

Scotpress

FALLEN ANGEL

by

LYN VIVIERS

a
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fanzine

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A ScoTpress publication

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FALLEN ANGEL

PROLOGUE:

It lay in terror, small body tightly curled beneath the rest cot. Tiny fists were thrust into its mouth, muffling the whimpers that threatened to escape and reveal its presence. Harsh, ugly sounds bombarded its ears - whining energy beams and the screams of pain, panic and death, shrill over the harsh, guttural shouts of the attackers. They were in this room now. A booted foot stood close, black material polished to a sheen. It squeezed its eyes closed and listened, hardly daring to breathe. It heard a barked question and one of its own shouted back in defiance; a bravado that ended with a slap of flesh on flesh and the rasping slither of drawn steel. The choked cry ended in a rattle. A body thudded to the floor. Someone screamed in rage. They were slaughtered. Tears leaked from its eyes, but it remained quiet, obeying the whispered command when it had been hidden there.

They were ransacking the room. Opening containers. Smashing and destroying. Finally, they left, but it stayed where it was, cold and hungry and terribly cramped in the narrow space. It was too terrified to move in case they came back. Finally it heard the faint drone of surface craft leaving, and with a wildly fluttering heart, it cautiously peered out. The memory would remain into adulthood. The rest room was in a shambles. Broken furniture littered the floor, along with personal possessions and tape spools. Black marks pocked the walls, the deep gashes scoured into the fibres by energy beams. Worst of all were the bodies, and the sickly sweet smell of blood.

It crawled out, hesitantly approaching one body, reaching out to shake a slender shoulder. The eyes remained closed, lips pulled back in a surprised snarl of pain and anger. There was no movement. It went to each one, hoping in vain that someone would answer it.

There was no life.

With a choked wail, it ran from the room into the main tunnel of the burrow, encountering more gruesome sights. The food provider lay in a sprawl, its own cleaving knife in its back. Another lay as if in sleep, but for the gaping stomach wound.

It stumbled on in a daze, passing the nursery. Quickly it averted its eyes from its lifeless foster siblings, but not before it had seen a parent protectively hugging an infant in death. A sword impaled them together.

It went down to the next level where the laboratories were. The thick, insulated door had been blasted off its hinges. Slowly it walked inside, stepping carefully over pools of chemicals and broken bottles. It headed toward the inner room. It stopped at the door, eyes picking out the massive container at the end of the room. That bore the marks of forced opening, the lid lying at a crazy angle, held by one bolt. It lifted its eyes. Those who had protected the secret opening mechanism had paid with their lives. They had been savagely tortured and then slaughtered.

Ten bodies were strung upside down from the overhead vent pipes, some with sightless eyes still wide with shock. Burn marks

blackened their temples. Hands were tied and swollen, with fingers clawed in rigor. Their throats had been slashed. Its parent hung amongst them.

It raced forward, begging the parent to answer it. It reached up on tiptoes but couldn't reach the hands. It cried out and pleaded, and then it gathered itself and jumped, grasping the swaying body, clinging to it. It climbed up the corpse, wrenching a knife from the parent's belt. It hacked at the fibres suspending it until they parted, spilling them both to the floor.

It tried to revive the parent, fetching water, dribbling it into the slack mouth. It bandaged the gaping throat with strips torn from its own tunic, as if once covered, all would be well and life would return. Kneeling next to the body it wiped the cold face, smoothing the hair, and then finally, it flung itself across the corpse, weeping bitterly, as it realised nothing would help. It was the only one left alive in the burrow, and it could not understand why this terrible nightmare had happened. A fierce hatred for this hostile environment engulfed its being. Finally, exhausted, it curled down next to the parent and slept.

* * * * *

The ten scout craft dropped from the belly of the space cruiser, idling in a holding pattern. Once all were launched, they formed pack formation and headed towards the orange planet, entering the turbulent atmosphere with ease, their sharp lines cutting through the jostling currents without difficulty. They swooped down through the thick cloud into a dismal morning light, heading on a course toward a distant group of hills.

