

SciFpress

Blood

of

Others

by

Lyn Viviers

a Star Trek
fanzone

BLOOD OF OTHERS

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Editors - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini

Typing - Sheila Clark

Proofreading - Janet Quarton, Sheila Clark & Valerie Piacentini

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Sheila Clark
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BLOOD OF OTHERS

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The view from the medical centre was spectacular. Far below he could see the river flowing down the mountainside to encircle the spread-out city of N'vet, sparkling crystal clear in the dawn sun. He traced its path through the city, envisioning the waterways, parks and marble buildings. If he looked to his right, he would see the enormous complex and adjoining centre which was the seat of government and the space complex. Behind these, the Neman Desert started, stretching out into an endless wasteland, past the Rock of Remembrance to an area that most people avoided.

To the left of him lay the cobbled pathway, winding down the incline to the guarded gates where he could see citizens waiting to be cleared into the grounds. He had never had to walk that long path; his was a short trip every four months from the space complex along the inner connecting corridors.

The door to his sterile white-walled room opened, and he jumped at the sound. Always precautions where he was concerned, because of his aversion to the manner of surviving - always on the point of rebelling against his heritage, of refusing to feed - which threw his system into continual chaos, causing a more vicious streak when he finally succumbed to the hunger. Only drugs helped, calming his system - and, of course, Devon. His friend, and the Keeper of body and soul; his shadow, who now stood next to the doctor, waiting to assist if necessary.

He lay down on the indicated examination bed, automatically tensing as the doctor touched him, his nerves already at breaking point.

Control!

The pain in his upper gum was becoming excruciating, but he could not release his biting teeth yet. The doctor held up a syringe, judging the correct amount of medication, and squirted the contents into his arm. He struggled into a sitting position.

"No, don't get up," the doctor said. "You are just about ready, so we will take you through now."

He lay back on the bed, heart beating fast as they wheeled him out of the room into a lift and down into the insulated section where rooms stood in neat rows. They turned into the room at the end of the corridor, the doctor shutting the door and activating the 'occupied' light.

He was helped off the bed and led into a smaller inner room. The door was bolted behind him, leaving him alone, but he knew they would be watching on a monitor, ready to assist if he needed them.

A small door on the opposite side of the cell opened, and a Jihad was pushed in. Its terror hit him like a blow to the gut, and he backed away, sweating, the drug increasing his tension.

The Jihad was a female, young and pretty and alive. No; he couldn't... do it. The old horror engulfed him as his vision blurred and his muscles started to go into spasm as his instincts drove him towards her and his conscience held him back. And then she screamed and went on screaming in a high soprano, the sound cutting into his shattered nerves until he could no longer stand it - or control. He felt his biting teeth break out, and then sanity snapped.

He went for the kill.

Awareness returned in a hazy fog and he found himself lying on the floor curled up in a foetal position, with Devon and the doctor bending over him.

"Kyle!" Devon's voice held a note of worry. "Kyle, can you hear me?"

"You vrash!" he hissed through clenched teeth. "What did you do to me?"

"A new drug. It hasn't been used before." The doctor beamed. "It worked perfectly. You barely hesitated. How do you feel?"

"Sick - as usual. I'll have nightmares for days after this! Help me up, Devon."

He was supported to his feet, and he shivered as he saw the body lying nearby. Reaction had already set in, as usual, and he felt ill, shaking as if with plague, longing to be sick - but his body's automatic defences prevented that; and then he passed out, dimly aware that Devon caught him before he hit the floor.

"Take him back to his quarters, Devon, and double the dose of medication. There may be side effects to the drug that the tests didn't show. Call me if the pattern changes."

"Don't worry, I will. That was a powerful drug! Hula, I've never seen him attack that fast before."

"Nor I. Go, now."

The long day passed into night and Devon kept vigil at his K'Tzan's bed, dosing him with medication at regular intervals, listening to his ravings and soothing him when the raving turned to guilt and then to hysteria, and finally holding him like a child when the tears came.

The pattern had not changed.

Finally, exhausted, Kyle fell asleep. Checking him, his 'Keeper' was satisfied that he would be passed fit for duty the next day. Then, weary himself, Devon lowered himself onto the bed next to his charge and joined him in sleep.

The pressure became too much for the old star; the fragile shell cracked under the increasing assault from the molten fires within, and then the star blew itself to pieces, hurling new life into the blackness of space in a fiery red. Shock waves rippled and

contorted until they reached a white object blocking their path.

Captain James T. Kirk gritted his teeth as the Enterprise rocked violently. This was getting unhealthy. He turned to his Vulcan First Officer, who had all his attention focused on the hooded viewer at the science station.

"Spock, can we go before my ship shakes herself apart?"

"Yes, Captain. I have all the relevant data."

"Thank the stars for that! Mr. Sulu, take us out of here, and head for Starbase 10."

"Aye, sir." The Oriental helmsman needed no second bidding.

Kirk settled himself back in his chair, happy to feel the surge of the engines and finally be under way again. They had been sitting there recording the star's death for a week, all because the assigned scientific ship had engine trouble. Someone in Starfleet's Scientific Office had squeaked in alarm at missing this valuable data, so Starfleet Command had sent along the nearest ship - the Enterprise.

The lift doors opened to admit Dr. McCoy, who took up his usual position behind Kirk's chair. "Glad to see we're moving again. I was getting quite seasick with all that rocking."

"You mean 'spacesick', Bones."

"Whatever. Well, Spock - was it worth it?" he asked, turning to the Vulcan.

"Naturally, Dr. McCoy. This information is vital to the experiments being conducted at Starbase 10. If it had not been gathered, it would have put the research programme back by five years. The paper Professor Hartmann is compiling will make interesting reading."

"In what way?" McCoy asked, and then could have kicked himself for the stupid question. The Vulcan would now give them an in-depth lecture on something only he understood.

"It is a whole new concept of the disintegration and reforming of planetary systems." He broke off abruptly, studying his readings.

"What is it, Spock?"

"Captain, sensors show a residual cloud rapidly approaching. Fascinating. I have never seen anything like this before."

"Shock wave from the star?"

"I do not think so, Captain." He studied the readings for a moment longer, then added, "It is increasing in speed."

"Sulu, increase our speed to warp six," Kirk ordered.

"It is still gaining, Captain," Spock warned.

"Sound red alert. Sulu, give us rear magnification."

The rear scanners focused on a whirling mass of light mists, the outer shades of grey darkening towards the middle of the vortex until it resembled a deep black pit.

"What is it?" McCoy breathed, his heart threatening to burst through his rib cage.

"Unknown," Spock replied. "Nobody has been this close to a nova before."

"Sulu, evasive action. Hard to starboard!"

It was useless. The cloud enveloped them, caressing gently at first, but then the Enterprise began to rock violently while the crew hung on to anything they could in an attempt to keep their balance. Then the ship gave a final bone-jarring shake as she plummeted into the depths of the eye of the cloud, then listed as if an unseen hand was trying to turn her upside down.

Kirk was thrown out of his chair to crash against the bridge rails. He grabbed them for support, fighting a sudden feeling of vertigo and nausea as the deck seemed to drop sickeningly from beneath his feet. All around him he heard the cries of his crew, and then the lights went out. The last thing he heard was the red alert klaxon still blaring throughout the ship, before a tight hand crushed the air from his lungs and he knew no more.

When he woke he was lying face down on the deck. He struggled up as far as his knees, shaking his head to clear the insistent buzzing in it. It was a mistake. A bolt of pain hit him between the eyes.

Then a hand appeared, helping him to his feet, and in the gloom of the emergency lighting he saw the familiar figure of Spock.

"Thanks, Spock. You okay?"

"I am uninjured, Captain, but I fear there are those who will need medical assistance."

Kirk looked round the bridge. "Lighting?"

"Is out. At the moment only the emergency lighting is operative. Essentially, the ship is dead in space."

As he spoke they heard the secondary life support pumps begin to scrub the air, and Kirk sighed in relief. At least they would not suffocate. The deep breath made him aware of the acrid smell of overloaded circuits.

Around him he heard the bridge crew stirring, some cursing, a few moaning in pain.

"Where's McCoy?" he demanded. There was no reply but the crew fell silent. Worried, he continued in as even a voice as possible. "We have some injured with us. Those of you who are all right try to make them as comfortable as possible until the medics get here. Spock, find McCoy. Uhura."

"Here, Captain."

"Can you raise Sickbay and Engineering?"

A professional, she had immediately begun to check her console as soon as she regained consciousness, working by touch. "Most of my board is burned out," she replied. "But I'll try."

"The lifts, Spock?"

"Not working, Captain. However, I have located Dr. McCoy. He appears to be unconscious."

Kirk followed Spock's voice to where McCoy lay. "Bones? Bones!"

The Doctor stirred under Kirk's shaking hand, and the Captain couldn't help grinning at the string of oaths the Doctor let loose as awareness returned.

"What the hell happened?" he ended his tirade.

"That will have to wait for later. Are you all right? We have some injured here."

Concerned, McCoy struggled to his feet. "It'd help if we could see further than the ends of our noses."

As if on cue, the main lights flickered on, although only at half power, and McCoy breathed a sigh of relief. "Scotty's still with us, then... Good Lord!"

The bridge looked like the aftermath of a space slaughter; one or two of the crew lay in various positions on the deck or slumped over consoles. Everything was a shambles.

No-one had escaped without scratches or bruising. Others were more seriously injured; Sulu lay next to the navigation console, one leg bent at an impossible angle. Chekov was bending over him, trying to help, as McCoy hurried over.

"Captain, I've raised Sickbay," Uhura called. "They're sending a unit up via the emergency stairwell. Dr. M'Benga reports casualties from all over the ship."

"Anything from Engineering?"

"No, sir. I can't get through."

"Keep trying. Spock, get that door open."

The medical team eventually arrived, mostly out of breath from the long climb. Under McCoy's directions they sought out those who needed immediate attention, struggling with their burdens back down the emergency stair. Kirk watched as two attendants carried Sulu out, followed by McCoy.

"Captain, I've got Mr. Scott," Uhura called.

Kirk hurried to her station. "Scotty, what's the situation down there?"

"It's a mess, Captain. I've had to unhook the lines as one of the crystals has cracked, and most circuits have burned out. Mind asking young Chekov what he managed to navigate us into?"

Kirk smiled at that. "It's not his fault, Scotty. It's probably tied in with the star we were watching. Is anyone in your section hurt?"

"Only young Simpson. His hand is badly burned. Other than lumps and bumps, the rest of us are fine. Here come the medics now. I'll keep you posted, Captain."

"Do that. Yes, Uhura?"

"Damage repair units are at work, Captain, and an emergency relief crew is on its way up. The bad news is that I can't raise Starfleet."

"That's not all the bad news," a Russian voice said gloomily.

"What is it, Chekov?"

"Sir, I don't know where we are. These constellations are not familiar. I think we are lost."

Twelve hours later Kirk and his senior officers assembled in the main briefing room. Under the mopping up operations the ship was slowly being repaired. Her turbolifts were working again, as was the main life support unit. Now it was a matter of time for burned out circuits to be repaired, and, most important, the replacing of the cracked dilithium crystal.

"How many casualties do we have, Bones?"

"Not many serious cases. Sulu will be up and about in a day or two. The bone has been lasered back, but he will have to rest it for a while. Simpson's hand is badly burned and will need skin grafts and therapy to make sure he recovers the full use of it. Besides those two there are a couple of cracked bones and two or three cases of concussion. Apart from that it's just cuts and bruises. We were damned lucky."

Kirk nodded. "Damage report, Scotty."

"The warp drive is out until we replace the crystal. Impulse engines are only at 60% at the moment, but normal life support is now working. There is still a lot of minor damage to fix, not to mention general breakages. One of the main storage bins broke open, so don't expect a good dinner tonight. A couple of lab animals got loose, and what I hear is that Poppet is still missing."

"Poppet?" Kirk looked more than a little vague.

"Dr. Dextor's serbocat," Spock prompted.

"Oh, yes. Poppet?"

"She's harmless enough, but you wouldn't say so to look at her," Scott laughed.

Somewhere at the back of Kirk's mind a picture formed of a feline type animal with a long boa-constrictor tail, coal black eyes and a mouth full of fangs. "Let's hope Dr. Dextor is the one who finds her." He turned to Uhura. "Any luck with Starfleet, Lieutenant?"

She shook her head. "No, Captain. Nothing. I have replaced literally every circuit on my board, but I can raise no outside transmissions."

"Which brings us to you, Spock. Any ideas or suggestions?"

The Vulcan steepled his hands. "The data I have so far gathered agrees with Ensign Chekov's theory that we are lost. No star system has been identified by myself - or by the computer - as being familiar."

"So we've been thrown into uncharted space?" McCoy said.

"In a manner of speaking, Doctor."

"Which means?"

"It is my theory that we have crossed over into a different galaxy or universe."

"Oh, come on, Spock! How can you be sure of that?" McCoy scoffed.

"Wait a minute, Bones. Carry on, Spock."

"Thank you, Captain. The data I have point to similarities with past occasions. Captain, when you were transported into the Empire, you experienced nausea and vertigo, the same as here."

"Well, I suppose I did."

"But this was on a larger scale. A vast majority lost consciousness. The other incident I refer to was the occasion when the Enterprise collided with the ship of lights in that other dimension. It was they who pushed us back, but we experienced the same vertigo."

"Spock, you can't guess on two past experiences," McCoy objected.

"No. However, if you will look at the screen, here is data recorded by long range mapping cameras."

"Beautiful pictures of space with a fuzzy patch on it. So what?"

"Here is another, prior to the accident."

"Same cloud, Spock?"

"Yes, Captain. It could be a corridor that has opened between the two universes. I suggest a closer look, Captain."

"It couldn't hurt. How far, Spock?"

"A rough estimate of twenty hours, Captain. There is a constellation not far from the cloud that could prove valuable for a fixed position."

"I agree. I for one do not intend just to sit here. Carry on, people. That's all."

Kirk went down to Sickbay with McCoy to look at the injured.

Sulu was lying in bed, his lasered leg supported by a pulley.

"That looks most uncomfortable, Sulu," Kirk said.

"It's not too bad, sir. Dr. McCoy said I won't be here for long."

"If you behave yourself," McCoy threatened.

"You've already threatened me, Doctor," Sulu said.

"Listen to him, Jim! He sounds just like Spock," McCoy complained. "I swear your First Officer is giving lessons on how to cheek me. Don't ask me why, as they are provided with a comfortable bed and three meals a day at no extra charge. No, keep quiet, Sulu. I'm leaving."

"K'Tzan, I am picking up a reading of another vessel."

"Distance?"

"Approximately 5000 faner. She is not moving very fast, but she is definitely on our heading."

"Can you pick up a scan reading?"

"I think so." The young officer bent over his board, concentrating, and then pushed a button. "Coming through now, K'Tzan."

Kyle leaned over Zared's shoulder, watching as a picture emerged onto the screen. He frowned.

"Devon, come take a look at this," he called.

The tall blond man left his station and joined Kyle. "I have never seen a ship like that," he said, surprised. "It's not one of ours."

"Curious. Jihad?" Kyle asked.

"Maybe, but that colony has avoided us for years. Why tempt a confrontation now?"

"She's crossed our boundaries, so let's take a look. Keep tracking, Zared. If we can pick her up, she can do the same to us. Relay information to the helm if she deviates in any way."

"Yes, K'Tzan."

"Kinter, get Emon up here," he ordered the communications exec. "Was it only yesterday I was complaining about the quiet patrol? Hula, I should learn to keep my mouth shut!"

For six hours Kirk had been on the bridge watching the empty unknown space through the main viewscreen. They were moving on impulse power, Scott not yet having fitted the replacement dilithium crystals. The constellation they were heading for still looked far away - it would take many hours to get there at this speed - and

then, if Spock was right - which he didn't really doubt - home. Sulu had been released from Sickbay, but was not yet allowed back on duty. Kirk glanced at the relief helmsman, a stocky blond man with a cheerful grin. David Tregard normally worked the B crew shift.

"Captain, I am picking up another vessel in the near vicinity," Spock said, breaking into Kirk's thoughts.

"Heading, Spock?"

"Towards us, Captain."

"Can you identify her?" Kirk asked, moving to the science station.

