



'Mid Pleasures and Palaces

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THIS PLANET was remote and set apart, and nothing about it had made William Kirk think he might find human life. Yet just beyond, through a thorny bush shaped like an exploding rose, Kirk had seen eyes and nose and a flash of yellow hair that were definitely human.

Kirk poised motionless. He was three miles from the rocket and Leo, who was waiting inside of it. He thought for a moment of how Leo had told him, as they made their landing, that this is the kind of planet where you could go no further. This is the kind of planet that could be the end of twelve years, and you'd better be careful, William, old sport.

Kirk noticed a faint breeze; his palms were wet, and they cooled when the breeze touched them. He placed his palms against his jacket. Damn you, Leo, he thought. Damn your rotten fortune-telling. Kirk was superstitious when he was in space, and the memory of Leo Mason's cool, quiet voice saying "Watch it now, sport. Be careful, be careful ..." seemed now like some certain kiss of fate.

The bush trembled and Kirk's right hand flicked to his holster. His pistol was cold against his fingers and he let it fit loosely in his hand, the barrel half-raised.

The bush shivered again, and then all at once the figure was rising from behind it, a tall wide figure with a very tan face, lined and toughened by the sun. The shoulders, bare like the chest, were massive, yet somehow stretched-looking, as though endless exposure to wind and rain and sun had turned the skin to brown leather.

Kirk had his pistol pointing at the figure's stomach now, and the figure blinked, while the breeze touched and ruffled the long bleached hair.

The figure raised a large hand, palm up, and curled the fingers. "Hello?" he said softly. Kirk was surprised by the word and the polite sound of it.

Kirk remained motionless, pistol pointing. "Who are you?" he said through his teeth.

"Harry," said the figure, as though Kirk surely should know who he was. "I'm Harry, of course."

"Yes?" said Kirk carefully. "Harry?"

The figure nodded. "Harry Loren, don't you know?"

"Oh, yes," Kirk said, his eyes watchful. "Harry Loren." There was something about the man's eyes, Kirk decided. They were deep set and very bright within their sockets. They didn't match the softness of the speech. Harry Loren smiled and showed his yellow teeth. "Who are you?" he asked politely.

"I'm William," Kirk said. It was as though he might be speaking to a frightened child, he thought, who held a sharp knife in his hands. "William Kirk, of course."

Harry Loren nodded apologetically. "Oh, yes. I can't remember everyone. It's been so long. How are you, William?"

Kirk's eyes flickered. "I'm fine."

"That's nice," Harry Loren nodded. His wild hair brushed over his shoulders and reflected its yellowness against the sun. The knife then, the one that Kirk had thought about a moment ago, appeared in the figure's hand. "*Bastard*," Harry Loren hissed, and he was leaping at Kirk, the knife making a sweep toward Kirk's stomach.

Something kept Kirk from squeezing the trigger, and instead he swung his pistol so that it struck the brown, weathered knuckles. The knife flew into a thicket and Loren, screaming, was upon Kirk, reaching for Kirk's neck. Kirk wrenched backward and at the same time swung the barrel of the pistol toward the yellow flying hair. There was a crackling sound, and Harry Loren, brown and wild-looking, crumpled silently before Kirk's feet.

Kirk examined the man, then he reached down and picked up the knife from the thicket. It was crudely hammered out from some kind of alloy, but sharp nevertheless, and it could have been deadly in a hand like Harry Loren's.

Kirk looked again at the yellow-haired man on the ground. He was wearing some kind of ragged cloth about his waist and nothing else. Across his back, Kirk could see, was a curving scar, an inch wide and ten or twelve inches long. It was white and very noticeable against the brown of the man's skin.

Kirk bent down, looking at the scar carefully. It could have been made during a crash of a rocket, but there were, he noticed, fine whiter ridges running along the length of the scar as though they had been made by fine comb-like teeth. A talon, perhaps. Some kind of strange claw. Kirk straightened quickly.

It went through his head that Harry Loren might not be the only animal life on this planet. He tightened his hand on his pistol, stepping backward, his eyes darting.

But he could only pivot slowly, trying to see, to discover, and he was much too slow when he finally saw it. It was only a flash of yellow and brown, making a hissing kind of sound. He felt the ripping along his right arm. The pistol was going out of his hand. And a swirling blackness got in front of his eyes.

THEN HE AWOKE he saw Harry Loren first, who was sitting up now, silent, motionless, with Kirk's pistol resting in his hands.

To the side of Loren and just a little behind rested a peculiar-looking thing. It was alive because its head, shaped like a cone that had been attached to its neck, kept swaying gently back and forth. The dark blue eyes, spaced back from the smallest end of the cone, were rather small with no lids. The creature's neck was long and thin, a multitude of shades of yellow and brown like the head, and the rest of the body widened out like a funnel and this area was covered with yellow feathers. It had what appeared to be arms and legs, long thin extensions of dark brown with large bony joints. At the end of each of these, Kirk could see a flat claw with rows of tiny comb-like teeth.