The leader signalled them to lower altitude, and the silver craft streaked down an old dry water course, the booming aftershocks resounding against the ravine walls. The leader switched on to the burrow frequency, frowning at the lack of response. It notified the carrier, and then urged the pack on. They screamed upward, shooting over a jumbled rock formation and over a plateau. A solitary guidance beacon stuttered weakly, and the pack throttled back, gliding on minimum power over the tops of sparsely wooded trees. The compound lay beneath them, half hidden in a depression. The only surface buildings to be seen were the guidance generator sheds, which should have activated the landing beacons at their approach.

They remained dead.

Cautiously the pack circled overhead, and then with retracted wings, they landed at the leader's signal. The group climbed warily from the scout ships, drawing together to shield each other.

Something was wrong. No-one had emerged from the burrow, and on closer inspection, they saw that the sheds were black and twisted from fire. They approached the burrow's entrance hatch, finding it open and unguarded, with an ominous smell drifting out. Dropping down the hatch, they found the first body. Eyes open and staring, black and encrusted blood covered the front of its tunic.

Automatically alerted, razor-sharp swords hissed from the scabbards, fingers poised on the buttons that would transfer them into deadly cutting weapons of energy. The group moved from tunnel to tunnel, room to room, their faces changed from horror to grim anger. Hardened, they went down to the next level, and in the laboratory, they found the youngling; dirty, starving and

grief-stricken, it stared at the pack in disbelief, and then ran to the leader, melting into the being's arms.

PART 1

He had shown inexcusably poor judgement in being talked into coming here. He sighed. It was Jim's birthday.

Spock sat squashed between Kirk and McCoy in the cramped booth, trying stoically to keep the look of distaste off his features. He wished his hearing wasn't so acute, and that he could turn off the grating dissonances of the music and drawn out peals of drunken laughter and raucous voices by finding the right switch.

The spaceport bar was filled to capacity. The clientele were mostly crewmen off the cargo freighters, with a sprinkling of off-duty personnel. The freighter crewmen were all from the same mould - big men, tough and hard off-duty drinkers, who gave no consideration to genteel talk or manners. One might automatically assume they were all stone deaf due to the raucous level they spoke in. These were *not* the cream of Starfleet, but perhaps they could be sympathised with. Their jobs were hard and often dangerous, ferrying ores and other precious minerals from isolated planets on the galaxy rim. Their carriers were lumbering giants with little manoeuvrability and not much weaponry; prizes asking for the taking by pirates. Long months in space played havoc with their nerves, causing irritability and sometimes fatal fights. A spaceport was the ideal outlet for these emotions.

The M.P.s would be very busy tonight.

"Is anything wrong, Mr. Spock?" McCoy was watching him intently.

"Wrong, Dr. McCoy?" A number of items sprang to mind.

"You haven't touched your drink."

The Doctor's eyes sparkled with mischief. Spock did not drink. He knew that any celebration the pristine Vulcan was forced to participate in only warranted the merest distasteful wetting of his lips.

Spock gave an inward sigh, eyeing the purple drink McCoy had ordered for him with suspicion. He took a cautious sip. The effect was immediate. The liquid blazed a trail down his throat, exploding in his stomach. His breath caught, bringing tears to his eyes and he choked, gasping for air.

Kirk slapped him on the back, grinning.

"They *do* call it a Super Nova. Can you breathe?"

Spock nodded, not trusting his voice, forcing his breathing back to a level of normality.

McCoy's grin was positively wicked, and then he checked his wrist chronometer.

"We had better move. Our table at the club is reserved for 20.00 hours sharp." He downed his drink in one swallow, watched in

fascination by the Science Officer.

A loud commotion at the entrance drew everyone's attention. Three more freighter men barged in, all sporting an injury of some kind, and looking angry. They went straight to the bar, shouldering for space, and ordered drinks in loud voices.

"They came from nowhere," one told a companion, "or else the sensors weren't working again. There was no warning. They just came straight at us and opened fire. The Number Two was killed outright, but nobody's crying about that. He was a bastard."

"Who were they? Orions?"

The man shrugged. "Couldn't tell, but I doubt it. The Orions don't operate in this sector, or so Starfleet keeps on insisting."

"Klingons then," a new voice suggested. "They are always sneaking into Federation space right under Starfleet's nose."