"Not from this distance, sir. She is travelling at warp speed. Visual contact in ten minutes."

"Uhura, can you pick up any transmissions?"

She bent over her board, concentrating, and then turned back to Kirk.

"Nothing, sir. All I get is static."

"Mr. Tregard, go to yellow alert," Kirk ordered.

"Aye, sir."

"Captain, if she is hostile, we cannot outrun her," Spock said.

"Let's test that, shall we? Mr. Tregard, raise the shields and turn 60 degrees to port."

"Shields up, and turning... now."

"The vessel has also changed course," Spock reported.

The lift doors opened to admit McCoy. "What's happening?" he asked.

"A visitor, Doctor."

"There, Captain! At eleven o'clock!" Tregard said urgently.

A pinpoint of light emerged through the blackness. They watched as the ship grew larger until they were able to define her lines. She was smaller than the Enterprise and obviously built for speed and manoeuvrability. Her sleek lines gave her the impression of a swooping bird, similar in design to the Romulans' Bird of Prey. Against the dark blue of her hull, red symbols glowed in the wash of her navigational lights.

Kirk twisted around. "Spock?"

"Unfamiliar, sir," the Vulcan replied.

"Captain, I may have picked up a transmission, but I don't understand it."

"Link up with Spock's console. See if you can decipher it." He waited agonising seconds as the Vulcan went to work.

"It is of no known Federation dialect. Captain, we are being scanned! Fascinating - they have broken right through our shields."

"Uhura, try raising them. Mr. Tregard, return to our original course. Let's see what they do."

As the Enterprise turned, a yellow tracer spat passed the viewscreen.

"They don't want us to go that way," McCoy remarked.

"A warning shot only," Spock said.

"One across the bows, eh, Spock?"

"Probably, Doctor."

"Mr. Tregard, slow to one half impulse power," Kirk ordered. "Keep your finger off the firing button, Mr. Chekov."

"Shouldn't we go to red alert?" McCoy suggested.

"Bones, please!"

"Sorry."

"Uhura? Can you pick them up?"

She held her hand up. "Nearly there... Got it! The channels are open, sir."

"Right, let's try talking to them. This is Captain James T. Kirk of the Federation Starship Enterprise. We have no hostile intentions. Please identify yourselves."

Silence crackled from the speakers.

"Talkative lot," McCoy remarked.

"Mr. Tregard, try manœuvring again. Slowly."

This only resulted in another tracer of yellow fire which drilled into the ship's bodywork. Kirk winced, thinking of what Scott would say, and then tried again.

"I repeat; this is Captain James T. Kirk of the Federation Starship Enterprise. Please identify yourselves."

The Enterprise gave a slight lurch. "Tractor beam," Spock confirmed.

"Can we break free?"

"Negative, Captain. We are locked in tight."

"What now, Jim?" McCoy asked.

"That, Doctor, depends entirely on them. Mr. Tregard, stop engines."

"What do you think, Emon?"

"If they are Jehads, they have a lot of cheek in first violating our space, and then demanding that we identify ourselves," Emon said. He was a short teddy bear of a man with bright, shrewd eyes.

"I don't think they are Jehads," Kyle said thoughtfully.

"They speak the language," Emon pointed out.

"I realise that, but no. A ship of that size... I don't think so. As for the 'Federation', I have never heard of one. The scan shows advanced technology, and that is one thing the Jihad do not have; but just to be on the safe side, we'll keep them on ice. See if they make any mistakes."

"And if they don't?" Devon queried.

"Why, then we'll talk to them. Invite their commander over to the Shuura. No Jihad would want to do that, now would they?"

"Kyle, I've said it before. You are devious," Emon said.

"I'll take that as a compliment. Zared, no communications, and keep that leash tight. Kinter, you're in charge. Come, Devon. I'm hungry."

"I don't get it!" McCoy fumed. "We've been sitting here for two hours. Why haven't they done anything?"

"They're playing with us, Doctor. It's called 'the waiting game'."

"But what for?"

"They are testing us, Dr. McCoy," Spock replied.

"Are you going to call them again, sir?" Uhura asked.

"No, not now. We'll play it their way for a while. You can call a yeoman for some coffee, though - and a couple of sandwiches. It's going to be a long wait, and I'm hungry."

"How much longer are you going to keep them waiting?" Devon asked.

"Not much longer," Kyle replied. "The scan shows the presence of drive power, and yet they were using their secondary systems. They must have damage somewhere." He scanned the reports. "Yes, there. Look, Devon - there are signs of extreme pressure on this part of her secondary hull. I wonder what - Uugh!"

The report dropped from his hands and he buckled over in agony.

"Hula! Not now!"

"Devon! Quickly!" Emon shouted.

Devon was already at Kyle's side, hands reaching for the nerve points. "Don't fight it, Kyle. Ride with it. There. Now breathe

deeply. That's it. Emon, help me get him flat. Easy now."

Devon wrapped his arms round Kyle's waist and with Emon's help lowered him to the floor where he lay pale and limp. Devon unclipped a vial from an inside pocket of Kyle's uniform. He studied the quantity, frowning, and then squirted some of the contents into Kyle's mouth. The spasms passed, and Kyle slowly sat up, cross-legged, his head bowed as he caught his breath.

"K'Tzan, may I enquire when you last took your medication?" Devon asked, one eyebrow raised.

"I forgot," Kyle said, squirming under those angry eyes.

"You forgot! I am your Keeper, K'Tzan, but I do expect you to remember when to take your own medication. You have yourself and the crew to consider!"

Kyle looked up into Devon's angry face. "I consider myself duly reprimanded, B'ruam, and I am sorry. It won't happen again," he said meekly.

"It had better not," Devon threatened, and then he smiled, holding out a hand to help Kyle up.

"What are you looking at?" he demanded of his crew, who were all wearing grins of relief.

They were rescued from having to answer by the timely transmission from the alien ship.

"Now, Captain James T. Kirk, let's see what you have to say for yourself," Kyle murmured softly.

With each passing minute Kirk was growing tired and impatient. Who were these people?

"Okay, that's it! Uhura, open the line again. Mr. Tregard, get ready to go into reverse. If they won't talk, we'll have to try and break free. It may weaken their hold on us even if we can't get free. Stand by to divert power." He sat in his chair, mouth set in a tight line.

"USS Enterprise to alien craft. We are getting tired and impatient of waiting for your convenience. If you can understand me, respond!"

"Indeed we do, Captain Kirk," a voice said.

"Well, that's a start!" McCoy muttered.

"What is the meaning of this attack on my ship?" Kirk demanded.

"Captain Kirk, you have violated our space. I will ask the questions if you don't mind."

"We had no intention of violating any space," Kirk answered.

"Then why are you here?" the voice asked smoothly.

"It was an accident. If you had responded to our first

transmission, you would have heard this and not wasted our time by keeping us on a tractor beam for four hours."

"An accident? Perhaps you would care to clarify that remark."

"Look, it's a long story," Kirk protested.

"We have all the time."

"Maybe you do, but we might not."

"I beg your pardon?"

"We hit a freak phenomenon in space and landed up here, which might not even be our own galaxy. It is the theory of my science officer that we were forced through an opening between our two universes."

"Your ship is damaged?" the voice asked after a fractional silence.

"It is," Kirk confirmed.

"Your answer is, fortunately, the correct one, Captain."

"What do you mean?" Kirk asked, feeling suddenly as if he was being toyed with, that these aliens already knew all the answers.

"If you had denied any damage you would have been lying - with unfortunate consequences to yourself and your crew. Now I would like to apologise and offer you a safe conduct to my home planet of Akronia. This part of space is not safe."

"That is very generous of you, but why the sudden change in attitude?"

"Forgive me, Captain, but we had to be one hundred percent certain that you were not... who we thought you might be."

"You have been scanning us?"

"Naturally. Your drive power is damaged and there are signs of a weakening in the secondary hull."

"How do they know that?" McCoy whispered.

"Very well," Kirk agreed. "We will accept your help."

"Good. For speed we will keep you on leash until we get to Akronia. One more thing," he added lazily, "would you and your fellow officers care to come aboard the Shuvra for dinner, where we can meet face to face?"

"It could be a trap, Jim," McCoy said softly.

"I assure you it is nothing of the sort," the voice said.

"Good grief, he's got ears as sharp as Spock's!"

Kirk couldn't help smiling at the look of total astonishment on McCoy's face. "We will be pleased to accept, and sort this misunderstanding out."

"I will send a shuttle over in two hours to your port docking bay. Until later, Captain Kirk."

"He's cut transmission, Captain," Uhura said.

"I don't like this," McCoy said. "We didn't even get his name."

"Never mind Bones. You'll find out later."

"Now wait a minute, Jim! I didn't say I was going. They may be serving us for dinner."

"Consider it an order, Doctor. Spock, you're coming too. Scotty can run things here - not that there is much to run at the moment. Uhura, get a relief crew to cover the bridge for two hours, and then I want you all back on duty. That's all. Come on you two, dress uniform."

He disappeared into the turbolift, missing the look of horror on McCoy's face.

"Seems like you were right, Kyle. They are not Jihad," Emon said.

"Or they are very clever," Devon added.

"No matter. They will be thoroughly screened. Zared, get hold of Meira and tell her to ready the shuttle; and tell whoever is on my cabin shift to arrange dinner there."

"For how many, K'Tzan?"

"Oh, I don't think he will bring more than three with him, and then it will be Emon, Devon and myself." He turned to his security exec. "Emil, arrange security. If they are Jihad we don't want to be caught off guard, though there is not much they can do except blow both ships up."

"That's a comforting thought," Devon said. "All there is left to do, K'Tzan, is let you get some rest. Come!"

"All right, I know when I'm beaten. Take over, Kinter, but if you smell a rat let me know immediately."

"Are you going to contact the Proktui?" Devon asked as they made their way to the officers' quarters.

"I will have to, but only after we have met with the aliens. I have offered help, but if it will expose... We will just have to wait and see.

"I feel like a dog's breakfast," McCoy complained, fussing with the collar of his dress uniform. "I could have forgiven you for having dragged me along, under protest let me add - but this - never!"

"Dr. McCoy," Spock answered him, "perhaps if you follow your own diet, you would realise why you feel uncomfortable."

"Jim! Did you hear that? You cheeky Vulcan! I am not fat!"

Kirk was saved from answering that by Scott's timely call.
"Alien shuttle on final approach, Captain."

"Thanks, Scotty. Stop arguing, you two, and let's go."

They took the turbolift down to the port docking bay level in time to hear the shuttlecraft's suction pads locking onto the outer hatch.

"We're going now, Scotty. Take care of my ship."

Kirk deactivated the door release, and they stepped into the inner compartment, the door closing and locking behind them.

"What do we do now?" McCoy demanded. "Knock?"

"The green light is on, Doctor, which means we can deactivate the outer hatch."

"And if nobody is there?"

"We breathe space," Kirk said lightly, punching in the sequence.

"Oh, great! Why couldn't we use the transporter?"

"They probably don't have one."

The hatch slid open and they stepped over the lip into the shuttle. The Enterprise hatch slid closed and seconds later the shuttle followed suit.

"Please be seated," a feminine voice said, "and fasten the harnesses."

"All that's missing is the soft music," McCoy muttered, settling himself into a soft blue couch. "Now how do these damn things fasten?"

"Let me assist you, Doctor," Spock offered, bending over.

"No, I've got it now, thanks."

"Bones, please try to behave yourself," Kirk begged.

"Sorry, Jim. I ramble when I'm nervous, and right now I'm very nervous."

The flight was short and smooth. Soon they were flying under the belly of the alien ship, floating up into the hangar deck to come to rest with a slight thump. Darkness closed in as the bay doors shut, and then the engines cut out, to be replaced by the sound of machinery, and the shuttle was lifted upwards. With a hiss of pumps it stopped and the hatch slid open.

"Well, here we are. Let's not keep our hosts waiting."

They stepped out into the small enclosed chamber to find three men waiting for them. They were all humanoid in appearance, the eldest a short tubby man, his hair growing grey at the temples. The second was tall and blond with sharp nordic-type features and clear

blue eyes.

It was the third that drew Kirk's attention. He had dark hair and a sharp bone structure with deep grey eyes set in a pale, almost drawn face. He was shorter than the blond alien, slim in build, and carried himself with a sureness that bordered on arrogance.

But the one aspect of all three that caught Kirk's attention the most was their hands. Instead of fingers they had short tentacles that twitched like lazy snakes, and for some unknown reason Kirk felt goosebumps start along his arms. He could see that they were being equally scrutinised, especially Spock.

The dark alien stepped forward, offering a hand.

"I am K'Tzan Kyle Fh'ers." His sensitive lips broke into a smile, as charming as Kirk's own.

Kirk took the hand, feeling the tentacles wrap gently around his fingers, noting that they felt dry rather than slimy. "Thank you. I am Jim Kirk. This is my First Officer, Mr. Spock, and our Chief Surgeon, Dr. Leonard McCoy."

Kyle shook hands with McCoy, but some instinct made him refrain from offering his hand to Spock. *Uncanny*, Kirk thought. *How does he know that Spock hates close contact?*

"May I present Emon Ind'r and B'ruam Devon T'Zon, our exec. officer. I am pleased that you consented to this meeting after the way we have treated you."

"You had your reasons. I might have done the same," Kirk replied.

"Maybe. Come, this is not a comfortable place to talk in. Please follow me."

They passed through a hatchway and into a curving corridor. Kirk stopped in amazement at the sight of a central well, the corridor rising in a spiral from the depths below to what must be the bridge. The walls were of a clear plexiglass, allowing visual contact with the levels below. In this central core were alcove exits into the banks of lifts, all see-through domed constructions moving swiftly and silently. The outer sides of the corridors led off in various directions to other parts of the ship.

"Fascinating!" Spock murmured.

Kyle opened the door of a lift, ushering them inside, and warning them to hold on to the handrails. It was necessary, as the lift shot up at a tremendous speed to stop smoothly at the desired level.

"Most impressive," Kirk said. "You have quite a view from the corridors."

"It keeps the crew on their toes," Kyle smiled. "They never know who is watching them." He grinned at Devon, as if it were a private joke, and the blond man actually looked embarrassed.

The Enterprise party was ushered into a room, simply but comfortably decorated in warm tones of blue. Another door led into what must have been the sleeping area.

"Please be seated, gentlemen. I am really glad your physician is with you, as I am not sure if these refreshments are safe for you. We have never had visitors from a neighbouring galaxy before."

"So you accept that as the truth?" Kirk asked.

"Perhaps. I would be interested to hear exactly what happened." The alien looked relaxed, but his eyes were intense in their watchfulness.

"The Enterprise," Kirk started, "is both a military and scientific vessel. We were recording the death of an old star when the incident occurred."

"What star?" Devon asked.

"K 34L 576 - Z," Spock replied.

Devon shrugged. The name was not familiar.

"Perhaps Mr. Spock would explain. He is more familiar with the scientific details than I am," Kirk broke in.

"Certainly, Captain." The Vulcan rapidly gave the details of the cloud. Kirk watched the three aliens closely. They obviously understood the scientific jargon, nodding in agreement with certain things Spock said.

"So you were thrown into this universe?" Kyle said.
"Fascinating."

"We were heading for the nearest constellation on impulse power when you appeared," Kirk told them drily.

"Why that one in particular?" Emon asked.

"There is a piece of distorted space at its furthest point which we believe to be the same cloud which we encountered from our side."

The three aliens glanced at each other.

"The Devil's Staircase," Emon said. "That is one place I would avoid at all costs."

"Why is that?"

"It is also known as a ships' graveyard. Many vessels which have gone into that sector have never been heard of again. It could be your answer - or your death," Kyle said seriously. "We have sent numerous probes into that area, and none have ever returned."

"Which could also support our theory of an opening," Kirk insisted.

"It is possible," the alien agreed. "We have a research library on Akronia; perhaps it would be wise for you to explore all aspects before making a move in that direction. You will have time before your drive engine is working again. I offer you our hospitality for as long as you wish."

"Thank you." Kirk looked him straight in the eye. "You seem to have examined us pretty thoroughly without our knowing it," he

accused.

"A bad habit we have, which I will admit has caused friction in certain areas. Ah, here's Zeora with the food. I hope you don't mind sitting on the floor." He waved them over to a low table set in the corner of the room, and they sat down on comfortable cushions.

