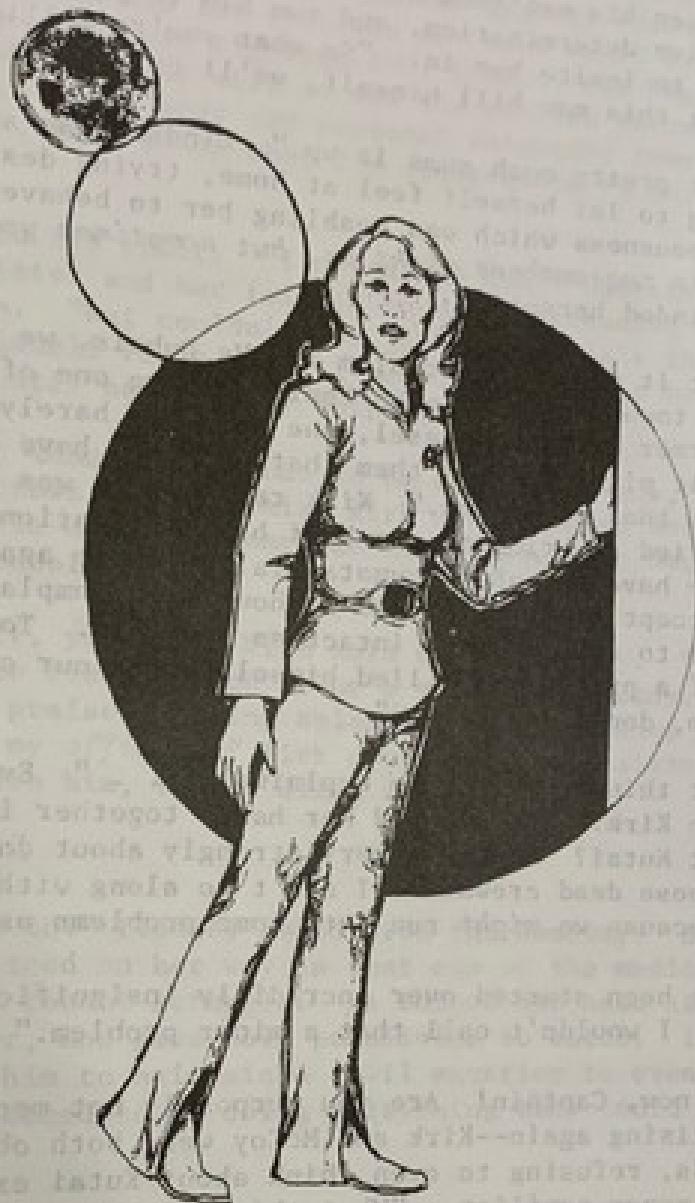
"Yes, he did. But you aren't going to like what he said." Briefly, she explained what Kutai had told her, as she understood it.

"I've never heard anything so . . . so *twisted* in my life," McCoy fumed as she finished. Her face went cold and she stood up, ready to go in search of Kirk. "Take a perfectly healthy individual and teach him he has to kill himself just because everyone else died! Well, I'm telling you now, I'm not going to be a part of it! If he wants to kill himself, he can do it somewhere else--not in my sickbay!"

"If he's determined to do it, Doctor, don't you think it's cruel to make him lie there, strapped to a table, just *thinking* about it? It's his right to fulfill his religious duties as he sees fit, no matter what you . . . or I . . . think of it."

"No! It's barbaric, and I'm not goin' to have anythin' to do with it!"

"He hasn't asked you to. I think he can handle it without your assistance. If you don't want to be the one to give the okay, I can understand that. It's more Captain Kirk's province, anyway, isn't it?"



McCoy's eyes blazed. "Going over my head? Fine! You'll get the same answer from the captain. And even if you don't, I've still got full medical authority in here. If I say he stays restrained and sedated, then he will!"

With a pitying look, Lindsey turned on her heel and left the room. McCoy stood watching her go, already regretting the harshness of his tone, if not the sentiments behind it. Two technicians came in, carrying equipment; they conferred with the guard outside the Klingon's door, then entered. A sense of guilt, fueled by Lindsey's surprising revelation about the patient's motivation for suicide, stabbed at him. There was, at least, dignity in choosing to die. The practices necessary to maintain a patient under total restraint could not be called dignified by any stretch of the definition. Swearing mildly to himself, McCoy hurried out. There had to be something going on somewhere with which to distract his conscience.