Again the man shrugged. "The computer couldn't I.D. them. Nifty craft. Like blasted insects. They were all over the place, and packed a hell of a punch, and then they pulled out, leaving us full of holes, with burst pipes and injured. We had to radio for a tug to fetch us, and now we'll be stuck here until they fix the old girl, and the old man will miss his next contract. He's mad enough to chew neutronium. He's going to demand compensation and more protection from Starfleet. That's what they are here for, isn't it?"

Several voices muttered agreement.

"Gentlemen, I think we should leave," McCoy suggested, eyeing the agitated group.

"Agreed," Kirk said.

They didn't make it.

"Hey, Joe. Ask those Starfleet types where they were when you got hit."

The room fell silent as all eyes turned to Kirk's party.

"That's a good idea."

The big spacer aggressively blocked their path.

"Let's all hear where you were!"

"What was your exact position?" Spock enquired politely, aware of McCoy's elbow suddenly digging him in the ribs.

The spacer gaped at him, and then flushed with anger. "Are you trying to be funny, Vulcan?"

Spock was unruffled. "Sir, Vulcans do not joke. I am endeavouring to determine your position in relation to ours when you were attacked."

"That is not what the man meant, Mr. Spock." Kirk winced. "Please stand aside and let us pass."

"Not on your life," the man growled, one hand grabbing at Kirk's arm, pulling him off balance.

Kirk's own arm flailed wildly, and unfortunately connected with the spacer. The room turned deathly quiet, the outcome inevitable.

"The Captain's in trouble," a familiar Russian voice announced in that eye of calm, and the fight was on.

As brawls go, it didn't last very long, but to those chins connecting with knuckles, it seemed forever. It turned into a free-for-all, crew ganging up on crew, as old grudges resurfaced with Starfleet mangled in the middle.

What a birthday, Kirk thought, then ducked as a chair leg whistled past him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw McCoy deck a man, and he grinned. Bones could fight dirty when he had to. Then whistles were blowing frantically as a squad of M.P.s rushed in, wrestling with the fighting men and hauling them out to the lockup wagons in twos and threes.

Two of them bore down on Kirk, slapping him in stasis cuffs.

"We didn't start it," he protested, wincing as the cuffs tightened with his struggles.

"Sorry, Captain. You were involved and in accordance with Fleet regulations, we have the right to detain you. You can give your statement to the charge officer tomorrow morning."

Blast regulations. Kirk scowled as he was escorted to the waiting wagon and bundled inside. Sirens wailing, the vehicles glided off to the port detention centre. The violators were herded inside and formally booked for disturbing the peace. Kirk chafed at the indignity of having his fingerprints taken as well as a voice pattern identification. At last they were herded down to the cell levels, and Kirk and his party were put into one cell, the shock screen switched on behind them.

"Not bad," Kirk said mildly, glancing around the cell. The walls were white and smooth. Four bunks with thin, blue blankets and the minimum of fixtures furnished the cell. The light would be left on - as per regulations.

He glanced at Spock who appeared to be in a mild state of shock. "That's going to be quite a shiner, Spock." He chuckled.

"What's so funny?" McCoy snapped.

"The crew is going to love this! Here I bawl them out for fighting on shore leave, but this time I find not only myself, but my senior officers, including Spock, in the slammer for doing just that!"

"It's all his fault anyway," McCoy sniffed.

Spock snapped out of his comatose state. "Mine, Dr. McCoy? I fail to see how the blame can be attached to me."

"Oh no? Just *who* was the one who had to be clever? 'What was your exact position?'" McCoy mimicked.

Kirk watched the verbal assault. *I am going to kill them*, he

decided.

"I logically interpreted the question..."

"Logic, smogic! It doesn't mean a damn thing to those roughnecks," McCoy snorted. Spock opened his mouth to protest, but Kirk cut him off.

"If you two don't mind! We have been in one fight already. Don't start another. Right now all I want is some sleep - so stop it!"

His tone warranted no arguments. They all meekly lay down for the night.

{In Sector 7, Space Station K-5 was under attack.}

They were released the following morning, much to the amusement of the station commander. He sauntered over to the charge officer's desk while they were collecting their personal possessions.

"Good morning, Jim. Did you sleep well?"