"It saves space," Kyle explained. "Dr. McCoy, if you would make certain we are not about to poison you?" There was a glint of amusement in his eyes.

McCoy looked startled, and then relaxed, taking a quick reading with his medical tricorder.

Satisfied, he put it away. "Everything is safe except for that dish of red stuff."

"That's a pity. They are really very good. We call them brinda - a type of mushroom found only in the Kishantu area. Pass me the bowl, Devon - I'll keep it by me, just in case."

The food was very palatable. Kirk noticed that not one dish held meat of any kind, and he asked Kyle about this.

The alien wrinkled his nose in distaste. "No, we do not eat animal flesh."

"You're in the right company, Spock," McCoy grinned, and turned to Kyle. "Our First Officer is like you - vegetarian."

"What I would like to know is how come you speak our language?" Kirk asked.

"It is not our language," Kyle explained. "It is the language of another race, an enemy of ours. That is the main reason we were so suspicious of you in the first place."

"But you all speak it? We call it Federation Universal."

"That is not the name we have for it. But yes, most of us do speak it. It helps to understand your enemy."

"Who are they?" McCoy asked.

"They are called Jihad," Kyle answered carefully. "Do you have many enemies in your universe?"

"Quite a few," Kirk admitted, "although the enmity is not of our making."

"Perhaps one day you would tell us more of this Federation of yours. Mr. Spock is evidently of a different species from the rest of you."

"I come from a planet called Vulcan," Spock said.

"And you are part of this Federation?"

"We are; as are numerous other planets of different races and cultures."

"Remarkable."

"Just imagine if we were like that, K'Tzan," Devon mused.

"And think of all the problems we would have," Kyle laughed. Kirk got the impression that they were missing the point of a joke.

"What does *Ktsan* mean?" The word shattered over McCoy's tongue.

"K'Tzan? Head; chief; leader... "

"It is also the equivalent of 'Captain'," Devon put in. "We know the exact usage almost instinctively, but the meanings are so many that I realise it might be confusing for you.

"K'Tzan Kyle is Captain of the Shuvra; he is also Chief of the Family Fh'ers. Emon is K'Tzan too," he added.

Seeing the startled look on the faces of two of their visitors, Emon explained. "Yes; I hold the same rank as Kyle. But I am K'Tzan of the Family Ind'r - he is K'Tzan of the Family Fh'ers.

"We do not hold much with rank on the ship; but our shoulder tabs do show our rank, along with a coloured ribbon so that everyone knows which Family we represent. My colours are red, and Kyle's, blue. At official functions we usually wear short capes in our Family colours."

"Does that mean you are both Captains of the Shuvra?" Kirk asked.

"Yes," Kyle said. "You see... Although we have Houses and relatives on Akronia, you could say that the ships are also our homes. Two Families run one ship, with every position duplicated. If I were to fall ill, Emon is here to take over. Devon, too, has a rank-partner; and so with everyone on the ship. All members of the Families Fh'ers and Ind'r who wish to serve in space must join the Shuvra; no other ship would take them. Nor would we take as crew members of any other Family."

"An interesting situation," Spock said. "But if you are Chief of a Family that still has members living on a planet, it is logical that you only spend a limited amount of time in space."

"You are correct, Mr. Spock. We have two months on active duty and two off. For the crew, that is shore leave; for we K'Tzani, it gives us time to attend to our planet-based responsibilities. When we return to Akronia, another ship, manned by the representatives of two other Families, will take over our patrol."

A soft chime interrupted them, and Kyle excused himself, rising quickly to answer the call at his desk.

"Yes?"

"Forgive the interruption, K'Tzan, but the officer in charge of the Enterprise wishes to know what has happened to his Captain. His 'routine report' is overdue." They could hear the *whatever that is* in his voice.

"Tell the Enterprise that we will return their Captain in one piece - shortly." He grinned at Kirk. "You are being worried about, Captain Kirk."

Kirk returned the grin. "I suppose we had better get back before Mr. Scott has a heart attack. Thank you for the dinner."

"It was a pleasure. I hope we have been forgiven and will remain friends. As soon as you are back on board your ship we will start for Akronia."

"And the tractor beam?" Kirk enquired.

"Will remain. We have a defence system which - with all due respect - you would not be able to negotiate."

"Fair enough," Kirk said lightly.

"I will say goodbye from here," Emon said. "Kyle and Devon will escort you. I hope I will see you again?"

"I am sure of it, sir." Kirk was not about to try to say the alien word.

They followed Kyle back to the lift, descending back to the lower level. It was as they reached the shuttle departure room that they heard IT.

IT was a scream, so full of terror that it halted them in their tracks, raising goosebumps on the Humans' arms. Kirk saw Kyle turn deathly pale and grab at Devon for support.

"What in hell was that?" McCoy demanded.

"Do not be concerned," Devon replied. "A crewman was probably careless. Our staff will attend to it." He spoke firmly, his tone discouraging, but Kirk was watching Kyle. The alien seemed to be on the point of collapse, his tentacles wrapped round Devon's arm. Then, with an obvious effort, he pulled himself together.

"Until later, Captain. Meira is waiting."

They entered the shuttle, the door closing as the machine fired her rockets. As they were lowered into the hangar deck, Kirk caught a glimpse of Devon picking Kyle up bodily. The alien Captain seemed to have passed out.

Then his view was obscured.

It was with some relief that Kirk felt the deck of his own ship under his feet.

They had remained silent on the return trip, none of them mentioning the scream that they had heard for they knew that Meira would hear anything they said. But they were all aware that it was the first positive sign they had had that things aboard the Shuvra were not as they appeared.

As soon as they were safely aboard their own ship and the Akronian shuttle under way again, McCoy exploded.

"Jim!" he blurted out the moment he felt it was safe to speak. "That was no scream of pain. It was pure terror!"

"It sure sounded that way," Kirk agreed. "And Devon knew it.

Also... why did it cause Kyle to react that way? Spock - what do you think?"

"I do not know of any explanation that will fit the facts we have, Captain. Perhaps it would be wise to be cautious until we have more facts."

"Keep looking over our shoulders, you mean."

"Yes, Captain."

"Well, there's nothing we can do while we're locked into their beam. Let's get to the bridge before Scotty sends out a rescue party."

They arrived on the bridge to find Scott apoplectic. "Did you not straighten things out, Captain?" he demanded.

"What's the problem?"

"I called their ship to tell them you were safe on board, and when would they be releasing their tractor beam. I was informed that the 'leash', as they call it, would stay in place as a tow! Tow to where, I asked, and they cut transmission."

"Calm down, Scotty - I'll explain later. Uhura, open a ship-wide channel."

"You have it, sir."

"Attention all hands. This is the Captain. As you all know, we have encountered an alien race. Dr. McCoy, Mr. Spock and myself have been over to the alien ship to talk with her commander, who at first thought us to be a hostile force invading their space. They now realise that this is not so, and have offered - probably out of continued caution - to tow us to their home world so that we can continue with our repairs. I have accepted the offer, and from there we will work out how to get home, through what they call 'The Devil's Staircase', an uncharted piece of space similar to, or the same as, that which got us here in the first place. Everything points to its being a corridor between our two universes. I want you to be cautious and ready for any emergency that could arise. I know you will give your fullest attention to the problem in hand. That is all."

As he signed to Uhura to switch off, the Enterprise started to move.

"Here we go," McCoy muttered.

"Explain!"

Kyle looked at the younger man standing before him, his anger obvious in the cold gray eyes and ever-twitching tentacles.

"I... I am sorry, K'Tzan. The insulated door was not closed properly."

"Due to whose error?"

"Mine, K'Tzan." *The young man looked miserably at his feet.*

the wonderful feeling of renewed life gone.

"This has happened before, Alek," Kyle said. "You always make the mistake of waiting too long, and that makes you careless. The whole crew heard the Jihad's scream and reacted to it - myself included. Quite apart of the shame of having the Family of Ind'r know that one of the Fh'ers is so careless, what I do not need is a shipful of hypersensitive people all feeling Hunger ahead of their time."

"No, K'Tzan. Please don't transfer me to ground duty! It will not happen again - I promise!"

"I hope I can believe that. To make sure, I am placing you under the medical staff, where they can monitor your cycle, and you are to do exactly as they say. You owe it to the ship and to yourself. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, K'Tzan. Thank you."

"You can go. Report to the medical unit."

Alek left as fast as he could, more ashamed of being hauled over the coals by Kyle than of the actual crime itself. The K'Tzan's words could sting like a barb when he was angry.

Kyle leaned back in his chair in utter weariness. His system was still shaking. "I don't want to lose him, but if it happens again he'll have to go," he commented. Then he smiled lopsidedly at Emon. "What made me take to a life in space? I could have stayed at T'zon in peace and tranquillity, handling one job instead of two."

"We both know the answer to that, my friend. You are running away - like the rest of us."

"But it doesn't help, does it, Emon? The curse and the shame come with us... The curse of our ancestors."

"You can't take the blame on your own shoulders. We are what they made us, yes; but it was a mistake."

"An expensive one. They were all right but it turned their future generations into..." He shrugged. "In the end we will be the losers." His eyes were haunted.

"What you need is sleep. Be reasonable for once."

"When has he ever been reasonable?" a voice asked from the door.

"Ah, Devon. How are things upstairs?"

"Everything is running smoothly. We'll be home by nightfall. Kyle, why don't you go and get some rest?"

"That's all I seem to have been doing lately."

"I'll pull Keeper's Privilege on you if you're not careful."

Sighing, Kyle got to his feet. "Wake me on final approach." He closed the door of the sleeping area behind him.

"That damn cretin Alek!" Devon swore savagely. "Kyle will probably come early now because of that fool, and be out of phase for who knows how long before a new cycle establishes!"

"Let's hope not," Emon murmured. "Certainly he can't keep on like this. Its wearing him down, and if there is no improvement, the Proktui will ground him when he's next tested."

"We'll get him through, just as we did last time," Devon said firmly.

"That's optimism, not certainty," Emon commented. "I wonder what the aliens thought. What a mess!"

"They know something is not right," Devon said bitterly. "A five-year-old child could have seen through my lie. 'A careless crewman' - and Kyle on the point of collapse? Hula! It tore through my gut bad enough, and I'm classified as unusually stable!"

"Keep an eye on him, Devon. I'll have to get up to the bridge now, and he shouldn't be left alone."

"Of course, K'Tzan Emon."

When the older man had left, Devon went quickly into the sleeping area and settled into a chair. He looked at the sleeping form of his Family K'Tzan with affection and worry.

Kyle looked very pale, lines of tension and exhaustion etched into his face, and Devon thought, not for the first time, that for this man he would do anything. He thought back to when they were boys, young and idealistic, growing up on the T'zon estate with no real thought for the future and no knowledge of the bitter struggle for survival that went on daily around them.

And then their world was completely changed when they matured and the secret of how their people survived was made known to them. Devon had accepted the unpleasantness, pushing the guilt to the back of his mind, locking it away with an air of fatalism and a finality that earned him his classification of unusually stable. It was his people's way - their heritage, bequeathed them by their ancestors. But Kyle was different; unusually sensitive, he couldn't ignore the guilt. Tortured by the knowledge of what he must do to survive, his system rebelled every time, his metabolism fighting back, until all that was left was a man with a broken soul and a thin shell that threatened to crumble at the slightest shock. It was fortunate, Devon, knew, that he was there, already a friend, unusually stable, to become Keeper for the T'zon heir.

Hula knew that they had tried every new idea - the psychiatrists had proved now that only a perverted few actually enjoyed what they must do, and everyone knew it - but even with that knowledge Kyle could not come to terms with his conscience. Guilt was slowly killing him, and even though Devon acted as an anchor, coaxing him through life day by day, sheltering him, as far as possible, from the traumas caused by their physiology, the Keeper often knew despair.

All he was doing was delaying the inevitable. In the end, he would be helpless.

"Captain Kirk to the Bridge."

Uhura's call came into the rec room where Kirk was trying to have an undisturbed cup of coffee.

"Kirk here. What is it, Uhura?"

"Message from the Shuvra, Captain. Their commander wishes to speak with you."

"I'm on my way. Coming, Bones?"

"May as well. He's taken his own sweet time calling back."

Kirk nodded. He had called the Shuvra to find out the arrival time at Akronia, but had been firmly put off by one of Kyle's officers.

"K'Tzan Kyle is not to be disturbed," the voice had told him. "I will gladly relay any message on his return to the Bridge."

Kirk had then asked for Emon, and had got the same reply. Now - as luck would have it - the minute he tried to take a break, he was summoned to the Bridge. The Shuvra was clearly run on different lines from Federation vessels!

"What did he say, Uhura?" Kirk asked as he settled into his chair.

"Only that he is returning your call, and could he speak with you at your convenience. Terribly polite people - I can't wait to meet one."

"I will personally introduce you. But for now, can you open a line for me?" He raised a Spockian eyebrow to soften the mild reprimand.

"Certainly, Captain," Uhura replied sweetly. "We have visual this time."

The viewscreen changed to show the Bridge of the Shuvra. The alien bridge was decorated with the same blue/grey, screens and consoles encircling the outer walls. There did not seem to be a central command seat. In its place stood a circular lift, its walls transparent to give a clear view.

Kyle detached himself from a console, moving closer to the viewscreen. "Captain Kirk. I apologise for not being available when you called." Kirk noticed that he looked terribly tired and drawn.

"It was not particularly important," he replied. "I only wanted to know ETA to Akronia."

"Another twenty minutes now. We are about to negotiate the defence system. Can you not see her?"

"No. I suppose we haven't been looking very hard." In fact, Spock had taken the opportunity to adjust the sensors, and they were

off line.

"She is usually difficult to see on this approach; the defence system throws a blanket around her. Wait a minute, and I'll give you a visual." He nodded to the man at a console, who brought up a magnification of a beautiful silvery-blue planet with a sun and two moons. It appeared to have only two land masses.

"They can camouflage an entire planet?" Chekov said in wonder.

"I wonder what else they can do," McCoy muttered cynically.

The viewscreen was replaced by Kyle. "You must excuse me. This is the tricky part of entry. I will contact you again when we are safely in orbit." He cut transmission.

"An ingenious method of defence," Spock said. "It will be interesting to learn how they devised such a system."

"Or what they have to hide," McCoy answered soberly.

The Enterprise lay in synchronised orbit around the planet. Spock, realising how close they were to landfall, had hastily terminated his work on the sensors, returning them to operating readiness just minutes before they swung into orbit. He started scanning immediately, but with negative results. Their scan was being blocked.

"Now why would they do that?" Kirk wondered.

"Obviously they distrust strangers," the Vulcan replied, slightly piqued.

"Captain, I have an incoming call from the planet's surface. It's from someone who calls himself Proktui Denru."

"On audio, Lieutenant."

"Am I speaking to Captain Kirk?" a deep voice enquired.

"That is correct, sir."

"I am Proktui Denru. Welcome to Akronia."

"Thank you. We appreciate the Shuvra's assistance," Kirk said dryly.

"K'Tzan Kyle has given me a full report, and I too wish to apologise for our hostile approach. Please feel free to call on us for any assistance you may need in repairing your vessel."

"Thank you. I will keep your offer in mind."

"I would like to talk with you, Captain. I find the idea of an opening between our two universes very interesting. Perhaps you and your officers would accept an invitation to a banquet tomorrow evening?"

"We will be glad to accept, Proktui."

"Good, good. Kyle will make the necessary arrangements. Until then, Captain."

"Transmission ended, Captain," Uhura reported. McCoy had not waited for her; impulsive as he often was, he spoke at the same time.

"What's a Proktui?" he asked.

"We will find out tomorrow."

"We? Haven't I done enough for you?" McCoy let an injured tone creep into his voice.

"You surprise me, Doctor. It's not like you to pass up an invitation to a party."

"Very funny, Captain, sir. As long as I don't have to wear dress uniform!"

"This is going too far," McCoy growled, squeezing his fingers in between his neck and the collar of his dress uniform.

"You should either get a larger uniform or go on a diet, McCoy."

"Don't you start on me, Scotty. Where is that shuttle anyway? Why couldn't we have beamed down?"

"I never thought I would hear the day transporter-phobic McCoy would refuse a shuttle," Scott said slowly.

"Please, gentlemen," Kirk begged. "Behave yourselves - just this once."