Kirk had listened to Lindsey's explanation with a worried crease slowly deepening between his eyebrows as he fingered his chin. She had sought him out with apprehensive determination, and run him to ground near his cabin, which had forced him to invite her in. "So what you're telling me, Chaplain, is that if we don't let this man kill himself, we'll be violating his civil rights."

"Yes, that pretty much sums it up." Lindsey was sitting stiffly in a chair, refusing to let herself feel at home, trying desperately to maintain the sense of righteousness which was enabling her to behave so . . . so contentious-ly. *Blessed the peacemakers might be, but sometimes you had to have confrontations*, she reminded herself.

"I thought it did. The problem is, Ms Dubois, we are--to speak figuratively--limping in towards the Klingon Empire towing one of their military vessels, or rather a former military vessel, one which is barely hanging together. At first glance, it might seem to them that we could have had something to do with getting it into that condition." Kirk realized he was sinking into unbecoming sarcasm, and tried to bring the tone of his explanation back to a more respectful plane. "We have enough circumstantial evidence against us as it is. The Klingons *may* accept their ship back without much complaint, if we've gone to obvious trouble to return it as intact as possible. To give it back and then add the body of a priest who killed himself under our care will look very suspicious to them, don't you think?"

"You don't think . . . if we explained . . ." Even she had to shake her head along with Kirk. She clasped her hands together in an unconscious plea. "But what about Kutai? He feels very strongly about doing . . . what he feels is right for those dead crewmen. I can't go along with making him continue to suffer, just because we *might* run into some problems as a result of . . ."

"Wars have been started over incredibly insignificant acts many times, as you well know. I wouldn't call that a minor problem."

"Oh, come now, Captain! Are you purposely not mentioning the Organians?" Her anger was rising again--Kirk and McCoy were both objecting on purely selfish personal grounds, refusing to even think about Kutai except as an abstract component in the larger conflict. "What this all boils down to is you obstructing this individual in his pursuit of his religious beliefs. I do not believe your starship captaincy gives you the right to arbitrarily take away the rights of others, and certainly not the right of a spiritual leader to minister to his people!"

"Ms. Dubois, I would like to remind you that you are currently a Starfleet officer yourself, and even though you are also a minister . . ."

"Correction, Captain. I am a minister who is also a Starfleet officer. I signed up to help people, particularly people who were cut off from regular avenues of spiritual guidance because they were far away from home, out among the stars. This man isn't a Terran, but he is definitely in need of help. And I intend to do everything I can think of to help him."

"Is that a threat of some kind, Lieutenant Dubois?"

"It is simply a statement, Captain. I won't be a party to hindrance of

religious freedom, and I won't sit still for it, either." She lifted her chin to cover the quaking she felt inside. Between the anxiety caused by challenging the captain she respected and the distress she knew would expand into real depression if she got what she was fighting for, Lindsey was beginning to fear she might not have the strength of will to see the problem through to any real conclusion. "I certainly don't bear any personal animosity towards you, you understand. I just . . . have to do what I'm constrained to do, so I won't be unfaithful to my faith."

Kirk slumped back in his chair. "I certainly don't want to end up accused of coming between a minister and her faith," he said, spreading his hands in good-natured frustration. "But couldn't you just try to talk this . . . this priest out of killing himself right now? I mean, why does it have to be now? Can't he wait two days until he's off my ship?"

"Well . . . I don't know that it has to be done right now," Lindsey admitted, clutching at the same straws of compromise Kirk was reaching for. "Maybe I could talk to him a little more and convince him it would be better to wait until he's back with his people."

"If anyone can do it, you can," Kirk said encouragingly. "I don't think he would have told anyone else as much as he's told you already." Lindsey colored slightly at the praise. "Being able to do the job they signed on for-- that's what I expect of my officers," Kirk continued, emphasizing the last word. "Try for a compromise with him, that's all I ask."

"Kutai? May I come in?" Lindsey asked from the doorway. He looked disheveled, and she had noticed on her way in that one of the medical technicians seemed to have been in a recent struggle. He turned his head at the sound of her voice, recognized her, and gave cold permission to enter. It was growing close to impossible for him to maintain a civil exterior to even this one Earther, when the rest seemed to be doing everything they could think of to humiliate him.

"I've been to see the captain. He told me he's worried about being misunderstood by representatives of your military when we get to the neutral outpost where they plan to leave you. I mean, if you're dead, it would be fairly natural for them to think one of our people killed you. . . ."