Kirk spun around in surprise. "Randall Todd! When were you reassigned? The last time I saw you, you wanted a post on Earth."

"No such luck." He shook hands, the laughter barely contained at their ruffled state. "Really, Jim. I thought you had given up on this sort of behaviour a long time ago."

Kirk winced. "The wrong place at the wrong time," he said flippantly. "I suppose the Enterprise has been notified?"

"Of course. Regulations, you know. Where are you off to now?"

"Border patrol, and the usual postman delivery service. We're stopping off at Arda to drop off medical supplies."

Todd frowned. "That area is unsettled. Word has reached us of pirate raids, though much of it is garbled. Of course it could be our old neighbours up to their usual disruptive tricks. I won't keep you any longer. Have a good trip."

Murmuring their thanks, they left the Detention Centre, taking the walkway to the main terminal complex and the transporters.

"I wonder who those raiders are," McCoy mused. "Surely the Klingons wouldn't try to violate the Organian Peace Treaty?"

"I wouldn't put it past those Cossacks!" Chekov sniffed.

"Be tolerant, Ensign," Kirk admonished him. "Here's our station. Chekov, go ask the controller to alert the Enterprise. I badly need a shower."

* * * * *

His years of service aboard the U.S.S. Enterprise had taught Transporter Chief John Kyle control, especially where Captain Kirk was concerned. If he thought there was something amiss in the appearance of his commanding officer, he didn't voice it or allow it to show. He faced Kirk with a poker straight face.

"Good morning, sir." His eyes fell on Spock, and a twitch nearly escaped. "Mr. Spock." The Vulcan merely nodded, following Kirk out.

Kyle notified transporter central, resetting the dials to bring the next group in. His control shattered.

"It is not that funny," Chekov protested indignantly through swollen lips, "and besides, it was in the line of duty!"

"Well, you certainly lost," Kyle chuckled.

"Actually, they look worse than we do," Chekov answered smugly, exiting with all the injured dignity he could muster, his group at his back.

"I bet they do!" Kyle yelled after them.

{In the Orion Belt a pirate ship was under attack.}

With relief, Kirk stepped into the privacy of his quarters, away from the curious eyes that had followed their passage to deck five. He threw his uniform into the recycle unit, and stepped into the sonic shower. Turning the setting up to maximum, he sighed with relief as his skin was blasted clean. It felt good, the clean uniform better; and his swollen cheek worse. McCoy had ordered them all to sickbay for patching up and, checking his chronometer, he made his way down to level seven, meeting Spock on the way.

They walked into McCoy's domain to find the Doctor in the unsympathetic administering clutches of his Head Nurse, her mouth drawn tight in disapproval.

"Careful, Chris. That hurt!" McCoy exclaimed.

She glared at him, breaking the icy silence. "I am disappointed in you, Dr. McCoy. How could you involve yourself in something as common as a bar-room brawl? What sort of impression do you think this will make on the lower ranks? You, a senior officer!"

McCoy smirked. "Oh? I surprise and disappoint you, do I? I hate to disillusion you, Christine, but turn and take a good look behind you."

She did so, eyes narrowing at the abashed Kirk, and then they widened as Spock fell under her laser gaze. He lifted an enquiring eyebrow. Wordlessly, she handed the Vulcan something to ease his rainbow eye, attended to Kirk's cheek, then stalked off into the dispensary, back stiff with disapproval.

"She's angry with us," Kirk remarked mildly.

"Hmph. You won't have to work with her," McCoy grouched. "I'm the one who will be getting all the frost."

Kirk laughed. "You have my sympathy, Bones. Duty calls, Spock. Neutral Zone, here we come."

* * * * *

Chekov had obviously told the whole sad story to the bridge crew. Surreptitious glances and a false hush greeted them as they

stepped onto the bridge. Kirk ruthlessly suppressed the giggle working up his throat.

"I have the con, Mr. Sulu."

"Yes, sir." The Oriental slid out of the centre seat, taking his own at the helm.

"Status?" Kirk enquired of the Communications Officer.

"All crew present, sir. We are ready for departure." Uhura grinned at him. They were the last crew to be beamed aboard.