"We always do, Jim," McCoy said innocently. "Especially when we are about to be poisoned."

"What are you rambling about, McCoy?" Scott demanded.

"Avoid the red mushrooms. I'm being serious. Check with me before you eat anything. Some of their food is poisonous to us."

"Some party," Scott said gloomily. "I hope their beverages are okay?"

"Dr. McCoy is correct. Stay with the food he passes as edible."

"Well, whadda you know. Old Spock is agreeing with me!"

"The shuttlecraft has arrived, Captain," Sulu informed them.

"Right, Mr. Sulu. Look after my lady."

"Yes, sir. Enjoy yourselves."

"What's to enjoy?" McCoy muttered.

"Don't be such a party pooper, Bones."

"Me? A party pooper?" The lights on the panel changed from red to green. "Here we go again. After you, Uhura."

"Thank you, Dr. McCoy. Chivalry is not dead - I think."

Kyle and Devon were waiting for them in the shuttle cabin, and Kirk introduced Uhura and Scott.

"Ah - the lady of the airwaves," Kyle smiled.

Uhura blushed, taking Kyle's hand although she was unable to stop herself from looking at the tentacles which wrapped gently around her fingers. They felt soft, like velvet bands.

Soon they were settled for the short trip to the planet.

"How's your injured crewman?" Kirk asked idly.

"Injured crewman?" Kyle looked vague for a minute. "Oh. Oh, yes. He's fine. It was nothing serious - he was frightened more than hurt."

"What happened?" McCoy probed.

"Let's just say he was... careless. Something he won't repeat."

Kirk left it at that. Maybe they had imagined more to the incident than there was... No, they hadn't, but he knew that they would get nothing more out of Kyle or Devon about the affair.

A short jolt announced their entry into the planet's atmosphere, and they dropped down from the blackness of space into a magnificent sunset. The Enterprise party gathered around the shuttle's window to watch the passing terrain as their pilot zigzagged across open fields towards a distant mountain range.

"What we have been able to gather is that your planet is made up of only two landforms," Kirk remarked.

"That is correct," Devon said, "but only this one is inhabited."

"Why is that?"

"We have had a long struggle to pull our civilisation back from the brink of disaster," Kyle told them. "Our ancestors made a fatal mistake that all but wiped out life on the entire planet."

"What happened?" Kirk asked.

"Nuclear experiments, Captain, or so the old writings say. It is only in the past two thousand years that vegetation has - with our help - begun to win back some of the ground that was claimed by the desert. We are a strong race, and slowly we reclaim more land. The other land mass, however, is completely dead. There is nothing there but barren rock and volcanic ash."

"Oh, look!" Uhura exclaimed.

Blending into the mountain side lay the alien city, the white buildings glowing with a pink hue in the evening sun.

"That is N'vet, the only city on Akronia, and also the seat of our government, the Proktui. The space centre runs through the mountain to the other side. Those buildings at the back are the

official quarters of the government workers and also provide the Chiefs of Families with town houses."

"It is beautiful, but... the only city?"

"Yes. Most Akronians live there. The rest mostly form farming communities on Estate lands. There are a few coastal villages. Occasionally a younger son from one of the Estates gathers a few workers, younger sons like himself who would not, in the normal way of things, inherit much from their fathers, and sets out to reclaim land from the desert. If he succeeds, he sets up a new Estate and founds a new Family.

"In some ways it is like two different cultures; one modern, the other clinging to the old ways. That is why I enjoy coming home - hardly any modern technology, just hard work of a kind different from what I am used to."

"Where is your house?" Kirk asked.

"West of here, in the middle of nowhere. If you have the time, I could take you there. It has the most spectacular surroundings and the richest soil in Akronia - though I am sure the other K'Tzani would argue that point."

"Who looks after the place while you are in space?" McCoy asked.

"My younger brother, Vor'een. It is giving him practice in case he has to... Ugh!"

Kyle fell forward onto his knees, arms encircling his middle. McCoy sprang forward to help, but was blocked by Devon.

"Leave him!" he ordered. He knelt next to Kyle, concern on his face, while McCoy hovered anxiously, wanting to help but realising that if Devon knew what was wrong he would be of more assistance than a sympathetic but ignorant stranger.

Devon had dropped into the native tongue, and the Enterprise party watched anxiously as Devon placed his tentacled fingers over a certain area on Kyle's neck, pressing down with a strength they would not have considered possible for tentacles. Kyle was gasping for breath, his face white, but then he shuddered, visibly relaxing. He took a deep breath and murmured something; Devon helped him to his feet.

"I am sorry," he said.

"There is no need to apologise." Manners made Kirk refrain from asking what was wrong - in much the same way that, on Earth, he would refrain from asking what was wrong with someone who clearly suffered from epilepsy, but those grey eyes seemed to read his silent question.

"A slight malady I suffer from. Nothing serious, but unfortunate in its timing." The explanation told them nothing, and the look on Devon's face gave the lie to Kyle's claim that it was not serious. "That's why Devon is always hanging around me as if I were about to have triplets. He knows how to terminate the attack."

"Otherwise?" McCoy asked, his medical instincts aroused.

"It lasts longer. Ah, here we are."

Looking closely, they saw a man-made opening in the rock face of the mountain, and this was where the shuttle was heading, cutting power as it glided inside. They landed with a soft bump, halting beside a platform similar to that on the Shuvra.

"Thank you, Meira," Kyle said into the intercom.

"My pleasure, K'Tzan."

"A woman!" Scott exclaimed.

"Come now, Scotty. Don't sound so surprised. We have women pilots."

"But not that good, Captain."

"Don't let them hear you say that, or you'll get lynched," Kirk laughed.

They followed Kyle out to a bank of lifts, which took them up to the ground level of the complex.

"We are now in the main complex. It may look confusing, but it isn't really. Come - there is a view-window around the corner. I'll show you the different areas."

They followed him down an enclosed corridor to a section dominated by a huge window.

"We are now in the rear building, the space complex. That one to your right is the Proktui building where we will be going later. The immediate two on the left are Family houses, and the tall one on the far left is the medical centre. They are all connected by corridors and moving walkways. I'm sorry, but the signs are all in my language, so if you want to go anywhere, just ask."

"And the city?" Uhura asked.

"Maybe something can be arranged, but please - for your own safety, do not go down there alone. The populace may mistake you for Jihad, and I would hate anything to happen to you."

"Perhaps you would define the Jihad," Spock said.

"They are not friends of ours. You could easily pass for them - your hands are similar, with jointed digits rather than tentacles."

"I think then that the city is off limits," Kirk ordered. "But what about the people here? Do they know about us?"

"Most certainly. Yorath especially would like to meet with you. He has done a lot of research on the Devil's Staircase and is willing to help you."

"That would be appreciated."

"Perhaps you would like to see him now. There is plenty of time."

"Of course. Why not?"

They followed him around a series of bends until they came to a sunken section in the floor. The bottom was level and carpeted, but they could see that it was moving.

"A walkway?" Scott asked.

"That is correct. Just step onto it, and hold onto the grabrails." He demonstrated how, and soon they were all standing on the platform. They travelled through the buildings, the journey swift and smooth, following Kyle as he stepped over onto another walkway.

"This is the turn for T'zon and Ind'r, as well as some other lesser Houses."

It took them through a transparent tunnel, and Kirk saw that they were very high up. The walkway ended in a rotunda, disappearing back to the main causeway.

"The library is not far. Just follow me."

They went up two more levels, stopping in front of a heavy, ornate door. It opened at Kyle's knock, and they stepped into an office crammed with shelves of books and papers. Behind the laden desk sat an old Akronian, his hair snow white and his face wrinkled, but his eyes were sharp and bright, of the deepest brown, seeming almost black, as they appraised each visitor.

"Who have we here, Kyle? Renegade Jehads?"

"No, Yorath. These are the visitors from outside our galaxy - the ones you wished to meet with."

"Yes, by Hula. I didn't expect them to look... Kyle has given me the outline of your dilemma. If any of you can use a computer, please feel free to use these facilities."

"I have had some training," Spock said with surprising tact, while McCoy choked and the rest of the Enterprise party grinned behind their hands. Kyle looked heavenwards in a 'give me strength' attitude. Did Yorath really think these aliens would be able to travel in space without knowing how to use computers?

"You can start in the morning if you wish," Yorath said, unaware of the amusement.

"Tomorrow will be appropriate," Spock agreed.

"Let me show you the basics, in case I am not here when you arrive."

"Yorath, we have this banquet to attend," Kyle reminded him.

"Stop fussing, Kyle. This will only take a minute, and anyway, Denru and his crowd are usually late."

McCoy wandered over to the window, looking down on the city lights. As he turned away, he caught sight of a solitary building to his left. It lacked windows and looked extremely uninviting.

"What building is that?" he asked Devon.

The Akronian shrugged. "A scientific complex."

"Oh? What do they research there?"

"Nothing which would interest you, Doctor. It is off limits."

"Why the red flag?" McCoy persisted.

"You would not understand. Please cease these questions!"

McCoy looked up in surprise at the tone of Devon's voice, and took a step backwards, startled at the coldness on the alien's face. It had a frightening quality to it.

"I'm sorry," he stammered.

Devon seemed to shake himself mentally, the anger disappearing to be replaced by his natural charm. "I think it is time we returned. The Proktui would be most displeased if we were late."

On the return trip, McCoy sidled up to Kirk. "There's something strange here, Jim," he whispered.

"Why so?"

"It's just something... I feel... uneasy."

"We'll discuss it later. Just try and look as if you are having a good time."

Kirk's voice was teasing, but his eyes were serious.

Kirk strolled lazily through one of the gardens in the complex grounds.

It was his second visit planetside since the banquet, and tomorrow they would be leaving. Scott had completed installing the crystals, reinforcing the mix chamber's casing in case they experienced a similar mishap on the return trip through the cloud. All they were waiting for were Spock's final calculations and to say their goodbyes.

At the banquet they had met the five Akronians who made up the Proktui, two women and three men, all elderly, polite, but seemingly hesitant, as if they were uncertain about something - even Denru, who had spoken to them earlier.

Kirk frowned, remembering McCoy's warning that something didn't feel right. His mind may have been playing tricks on him, but he had felt that way too. The Akronians at the banquet had been friendly enough, but there was always a tangible feeling of caution, as if their questions and answers had been carefully thought out.

The feeling had been there yesterday, too, when he and McCoy had been taken on an official tour. In the medical complex they had been taken to only a few departments near the main entrance, never going deep inside the building. A carefully chosen tour.

And Kyle himself. What caused those collapses of his? He was friendly enough, but he always had an air of tension about him. That incident on the Shuvra had had a significant meaning to the alien to cause him to react the way he did; and Devon had lied. That had been clear in his whole manner and nervous glances. And

what of McCoy's building? It looked more like a prison than a research centre.

"Hello, Captain," a voice said, startling him.

Kirk swung around to see Kyle sitting on a bench. His thoughts had been so deep that Kirk had not seen him.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you so."

"I suppose I was daydreaming," Kirk said, forcing a smile.

"Something we all do. Have you got anything planned for today?"

"No, not really. Everything is ready for tomorrow's departure. We're only waiting for Spock."

"I am going out to my home for a day visit. The invitation still stands if you want to come with me. We will be back by sundown."

Why not? Kirk thought. "Yes, I would like that. I'm sure McCoy would too."

"By all means. I am leaving in half an hour. I'll collect you at the library." He uncurled himself from the bench. "I had better go and report where I will be, otherwise Devon will have a fit."

"Won't he be coming?"

"No, he has... another matter to attend to."

Kirk watched the alien walk back inside. For no reason he felt cold. He felt that something was about to happen, but he didn't know what.

The desert shimmered in the heat haze as the flyer skimmed over its surface. Kirk winced as the glare reflected off the screen, envious of the shaded sunglasses Kyle wore, and of Spock sitting in comfort back on board the Enterprise. The Vulcan had returned to the ship to feed the data on the Devil's Staircase into the main computer. Although - on consideration - Spock would probably consider this as little more than a mild summer day.

"I normally take this route over the desert," Kyle said. "It's a bit shorter, and I can fly much faster than in the traffic zones."

The flycar was a trim four-seater, and Kirk could see that Kyle was enjoying himself, as he zigzagged across the desert floor. He flew with confidence, and was obviously a good pilot.

"Do you see that solitary rock over there, Captain?" Kyle pointed. "That is the Rock of Remembrance."

Kirk followed his pointing finger, seeing a towering formation that resembled a kneeling figure, its head thrown back as if in agony.

"Remarkable. It is very life-like."

"In the old days it was considered a shrine. People used to make a pilgrimage out here every year as a reminder of what happened all those years ago... what might happen again if we are not careful. It is a symbol of desolation and waste."

"Very appropriate," McCoy said. "Can you take us closer?"

Kyle circled, bringing them closer. Suddenly the flycar shuddered and they heard a booming clap as one of the boosters backfired, spewing gouts of smoke and flame.

"Hula!" Kyle swore, throttling back and cutting off the damaged booster.

"What happened?" Kirk shouted.

"Rear rocket has failed. I'm turning back." He turned the control yoke, but nothing happened.

"We're in trouble," he said. "The system's jammed; communications are out too." He flicked switches futilely. "When I get hold of the basha who was supposed to have checked this flycar... "

He broke off as the flycar slewed violently, and then the gyros cut out. There was an unpleasant smell of burning.

"We have to bail out," Kyle said. "The whole seat will jettison. Don't worry, there's a chute pack on each seat."

"But... " McCoy panicked.

"Get ready, Doctor. I'll find you both," Kyle said urgently. He hit the main jettison switch, and the canopy blew off. All three shot out of the crashing flycar.

Kirk gasped at the altered pressure. He heard a slight whoosh as his chute billowed open, and was tugged up higher as the air pockets filled the chute; and then his increased momentum ceased and he slowly started to descend. From his high perch he saw the flycar hit the ground, exploding on contact.

Worriedly, he looked around for the others, spotting McCoy at a lower altitude, but he couldn't see Kyle. Then he stopped worrying as the seriousness of landing confronted him. He would have to unbuckle the safety strap before he hit the ground, because although the seat was light, it wouldn't do to get entangled in it. He loosened the strap, tensing as the ground rushed up, and then he threw himself clear, rolling easily in the sand.

He stood up, brushing dirt from his uniform, and looked anxiously about for McCoy, spotting him in a heap behind a slight incline. He ran over, and then grinned in relief. The chute had collapsed over the chair, and McCoy was fighting a losing battle trying to extract himself from its silken folds, using language that would have made a cargo freighter's crew blush.

"Bones, what are you... "

But it was too much for Kirk. He burst out laughing at the sight on McCoy's various limbs punching in vain at the folds.

"Stop mmph... and get mmmph... of here!"

Still laughing, Kirk rolled back the silk to reveal a terribly rumpled McCoy.

"Thank you," he said acidly.

"Bones - Oh, Bones! I'm sorry, but you should have unbuckled and rolled clear."

"Kinda forgot about that," McCoy growled. "Where's Kyle?"

"I didn't see where he came down. We'll give him five minutes then go and look for him."

"Damn all flying contraptions! They're all the same, no matter where you are... Here comes Kyle now." He pointed.

"I hope you weren't hurt," the alien said when he reached them.

"No. We both made it in one piece. A slight variation in method, though," Kirk said, grinning at McCoy.

The alien's eyes took in McCoy's mussed hair, a faint smile playing around his mouth, but he didn't say anything to embarrass McCoy further.

"It's a long walk back. We had better get started if we are to make it before nightfall."

"I've got my communicator," Kirk said. "I can contact my ship and they can send a message through to your control."

"Of course! They can pick us up!"

Kirk flipped open the communicator's grid. "Kirk to Enterprise. Come in Uhura." They waited expectantly.

"Maybe it's broken," Kyle offered.

"Here, Jim - try mine," McCoy offered, handing it over.

"Kirk to Enterprise. This is an emergency!" He twiddled the dials. "Nothing. I only get static."

"Could be atmospheric interference," Kyle said. "It's been known to happen before. Sorry, we'll have to walk."

He scratched in the back of McCoy's chair, handing over a small waterproof pouch. "Survival kit. Clip it onto your belt. Here's yours, Captain. I picked it up on the way over. Let's go."

