

Star Trek: TOS (#49) – “The Pandora Principle”
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Back Cover:

A Romulan Bird-of-Prey mysteriously drifts over the Neutral Zone and into Federation territory. Admiral Kirk and the crew of the Enterprise investigate, only to find the ship dead in space. When Starfleet orders the derelict ship brought to Earth for investigation, the Enterprise returns home with perhaps her greatest prize. But the Bird-of-Prey carries a dangerous cargo, a deadly force that is soon unleashed in the heart of the Federation. Suddenly, the only hope for the Federation's survival lies buried in the tortured memory of Commander Spock's protégé, a cadet named Saavik. Together, Spock and Saavik must return to the nightmare world of Saavik's birth, a planet called Hellguard, to discover the secret behind the Romulans' most deadly threat of all.

Summary:

2274 – As the USS Enterprise crosses the Gamma Hydra sector patrolling the uneasy perimeter of the Romulan Neutral Zone, it detects a faint, frantic mayday in obsolete Federation code. Further investigation reveals the distress originating from a Romulan cargo craft fleeing toward Federation space, with a warship of the Empire in pursuit. The Enterprise breaches the line to come to the rescue; however, as she did so the Warbird opens up a stream of hellfire, enveloping the fleeing cargo vessel. The only occupant, a Vulcan female, was too badly burned to survive long, but Spock reaches her side just before the end to give aid and comfort through his telepathic abilities. During the melding of their minds, Spock gleans something so important he doesn't note it in his log or speak of it to anyone. Instead, when the Enterprise returns to starbase, he quickly arranges for time off and books transport to Vulcan. The efforts of his labor lead him and a team of elders to an abandoned world called Hellguard, the fifth planet of 872 Trianguli system on the Romulan side of the Neutral Zone. What lay there sends shock waves through the Vulcan community: Vulcan children ages 5 to 15 lay dying on that burning rock in space and no one knows why.

At first no one could understand how Vulcan children could have come to occupy Hellguard, but there they were - unruly, uneducated and for the most part, feral. But most of all they were only half Vulcan. Romulan stock served as their second half. It wasn't hard to deduce what had transpired; Vulcan had lost four science vessels along the Neutral Zone over a fifteen year period, disappearing without a trace - the Criterion, Preceptor, Constant and Diversity. And it was quite clear the crews were captured and the women raped as they came into Pon Farr. During his time surveying Hellguard, Spock comes across a child of the world who couldn't be more than ten years old but reminds him of someone he once knew. She had just killed to protect herself and turns her attention on Spock. The Vulcan is able to communicate with the child despite her vocabulary deficiency and by the end of his stay, takes her aboard his shuttle and returns to the world of the Federation.

Spock takes a year off to spend with the girl, named Saavik - whose name means in either the Vulcan or Romulan language "little cat" - to educate her in the ways of the world as well as the Vulcan way of life. She is very bright, but unruly. After a year of living on Dantria IV, Spock decides to take Saavik to Vulcan where he would care for her with the help of Sarek and Amanda. Saavik was given an excellent upbringing on Vulcan and soon embraced the Vulcan way of life, but eager to please her teacher, she expresses interest in following Spock into Starfleet and by 2281, enters Starfleet Academy, assigned to live in Residence Complex Three. Her time at the Academy was not the easiest, but she was able to fit in by playing on the baseball team becoming known as The Photon Torpedo for her quick and accurate pitching. Although apart, Spock converses with Saavik every day via daily video messages, many of which are responses to Saavik's unyielding number of questions.

Meanwhile, the Enterprise is once again patrolling the Romulan Neutral Zone when an identified vessel is detected approaching Federation space at sub-light speed. The ship is an old Romulan Bird of Prey, fully stocked but without a living crew. The investigation turns bizarre when a number of strange boxes are found on board ship containing equally strange glowing orbs. They are mistaken for art and are catalogued away for future study, but the ship has even more value to the Federation: it contains a new type of cloaking device with unlimited range and other unknown abilities. Understanding the value of this find, the Enterprise immediately salvages the vessel and brings it back to Starfleet Command under the orders of Admiral Nogura for a complete and thorough run-through. The orbs, which are of scientific curiosity, are packaged and sent two places: one, a Federation Exo-science lab on the 18th floor at Headquarters in San Francisco, and the second to a facility in Life City specializing in rare and unusual off-world objects.

While the Captain returns to Starfleet Command in the dead of night to make his report (in the hopes of avoiding Nogura who Kirk is sure will try and strong-arm him back into a desk job), a shuttle docks with the Enterprise to omit a special guest of Spock's: Saavik. Spock and Saavik spend quite some time together on the Enterprise, talking about whatever may be on Saavik's mind: from Human traditions and rituals to matings to games. But something happens to change all that: one of the strange orbs taken to the Exo-science lab is activated through a system scan, killing the two technicians. But the effect doesn't stop there; it spreads throughout Federation Headquarters, killing everyone in the building - except for Captain Kirk. In his attempt to avoid Nogura, he was down in the Vault, a relic of the Romulan wars - a bunker, if you will, completely cut off from the rest of the building. Although protecting him from whatever effect has swept Federation HQ, the fail-safe on the Vault are overridden and he is locked inside completely cut off from the outside world. At the same time, Spock is showing Saavik a visual of the object he found who immediately goes rigid: she'd seen thousands of those objects before, in a cave on Hellguard, but it was a dream! Or so she thought...