Kirk flushed. "Thank you, Lieutenant. Notify Spaceport Central of our immediate departure. Mr. Sulu, take us out of orbit."

"Aye, sir."

"Heading, Captain?" Chekov asked.

"Course bearing 70/30/45. The Neutral Zone, Mr. Chekov. Ahead warp factor five." Kirk leaned back in his chair, listening to the familiar sounds of his ship. Three days to get to the Neutral Zone, and then a four-week patrol. He noted the idea of having a few surprise emergency drills, and then he started skimming through and signing a stack of reports some thoughtful yeoman had placed at his side.

* * * * *

"You're pushing, Spock."

The Vulcan swivelled in his chair to face McCoy. "Pushing, Doctor?"

"I admit I'm only a simple country doctor, but I thought the rating on the last drill was pretty good." He leaned against the science console, arms folded.

"'Pretty good' is not satisfactory, Dr. McCoy. The slightest drop in the efficiency gradient could place the ship in jeopardy."

"I agree, but you are tiring the crew, and the state of their minds is my concern. A tired crew in this part of space is not healthy. Ease up a bit."

Spock stared expressionlessly. "Very well, Doctor. You are, of course, correct."

"I am? You agree just like that?" McCoy was suspicious.

"Yes, Doctor." He sat in thought for a while, and McCoy didn't like the light behind his eyes.

"What are you plotting, Spock?"

"It appears, Doctor, that the medical unit is usually absent from battle drills. I think perhaps it would be wise if they had a practice drill. If you would brief them, I will arrange for the 'injured' to place themselves. The efficiency of the paramedics and medical staff under battle conditions is extremely important."

"You're joking!"

"Doctor, if you familiarise yourself with Starfleet regulations, you will recall that section 13 of drill emergencies, paragraph 5, section 2 B states that, and I quote - "

"Cut it out, Spock! I get the idea!" McCoy glared at him, and then abruptly left the bridge.

"You were a bit hard on Bones, Spock," Kirk protested, although he was grinning. "I don't recall such a regulation."

"It exists, Captain."

"I believe you," Kirk sighed. "I'll be in my cabin if you need me. You have the con."

"Affirmative, sir."

{Across the Neutral Zone in Klingon space a warbird exploded.}

* * * * *

Jangling klaxons woke Kirk with a jolt.

"Red alert. This is not a drill. Repeat, this is not a drill."

He was already pulling on his uniform, bounding across the cabin to the comm. viewer. "Bridge. Mr. Spock, report."

The Vulcan's calm face filled the screen, the red lighting of emergency status throwing him into demonic shadow.

"Long range scanners have identified a group of vessels approaching the border zone on our heading. Distance is five hundred thousand kilometres and closing."

"I'll be right up." He raced for the turbolift and it shot up at his command, expelling him into a scene of battle readiness. Spock relinquished the command seat.

"Status?"

"They are still on the same heading, Captain. Visual contact in one point six minutes. Sensors indicate a Klingon bird of prey and five smaller craft of unknown origin. They are now in Federation space."

"Any form of communications, Uhura?"

"Negative, sir."

"Visual contact, sir," Sulu called out.

"Forward viewer, Mr. Sulu. Full magnification."

The five vessels the Klingon ship was pursuing were small and streamlined, resembling orbit to ground fighters. Sleek, fast and manoeuvrable, they evaded the tracer fire with ease, showing superb piloting. Again the Klingons fired and missed.

"He can't use torpedoes. They're too fast," Chekov murmured.

"Uhura, open a channel," Kirk ordered, waiting calmly for her affirmative nod.

"U.S.S. Enterprise to Klingon warbird and small craft. You have crossed into Federation space. State the nature of your emergency."

They were ignored.

"Spock, what is her registration code?"

"It is the Firebird, last commanded by Commander Kroth."

Kirk tried again. "Commander Kroth of Firebird. I must insist that you state the nature of your violation. Perhaps we can be of some assistance."

"You have the audacity to talk of violations, Kirk, after three of my ships have been destroyed in Klingon territory. I will destroy them and then return to continue our conversation in the language we Klingons understand!"

Uhura listened, turning up the communication screens and then she shrugged. "He has broken communications, sir."

