

"The Hunting" by Doris Beetem

Rhinegelt. It was a frontier planet—a few hundred kilometers of settlement surrounded by barely surveyed terra incognita. Shore leave would be limited either to hiking, hunting, and camping in the primitive areas, or to drinking and carousing in port towns reminiscent of the American West of three hundred years ago.

"You're getting old, McCoy," the Enterprise's chief medical officer told himself. Roughing it, either in the forests or the port towns, didn't appeal to him, perhaps he wouldn't bother leaving the ship this stop.

The Sickbay door swished open. "What shore party shall I assign you to, Bones?" Captain James Kirk asked. To the captain, nothing was more relaxing than a stable orbit around a safe planet, and a lessening of responsibility for the 430 crewmen he commanded: so the captain could always approach shore leave with considerable energy.

"I don't need leave," McCoy said. "Give it to somebody who can use it."

"A little rest'll do you good, Doctor," Kirk replied. "That's what you always tell the crew, anyway. Even Spock's taking leave."

"He is?" McCoy was startled by this unusual occurrence.

The captain was obviously greatly pleased. "Spock's been under too much stress lately—even for a Vulcan. He's been stretched both physically and mentally, although he'd never admit it. We've both seen it."

"And you know how stubborn Spock is about taking shore leave. He says it's illogical."

"By his own request, I put him down for shore party three. And Lieutenant Uhura tells me that he's already contacted Rhinegelt Port Control and arranged to take out a Primitive Area hunting permit."

Dr. McCoy reviewed four years of poking, prodding, and psychologically dissecting the Enterprise's Vulcan science officer. "Something's wrong there, Jim. Spock wouldn't kill a fly. A hunting permit, you said?"

"Why not ask him about it?" answered Kirk, apparently untroubled. "Sure you don't want shore leave?"

"Ye-es," McCoy answered slowly. "Guess I will, at that. Put me down for party three."

Kirk foresaw another McCoy /Spock bout, but complied with the request.

"Fool Vulcan! He can't be gone already!" McCoy, waiting impatiently outside Spock's door, signaled for admittance again.

"Yes, Doctor?" Imperturbably the Vulcan surveyed McCoy's collection of camping equipment, which was piled lumpily in the hall. McCoy was determined to be well prepared, and had packed everything from medikit to insect repellent to a small tent.

"Spock, I'm going with you," McCoy asserted, too proud to soften his statement to a request. "I'm all packed and ready to go."

Spock, staring quizzically at the heap of equipment compiled by the tenderfoot woodsman, replied, "I can see no logical reason-"

"Blast it, I've got a hunch," McCoy interrupted. "A Human, irrational hunch that you'll need my help. Now, am I going with you or not?"

Spock, after considering the matter carefully, answered, "You have the right. And I should have a companion. A Vulcan preferably, but you will do." While McCoy was deciding whether or not to be insulted, Mr. Spock, after picking up a small green sack of his own, slung a good part of McCoy's camping equipment over his shoulder. "Come, Doctor," he ordered, starting down the hall.

"But what about your supplies?" McCoy spluttered. "Don't you need to get ready?"

Spock shook his head and continued on his way. McCoy picked up the remainder of his equipment and followed Spock to the Transporter chamber. Once again he checked to make sure that his medikit was still securely packed.

Three days later, McCoy was still puzzled, although he was learning more about Spock's character than ever. He'd discovered that, given half a chance, the Vulcan would keep his mouth shut forever. However, no new information had been offered about the hunting expedition.

"Dr. McCoy, you have turned up your sonic screen to the point that it is audible to me." Both the doctor and Spock had edged quite close to their campfire-McCoy for protection against the native animals, and Spock because he found nights on the Rhinegelt savannah chilly.

McCoy grudgingly turned down the protective device. "By the time it's low enough for you, the wild animals it's supposed to ward off won't notice it," he complained.

"I am somewhat dubious about the value of a supersonic transmitter as protection. Were I a wild beast, I suspect that I would more likely be irritated into attacking than retreating," Spock said politely, but with a trace of resentment against the machine. Since the beginning of the hunt, he'd used no tools at all, and was eating various tubers he'd collected, without even bothering to roast them in the fire.

"Hasn't eaten anything but native plants since we came here," McCoy thought. "Some hunter!"

Above them, the giant planet Fafnir glowed green in the sky. It provided as much light as Earth's full moon, but in coloring, the landscape distorted vision. McCoy peered gloomily out into the savannah. "What game animals are found on Rhinegelt, Spock?" he asked suddenly.