"I am a priest. Any Klingon would understand immediately."

"Kutai, I can accept that, but . . . how can I say this? The captain's specialty is military action; maybe he does understand other military minds better than you or I would." Kutai turned his face away. "If I am not prying," she went on, trying not to reveal her desperation at seeing his trust in her slipping away, "is there a . . . a time limit set on your . . . sacrament? Would harm be done if you waited until you were back with your people?"

"What evidence is there to make me believe I will ever be back with my people?" he shouted, turning on her with emotional ferocity he could not express with his leashed body. "Who says it? The same ones who brought me here, tied

me like a beast, refused to allow me to do my duty to the men they probably killed!"

"Kutai, we weren't anywhere near your ship when it was destroyed. They sent out a distress call--we answered it."

"Then why destroy the damaged ship, if not to obliterate evidence of your attack?"

"What?" Lindsey looked at him as if he had gone mad. His heart leaped erratically with futile hope; he half-wished he could be mad, rather than be disappointed again. "Kutai, we have done absolutely nothing to the ship you were on except to take it under tow with a tractor beam--except I think they put some temporary patches on it first. But they are bringing it in intact as partial proof we didn't cause the damage. Just like they want you alive so you can tell your people what happened."

Kutai tried to speak, failed, and thrashed to free his hands, unthinkingly attempting to fight free of the choking pain caused by his emotional turmoil. The door flew open and McCoy stampeded in, followed by a nurse and a security guard.

"Wait!" Lindsey implored, and no one paid her any attention.

"What's goin' on here? What are you doing?" McCoy demanded of Lindsey, who shook her head in bewilderment. "I thought he was going into heart failure . . . or that you . . ." He left his other suspicion unvoiced.

"Lindsey . . . say again, and swear! You say the ship I was travelling in is still in existence?" Kutai demanded in gasps, ignoring the presence of the other Earthers.

"Yes, Kutai, it still exists." She looked around for something to swear on, finally reverting to childhood drama and crossing her heart over the chaplain's emblem on her tunic. "But . . . the crew is . . . you are the only survivor we found. . . ."

"I want to see the ship," he said, believing her, but still wanting solid proof. "I want to re-board it."

"Impossible . . . much too dangerous," McCoy said instantly.

Lindsey did not even hear him. She was gazing intensely at Kutai. "Why?"

"To see for myself . . . whether the effects I had charge of are still there, and the bodies of the crew."

"Of course they are! Where else would they be? We don't rob the dead!" McCoy yelled indignantly.

"I . . . I think I may have misunderstood you," Lindsey said, slowly and carefully. "I thought you were required to die completing your ritual because the crewmembers of that ship died in space."

"No," Kutai said, wondering how she could have possibly thought that. "I was given charge of the belongings and bodily remembrances of certain individuals who had died on other stations, which were being sent to their homes. I was told," here he looked accusingly at McCoy, "that it was impossible for me to regain these items. Naturally, I understood impossible to mean impossible, and believed the ship and all it carried to be destroyed. The act of sacrament I intended was to symbolically reunite these things, and thus the dead, plus the crew who died, to Homeworld. And yes, if the possessions entrusted to me had been destroyed, I would have been bound to die in redeeming them."

Lindsey turned to McCoy, who explained defensively to the Klingon, "The reason it was, and is, impossible to board that ship is because it's too risky. According to Spock, your people ran through a collection of energy particles that had a charge with an affinity for your ship's circuitry--it overloaded everything and caused the entire ship to self-destruct. The people we sent to rescue you, and to try to find the ship's log, reported a lot of dangerous residual activity--panels overloading, doors slamming shut for no reason. As soon as they got you out, the captain said no one else was to board the ship--he didn't want any injuries."

It made sense. Kutai tried to make himself doubt their story, but . . . if it was a lie, it was fiendishly tailored to fit perfectly any details he could remember or imagine about the ship's catastrophe.

"Could he come see the ship in tow, Doctor?" Lindsey asked the physician, and before he could answer, said to Kutai, "If you can see it, so you know the ship is there intact, will that satisfy you? At least until we reach Outpost 336?" Indecision wavered in his eyes, and Lindsey put her hand back over her uniform emblem. "My religion requires me not to swear falsely, or to work against another person's rights. The ship really is still there. We really are taking it, and you, back to your people."