"Mr. Sulu, follow them but keep out of phaser range. Mr. Scott, keep those shields locked tight."

"Three craft have veered off," Spock warned. "The remaining two have accelerated. Fascinating. I have never encountered such power in craft of that size."

"What are they up to?"

"A joint attack, Captain. They have formed a wedge from behind."

"Why hasn't Kroth seen it?"

"He has, Jim."

They watched in sick fascination as the Klingon tried to shake them off, but it was too late. The five craft stuck to the ship, seemingly anticipating each desperate move, and then they tired of playing and fired simultaneously. Raw blue beams hit the warbird side on, engulfing the ship in seconds. She staggered under the impact, slewing crazily while the craft veered off. Kirk could almost hear her death agony, and then she blew up, raining burning debris in all directions.

The alien vessels hovered, watching their kill, and then they regrouped in formation, heading straight for the Enterprise. Kirk tensed to order phaser fire, and then the whole bridge complement instinctively ducked as they veered off past the viewscreen at the last minute, accelerating into the black void.

"Sulu, get a fix and follow them," Kirk rapped.

The helmsman frowned at his board, and then looked at Kirk helplessly. "There is no trail to follow, sir. They've disappeared."

Kirk swung around to the science station where Spock wore as

near an amazed expression as he permitted himself.

"Nothing, Captain. The scanners and sensors register clear."

"What kind of propulsion unit is that?" Chekov whispered in awe. "They had to be travelling at over warp eight!"

"Apparently a very sophisticated one," Kirk answered grimly, "and whoever they are, they are not friendly. Spock, did the computer come up with any clue?"

"Negative, sir. There are no identification codes."

He hadn't expected any. "Mr. Chekov, initiate a search pattern. Long range sensor sweeps on full power. They may not be able to maintain that speed."

He settled back in his chair, aware of the turbolift doors opening and the familiar presence settling behind the bridge rails.

"Is the excitement over?"

"For the moment, Doctor."

McCoy grunted. "Fancy a Klingon warbird being blown to pieces by such small fry."

"Don't underestimate the size, Bones. It's the punch that counts."

"Yes, but it still seems absurd. Any idea who they were?"

Kirk shook his head, eyes never leaving the viewscreen. "Not yet."

McCoy looked at him quizzically. "You think they'll be back?"

Kirk glanced at him. "Don't you?"

"I was afraid you'd say that. I'll be in sickbay - just in case." McCoy sighed.

The Enterprise moved in an intricate pattern, combing the immediate area of star-studded blackness, criss-crossing and backtracking over her own path. They found nothing.

"Mr. Sulu," Kirk said eventually, "put us back on our original course but keep the ship on yellow alert. Mr. Spock, you have the con. I'll be in my cabin."

* * * * *

The Enterprise moved on toward the colony planet of Arda, with Kirk spending most of his time on the bridge, but the only ship they encountered was the U.S.S. Potemkin, on her way to her assigned sector. The two Captains passed information, and Kirk was troubled to hear that both Romulan and Klingon empires were sending threatening messages to the Federation of isolated attacks on their free trading corridors.

On the third day they established orbit around Arda.

"Standard orbit at twenty thousand perigee, Captain," Sulu

informed him.

"Maintain. Lt. Uhura, contact the base settlement of Lidda."

"Aye, sir." She adjusted her headset, touching a lighted button on the console before her. One of the comm. screens flashed to life. "U.S.S. Enterprise to Lidda."

The answer was instantaneous. "Hello, Starfleet. We wondered when you would arrive."

Uhura smiled at the cheerful voice. "Captain Kirk on the line," she informed the voice, nodding at Kirk. He punched into the comm. system from his chair console.

"This is Captain Kirk. We have your supplies, Lidda. How soon can we beam down?"

"As soon as you wish. Stand by for the transporter co-ordinates."

"Let's go then." Kirk was on his feet. "Uhura, have Dr. McCoy meet us in the main transporter room and relay the co-ordinates. Oh, and Mr. Scott has the con. Notify him, please."

* * * * *

The transporter beam released them, and, true to form, McCoy did a quick check to assure himself that he was still in one piece, and only then did he glance around appreciatively.

"Very nice. This reminds me of my boyhood surroundings."