"Scissorbuck, white mammoth, and owltiger. We are hunting an owltiger," Spock replied, answering the question that had been bothering McCoy more and more with time.

Scissorbuck were the brown antelope types with prongy white horns, McCoy knew, and the mammoth would be farther north. But..."How big are owl-tigers, Spock?"

"Approximately the same size as the Terran Bengal tiger."

"Then why," McCoy exploded, "are you hunting one with no weapon? What are you going to do-give it the kiss of death?"

"I can stun it with a nerve pinch long enough to accomplish my purpose."

"What purpose, Spock?" McCoy asked. "You've got to let me know, or I'm likely to be a hindrance when the time comes." He was determined, this time, not to let the Vulcan lapse back into silence again.

Spock settled back, nodding reluctantly at McCoy's request. "I am engaging in a ritual hunt-one of the more important rituals of my people. Since I am a male of full physical strength and dexterity, I seek out the most dangerous beast of all. It is the mok farr-the time of remembrance."

"Another Vulcan ritual-and me with only a medikit," thought McCoy, appalled.

"The hunt does not end in a killing. Instead, I shall meld minds with the animal, as you have seen me do before. The purpose of the tradition is to see and understand, in the ferocity of the beast, the savagery of the Vulcan nature, which we have hidden and controlled so carefully."

"And then what?" McCoy asked skeptically, thinking privately that Spock, unlike young men on Vulcan, had doubtless already encountered more savage ferocity than he would ever require.

"Then I shall officially be an adult."

"You mean you're not?" McCoy asked, amazed.

Spock shook his head, shamefaced. "My human heritage impeded my telepathic ability, and I was quite young when I left Vulcan. I could not have successfully completed the ritual. Since then, I have had mind contact with many aliens-Humans, the Horta, a Medusan. Now I am prepared. I do not wish to further postpone the rite."

"Wouldn't it be safer to put it off until you could get to Vulcan?" McCoy ventured tentatively.

"Doctor. The mok farr is the Vulcan rite of passage into adulthood. If our positions were reversed, would you put it off?"

"I guess you've got a point."

Spock curled up like a cat on a pile of leaves-he was carrying primitivism a bit too far, McCoy thought resentfully-and prepared for sleep. "The correct phrase would be 'Good night, Doctor,' " Spock said sleepily. McCoy crawled into his sleeping bag, and for a long time listened to the voice of the warm wind.

As usual, Spock was up at dawn, irritatingly alert, and as usual, McCoy slept half an hour longer, savoring each precious moment of sleep with an intensity he had not previously possessed. Once McCoy was finally wakened, Spock had them ready for the trail in practically no time at all.

In three days the Vulcan had taught McCoy something of the rudiments of stalking-enough to tiptoe quietly down the trail. Spock, who by this time had appropriated the carrying of nearly all of McCoy's pack, was more silent still.

"How long until we find your owltiger?" McCoy panted.

"We have been following a scissorbuck herd for two days now," Spock replied. "Eventually, one will make an appearance."

"Mmmph. Maybe."

"Dr. McCoy, do you know nothing of hunting?" Spock was watching the lithe brown forms of the scissorbucks move slowly in the distance.

"I've fished a little."

"I have never been able to comprehend the Terran attitude that fishing is a sport. Considering the mass ratio between man and fish, it can hardly be called an equal contest. At any rate, you may trust me. I know what I am doing."

At that moment Spock's keen eyes caught the leaders of the herd sniffing the air nervously. "Wait here," he commanded, slipping off the bulky pack and moving quietly toward the herd. After a few minutes, McCoy crept after him, clutching the medikit firmly in hand.

From a slight rise he watched Spock approach the now skittish herd. The Vulcan's Star Fleet uniform was relatively easy to spot-McCoy recollected the incredulous eyebrow-raising he'd encountered when he had suggested wearing different clothes for the occasion. Apparently Spock considered his uniform an auxiliary skin.

McCoy strained his eyes looking for an owltiger, then finally flipped open his medikit to check its lifeform-sensor. He hadn't wanted to take one of the Enterprise's tricorders on a private excursion, but the medikit would perform the same function.

Yes. Spock was cautiously approaching the location of a large animal only a few hundred yards from the herd. Then McCoy saw the owltiger.

It was huge, a mottled dun color, with a small white ruff. The owlsh ears were what gave the beast the name owltiger, McCoy knew, that and the two wicked fangs placed close together, which gave the impression of a beak.