They swung south-east, following the Akronian who set a fast pace. The going was fairly easy, the sand soft but not deep, and every now and then they crossed a rocky surface. Kirk was thankful for their heavy boots which protected them from the sharp rock. The sun was their worst enemy. It blasted every bit of exposed skin, turning it cherry red, and burning as their sweat dripped down in a steady stream.

"How you doing, Bones?" Kirk asked the puffing McCoy.

"Ready to drop. Blast him! He looks like Spock, fresh as a daisy and tireless. I wish he would slow down."

The Akronian was slowly drawing ahead of them, walking swiftly, sure of the way home. They had changed direction twice, and now, as a rocky patch loomed up ahead of them, Kyle swung into its path. He glanced back at the two wilting Starfleet officers and slowed down until they caught up with him.

"We can rest there for a while. It's sheltered from the sun."

"Thank goodness for that," McCoy gasped.

They reached the jumble of boulders, sinking down into the shade. "Ahhh... This is marvellous!" McCoy sighed.

"There are frozen water sticks in the kits. I would advise against eating anything, though. The food is all dehydrated, and I don't know what is in it."

"How far now, Kyle?"

"Another three or four hours, I think. We're about half way."

"I spotted a mountain range over to the north. What's over there?"

"Those are the Draco Mountains. It's very desolate, and nobody goes there. Once a group of prospectors went exploring those peaks, and were never heard of again. It's dangerous country to fly over as well, due to freak updrafts and duststorms."

"Not at all inviting," Kirk agreed. "Let's see if I can save us more walking." He tried the communicator again, but still got nothing.

"I am sorry I got you into this," Kyle said.

"It was an accident." Kirk grinned. "You can pay us back with an enormous supper when we get back."

"Done. If you are rested, we had better get going again. It gets a bit... Hula!"

"What is it?" Kirk leaped to his feet as Kyle doubled over.

"Attack," he gasped. "Vial... in my belt... Please... get it..." He gritted his teeth in agony.

"McCoy! Get over here!" Kirk shouted, feeling along Kyle's belt for the vial. "Kyle! It's not here!"

"Must have lost it when... Aaahh!" He collapsed, curling in a ball on the sandy ground.

"Tell us what to do," McCoy said urgently. "What does Devon do?"

"Not... possible. The pressure points... Digits... won't cover... Hula, stop it! Why won't it stop?" He started convulsing, body arching and rolling in agony.

"Jim, grab him! Hold him still. Tighter!" McCoy lay full length on the sand, prising Kyle's mouth open with considerable difficulty, trying to grasp his tongue to prevent him from swallowing it. "For Pete's sake get something to keep his mouth

open. He's biting my fingers off!"

Kirk looked around in vain for a stick, and then unhooked his communicator.

"Better than nothing. Get it between his teeth, Jim; I can't let go now." McCoy was lying in an awkward position as he held on to the slippery tongue with grim determination. Kirk eased the communicator in.

It seemed that the convulsions and groaning would never stop, but then suddenly Kyle went limp, his mouth slack.

Creaking in every muscle, McCoy released his grip, removing the communicator as he did so. It was dented with tooth marks, the grid buckled.

"Bones, you're bleeding!"

"It's nothing. Help me turn him over. Easy now... At least he's alive; but that's all I can say."

"This attack was like the one in the shuttle."

"But worse, much worse," McCoy said grimly. He unclipped his medical tricorder. "The readings are all there, but I don't know what they mean." He felt helpless.

"We can carry him," Kirk suggested.

"No. It might be better to wait until he regains consciousness. We don't know what damage that seizure did to him; I don't know enough about his physiology to tell. Moving him might aggravate an injury, even kill him."

Kirk nodded agreement. Their main hope lay in the complex sending out a search party once they were overdue. If only he could contact the ship! They would be safe in seconds. He tried the communicator again, but still with no luck.

"Take your jacket off, Jim. He may be in shock - if so he'll need extra warmth. We don't need our jackets here in the shade."

They both took off the jackets that had protected them from the sun, wrapping them around Kyle.

"You'd better fix your fingers," Kirk suggested.

McCoy looked at the bloody appendages and then rummaged in his medical kit, taking out a hypo and setting it to a wide-range antibiotic. Wordlessly he injected himself. "Just a precaution," He said, noticing Kirk's look. "Right - help me bandage this lot."

Kirk wrapped the white strips of bandage around three fingers. His knowledge of first aid was quite up to the task, but McCoy insisted on giving him instructions just the same. Then they waited the hours out until the sun began to sink.

The evening air turned cold.

"I'll heat up some boulders," Kirk said, surprised at how chilly it had become. He moved some larger rocks nearer to them, using his phaser to heat them to a glowing red. They sucked on more

water sticks hoping to ease the hunger pangs. Throughout, Kyle didn't stir.

They settled down for the night on empty stomachs, wedging Kyle in between them to keep him as warm as possible.

"Bones, if he hasn't come round by tomorrow, maybe I should try to get back alone."

"And if you get lost?" McCoy demanded.

"I won't, as long as I keep the sun on the right side of me."

"Maybe they will find us by morning. Spock won't just dismiss your not being on the Enterprise. He always keeps an eye fixed on you."

"Come on, Bones!"

"He does, and I'm glad. Even Starship Captains need someone to look after them... especially you!"

"I'm not that bad," Kirk protested.

"No, of course not," McCoy replied sarcastically. "Goodnight, Jim."

Spock closed up the front panel of the main computer, the adjustments concluded and all relevant data fed in. He had checked and rechecked the readings, coming up with the same answer every time. They had forty eight hours left to enter the corridor; it was closing. At some indeterminate time in the future, it would open again, but there was no guarantee that it would then lead them home. The next opening might send them into yet another universe, send them further and further from home, forever unable to return to the universe they knew.

He left the computer room, taking the turbolift up to the officers' quarters, and buzzed at Kirk's door. There was no answer, so assuming that he was with McCoy, he tried there.

When he received no reply there either, he went to a wall intercom.

"Bridge here."

"Lt. Uhura, is Captain Kirk there?"

"No, Mr. Spock. I haven't seen the Captain all day. He may not be back from the planet yet."

"Please contact the duty officer. I am coming up."

Faintly uneasy, he went up to the bridge. Uhura looked round as he entered.

"Mr. Spock, the duty officer reports that the Captain and Dr. McCoy are still listed as being on the planet."

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

"But sir, he should have reported in if he is staying there overnight," she protested.

"The night is relatively young, Lieutenant," Spock said quietly.

Uhura grinned as she caught his meaning. "Yes, sir. I'll leave word with my relief to contact you when the Captain calls."

"I would appreciate it, Lieutenant."

Devon entered Kyle's quarters, his spirits soaring. It had been good, and the feeling of renewed alertness made him feel optimistic; but then he dampened his feelings, mindful of the reverse effect it would have on his K'Tzan. Inside, he stopped in puzzlement. Kyle wasn't there.

Perhaps he had chosen to remain late at the Estate. Devon shrugged and poured himself a drink, then settled himself on the couch.

He relaxed as he sipped the drink; soon he was asleep.

An insistent droning disturbing his sleep irritated Kirk. Half awake, he swatted at it, sighing as it stopped; then suddenly he sensed something and was instantly wide awake.

A group of five men stood over then. All were heavily armed.

"Well, well, what have we here?" a tall bearded man said. "Three babes sleeping soundly."

McCoy woke, looking around blearily. "Is this the rescue party?" he asked.

"Hear that, Kiran? They think we're here to rescue them!"

"Aren't you from the city complex?" McCoy asked.

"I'm afraid not." He sounded slightly mocking as he levelled his blaster at Kirk.

"Who are you?" Kirk demanded.

"You seem to be confused. I am the one who will ask the questions. Get up nice and slowly and put your hands where I can see them. Don't make me nervous. Search them for weapons, Kiran."

They did as they were told, and Kirk bit back an oath as his communicator was confiscated.

"Hold it!" the bearded man ordered as Kiran turned to approach the prone Kyle. "Your friend there - is he dead or something?"

"He's unconscious," McCoy said.

"Check it out, Kiran. Carefully."

The younger man went over to Kyle, jabbing him in the ribs with

his boot. "Yup. Out like a light."

"Search him."

Kiran tore off the jackets covering Kyle and then took a startled step backwards. "Take a look at this, Zac. We've got ourselves a bloodsucker."

Still keeping Kirk and McCoy covered, Zac went to look. His face hardened as he turned back to them.

"What are two Jehads doing in the middle of nowhere with an Akronian?"

"We are not Jihad," Kirk said quietly. There was something strange going on here.

"Oh, really? I find that hard to believe. Tie them up," he ordered. "They're coming with us. And you two had better have the correct answers."

Rough hands grabbed them and their hands were secured behind their backs. Kyle was rolled over, his tentacled hands cruelly lashed.

"He's ill, for Pete's sake!" McCoy exclaimed. "He can't harm you!"

"Better safe than sorry," Zac said. "And that's the way we like it. Load them up. The sooner we head back the better."

Kirk and McCoy were hustled into one of two surface skimmers, their captors piling in after them. The pilots inflated the grav cushions, and with a whisper of sound they headed back into the desert at a fast speed.

To Kirk's relief, the Akronian who was wedged in between them started to come to his senses. His eyes eventually opened and he looked about him blankly, and then in an unconscious imitation of Spock he raised an eyebrow.

"How do you feel?" McCoy asked. "You were out for a long time."

"I'll be all right. This has happened to me before. Where did this lot come from?"

"Were not quite sure," Kirk answered. "Do you know who they are?"

"Of course. They are Jihad." Kyle put his head back, closed his eyes, and refused to say another word.

They flew on, heading towards the towering crags of the Draco Mountains. Kirk could only admire the pilot's skill as he zigzagged between large boulders and through deep ravines.

They turned at last on reduced power into a dark tunnel. The skimmer's headlights threw eerie shadows off the walls, and then they stopped in a section lit by wall torches and were ordered out of the craft. They were marched down a connecting tunnel which opened into a wide cavern. Another smaller group of Jehads stopped their chores to stare at them, some of them flinching as they saw

Kyle.

Why were they so afraid of him?

A young woman came up to them. "Zac, who are these people?"

"We're about to find out, Chani. But first I think they had better be put into the cages for safe keeping. Move! Through there."

They were prodded into an adjoining cave that was filled with a row of trap-cages.

"I'm not going in there!" McCoy protested as Zac threatened with the blaster.

"I'm not asking you - I'm telling you. Get in."

"Do as he says, Bones."

"Very wise of you."

Cursing with disgust, McCoy went into one cage, Kirk and Kyle into others. The trap doors were lowered and secured.

"There. All safe and sound. Now we can talk. First - your names."

"I am James Kirk. That is Dr. McCoy, and our Akronian companion is Kyle Fh'ers. Now what do you want with us?"

"What I want, James Kirk, is to know where you come from; and what you are doing in the company of... that."

"We are not from your planet," Kirk began.

"Not from... This will be interesting. Go on."

Kirk did, giving a brief outline of what had happened, seeing Zac's expression turning from scepticism, first to wonder then to excitement.

"Tell me, James Kirk - this Federation of yours. Is it big? Does it consist of many different people?"

"Yes."

"And... is it safe there?"

"In what sense?" Kirk asked.

"Can people live there in safety, without persecution?"

"Yes, they can."

Zac looked long and hard at Kirk, and then abruptly signalled to the others and left.

"What was all that about?" McCoy demanded.

"I'm not sure, Bones. We will just have to wait and see. They don't seem to like you very much, Kyle."

The alien shrugged. "It would be surprising if they did."

"But why?"

"An old feud, I'm afraid, which they will probably explain to you in great graphic detail."

Kirk realised that Kyle was not going to explain further, and prowled his cage instead. He tested the bars, but they were set solidly into the floor and top of the cage. "No way out," he muttered.

"But what do they want with us?" McCoy protested. "Why lock us up? We haven't done anything to them. We don't even know them!"

Kirk shrugged. He had no answer. "They'll let us know in their own time. Damn - if only I had my communicator!"

"It wasn't working anyway."

The group of Jehads came back into the cave, clustering around Kyle's cage, openly sneering.

"How low has he fallen! What does it feel like to be locked up?"

"Let us slit his miserable throat!" another voice shouted over the catcalls.

Kyle ignored them, and this seemed to make the group more hostile. The alien could put on a terribly arrogant air, and the Jehads pounded and kicked at the cage while Zac stood watching, as if indulging naughty children.

"Wait!" Kirk called, trying to attract their attention away from the alien. "What do you want from him? From us?"

The Jehads turned their attention to him. "Tell the vermin-lover, Zac!" Kiran shouted.

Zac came closer until he stood at Kirk's cage. "First, we only wanted an explanation of your being with *him*. Now we want something more. Your ship."

Kirk and McCoy gaped at him, and then Kirk spoke coldly. "Forget it."

"Come now, Kirk, don't be so hasty with your answer. We want to get off this planet, and you and your ship provide the only possible way. This is a communication device, isn't it? No, don't think of lying - it went off a while ago. Someone is very anxious about you and the doctor."

"All right, it is a communicator," Kirk agreed.

"You are going to call your ship and arrange our transport, and you are going to stress that your life is in the balance if anything goes wrong."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then I hope Dr. McCoy can stand pain," Zac replied with utter conviction.

Devon woke to the early morning sun streaming into the room. He felt stiff from sleeping on the couch all night, and then felt puzzled that Kyle had not wakened him. He went through to the sleeping area, stopping dead. The bed had not been slept in. Feeling a bit panicked he rang through to Emon's quarters.

"Sorry to disturb you, K'Tzan, but have you seen Kyle or know where he might be?"

"No, I haven't seen him since yesterday. Isn't he back yet?" Emon sounded alarmed.

"Back from where?"

"He went out to his house for the day, and took Captain Kirk and the doctor with him. They were due back in the evening."

"I'll check." He switched through to the dispatch desk in the space centre.

"The K'Tzan has not yet returned," the dispatcher informed him.

"Why wasn't anything done about it?" Devon demanded.

"With respect, B'ruam, the K'Tzan has often stayed overnight without informing us."

"Contact the house to make sure," Devon snapped. "I'm coming down."

He raced through the walkways, arriving breathless, and the anxious face of the dispatcher made him go cold all over.

"The K'Tzan never arrived at T'zon."

"What flight path did he take?" Devon demanded.

"The usual one across the desert."

Devon swore. "Arrange a search team, and call the Enterprise. Maybe he's aboard her."

"Immediately, B'ruam."

Spock was desperately worried. The Captain had not returned, and Uhura had been unable to raise him by communicator.

"Mr. Spock, there's a call coming in from the planet." She smiled in relief. "It must be the Captain."

But it wasn't. Devon's tightly controlled voice broke over the speakers. "Mr. Spock, is my K'Tzan aboard your vessel?"

"No, he is not. He is in the company of Captain Kirk and Dr. McCoy on the planet's surface. Has something happened?"

"Yes. They were supposed to have gone out to Kyle's home, but they never arrived. I have only just been informed. A search party has been organised."

"We can assist from here if you could lift the blind to our sensors."

"I'll attend to it." He cut transmission.

"Mr. Spock, what could have happened?" Uhura asked.

He had no answer.

"Captain Kirk, I am waiting."

"All right, damn you. Tell your men to untie my hands."

"Oh, no. I will hold it. Tell me how it works."

"Open the grid and press the red button. Now talk into it."

"Like so? You up there - can you hear me?"

There was a short delay and then Spock's voice answered. "To whom am I speaking?"

"Never mind, just listen. We have your Captain and your Doctor, and if you want them to continue in good health, you will do as I say." If the situation hadn't been so serious, Kirk would have laughed at the melodramatic phrasing.

"What is it you wish?" Spock's voice was mild.

"We want safe transportation to your ship."

"And after that has been accomplished?"

"To leave with you when you return to your Federation."

"Perhaps if you had requested this instead of resorting to... I believe the word is 'blackmail'..."

"You have got to be joking! How were we to have done that? Fly?"

"You could have requested it through the space complex," Spock answered.

This brought gales of laughter from the Jehads. One of them made a mock bow in front of Kyle. "Please allow us to leave on the alien ship!" he mocked.

Zac sobered and spoke once more into the communicator. "You still there?"

"Of course."