Loren reached out and ran a hand softly along the creature's long neck.

Kirk tried to think, testing his muscles without moving, and he remembered then the ripping along his right arm. He looked at the arm and at the way his jacket had been torn away along with the shirt beneath it. He could see the comb-like marking of his skin. The cut was not deep but it bled a little and stung. He tried to move his arm and found that he could.

Kirk looked back to Loren. Loren stroked his hand along the thin neck of the creature. Kirk decided to try:

"That's a nice-looking animal, Harry."

Loren's expression did not change.

Kirk paused. From the looks of the man, Loren had been here a long time, a very long time. It had been a crash, probably. And all the years afterward of loneliness, all the time for the quiet but sure warping of the brain.

He raised a hand quickly, watching Loren's eyes. Loren did not change expressions or move the pistol, but Kirk felt a comb-like claw touching his hand, freezing it to motionless with its razor tips. Kirk looked at the creature. The dark blue eyes were steady. Kirk lowered his hand slowly and the claw was drawn away. The creature's head resumed its gentle swaying, and Loren's hand resumed its stroking.

Kirk licked his lips.

"Where have you been?" Loren said, his voice sudden and hoarse now.

"Where have I been?" Kirk said, tight and motionless.

"Why didn't you come before?"

Kirk considered it. The dancing lights in the man's eyes, the high-strung sound of his voice were things to make you wary and careful. Kirk closed his fingers the slightest bit. "I didn't know you were here."

Loren's lips thinned. "Liar."

Kirk thought he might try a smile, to reassure Loren that he was telling the truth. He decided against it. "How long have you been here, Harry?"

"How would I know?"

Kirk thought of the endless nights and days when time ran together and there was no more separation of one time from another. Today would be tomorrow and tomorrow would be today. No changes. Endless. "Did you crash, Harry?"

"Did you crash, Harry?" Loren mimicked, and for a moment Kirk felt a chill dancing through him as he watched the sarcastic leer of Loren's mouth.

Kirk kept his tone polite, patronizing. "Was there anyone else?"

Loren laughed, a laugh that bounced over the rocks and through the scrubs and bushes.

"Was there, Harry?"

"Oh, yes," Loren said, grinning and showing his yellow teeth. "Six. One, two, three, four, five, six. Would you like to see their graves? I've kept the graves pretty. I know where they are because I dug them."

Loren remained in a half crouch, the fingers of one hand holding the pistol loosely, the other keeping up its monotonous stroking of the animal. His eyes seemed to become vacant for a moment, as though lost in the memory of the digging of six graves. Then they narrowed. "Where have you been?"

Kirk tried to match his answer to the wants of the man. "I came as soon as I could."

"You did?"

"Yes," Kirk said. "I did."

Loren's right hand stopped its stroking and his fingers tightened about the thin long neck of the animal. "Eddie?" he said.

Kirk saw the animal's left claw whipping out. He ducked suddenly, but the claw ripped along his left arm. He tried to roll sideways, and then he lay, half sprawled, looking at the blood welling up from this new set of ripped ridges in his arm. He shifted his eyes to look at the animal, and he was quite certain that he could detect a small mouth fitting around the under side of the funnel-shaped head. It was only a line, but Kirk thought that there was a grinning look to it.

"You didn't come as soon as you could," Loren said, his voice an angry trembling sound.

"I did, Harry," Kirk said, still remaining in his half sprawl. "I really did."

Loren replaced his hand on the neck of the animal, squeezing.

"No, no," Kirk said, and he tried to keep the panic out of his voice. "Harry, I'm telling you the truth!"

LOREN'S MOUTH showed a faint surface of his yellow teeth. He shook his head, slowly, back and forth, his fingers tightening about the animal's neck.

"Harry, listen," Kirk said, watching Loren's squeezing fingers, "it's over now. You don't have to wait any longer. I'll take you back now. I'll take you home!"

Loren froze, staring. "Home?" he said.

"That's right," Kirk said. "That's right, Harry."

"*Home*," Loren breathed, and his eyes were suddenly like a child's, wide and unbelieving.

"The waiting's all over," Kirk said. "You don't have to wait any longer."

"I don't have to wait any longer," Loren repeated softly, and his hand dropped from the neck of the animal.

Kirk watched Loren and the swaying animal. "The rocket's ready," he said.

Loren's eyes were lost in some distant memory. Gradually Kirk could see the eyes turn shiny with tears. "Is Annette waiting?" he asked.