Had it seen Spock? The scissorbucks were beginning to scatter. Then McCoy saw Spock fling himself toward the giant carnivore at a dead run. The great cat roared, and responded by leaping toward him.

As the two closed, McCoy cursed the government regulation that made phasers in Primitive Areas forbidden. He watched helplessly as the beast attacked. Spock was almost under its paws, and then suddenly standing over the brute, which was twitching convulsively. "He's safe!" McCoy shouted thankfully, then added, "Knock on wood."

The owltiger's short red thoughts flooded into Spock's mind. Spock struggled with the problem of handling its bestial emotions without suppressing them, and attempted to calm the beast by mentally asserting, "We are one mind. Our thoughts are moving together." Hurt, pain, attack, slash. "No! We are unity-no need for that!" Run, leap, bite, hurt. "The twitching

in the legs will stop...." Flesh rending food, the hunting...Fascinating-all thoughts the same. Monomania...monom...mon...Teeth, claws, kill, kill, kill killkillkill...

The owltiger shook itself and bounded off. McCoy watched it go with a feeling of great relief. "Well, that's that," he told himself, satisfied. He was startled, then, to hear an unearthly roar..

Or was it a scream? It's Spock! McCoy realized. "I'm coming," he yelled, and recklessly scrambled down the slope toward his comrade.

Spock was crouching on all fours, flexing and unflexing his hands, looking at the strange blunt claws. He felt clumsy and off-balance. The whole landscape was full of confusingly different colors, sounds, and odors. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the scissorbuck herd, alerted and on the run, and he growled in irritation.

Some creature was crashing down the hill at him. Suspiciously, he prepared to spring. But foggily, from the back of his mind, he remembered that the creature had something to do with sickness and whirring things that hurt, and his own blood. Rattled, he got up on two feet and fled.

"Wait, Spock, wait!" McCoy puffed. He'd known that catching Spock was impossible from the moment that Spock had started to run, but had continued until the last glimpse of the blue shirt was gone in the distance.

"Damn!" McCoy remembered bitterly Spock's tendency to get so tied up in the mind of the being he was contacting that he had to be pried loose. "I'll have to bring him back to himself, or he'll be yowling at the moon for the rest of his shore leave." McCoy grumbled. Nagging at him was the recollection of Simon van Gelder. Spock had snapped back to normal immediately after being pulled away from him. Never before had Spock maintained mental identity with a being so far away from him. Worriedly, McCoy reached for his communicator to summon help.

It wasn't there. He'd let Spock carry it, along with most of his gear. The doctor scrambled over the dusty grasses to where Spock had dropped his pack, opened it, and rifled through. No-Spock had carried both their communicators securely on his belt. And they were both lost with him.

Glumly McCoy considered the situation. The nearest Wilderness Station was about twenty miles back along the river. By the time he could get there and call the Enterprise, Spock could wander off so far that the search operation might take months. And heaven only knew what would be happening to Spock, mentally and physically, in the meantime.

Grinding his teeth quietly, McCoy decided to follow the herd. Maybe Spock would return. He

had to!

Midday. The sun's warmth comforted Spock, even as it disturbed him by revealing colors he'd forgotten how to name. Night was best, when the violent stars lit a gray landscape and he could prowl, scenting sharp living odors on the wind. It was too cold to hunt then, though.

He tried to doze, well hidden in the tall grass, lying with his head on his hands. Both legs were drawn up awkwardly to his body, showing great rents at the knees of his trousers where the dura-fiber had been worn away by too much clumsy scrambling on all fours. His knees were scratched and gashed, and his hands.

Spock's eyes gleamed ferally as his ears flattened at a small, suspicious sound. He had been hunted. Something was following his trail. Some...what? He couldn't remember what, but he didn't want it to find him.

He sighed. No way to hunt and run away at once, and now he was so tired. He kept wary guard regardless, but trusted his ears more than his eyes, which constantly drooped and closed. Suddenly his eyes snapped open. There was a rustle in the grass, and a small, foolish rodent ran in front of him. It was small...but he was hungry! Spock carefully lifted one paw.

McCoy watched the sun flee over the mountained horizon. His back straightened painfully as he unfastened the heavy pack. The light would soon be gone; he'd try again tomorrow.

"Why didn't I go back and call out the search parties?" he asked himself for the thousandth time. "Nine days-we'll be absent without leave in two more. Anything could be happening to him out there."