"This is what you will do. Send a shuttle down to the outer reaches of the desert, where the Draco Mountains start. There is a volcanic formation there with geysers. Land there with no more than one man."

"There is a simpler method," Spock answered.

"What's that?" Zac asked suspiciously.

"I want to speak with Captain Kirk first," Spock said firmly.

"No tricks," Zac warned. "You may talk to him, Captain." He thrust his hand through the bars.

"Spock," Kirk said. "Bones and Kyle are both here with me."

"You are unharmed?"

"Yes, we're all fine."

"Captain, may I enquire how you managed to put yourselves into this predicament?"

"It's a long story that can wait till later, Spock."

"Very well. Perhaps you can tell how many kilometers you travelled before landing in your present position?"

"About fifteen hours, Spock. We flew a long way."

"Understood, Captain. Executing now."

"Here, what are you two... What's happening?"

A low hum filled the cave, and the tightly grouped Jehads started to dissolve in a sparkle of golden bubbles, and then they disappeared. Kyle jumped to his feet in astonishment, but the question died on his lips as Kirk told him to stand as close to him as the bars would permit and to remain still. McCoy was already in position, grinning hugely. In fascinated wonder, Kyle saw the cave dissolve around him, and then he found himself on a raised platform in a medium-sized chamber. A group of men in red shirts had the Jehads covered in a corner.

Spock stepped forward from the transporter console, obvious relief in his eyes, and untied Kirk.

"Thank you, Mr. Spock," Kirk said, and then turned to Kyle. "Welcome aboard the Enterprise, K'Tzan Fh'ers."

"How, by Hula, did you manage that?"

"A simple technique we have. We call it a transporter." He untied Kyle's hands while Spock was untying McCoy.

"Simple? It is unbelievable!"

"You tricked us!" Zac shouted furiously.

"Perhaps. I dislike being at a disadvantage and held to ransom by a group of misfits, as I am sure do Dr. McCoy and K'Tzan Fh'ers."

"K'Tzan?" The big man's face paled. "Captain Kirk, I am now begging you. Do not send us back. Take us with you!"

"Why?"

"I will tell you, but perhaps... where there is more quiet?"

"Very well. Follow me." Kirk turned, and that was a mistake. The moment his back was turned Zac sprang, grabbing Kirk from behind before anyone realized what was happening, and placed a heavy knife

at his throat.

"Back off!" he shouted at the security men. "Put your weapons on the floor. Kiran, collect them. You with the ears, keep back and still. Good. Now, Captain, we are going to wherever you command from, and we are leaving."

"You've overlooked the defence systems," Kyle said coldly. "You'll destroy the ship if you leave without an escort."

"Oh no, K'Tzan. I have not overlooked that. Tie him up again," he ordered two of his men. "And bring the doctor as well. If any of you try anything, you will be without a Captain and a ship. Chani, do you have them?"

"Yes, Zac."

"Arm one."

The girl brought a round globe out from the folds of her cloak. It had three coloured switches on its side. She pressed one.

"I am sure the K'Tzan knows what that is, but for your benefit I will explain. It's a mine. Nasty things. One button to arm it, one to render it harmless; and the third - well, nothing on this world will stop it exploding once that button is depressed. Now, Captain, shall we go?"

"Do I have any choice?"

"None whatsoever. Mikel, lock this lot in here, but smash that device - " he indicated the intercom - "first. We don't want them warning anybody."

The three hostages were dragged out.

"Which way, Captain?"

"The lifts," Kirk wheezed. "Over there." To his disgust the corridor and lift were both empty; they arrived on the bridge without detection. The two security men on the bridge were unsuspecting, and as the party burst onto the bridge they were quickly overpowered. Everyone swung round in surprise, and then froze.

"Captain!" Scott exclaimed.

"You'll be taking orders from me," Zac said. "If you value your Captain's life you will obey."

"What do you want?" Scott demanded.

Zac ignored him. "Fasten the doctor and the K'Tzan to the railings," he ordered, "and fasten a mine onto each of them. On their belts where everyone can see them." He nodded in satisfaction. "Now, one of you contact the space centre."

Uhura looked questioningly at Kirk, who nodded. "Do it, Lieutenant," he said.

"Don't think of calling your security!" Zac warned. Uhura gave him a dirty look.

"Enterprise, this is space central," a voice said.

"We want to speak to someone in authority," Zac demanded.

"Who is this?"

"Don't argue, do it."

"One moment, please."

Zac grinned. "Very polite. They won't be in a while."

"This is K'Tzan Emon Ind'r. What has happened, Enterprise?"

"Nothing if you do exactly as I say. Deactivate the space defence system. If you don't, the Enterprise will blow up with everybody aboard - including K'Tzan Kyle Fh'ers."

There was a sharp intake of breath. "Kyle is there?" Emon asked.

"In person." Zac glanced over to Uhura. "Can you switch over to visual?" At her nod, he went on. "Do it. Let them see what a predicament he is in."

The viewscreen broke into visual. Emon paled slightly. "Jehad!" someone spat, and Devon stepped into view.

"Harm him and you will regret it."

"Then you had better behave yourselves. Turn off the defence system. Once we have reached open space we will let him go. I am sure Captain Kirk will not mind losing a shuttlecraft."

"How can we be sure you will keep your word?" Emon asked.

"You will just have to take the chance. We want nothing more from you - only our freedom."

"We will have to contact the Proktui. They have the final code."

"Do it. You have twenty minutes." Zac signalled Uhura to cut transmission. "Start warming your engines, Captain."

"I will need my Science Officer on the bridge if we are to enter the corridor," Kirk demanded.

"Then he shall be here - but only then. I think you should sit now, Kirk. My arm is getting tired."

Kirk sat in the command chair, helplessly furious as he was tied down.

"The engines, Captain?"

"Do as he says, Mr. Sulu."

"Aye, sir." Sulu flicked switches and the ship's engines throbbed with life.

"Call coming in," Uhura said. "On visual"

The figure of Proktui Denru filled the screen. "I am sorry that such an incident has taken place while you were our guests, Captain Kirk."

"Stop all the meaningless talk!" Zac shouted. "Have you deactivated the screens?"

"They are down. Where will you release Kyle?"

"We'll let you know later. Just get one thing straight. If any ship tries to intercept us, they will blow up with us."

"Understood. All ships have been warned to stay clear."

"That's it, then, Captain. Let's go."

"Course, Captain?" Chekov asked savagely.

"Devil's Staircase, Mr. Chekov."

"Kyle!" Devon shouted. He spoke rapidly in his native tongue. Kirk twisted his head around to see the alien shake his head, his face unreadable. Devon sagged at the console, his face white. "No!" he exclaimed, and then the transmission broke.

"I think it's working, Mr. Spock," Fielding said. The door control panel lay open, Spock concentrating as he tried crossing the wires. "I saw a spark!"

"I fear we may be too late, Lieutenant. The Enterprise is leaving orbit." He attacked the door's innards furiously, and then there was a large flash and a crack as the wires made contact, throwing Spock across the room.

"Mr. Spock!" Fielding cried. "Sir, are you all right?"

"I am uninjured, Mr. Fielding," Spock said, although he sounded rather dazed. "Try the door."

Fielding grinned in relief. "Come on, boys. Let's see if we can push this thing open." They applied their combined weight against the slippery surface, palms lying flat. "It's coming, sir." The door creaked in protest, a crack appearing at the jamb. "Once more - push!"

Slowly, inch by inch, it squeaked open until a space large enough to squeeze through opened for them.

"Freedom at last!" Fielding grinned. "Do we go to the bridge, sir?"

"Yes, but use extreme caution. Try to confiscate the mines first. We will require phasers."

"I'll get us some," Ensign Hanson offered.

The engine beat changed before he could leave. "We are in warp drive," Spock said.

"We have cleared the planetary defence system," Sulu said.

"Are you sure?" Zac demanded before Kirk could reply.

"We passed a marker buoy," Sulu replied.

"It had better be. How long to this Devil's Staircase?"

"One hour at warp speed."

"Get going, then," Zac ordered.

"Wait. You said Kyle could go. We made an agreement with Emon."

"Too bad. I lied. Get this ship moving."

Kirk looked helplessly at Kyle, but the alien's face was like stone.

"Ship approaching, Captain," Lt. Peters said from the science station.

"Bastards!" Zac spat. "Underhand, all of them."

"They have probably come to pick up Kyle," Kirk said reasonably.

"Or shoot at us." Zac placed his knife at Kirk's throat. "Helmsman, you have ten seconds to get us out of here. One. Two - "

Cursing savagely, Sulu worked his board. The Enterprise throbbed with life and disappeared from the sight of the approaching craft.

The tracking officer leaped to his feet. "They've gone into light speed."

"Has the Cursad got a fix on her?"

"No, B'ruam, but there is only one place they can go. The Cursad will follow to the Devil's Staircase and are sure to pick up her trail."

"We can only wait and hope," Denru said.

"Wait? Yes. Hope? No, I don't think so. Those ill-begotten basha! And we believed them! He won't be coming back." He stood trembling with white rage, sorrow and guilt. If only he had acted sooner instead of going to sleep... "Proktui Denru. We hold the brother of the Jihad leader. Give him to me." For a moment he saw doubt in the Proktui's eyes. "Do not deny me this. I want him!"

The old man sighed. "You can have him, Devon. Do whatever you wish with him."

"Sir, the Enterprise has gone. Cursad says they have entered the vortex." The tracking officer looked fearfully at Devon, whose

face had turned to stone. Then, without a word, the Keeper wheeled about and strode from the room. With rage in his heart he went straight through the complex to the medical centre, striding down the corridors and down a long flight of stairs until he came to the security detention area. The guard at the iron gate recognised him and let him pass.

Devon halted at a desk, and the guard jumped to his feet.

"Subject 502. Where is he?"

"Cell 5B, B'ruam," the man said after consulting a readout.

"Get the physician in charge."

"At once, B'ruam."

Two minutes later a white-haired Akronian hurried towards him, anxiety on his face. It was Kyle's physician.

"What's the matter, Devon? Is it Kyle?"

"No. Kyle... will not be needing treatment any more. You will be informed officially of the reason. Meanwhile, Proktui Denru has given subject 502 to me."

"Noted. I'll put a tag on his door."

"I want to see him."

"Of course. This way."

Cell 5B lay deep in the bowels of the building. Devon looked through the clear plexiglass laid in the door at the Jehad sitting miserably in the cell. He was about twenty five years old, fair haired and with green eyes, and in spite of the hardship of his imprisonment still looked to be in good physical condition.

Devon gestured for the physician to open the door. The Jehad sprang to his feet, the terror in his eyes belying the apparent boldness of his stance.

"Relax," Devon said. "Have you been well treated?"

The Jehad licked his lips nervously, unsure of the smile on the Akronian's face. When he didn't answer, Devon beckoned the physician to enter.

"Can he understand me?" he asked.

"Of course."

"Listen very carefully. Look after him well. I don't want my property to try and damage itself before I need it."

"He won't," the physician assured him.

"What do you want from me? Let me go!" the Jehad cried.

"You know perfectly well what I want, Vin. And if I let you go, where would you go? Back to the Draco Mountains? There's nobody left there any more. Your brother and his mob have gone."

"How do you know who I am?" Vin whispered.

"You forget that you were born in that building over there. You, your brother Zac, Chani, Kiran... and about seven others. Very ingenious, using the sewers to escape from us - but also stupid. We knew where your hideout in the Mountains was, but it was amusing to let you stay there, hiding in your holes during the day, creeping out at night to steal food... It was unfortunate for you that you strayed too close to the space complex and ran into the guards. If you had not, you would now have been with your brother - off planet."

"Off planet?" Vin stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Your brother pulled another one of his stunts and got onto a visiting spacecraft. His big mistake was that he took my K'Tzan with him. I'm afraid you will have to pay the price for that."

"I'm glad! At least he is free!"

"Perhaps; but you are not." Devon smiled lazily. "Just think Vin; every day I will be visiting you... and you will never know which visit will be your last." He reached out and his tentacles brushed Vin's arm. The Jehad shrank from the contact as Devon went on. "Something to keep your mind occupied. I wouldn't want you to get bored."

He nodded to the physician, and left.

The swirling mass of the cloud drew closer. "Ten minutes to the boundary," Peters said.

"Zac, let Kyle go!" Kirk begged.

"No. He's coming with us."

"What use is he to you now?" Kirk persisted. "He can't stop you now."

"Be quiet, Captain. His kind are not the paragons you believe they are. Are you, K'Tzan?"

Kyle didn't answer. He was staring, mesmerised, at the cloud.

"At least deactivate those mines," Kirk urged. "I warn you, it will be a rough ride. The turbulence could set them off."

Zac looked thoughtfully at Kirk, then nodded. "Very well. Turn them off, Kiran."

McCoy sagged with relief. "Jim, you have to warn the crew."

"Three minutes," said Peters.

"And I need to call my science officer to the bridge."

"No communications," Zac growled.

"You bastard!" McCoy growled. "People could get killed - "

"Hold on!" Kirk warned as the ship started to rock.

The cloud closed in on them, sucking them into the swirling mass. The Enterprise shook violently as the red alert klaxon blared through the corridors and decks.

Here we go again, Kirk thought as the remembered pressure pressed down on him. As the lights flickered, he saw Zac drop his blaster, desperately reaching for something to hold on to.

The group of security men under Spock halted on the emergency stairwell. Spock grabbed Fielding by the shirt front as the lieutenant started to topple backwards.

"Get down! Hold on!" he ordered, and they lay on the stairs, bracing themselves against the wall.

Throughout the ship, crew members cursed and cried out as those who had been unable to wedge themselves or find something to hold were thrown about like rag dolls.

The small swimming pool overflowed, flooding the rec room next door to it. Emergency sprinklers switched on as the smoke alarm sensors were activated by the smoke from burning circuits.

Down in a lab, Poppet screamed in fright, clawing at her cage door. Then the lights went out and the maelstrom ceased.

It was with some relief that Kirk came to to find Spock bending anxiously over him in the glow of the emergency lights.

"How come you never pass out?" he demanded unsteadily.

"A superior metabolism, Captain," Spock said as he finished untying him and then moved over to free McCoy and Kyle. Both were unconscious, as were the Jehad and most of the bridge crew.

"How did you get up here?" Kirk asked.

"Via the stairs. We had managed to extricate ourselves from the transporter room just before the ship went into warp drive."

"Then what took you so long to get here?"

"Captain, we could not just burst in while the mines were activated."

"So you were behind that door all the time?"

"Most of it."

"And left me hanging here for an hour while you eavesdropped!" a peevish voice interrupted.

"Bones! I know this is a stupid question, but are you okay?"

"If you mean, am I okay after being strung up like a side of meat and then minced, then yes - I'm on the top of the world." He glared at Kirk for a moment and then turned his attention to Kyle.

"He's fine," Kirk grinned. "Ah, Fielding - take these weapons

out of here."

"What about this lot, Captain?" He indicated the Jehads, who were beginning to stir.

"Take them to the rec room and hold them there. Scotty, are you up to going down to engineering?"

"Aye, Captain. My poor engines! That was a wee bit rougher than the first time."

"Captain! I have Starfleet!" a bedraggled but smiling Uhura called out. Those of the crew who were conscious gave a ragged cheer.

"What about Kyle, Jim?" McCoy looked up from the still unconscious alien.

"Spock, can we get him back?"

"I doubt that the ship could survive another passage of the cloud in her present condition, and I am quite sure that a shuttlecraft would be completely unable to survive the passage. But in any case, it's too late, Captain. The corridor is closing."

"Are you sure? It looks much the same."

"Yes. We got through just in time. The extreme turbulence was caused by movement within the cloud as one corridor closed and another opened. To try to return Kyle would be folly; if he got through he would land in an entirely different universe - perhaps even in a void with no life at all."

"Damn. But what could I do? Zac had the upper hand."

"Don't blame yourself, Jim. We understand."

"Sure, Bones. But will he?"

"Captain Kirk!" Zac called urgently, struggling between the security men who were attempting to hustle him out. "Are we safe? Are we in your Federation?"

"You are," Kirk replied curtly. "Now please go with security. I will speak with you later."

The big man nodded, surprisingly meekly. "I am sorry, Captain. But we were desperate. It was our only way to safety."

He allowed the guards to lead him out.