Kirk thought quickly. He knew that what he was going to say shouldn't be said, because he had no right. But he was thinking of his own skin. "Why, yes, Harry," he said slowly. "I imagine Annette *is* waiting."

Loren let a quick breath come through his teeth. "Annette," he whispered. "And Dickie?"

"Dickie?" Kirk said.

"Little Dickie?" Loren said and he held his breath.

"Oh, yes," Kirk lied. "Of course."

"I can't ask about Eddie, because we never had the chance," Loren said, his eyes still lost. "I always told Annette that no kid should ever grow up without a brother, only we never had the chance for Eddie." Loren reached out absently and touched the brown and yellow neck of the creature. "I called this fellow Eddie, though. Do you suppose that was all right? He's not very pretty."

Kirk nodded, looking at the waving, funnel-shaped head of the animal. "That was all right, Harry."

"Does she still braid her hair?" Loren asked, his eyes shiny.

"What?" Kirk said.

"Annette. Does she still braid her hair?"

"Why," Kirk said slowly, feeling his palms going moist. "Why wouldn't she, Harry?"

A faint smile flickered across Loren's lips as he remembered.

Kirk watched one of the creature's claws, out of the corners of his eyes. He opened and closed the fingers of one hand, testing. The claw jerked slightly.

The blood of Kirk's new wound was drying, he knew, because it had been only a surface cut. He wondered how it would be if the thing used its claws with serious intent. Like it must have to make the cut that had been raked into Loren's back. Loren was bending forward now, and Kirk could see the tip end of that scar. Somehow Loren had managed to stay alive and befriend the creature. Eddie. The lidless eyes stared.

Kirk knew that he had to make use of the moment. It could break apart any time, the wildness could return, the unreasoning... .

"Listen, Harry," he said, "we ought to get started, you know. There's no use waiting longer."

"Started?" Loren said.

"Of course," Kirk said, trying to keep his voice matter-of-fact. "You're going home."

Loren looked at Kirk and his eyes turned suddenly hard and his mouth lost the faint smile. "I am," he stated flatly.

"Yes," Kirk said. "Of course."

"You're a liar."

"Now, Harry," Kirk said, his eyes flickering to the waiting animal. "I surely wouldn't lie to you."

"You haven't come for me until after all this time, and now you say you surely wouldn't lie to me."

It was like standing in a gully, Kirk thought, watching a boulder teetering above you. It tipped this way and that, and you didn't know when or if it was going to come hurtling down. You waited. But Kirk couldn't wait, he knew. He had to do something.

"Harry, listen. It wasn't easy to find you, don't you see?" He hoped he was making it sound as though all he had done for the last dozen years of exploring was look for Harry Loren. He wished that the damned thing

would stop swaying its ugly head back and forth. Loren's hand was inching out toward the yellow and brown neck.

"Look, Harry, these things aren't done in a day. We—"

"A day!" Loren hissed. "A *day!* All this time and you say a *day!*"

"No, I'm sorry," Kirk said quickly. He wished he could shift out of the cramped half-lying position he was in. "I didn't mean a day, Harry. I meant it wasn't easy. We didn't know where you were—" He was talking quickly, whining almost, and he'd never whined before.

Loren's fingers were touching the waving neck.

"We'd better hurry," Kirk said desperately. "Annette's waiting. And Dickie, of course."

Loren blinked.

"You wouldn't want to keep them waiting any longer, not after all this time, Harry."

Loren stroked his fingers slowly down the long neck of the animal.

"I think," Kirk said, almost hoarsely, "now that I really remember it, Annette *was* still wearing her hair braided. I remember that now, Harry. Positively."

Loren froze the motion of his hand and stared at Kirk. His lips trembled, and then suddenly he put his hands in front of his face. He bent forward, and Kirk felt his nerves jumping, watching the man start to cry.

The animal turned its stare away from Kirk for the first time. It looked at Loren and then slowly raised a claw, touching Loren's shoulder carefully. It made a sound then, a peculiar hissing sound, soft, barely audible. There was no danger in it, or menace, only a pitiful sound.

Loren raised his head a little and brought his hands away from his face. Tears had cut through dust and grime and his face was streaked.

"Shall we go, Harry?" Kirk said.

Loren wiped at his eyes, stupidly, without knowing what he was doing. Then he brought his hands down and wiped them across his chest.

"All right," he said. "Let's go." He picked up Kirk's pistol from where he had dropped it on the ground and held it out.

Kirk looked at the gun and at the animal. The claw had been drawn away from Loren's shoulder and again it was poised, ready. "You keep it, Harry," he said.

"Oh, yes. Of course," Loren said. There was a moment of silence as Loren stuck the pistol absently into the waist of his ragged cloth covering, beside the knife. The three of them waited then, Kirk, Loren, and the animal.