Spock, understanding the gravity of the situation, attempts to rouse HQ. When there is no response from anyone he asks for Nogura, Starfleet Commander. At the same time Captain Kirk is able to reach the Enterprise and through a three-way conversation tells everyone what has taken place: an accident has occurred within the exo-lab and whatever

the contamination is, no one is alive at Starfleet HQ. Through subsequent trials, a team from the Enterprise is able to discover that all the oxygen has been removed from the air, without a known modus (although soon after it is discovered that a silicon-based microorganism is reacting and replicating, taking the oxygen with it at enormous speeds) and if something like this were to be let lose in the Earth's atmosphere, oxygen would be depleted planet wide in approximately 10 hours, killing billions. And just as Spock and the Enterprise are dealing with the goings on at HQ and the possibilities this was sabotage of the highest order, a sudden realization comes to him: one of these objects was sent to Life City, a domed city from Earth's past, still in use.

But he's too late. The object activates and kills everyone within Life City; thousands. It's soon clear that the "virus" from these objects was meant to escape into Earth's atmosphere and destroy Starfleet from the ground up.

Now knowing that a) the Romulan Bird-of-Prey was meant to be captured and taken back to Starfleet Headquarters, b) that Humans' natural curiosity would lead them to examine the objects and unleash their terror was part of a terrorist plot, and c) that thousands more of these orbs exist on the long-ago forgotten planet of Hellguard, there is but one course of action: return to Hellguard to a) learn about the process and obtain, if available, an antidote and b) destroy the remaining cache of objects before they can be used elsewhere in the Federation.

The Enterprise gets underway for Hellguard without the Captain, who is ensconced at HQ; however, a number of other colorful characters come aboard, such as Lt. Robert Harper, Fred DiMuro and Obo, a Belandrid with a knack for fixing things ("Eaaasy fix! Verrrry quick! Gggood Oobo!"). Belandrids are easy to recognize: they have neon-yellow eyes, stand barely one meter tall and weighs only one kilo, but they are humanoid: two arms, two legs, and two webbed feet and hands. The only problem here is that Obo is not a Federation citizen, nor is he a member of Starfleet. He is effectively a stowaway on board ship, who was adopted by dock workers Harper and DiMuro who find themselves pressed aboard during this crisis. Saavik too remains on board.

On the way to Hellguard, the Enterprise picks up a distress signal on the edge of the Neutral Zone from a small merchant ship of Romulan origin. Aboard this ship is a man named Achernar, who was contacted by Praetor Tahn and ordered him to track down and retrieve items that had been stolen from him by a secret Romulan organization known as Ten. Unfortunately, he ran into trouble and was picked up by the Enterprise before doing so. He is distrusted by most of the crew, including Saavik, who believes the man will bring harm to the Enterprise if not closely watched. Meanwhile, back at HQ, the Federation council has voted to go to war with the Romulans over this attack, which gives Spock and the Enterprise just 24 hours or so to complete their mission. If a way is not found to counteract the effects of the weapon, and soon, the Federation will launch themselves into a war that neither side really and truly wants. Kirk becomes frantic to press Nogura for more time, even to the point of giving up the Enterprise and taking the Admiral's desk job.

On Hellguard, or Thieurrull as the Romulans refer to the planet, Saavik leads Spock down a cavernous passage that takes them deep within the surface of the burned-up world. Many ghosts exist here for the young cadet, who loses her calm Vulcan veneer the moment she discovers the terror of her dreams is still alive (a man), tending the cache within the underground laboratory. She comes to realize, as her repressed memories begin to resurface, that he was using the captured Vulcan scientists as guinea pigs for the creation of these orbs. Although tense and fierce words and actions ensue, Saavik is kept from killing the man in hatred. Learning all they could, Spock and Saavik retreat to the surface and prepare a bomb that will detonate the entire mountain, destroying and burying its ugly contents. But Saavik will not allow Spock to plant the bomb - unstable tectonics have created a number of highly volatile earthquakes, which could bury Spock in an instant if he took the bomb to the source himself - so she renders him unconscious to take the bomb herself, to enact revenge against the man who masterminded the whole Grand Design.

Although she is able to plant the bomb where it will do the most good, she succumbs to her rage and attacks the man yet again. Saavik is forced to come to her senses when she realizes time is ticking away on the bomb. As she retreats, an earthquake begins to rattle the cavern, threatening to collapse around her. Luckily for Saavik, Spock regains consciousness enough to help her escape from the collapsing cavern and the two of them beam aboard the Enterprise just in the nick of time. Although safe from the bomb, the Enterprise is under threat herself from approaching Romulan vessels containing the Praetor himself. Unable to defend the ship against three warbirds of the Empire, Spock enacts the self-destruct mechanism. But when Archenar steps in to help, the situation calms (remember, he's on assignment from the Praetor), which allows Spock to abort the self-destruct order (but not without some theatrics and the help of Obo).

With the Romulans appeased and the orbs of the Grand Design destroyed, the Praetor decides to use this knowledge to expose the Ten and get his lasting rewards (and revenge for past grievances). Meanwhile, this allows Spock to come up with the cure-all antidote for the Orbs' destruction on Earth: the dust from iron sulfide, or more commonly known as "fool's gold", which is commonly found on both Hellguard and Earth, turns out to be the answer. And it is surmised that the orbs' construction was not to keep the virus-compound in, but to keep the dust out - as the dust immediately breaks down the compounds that worked to suck out all the oxygen from the air. And with that discovery, the Romulan orbs are rendered neutral - Starfleet HQ and Life City are decontaminated and reopened, and the call to war rescinded.

Life continues aboard the USS Enterprise with Admiral Kirk as her commander and Mr. Spock by his side. Saavik, she returned to Starfleet Academy with one hell of an adventure to share, but ever quizzical.

"Permit me a question..."