"I canna believe it," Scott moaned. "Not one flicker of life to the engines. They'll have to send someone to tow us in!"

"Never mind, Scotty," Kirk soothed. "Think how you'll enjoy yourself refitting them."

"But it's so embarrassing, Captain!"

"You've got a point there. Thank goodness it wasn't this bad the first time! Casualties, Bones?"

"No fatalities, thank goodness. Same as last time - mostly cuts and bruises, a couple of broken bones. Oh, and a bitten hand."

"Bitten?"

"Poppet broke loose again and vented her anger on Dr. Dextor. He was very upset - more about her behaviour than his hand, admittedly. Kept on saying, 'It wasn't my fault!' and 'She bit me!'"

"Is she back in her cage?" Kirk asked.

"As docile as a lamb."

"What about Kyle?"

"I don't know, Jim. He's still out cold. I have no information to work on."

"Is there a security guard with him?"

"Yes. I don't trust those Jehads an inch. Where are they?"

"In the officers' lounge. The rec room was flooded. I want you two to come with me when I go down there."

The intercom whistled, interrupting him. "Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Captain, I have Admiral Mendoza."

"Pipe him through," Kirk said, wincing.

"Kirk! Where the hell have you been? And what's all this about needing a tow?"

"It's a long story, Admiral."

"Save it for your report. Have you the data you were sent out to get?"

"Yes, sir."

"Professor Hartmann has been driving me up the wall! I couldn't get it through to him that not only the data was missing but the entire ship. The minute you get to the base, you get your butt over there so I can have a bit of peace and quiet."

"Yes, sir," Kirk said meekly.

"Hmmm. We're glad you are all right. Most worrying. Starfleet out."

"Phew! Short, sweet and fiery," McCoy breathed. "Nice to know we were missed."

"Isn't it? Come on, let's see to our passengers."

The group of Jehads was sitting in a little knot as they entered the lounge.

"Security, wait outside," Kirk ordered. Before he could say

anything more, Zac stood up.

"Where is he?"

"Where is who?"

"That... Kyle, of course."

"In sickbay."

"Captain, for our safety - and your own - you must lock him up."

"Wait a minute. I don't *have* to do anything," Kirk snapped.

"Then at least give us our weapons back so we can defend ourselves."

"Against one man? One man you abducted and forced to come with us? Listen to me carefully, Mister. While you are aboard this ship you will adhere to the regulations, and civilians carrying weapons is not one of them. Once you reach the starbase, you may go and do what you want."

"It will be too late for one of us by then," Chani said fiercely.

Kirk looked at them in amazement. "Wait a minute. I understand your two peoples are enemies, but this is going too far. I can understand your hating him, but why are you all so afraid of him?"

"You *don't* understand," Zac protested.

"Then please explain."

"Captain, he and his kind are persecutors of my people, as they have been for hundreds of years. Ever year our numbers dwindle because of them and their perversion."

"What are you talking about?" Kirk demanded.

"Captain, we are the original descendants of the Akronians; they are a mutation. Our ancestors nearly destroyed all life on Akronia, releasing a plague in the form of those such as Kyle. Nature gave them tentacles instead of fingers; and fangs; and a lust for our blood. They drink our blood and we die. We die, Captain."

"Fangs? He doesn't have fangs!" Kirk protested.

"Yes, they do. They are retracted into their gums until they need them to drink our blood, and the more terrified the victim the more they enjoy it... and at the end they are left holding a corpse."

"Vampires?" McCoy exclaimed.

"Much worse," Zac answered grimly.

"I don't believe it," Kirk said. "If they enjoy drinking blood why didn't they move against us?"

"It's no story, Captain! They feed off us!" Zac said

desperately.

"You are the only ones of your people we have seen. Where are the rest of them?" Kirk asked. He needed all the facts he could get.

"Before the Great Accident, a group of our forefathers left Akronia to colonise other worlds. Jihad was the main colony, a beautiful and prosperous planet. The first we knew of the mutation on Akronia was when Jihad was raided. The Akronians were running out of unmutated... stock. They had evolved once more to space technology, much more refined than before, but what use would all that be without people to feed on? Then the raids stopped...

"Jihad also had space technology, but it was poor in comparison. Some years ago the ship I was on was attacked by these evil beings, and I learned why they were leaving the colonies alone. They don't need to raid any more; they realised that they could breed my people themselves.

"Now can you see why we are so afraid of them? To be caught would mean either death or a life of being treated like animals in their breeding centre."

McCoy stared, appalled. "They use you like animals?"

Zac nodded. Chani broke in. "It is the truth. I am a product of that place." She shuddered. "They let us learn to talk because it amuses them to hear us plead for mercy when they come to kill us... "

"All of us here managed to escape through the city sewers," Zac continued. "We managed to reach the Draco Mountains, where we have been living for the past five years, always afraid of discovery... Once we were discovered by a group of prospectors, but we killed them, and took their weapons and skimmers. It enabled us to do some raiding of our own, mainly for food. Desert rabbit gets to be very monotonous after a while. We needed extra clothing, too. We never went nearer to the city than necessary - we were terrified of being recaptured. That's probably what happened to my younger brother," he added softly. "Three of them went out one night on a raid and never came back. We were on our way back from a raid when we found you." He took a deep breath, then continued. "I'm sorry about the rough treatment we gave you, but there you were - two Jehads, or so we thought, with an Akronian, sleeping free and unmolested. I thought that you were traitors, working with them to capture us in exchange for a sort of freedom, but when you explained everything we knew we had to get to your ship. It was a mad plan, but it worked. You see, when you mentioned that he was a K'Tzan, we had nothing more to lose."

"What difference did that make?" Kirk demanded.

"A K'Tzan is very highly thought of. I reckoned they would do anything to get him back in one piece - and it worked."

"But you went back on your word to release him," Kirk accused.

"Yes, I know. But it was an opportunity to make them suffer for once."

"You have denied him his heritage," Spock said. "Where will he go?"

"I don't know; and quite frankly, I don't care."

"Now that you are safe, he is expendable?"

"Yes." Zac glared angrily from one to the other. "I can't believe you still side with him against us!"

"We have only heard your views," Spock reproached.

"Spock, they couldn't have made all this up!" McCoy protested.

"I am not refuting their explanation, Doctor."

"But?"

"Before you condemn him he should also be given the opportunity to explain."

"For pity's sake, we've brought a dangerous killer into the Federation!"

"You are being over-imaginative, Doctor."

"Oh I am, am I? And what when he turns on somebody? Me, you, the crew? You heard Zac! They kill for pleasure!"

"You are being paranoid, Doctor. There are many species here in our own universe who kill. The Klingons kill, the Romulans kill. We kill when necessary! Where there is life there is also death."

McCoy opened his mouth to speak, but Kirk intervened. "That's enough. Spock is right, but so are you, Bones. Zac, you and your people will stay here until we reach the base. I'll keep security outside to guard the door."

"And Kyle Fh'ers?"

"For now he can stay in sickbay - under guard - until he regains consciousness. That is all I am going to say on this matter. The rest will be up to Starfleet. Spock, please arrange everything. I have to get back to the bridge."

"Certainly, Captain."

"The Lexington is on final approach, and is signalling, Captain."

"Open hailing frequencies."

"Enterprise, we understand you need assistance." They couldn't miss the laughter in her commander's voice.

"Affirmative. Is that you, Bob?"

"Sure is, Jim boy. What a historic moment this is. The great Enterprise needing a tow! What has Scotty been up to?"

"Don't let him hear you say that. He's in a foul enough mood as it is."

Bob Wesley laughed. "I won't. I can't wait to hear the full story, though. Stand by. We're shooting a beam across now. Sit back and enjoy the ride."

"Thanks, Bob. See you at the base."

"You owe me a drink for this one, Jim. Lexington out."

"I don't think we are going to live this one down," Kirk grinned. He stood, stretching, glad to see the familiar stars again. "Take over, Spock. I'm going to get a bit of shuteye."

"McCoy to bridge."

Kirk groaned inwardly. "Yes, Bones, what is it?"

"Come down to sickbay. At once!"

McCoy sounded strange. "What is it, Bones?"

"Just get down here, and make it fast!"

"Come with me, Spock. Sulu, you have the con."

Security Officer Fielding was bored. He liked a bit of action every now and then, but this stint of guarding the unconscious alien was not it. He stifled a yawn and went through to the main area of sickbay for a cup of coffee. His charge was fastened down with restrainers, so it was quite safe.

Sickbay's lights were turned down, the few crew injured badly enough to be kept there fast asleep. Dr. McCoy's office light was on, but of the doctor there was no sign.

They've got it good, he thought. Come and go as they want and get others to do their dirty work. He was missing a gathering in Lt. Palmer's cabin because Spock had chosen him for this dull duty.

He took his coffee from the hatch, and then cocked his head in puzzlement. He had heard a noise, almost like a low growl. If that blasted serbocat of Dr. Dextor's had got loose again, he would personally complain to the Captain. Getting her back into her cage was always a problem.

It came again, a soft snarl that raised the hackles on Fielding's neck, and then he heard a loud snap. It came from the direction of the side room.

"Poppet? Where are you, girl?" *Now I'm talking to a dumb animal,* he thought. He went firmly back into the side room and stopped in surprise.

The alien was sitting hunched over the side of the bed, body bent as if in pain. The restrainers lay broken in half.

"Here, are you in pain? Should I call Dr. McCoy?" Fielding went over and put a hand on his shoulder.

The alien threw the hand off, springing off the bed to crouch next to the bulkhead, body tense, and making deep moaning noises. Fielding took a backward step, and then he blanched as the alien

lifted his head.

The dark eyes were blazing with an inner madness, lips were drawn back in an animal snarl, revealing two long fangs, pure white and sharp. Fielding stood paralysed with fear, forgetting all about his phaser.

Galaxy preserve me! he thought as the alien rose slowly to its feet, tentacles twitching. It advanced on him, catlike, staring at him with a cruel intensity. Self preservation returned, and Fielding's hand flew to his phaser, but he was too late. The creature flew at him, tentacles wrapping around his arm in a crushing vice. Dimly, Fielding heard his flying phaser strike the wall, and then he fainted.

McCoy returned from his cabin to sickbay to pick up a forgotten report.

Now where the devil is the night nurse? he asked himself, seeing her empty desk. His charges were asleep on medication, their forms outlined in the low lighting. McCoy went into his office, picked up the forgotten report, and, switching off the light, he crossed silently to check with Fielding.

The door of the side room stood open.

"Fielding," he whispered. "Is everything all right?"

He got no reply. "Hey, Fielding! Are you sleeping on duty?" He stepped through the door. In one glance he took in the empty bed and broken straps, and the crumpled security officer lying on the floor.

Heart racing, he stormed for the intercom. "McCoy to bridge!"

"Yes, Bones, what is it?"

"Come down to sickbay. At once!"

"What is it, Bones?"

"Just get down here and make it fast!"

Kirk and Spock arrived to find McCoy bending over a groaning Fielding.

"What happened?" Kirk demanded.

"I wasn't here, but it's obvious. He's gone on a bloodlust."

"How is Fielding?"

"No damage. He fainted. But look at this, Jim." McCoy rucked up the man's sleeves. Both forearms showed signs of bruising - livid red welts wrapped round them.

"Spock, get security. He'll head for the Jehads. They must stop him. Phasers on stun only."

"Take it easy," McCoy was saying to Fielding. "You've had quite a scare."

"Captain, he moved so fast!" Fielding gasped. "I froze, and he was on me. Those fangs! It was horrible."

"Consider yourself lucky to be in one piece. Stay here in sickbay. Bones, Spock, let's go. He'll be okay with the others. Have you got a tranquilliser in that kit, Bones?"

"A very powerful one," McCoy assured him.

"We may need it. Here's security at last. Jenkins, you stay here; Thomas can come with us."

He moved down the maze of corridors seeking the one thing that would give him relief. The pain was getting worse, the madness intensifying. Twice he had had to stop until the spasms had passed.

Where were they?

He crept down the emergency stairwell, every nerve on fire, and staggered through the door.

Which way? Ah - there! He could feel it - tangible fear, vibrating along every nerve, hurting him yet enticing him with ice cold fire. He drew nearer until he heard the angry and frightened voices clearly.

A creature in a red shirt that stood by the door spotted him. It shouted, coming towards him with a weapon. He sprang, swatting it aside, hearing it hit the wall, and then he was at the door, looking in on his choice of kill as they cowered in a pathetic huddle. He smiled and closed in, even though a small part of his mind screamed denial.

The lift halted on the deck where the Jehads were quartered and the four men raced down the corridor.

"We're too late, Jim!" McCoy cried, seeing the security man lying on the floor. Swiftly he bent down to examine him. "Unconscious."

"Get that hypo ready, Bones," Kirk ordered. They crept towards the door, and Kirk indicated to Thomas to stay outside.

Six Jehads stood crowded behind a table, their faces taut with fear, and Kirk saw Chani and Kiran among them. To their right, Zac was crouched helplessly beside a chair. Kyle stood poised in the middle of the floor, a lazy smile on his face, toying with them, choosing his victim.

"What do we do now?" McCoy whispered.

"Give me the hypo, Bones. Spock, see if you can edge around to the Jehads."

Carefully they slipped into the room. Kyle heard them, glancing in their direction, and as quickly dismissed them. Kirk

glimpsed the fangs set in a feral face, and he shivered, understanding the Jehads' fear. He moved forward, very slowly and carefully. The alien growled warningly, and he stopped.

"Kyle," Kirk said softly. "Don't do this. We can help you if you will only let us try. You don't have to kill." He took another step forward. "Relax. We won't hurt you, but you must let them go."

He thought he saw a look of desperation in Kyle's eyes; a moment's sanity and a cry for help. "That's right. Stay where you are."

Kirk gripped the hypo, judging the distance. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Spock shift around the wall, circling towards the Jehads.

Kyle's body was coiled like a spring, lashing with strain. Kirk was close now, hearing the alien's ragged breathing, and slowly he raised his hand, the hypo still concealed.

And then the moment of hope passed. Kirk saw Zac raise his arm, the glint of steel unmistakable. Kirk threw himself at Kyle, but he was too late. The alien turned on Zac with incredible speed, and as Kirk hit the deck he saw the two bodies rolling over and over. Chani screamed, and then there was only silence. The attack had taken only seconds.

Kirk picked himself up. "McCoy!" he yelled.

They raced over to the two bodies, one lying sprawled, the other curled in a foetal position. McCoy bent over Zac, taking a reading.

"He's dead. Heart failure." He turned Zac's head, exposing the neck. There were two small punctures along the carotid artery, both encircled with slight bruising and a little blood.

"Damn!" Kirk fumed. "I thought I was getting through to him!"

"You were, Captain," Spock said. "It was Zac himself who brought on the attack. If he had stayed still, you would have succeeded."

Kirk went over to Kyle, who was still lying as motionless as the corpse.

"Check him over, Bones. Spock, get Thomas to move these people over to the rec room. It should be dried out by now."

Chani pushed forward, her face tight with grief. "We warned you, Captain. If you had locked him up, Zac would still be alive. Are you going to let him roam free after this?"

"Chani, I realise you and Zac were close, but please do as I ask. I want no more bloodshed."

"You should have locked him up! Now Zac is dead instead of him!" She started to cry, and Kiran put an arm around her, drawing her away. The door closed on them.

"Bones?" Kirk asked, seeing McCoy bending gingerly over Kyle.

"He seems to be in shock."

"Can't you sedate him?"

"That won't be necessary, Captain." Kyle slowly uncurled, sitting cross-legged. He looked dazed, and to Kirk's astonishment there were signs of tears on his face. "Do you have a cloakroom near here?"

"Through there," Kirk directed.

Kyle rose shakily to his feet, and Kirk saw that he was shaking. He made it just in time, and the three Enterprise officers heard the sound of retching as he was violently ill.

"Not the normal reaction of a psychopathic killer," Kirk murmured.

"I agree, Captain. He appears to be extremely distressed."

It was a while before he returned, looking white and strained. He stared at Zac's body as if seeing it for the first time.

"Was anyone else hurt?" he asked.

"No. Kyle, are you up to explaining what happened to you?" Kirk asked.

"How much do you already know?"

"What Zac told us. I assume that the broad facts he gave us were correct. He wanted us to lock you up."

"You should have listened to him, Captain." Kyle sank wearily into a chair, head bowed.