He rubbed a grubby sleeve against grainy eyes, and strove to see one flicker of blue somewhere on the savannah in the fading light. Hopeless. Spock's Vulcan stamina could probably keep him ahead of McCoy indefinitely. Scrabbling through his pack, McCoy searched for a nutri-bar. He sat on a rock in the rapidly fading twilight and bit at the food concentrate. It would be another bad, cold night. His sleeping bag was at least fifty miles back, and he didn't dare light a fire for fear Spock would see it and run. Using the sonic screen was definitely out, too-Spock's sensitive ears might pick it up.

"Wait a minute..." McCoy smiled ephemerally. Then he searched out the screen projector in his kit. It had been too small and light to be worth leaving behind. Scrutinizing its control dial carefully, he saw that it allowed a considerably stronger broadcast than the labeled "protection" range.

"Wouldn't this just be audible to those Vulcan ears, though!" McCoy chuckled grimly. "And

that feline fiend inside him will be madder than a wet hen when it hears this. Maybe even mad enough," he speculated, "to come and try to stop it!"

His plan was risky, McCoy knew. The supersonics might frighten Spock into running off. "But what choice do I have? I could be following him till doomsday." Decided, McCoy flicked the sonic device on and up to maximum.

The vibration made McCoy's teeth grate rustily in his mouth. He couldn't hear the sound, but it was palpable, and pushed on every nerve relentlessly. From far off toward the mountains he heard a bloodcurdling screech, and another, and another echoing it, from much closer locations.

McCoy considered morbidly the chance that his trick might prove fatal. Some maddened owltiger leaping on him with bloodlust...Or even Spock. McCoy formed the grotesque picture of himself as King Pentheus in reverse-ripped apart by a man who thought he was a lion.

Then McCoy remembered Spock, standing stiffly, and saying in a thin, precise voice, "Nothing can excuse the crime of which I am guilty, I intend to offer no defense. I must...surrender myself to the authorities."

"And he would," McCoy thought savagely, He grabbed his ever-present medikit, pushed the med-record button, and spoke, "To whom it may concern-Jim, I guess, About the events occurring to Mr, Spock and me on Rhinegelt," He paused and then added peripherally, almost idly, "Damn it, Spock, don't try to deny that I brought this on myself!"

Outlined on a ridge, a scissordoe trembled and twitched her ears nervously. Then she ran toward the mountains, as if scenting the acridness of a grass fire, and nearly bowled Spock over in her uncautious flight.

The rasping shriek caused even more pain to Spock's sensitive ears than the doe's, He stood his ground, wondering. No! It was not like a fire, or a flood...something natural, to hide from. It was-Spock searched through his muddled thoughts-him! The following one, Spock remembered other times of Pain. when he had been strapped down so he couldn't run, and the face of the following one. A face that smiled too much.

"I will stop him!" And Spock, gathering up all his will, waded painfully through the tall grasses in the direction of the hurting.

McCoy thumbed his medikit and peered toward the hills, deathly afraid.

Hypnospray...sedative... knockout drugs. He considered them all, then muttered, "Nothing organic's wrong with him...nothing but the sanity of that alien Vulcan mind.. What am I going to do for him? And my God, what will I do if I guess wrong?"

Over the absolute silence of the hypersound, McCoy heard a sound—a branch snapping, And then hoarse, heavy breathing, as if every intake of breath was half a sob. Before McCoy could take a reading on his kit, Spock appeared, gliding swiftly toward him, looking ragged, muddy,..and homicidal,

McCoy had been expecting savagery, belligerence—all the emotions written nakedly on Spock's face—but not, somehow, the Vulcan's incredible, pantherlike speed. Before the doctor had time to more than yell. "Spock!". Spock had sprung. The lunge carried them both to the ground, where Spock dug his fingers cruelly into McCoy's neck with slowly increasing force.

"S-s-pock...s-s-stop..." McCoy hissed breathlessly. Then, as the Vulcan's lethal grip did not slacken. McCoy kned him in the stomach. Spock panted, and released him. McCoy scabbled off, feeling a little more confident, until he looked into the Vulcan's face to see a vicious smile. And recollected, with a dreadful certainty, how the cat toys with its prey.

The screen projector was sitting on a rock. Twisting desperately. McCoy reached it before Spock became aware of his intent, and grabbed it as his only protection. The projector vibrated fiercely in McCoy's hand as he jabbed it toward Spock. The diabolically feral look faded, and Spock covered his ears with shaking hands, pacing backward fearfully.