"I will take your word," Kutai heard himself say, and Lindsey barely restrained herself from reaching out to hug him, or McCoy, or anyone else handy.

"Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed," she murmured, smiling at the way a phrase some twenty-three centuries old could still aptly express her feelings. McCoy cleared his throat, decided he had nothing to add, and signaled for the nurse to release the patient.

Naturally, Lindsey spent all her waking hours of the time they had until they reached Outpost 336 in Kutai's company. Not that she had any fears he would suddenly decide to suicide after all, but because this would no doubt be the only opportunity she, and thus by extension the Galactic Council of Churches, would ever have to learn about the Klingon religion. Kutai seemed equally anxious to learn as much as he could from her, so much so that they goodnaturedly wrangled several times an hour over whose turn it was to be describing doctrines.

Word reached them the next day that the *Enterprise* was approached the outpost, and that the wrecked ship would soon be set in a docking slip to be collected by a Klingon vessel due in shortly. "I can't suggest you get your things

together--you're wearing them," Lindsey pointed out, trying to use humor to cover the fact that she was going to miss him. He was dressed in a one-piece coverall of sturdy dark material, worn but serviceable, and the *haraktae* was slung over his now fully-healed shoulder. He kept one arm tucked over it with the natural look that comes from years of habit.

"Do we have time to visit the gardens again?" Such a thing on a starship was a surprising novelty to him, and they had spent much of their time together there.

As they strolled companionably through the humid, scent-laden air, Lindsey said, "I'm so glad this all worked out, I can't tell you. When I think of how close things came to going completely wrong, all over such a small misunderstanding. . . ."

"I am glad, too. There isn't a priest on every hill, as it is said." She arched an eyebrow, a form of shorthand they had developed between themselves to stand for 'please explain'. "We set a value on individuals, too. My training, experience--my *self*. . . ." He cleared his throat self-consciously. "Few . . . are drawn to be priests. To be wasteful is, for us, similar to what you call a sin. I am willing to die for cause, but I would rather live and do my work for as long as I can."

"Ah, yes. Heaven is a fantastic prospect, but even ministers aren't usually in a rush to see it." Kutai rolled his eyes and she laughed. "Yes, I know--the idea of a paradise of treats being handed out is childish. You've mentioned that several times. The general idea is still the same--we do what we do because . . . we're the only ones who feel compelled to do it. And how will we know the work is being done properly by the ones who come after us?"

He nodded, fully sympathetic, as a chime sounded, followed by the below-decks berthing orders coming over the intercom, calling key personnel to duties involved with docking. "Well, looks like this is good-bye," Lindsey said, trying to sound bright without seeming glad to see him go. "Did I ever tell you what goodbye meant, originally, in our language? It's a slurred version of . . ." she blinked, shook her head to keep the tears from starting, then smiled up at the tall, solemn Klingon, " . . . God be with you."

Somehow he had not been prepared for her to profer a blessing, and felt somehow graceless for not expecting it. Or . . . had he not? His fingers twitched, then he slipped the inner seal of the *haraktae*, all the while keeping his eyes on her face. He knew there were necessary precautions about introducing foreign substances into a closed environment, but they *had* told him his *haraktae* and its contents had passed their inspection. Still, he took out only a scant half-handful of soil to crumble under the foliage of the small flowering tree she had named a dogwood. Lindsey understood, and her eyes shone. Kutai felt a smile form on his face as he bent to kneel and scoop an equal portion of bedding material from the frame that held the tree and plants. "I never thought," he said, rising to stand straight again, "that I would say this to an Earther, but . . . 'We shall be One, as we are One.'"

"Thank you, Kutai." No serious words seemed adequate, and they walked in silence for a few moments as they headed for the transporter room. At last she

said, "Well, as one of my teachers used to say, see you in heaven, if not before."

"Perhaps. But we will not know it."

"Maybe not. Except, if you're right, you'll never realize it, whereas if I'm right. . . ."

"Then I shall honorably concede the point--"

"I was sure you would."

"--if you can find me among the multitudes."

"I'll make a point of looking."

"I was sure you would."

Lost Warrior

Patricia Demetri



Stand,
Warrior;
Your life is forfeit.
You can not call back the lost;
You may not fight.
It is over, done.
Take your dead,
Go home.
Stay away.
Vengeance does not become you.
Had you desired victory
You would have fought
In his place.
Restraint does you credit.
Go.
Take his body,
Mourn him,
Do not return.
Death is final.