"Perhaps you could give us your side of the story," Kirk suggested. "You seemed to become transformed into... into a wild animal."

"In a sense, we are," Kyle admitted. "Zac told you there was a mutation?"

Kirk nodded.

"The exact details are lost in the chaos of the time. However, we believe that we were the result of a scientific experiment gone wrong. The air was polluted; children were born who were unable to survive... When the original scientists realised what was happening, they went into underground shelters and they, and their descendants, were not affected.

"It took several generations before the final mutation was fixed. By that time the air was clear again, and the unaffected Akronians - the Jehads - came out of hiding and set up communities as far from the mutated population as possible.

"Meanwhile, the mutated Akronians were having problems with survival. You see, Captain, once we pass childhood our bodies are unable to manufacture haemoglobin. In order to survive, we must find an external source of haemoglobin no later than every sixty days. Our fangs are linked to our veins; the blood we suck fills our veins and gives us new life."

"A transfusion!" McCoy gasped.

Kyle went on as if he had not spoken. "At first we obtained blood from animals, hunting them, taking blood and letting them go again, but we had to do this every two or three days; then a Jihad was attacked and we discovered that Jihad blood was better for the purpose, and lasted us longer. The animals survived; unfortunately the Jehads die. We believe it is their fear that kills them; they expect to die, therefore they do.

"My ancestors reasoned that the Jehads owed us this, for it was the fault of their ancestors that we were born."

"And the breeding?" McCoy asked.

"That is true. You realise that there were not many of them - the children's children's children of a handful of scientists living in a very cramped environment. There were far more of us. But by then we were no longer mere hunting animals seeking to survive, as our grandparents were; we had a... I suppose you could call it a civilisation. Certainly a society in which we co-operated with each other. So we captured the Jehads and set up breeding farms. In time the numbers grew high enough that everyone, not just the Akronian leaders, could get Jihad blood.

"Most of the females and the best, the strongest males, are kept for breeding; the unwanted males and the barren females are taken to nourish us."

"Zac mentioned that you raided Jihad colonies," Spock put in. "That the... the breeding stock came from there."

"No. We do not touch the colonies; we only defend ourselves against them."

"So how do you explain Zac? He came from a colony!" McCoy blurted accusingly.

"Was that what he told you? No, Doctor. Oh, no. Zac was born and raised at the centre - as were all of his group. They were all breeding stock who managed to escape several years ago. They were not the first, although - with the exception of one group in the past - they were the most successful, in that they managed to survive this long. We knew where they were, of course, but as long as their nuisance value was minimal we chose to leave them alone."

"But if the Jehads were planetbound, how did the colonies start?" Kirk asked.

"Centuries ago, Akronia had spaceflight. After we began to rebuild our culture, we redeveloped it. The group of Jehads I already mentioned - the most successful of the escapers - managed to stow away on board one of the earliest of our spacecraft. They killed the crew and managed to reach a habitable planet, their numbers augmented by the large number of Jehads carried on board to provide blood for the crew on what was intended to be a lengthy voyage. That was the start of the colonies. Of course, we knew nothing about that at the time; we simply assumed that the ship was lost. It was only when a Jihad ship attacked us that we discovered what had happened.

"That was when the defence system was installed; both as defence against a further attack, but also to prevent escape

off-world. Our ships are slowly exploring the neighbouring worlds, although we avoid Jihad-held space. When you arrived, we assumed you were part of a Jihad attack, especially since your language is so close to theirs. When we learned that this was not so, we accepted you as friends."

"That scream on the Shuvra?" Kirk prompted. "A Jihad?"

"Yes. Young Alek was careless."

"You still keep these people on board your ships?" McCoy was hostile.

"It would be fatal not to. You are not thinking, Doctor, or else you have not been listening. Tell me, what happens to someone whose blood loses its haemoglobin?"

"He dies."

"So tell me; what choice do we have?"

"Ordinary blood transfusions, dammit!"

"That has been tried. It fails. It seems that to be effective, the blood must mix with a substance secreted in our fangs. This substance loses its potency immediately it is removed from the body, and it has proved impossible to synthesise it."

"And what happens when you need blood again?" Kirk asked.

"I will die. I know you will keep the remaining Jehads far away from me. And I cannot return home, Captain, I realise that. Neither will I attack your people - your blood is different from Jihad blood, and is totally incompatible with ours - when we realised that it was our final proof that you were not Jehads."

"We'll find an answer," Kirk said with more confidence than he felt. "There has to be one. The Federation has many scientific means open to them. Vulcan scientists are especially skilled. And we have sixty days to come up with something. It's not as if you'll need blood again tomorrow."

Kyle looked at him for a moment in silence, then changed the subject. "How long before we arrive at your starbase?"

"About three hours at the most. We're under tow. It was a rough trip back."

"Can I stay here? The view is quite spectacular. I assure you I am quite harmless now. Post guards outside if you wish."

"That won't be necessary. Bones, get a team to remove Zac's body, and start checking out the differences between Jihad blood and Human. I'll be back later, Kyle. Don't give up hope. Come on, Spock - we have work to do."

After they left, McCoy paced up and down as he waited for the medics to arrive.

"You are uncomfortable in my presence, Doctor," Kyle stated.

"I can't help it," McCoy muttered apologetically.

"I understand that. But remember, your blood is useless to my system." He smiled wistfully. "Perhaps your Captain will take more care in the future when you are researching dying planets."

"I am curious," McCoy said slowly, "about those attacks of yours."

"Ah, yes. My physicians put them down to a neurotic system. Poor Devon - I was always giving him a hard time."

"Neurotic system?" McCoy prompted.

"None of us enjoy killing, Doctor, but in my case there is an acute aversion to it. This interferes with the natural order of things - it is as if you had an aversion to eating."

"I'm sorry."

"It is the way of Hula. Here - " He slipped a ring off his finger. It was of a fine gold, set with a deep blue stone. "I would like you to have this."

"Kyle! I couldn't! It's all you have left - "

"It is my house ring; I won't be needing it any more. I do want you to have it. You... worship life. Please take it."

"Thank you," McCoy said, slightly embarrassed. "I'll look after it well."

The medics arrived and McCoy supervised the removal of the body. Then, with a final backward glance, he left with them.

Kyle stood at the wide-view window for a long while. Nobody came in to disturb him. He slipped the knife out from under his tunic - the knife Zac had had. When his senses had returned he had felt it lying under him, and had slipped it, unseen, under his tunic. He fingered the sharp-honed blade. Zac must have spent hours getting it so sharp. It would do the job.

He had killed, and ironically he had not needed medication or assistance to get him through the ordeal. Although he had been sick, for the first time he had almost functioned as a normal Akronian, his senses awakened and the end result had not been as devastating to his system. The drug he had been given last time must have continued to work in him.

For the first time... and the last. He sat down cross-legged on the deck, drinking in his last sight of the magnificent star-studded void, so much richer in stars than his own familiar skies. He was too numb to feel any pain as the blade sliced through his wrists.

As I have taken the life of others, so now I take my own. At last I will be free.

The blood flowed from the severed arteries, collecting in a scarlet splash at his feet. He felt tired. The battle of living was at last over. It was time to rest.

"Control has been taken over by the base, Jim," Bob Wesley said.

"Thanks, Bob. I'll meet you in the bar this evening."

"I'll be there. See you, Jim."

"Well, that's that. Uhura, contact the base commander about our passengers, and Spock - you'd better hightail it to Professor Hartmann."

"It would indeed be unfortunate if he harassed you as he did Admiral Mendoza."

"Disastrous! Uhura, get the Jehads over to the transporter room, and let me know when they are ready to beam across. Also post the crew for a bit of shore leave."

"Yes, sir."

Lieutenants Sheila Palmer and Robert Frost opened the door to the officers' lounge. "Thank goodness there's no top brass in here," Frost said.

"What difference would that make?" Palmer asked.

"I want to be alone with you."

"Oh? And just what do you have in mind?"

"You'll find out. Oh, oh. My mistake. There is someone here."

"Where?"

"Lying on the floor," he whispered.

"Drunk? That's unusual. Let's go to my cabin. Let whoever comes in next deal with him." She turned to leave.

"Hang on a minute. What's that?"

"What's what?"

"There's a red stain on the floor. Whoever it is may be hurt."

They swiftly crossed the room to the body and looked down. Palmer screamed.

"Sheila!"

With an effort, she pulled herself together. "It's that alien guy Fielding told me about. We'd better get the Captain and McCoy."

"That's the last we'll see of them," Kirk said in relief as the last sparkles faded from the transporter that beamed the Jehads to the Starbase. Zac's body had already gone.

"Where do they go from here?" McCoy asked.

"The base commander is arranging it. Starfleet will help them to settle somewhere. When are you going across, Spock?"

"In a few minutes, Captain. There are some reports that need your signature first."

"Bridge to Captain Kirk."

"Now what? Kirk here."

"Captain, you and Dr. McCoy are needed in the officers' lounge. Lt. Palmer said it was urgent. Captain, she sounded upset."

"Dr. McCoy is with me. We're on our way. You too, Spock." Kirk had a gut feeling about the summons, and it was confirmed as they entered the room.

"Over here, Captain," Frost said.

Kyle was lying in a pool of dried blood, the cause unmistakable. The knife lay next to him. But what struck Kirk was the serene expression on the alien's face.

Kirk pounded the couch in frustration. "Damn! I shouldn't have left him alone."

"You are not responsible, Captain." Spock's quiet voice did nothing to calm his friend.

"Maybe not; but maybe I am. There could have been a solution; maybe I didn't try hard enough to let him realise that. He had two months; why didn't he wait a while to see if we could help him?"

"Perhaps he did not want it that way," Spock said softly.

McCoy looked up from examining the body. "Without knowing the exact physical norm for the Akronians I can't be certain, but I'd guess he's been dead for at least three hours." His voice was heavy. "I think he probably killed himself just after I left him." He stood. "I'll call an orderly to take him to sickbay."

Kirk picked the knife up from the floor. "I overlooked this. I saw Zac had a knife and I forgot it. Kyle must have planned this right from the moment he realised he'd killed him."

"You could not have known he would do that."

"No, Spock? I understand how guilty he must have felt." He looked down at the body again. "Do you think it would be all right to bury him on Vulcan?" He rebelled against the idea of handing over Kyle's body to the authorities, to be clinically examined and then disposed of.

"The request will not be refused. My father will arrange it."

"Thanks, Spock. Well, I suppose there's nothing more we can do here." He sighed. "Get him ready for burial, please, Bones."

Once again McCoy waited for the orderlies to arrive. As he gathered up his medical kit, something shiny fell from it. It was

the ring. He picked it up, holding it against the light. Instead of deep blue, the stone had changed to red.

For a moment, McCoy stood undecided. Then he slipped it back on the dead alien's finger.

The door to cell 5B crashed open, startling the Jihad inside. His guts churned as two white-coated orderlies advanced on him, one grabbing his arm, the other unlocking the collar chain fixed to the wall. Half beside himself with fright, he was pushed out of the room, stumbling on legs weakened by lack of use along the dim corridor and up to the floor above. Without a word being spoken, he was taken to the showers, scrubbed clean and dressed in a new dark blue coverall, and then taken to a small white-walled room. The door slammed shut behind him, and he was left alone, in terror, his mind conjuring up all sorts of horrible images. So terrible were his thoughts that he failed to notice a section of the wall slide open.

"Hello, Vin," a soft voice said.

Vin's head jerked up, his eyes wide with fear. Devon stood in the room, a gaunt shadow of menace, a soft smile on his lips and the promise of hell in his dark-circled eyes.

Vin scrabbled against the wall, trying to bury himself into the hard stone. "No!" he moaned. "Please, no."

"Yes, Vin. Yes! Today is the day of your fate." Devon advanced on him, squatting beside him, and, reaching out, ran an almost gentle tentacle down the younger man's face to his neck, in a movement that simulated a caress.

"We have some time yet; about an hour. And then..." He let the sentence hang in the air.

"Why are you torturing me so? If you won't let me go, why don't you just do it?" Vin sobbed.

"I thought you understood. We wait as long as possible before we take blood... for our own reasons. As for torturing you... Yes, I suppose I am. Do you know what day it is today?" he asked conversationally. "Oh, that's stupid of me. After so long in that cell, you would have lost all time sense. Let me tell you, then. It is four months today that my K'Tzan was killed by your brother. Oh, he may not have done the actual killing, but by forcing Kyle to stay on that accursed Federation ship your brother sealed Kyle's fate. I have often wondered how Kyle died," he went on, almost dreamily. "A quick knife in the back? Or slowly, inevitably, as his blood lost its haemoglobin? Or was he given a reprieve by killing one of your people on board the ship, knowing that it would only be a reprieve. How would those Federation people treat him afterwards? As a criminal, locked in a cell as you were?"

"All those questions, Vin, going around and around in my mind, never letting up, invading my sleep until I waken cursing our ancestors, and myself... and you."

"I hate you!" Vin snarled.

"Ah, a spark of spirit. I like that. It will make things so

much more tantalising. Will your hatred be stronger than your fear and enable you to live through giving blood, the first Jihad to do so? We really need very little, you know."

But it was only a spark. Devon fell silent and remained so for some time, watching the young Jihad lying curled in a ball, his body shaking with soundless sobs. He almost felt sorry for him. Then he rose swiftly to his feet, having to concentrate to do so. In his preoccupation he had nearly left it too late. His mouth was shooting pain as his fangs began to descend.

"Not long now." He crossed the room, picking up the collar and chain that had been tossed in by the orderlies, and went back to Vin.

"Up you get!" he said cheerfully, and pulled him up. Vin stood, totally resigned now, even the instinct to struggle lost. The collar was fastened around his neck, the chain attached to a ring high on the wall.

"There. Safe and secure." Devon winced as a cramp hit him. Vin watched, uncaring, as the Akronian started to pant; his tentacles twitching, he uttered low throated growls as his face was transformed, becoming a mask, lips drawn back as the two fangs erupted, sharp and pure white.

Vin looked at them without any real interest. He had no hope left; fear, too, was completely gone. He was beyond fear; Devon had waited too long to obtain his full revenge. Only the mildest of curiosity remained in Vin's mind. In an unreal sort of way he could even sympathise with the Akronian's hatred; during the weeks when he had waited for death at Devon's fangs he had had plenty of time to think and very little to think about except the reason for his owner's attitude.

Devon approached. His tentacles wrapped around Vin's wrists, bracing for a struggle that did not come. He bent forward, his fangs piercing Vin's neck. The suction was not pleasant... but, to Vin's surprise, neither was it painful. After a few moments Devon straightened, and Vin saw the surprise on his face as he realised that his victim still lived.

Slowly, Devon reached up and untied the chain.

"Why? I want to know - after all that, why didn't you kill me?" Vin demanded. Then he looked at Devon bitterly. "You never intended to kill me! This was revenge for what my brother did."

"Oh, I meant to kill you," Devon replied. "Make no mistake. I debated leaving you at the breeding centre - you are, after all, an excellent physical specimen. But my K'Tzan is dead now for lack of Jihad blood - the alien blood is useless to us. It seemed just that you, the brother of the Jihad who was responsible for Kyle's death, should die in your brother's place. But it seems that I was right, although I thought I was merely taunting you - you have lived through giving blood, the first Jihad to do so.

"You are legally my property - no-one else will touch you. But we must discover why you lived when all other Jehads have died. You may, perhaps, wish that you had died before our doctors have finished examining you!"

"Whatever they do will be worth it!" Vin exclaimed. "For it

might mean hope for my people - hope that no more of us need die to provide you and your kind with life!"

"I should, I suppose, be pleased," Devon said quietly. "Few of us actually enjoy killing. But the discovery is too late for Kyle, the one person who actively hated having to take life."

He left Vin with the doctors and then went to wash and change. Later, he made his way to the space station. The Shuvra was waiting for him, but Kyle would not be there; instead, his younger brother would be co-Captain with Emon.

Devon felt empty and terribly lonely. He would never have said so openly, but inwardly, he envied all the dead Jehads.

The long day on Vulcan drew to a close, the sun casting long shadows on the warm earth. On a lonely piece of land, the last rays lit up a simple slab of black polished stone which covered a grave, until it took on the sun's rays.

The colour of blood. The colour of life - and death.