The doctor had tasted his moment of triumph for only an instant, when he realized that Spock was about to bolt again. Swallowing hard, he flicked the screen projector off, gambling on Spock's mental controls for his life.

It was still Spock—nothing could change that. The Vulcan seemed confused. as if memories were being awakened, or perhaps because he was being pushed into an entirely different pattern than the days of chase on the savannah; Spock would have to choose now, to think. McCoy waited.

He found himself looking into eyes that were neither bestial nor logical. neither a Star fleet officers nor an owl's. Spock simply stood immobile, projecting a mute doubt and horror. It seemed to McCoy in that moment that all the gambles had been lost.

Then Spock stepped forward and pleaded in an awkward voice, "Alab hwallir k'len?" McCoy could practically have hugged him for every incomprehensible, tongue-twisting Vulcan syllable. Spock was acting Human again!

The doctor had pried the communicator off Spock's belt, and they were coalescing out of golden sparkles onto the comfortingly safe Transporter platforms, before he remembered to amend that description.

It was nice to have the authority to certify yourself medically fit for duty, McCoy thought. The captain, after grasping the situation's seriousness, if not its nature, had wanted to argue that with him. The doctor recollected how Kirk's grin at his friend's bewhiskered appearance had faded when Spock had toppled unceremoniously to the floor. He was worried about them both.

McCoy thankfully tugged on a clean shirt and hurried out of his office into Sickbay. Whether he'd be able to certify Spock medically fit was another matter. His med-scan had revealed Spock to be in acceptable, if not perfect, physical condition, and Dr. M'benga had agreed that he was suffering from no more than shock. But whether Spock would snap out of it quickly was another matter.

As Dr. McCoy entered the ward, M'benga approached him and whispered, "Mr. Spock has an unusually resilient mind, for either a Vulcan or a Human. He should recover quickly now." He paused, then asked, "It's not a medical question, Doctor, but this wasn't anything you did to him?" Scowling, McCoy returned to his patient.

McCoy sighed with relief as he saw Spock eye with loathing the sponge bath M'benga was taking away. The Vulcan was already back in thermal underwear and was finishing dressing rapidly. "Look at it this way," McCoy said soothingly. "It's better than a belly full of fur balls."

Spock looked up at him sharply, and McCoy was immediately aware that Spock was in no mood for the usual feuding back and forth; he just wanted to talk. "I believe I understand now the purpose of the ritual, Doctor."

"To understand how to control emotion?" McCoy ventured.

"No, to demonstrate that the alternative is attractive. I have wondered from time to time why there are such extensive game preserves on Vulcan. It seemed to me that the 'track and stalk' that is favored there had no logical value, since the prey was not killed. Now I know that there must be many who wish to re-create the experience of the mok farr."

McCoy, as usual, was not quite sure that he knew what the Vulcan was getting at. "Wait a minute! You can't tell me that you liked running around in the bush regressed back to an animal."

"As you should know, not all of that was intended to be in the ritual." The Vulcan's face was unusually somber. "It is what you have always advocated—a life ruled by the nerve endings. More pleasurable, in some ways, than my own. But I shall not choose it."

"Why?" McCoy asked.

"Doctor. Choose the life of a wild animal?"

"No," McCoy explained, "not that. But you might live a little more according to your nerve endings, Spock."

"The end result would be essentially the same." The Sickbay door whistled, and the captain of the Enterprise walked in, anxious about the condition of his friends. Catching the polite battle stance of his science officer and chief medical officer, Kirk extrapolated, "You must be all right, Spock. Bones never argues with seriously ill patients."

"Have him tell you someday, Jim, about the time he tried to walk out and go back to duty in the middle of an operation," McCoy cracked.

"All right, what's been going on, and why didn't either of you take my advice to rest during shore leave?" Captain Kirk demanded.

Dr. McCoy opened his mouth and prepared to give a long, aggrieved account of Vulcan rituals, uncomfortable nights of reversion to Boy Scouting, and a companion who alternated ignoring him and pouncing on him. The frozen look on Spock's face stopped him, and he closed his mouth carefully. "He wants to tell Jim slowly. In his own time. Or maybe not at all." Out loud he answered, "There was a Vulcan custom Spock wanted to go through. What was its name again, Spock?"

"The mok farr," Mr. Spock replied thankfully.

"Oh," Kirk said, mystified. "Well, I hope it worked out all right."

"There was...some difficulty." Spock said seriously. "But Dr. McCoy solved the problem."

"How?"

McCoy grinned. "I took a thorn out of his paw!"