"Eddie?" Loren said finally. "Are you ready?"

KIRK FELT himself smiling in the direction of the animal. He remembered when he was a small boy, going by a house where there had been a mongrel with a flat head and large teeth. He had smiled at that animal as he was doing now. The dog had sensed his fear in spite of the smile.

Loren was standing up slowly, and the animal's head swayed in slow circling motions.

"All right?" Loren said.

Kirk glanced at the man, saw the wild, nearly vacant look of the face, the polite tilt of the head. Kirk's palms were wet. Goddamn it, he thought, and he stood up suddenly.

The animal extended a claw, slowly, turning it so that it seemed to wind and circle as it came toward Kirk.

"*Eddie*," Loren said.

The claw came away. Kirk caught his breath.

"Shall we go?" Loren said, his eyes shining.

"Yes," Kirk said. "We'll go, Harry." He turned slowly, so that his back was to Loren and the animal. He thought about the comb-like claws and the scar on Loren's back. He thought about Loren's knife and about the pistol.

He wanted to look back as he walked. He wanted to talk, to hear Loren's answer and so know just where he was. More than anything he wanted to break into a run and get into that rocket and get out of here.

He could see the gleam of the rocket finally, but he didn't look back yet. He kept moving. As he got closer he could see Leo, standing near the base of the ship, tall, leaning carelessly against the silver surface, smoking. He wanted to shout to Leo, to tell him for God's sake to wake up and protect him.

They reached the edge of the clearing and Leo, whose careless body had stiffened, waited motionless, one hand on his pistol. Kirk stopped. "There it is, Harry," he said, not turning around. "There's the ship." He waited, half-closing his eyes, breathing slowly.

There was no sound.

"That's Leo, my friend, Harry," Kirk said, putting his palms flat against his thighs. "Your friend, Harry."

Leo, Kirk could see, was still frozen, his eyes slitted to narrow brightness. Kirk began to step into the clearing. "Hello, there, Leo," he said, his voice a tense, grating sound. "I've brought some friends."

Leo was lifting his pistol out of its holster, inchingly.

"*Friends*," Kirk rasped.

Leo's thin eyes flickered and the pistol slid back into the holster.

Kirk turned around slowly, and he saw that Loren had stopped just inside the clearing. The animal remained beside him, its head making its slow circles. Loren was staring up at the rocket and the sun reflecting from the bright surface, came down and shown on Loren's face, deepening the lines there.

"Leo," Kirk said slowly, "this is Harry Loren and his friend, Eddie. Harry's been here quite a while, waiting for us."

"Oh, yes?" said Leo, still not moving.

"That's right, Leo," Kirk said. "Quite a while. What year was it, Harry?" he said across the clearing. "What year did you crash?"

Loren blinked and there were tears again in his eyes. He reached out slowly, and the animal shifted so that its head touched Loren's hand. "Twenty-four-nineteen."

Kirk put his teeth together. "Twenty-four-nineteen," he said.

Loren nodded slowly, his eyes still upon the rocket.

"Eighteen years," Leo said softly.

"A long time, Leo," Kirk said. He thought of a girl with her hair braided about her head, looking up, while Loren had shot into the depths of sky and space. He thought of a little boy called Dickie, standing there, too, watching a fast-disappearing blackness in the sky. He thought about eighteen years, and the fading of youth. A boy becoming a man. Braided hair becoming gray. Memories fading and minds adjusting. New love, new dedication. A world shifting, a universe shifting.

Kirk looked at Eddie, the animal, real and alive, waiting patiently at the tips of Loren's fingers. "Eddie's been with Harry for a long time," he said.

"Oh?" said Leo quietly.

Loren's hand stroked the brown and yellow head.

"Harry," Kirk said. "We're going to leave now. Are you ready?"

Loren was silent.

"You go up first, will you, Leo?" Kirk said.

Leo looked at him, a faint frown touching his brow, then he began moving up the ladder to the air lock. Kirk waited until Leo had disappeared into the rocket, then he repeated, "We're going to leave now, Harry. Are you ready?"

Loren remained motionless, his hand touching the animal's head. Suddenly he turned then and began moving slowly away through the brush,

the brown and yellow creature bobbing beside him with queer rocker-like jumps.

"Goodby, Harry," Kirk said. Finally he turned and climbed up the ladder. When he had gotten into his seat, he said, "Let's go, Leo," and he moved his hands to the controls.

THE ROCKET settled into the quiet motion of its course through space.

"But I don't get it," Leo said. "I really don't. All that time, and then all he has to do is walk a dozen yards and get into the rocket and he's going home. That's all he would have to do."

"Why?" Kirk said.

"Why?" said Leo, frowning.

Kirk nodded, looking at the man. "Why?"

... THE END

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