The settlement was in a vast valley, encircled by towering mountains of varying deep-hued colours. Long grass stretched across the plain towards carefully cultivated fields and domed capsules used for hydroponics. The sun was warm and the air alive with the song of brightly plumed birds. The settlement of Lidda was not very big, leaning towards an old world charm, the high technology of this century blending into the natural environment. The structures were hand built; simple log and brick dwellings, the roofs thatched in the ancient way. The street on which they materialised was dirt-packed.

"Home on the range, Bones," Kirk teased, noticing a paddock.

"I hate horses," the Doctor drawled, continuing almost at once, "here comes our welcoming party."

A group of men hurried towards them, all dressed in casual jeans. The man striding out front was large, with a shock of silver hair atop a craggy face.

"Captain Kirk? Welcome to Lidda. I am Professor Finch, leader of this expedition. This is Dr. Mason, Laurance Hartly and Jason Warrington." His grip was firm and the smile warm. "We were expecting you a bit earlier than this."

"We were unfortunately delayed on the way. Dr. McCoy will supervise the beamdown of medical supplies."

"You will stay for a while?" Finch asked. "We don't often get visitors out here."

"A day or two," Kirk agreed. "My crew could do with some shore leave other than what starbases provide."

* * * * *

Kirk wandered through a shaded grove of trees. Finch had delivered his report for Starfleet, had shown Kirk around, and now he found himself without anything to do while McCoy finished invoicing the medical supplies with Dr. Morgan. He had allowed his crew down in groups to sample the planet's tranquil atmosphere. Tomorrow they would be on their way again.

A familiar shape was hunkered down beside a river pool, and Kirk smiled. No doubt his Science Officer had found something new to hold his attention.

"What have you got there, Spock?" He joined him on his haunches.

"A common garden snail, Captain. It appears to have adapted extremely well to its new environment, although I would..." The Vulcan broke off, lifting his head to the canopy above them.

"What is it, Spock?"

"I do not know. I thought I saw something metallic reflected above the trees."

Kirk's communicator beeped.

"Yes, Mr. Scott?"

"Captain! There's a... ships... cannot lower sh..." Harsh static whined from the grid.

"Transmission is being jammed, Jim." Spock was already running, Kirk on his heels. They burst out of the grove. Beneath them the settlement was calm and peaceful. A figure waved at them. It was Lt. Baillie.

"Captain," Spock said urgently, pointing towards the mountains.

They came in low, skimming over the peaks, the sun glinting off the wide wing spans. Sleek and deadly, the flying formation perfect, the pack swept over Lidda, black shadows engulfing the buildings. Kirk saw Baillie standing alone in the middle of the road, shocked into stillness, but he was already rushing down towards him. An alarm wailed and people dashed out into the street, Starfleet and scientists together, watching the thirty odd ships as they banked off to the east.

"Get out! Get out of there!" It was Kirk's own voice screaming.

The ships turned, breaking into pairs, and now he heard them, the hair lifting on his neck at the screaming pitch those engines reached as they flew in for the attack. The colonists turned and scattered, urged on by the crewmen, desperately seeking shelter.

"The grove," Finch yelled. "Make for the grove!"

"McCoy! Where is Dr. McCoy?" Kirk shouted at Baillie as he reached them.

Kirk was already flying in the indicated direction almost before the man pointed towards the paddocks.

Blue energy erupted as the fighters opened fire, raking the crude buildings, torching them in seconds. The ground shook with the shock boom as they flew past, clearing the way for the second run. Kirk continued to sprint for the paddocks, the ground sparking at his heels. The earth buckled beneath him, tumbling him like a rag doll and he fell - fell hard, the breath knocked out of him. Dimly he heard the shocking detonation as the laboratory blew up, chemicals igniting and spewing out a pall of black smoke. A hand dragged him to his feet, half carrying him to the pathetic shelter of a water trough. His senses recoiled with the noise as the fighters passed over again and again, and all he could do was lie in the dirt, arms covering his head, and worry himself sick as he listened to the cries of those hit, his thoughts full of fear for the Enterprise's fate.

Worse was the aftermath. The deadly silence chewed at his bones. Wordlessly, Kirk and Spock climbed to their feet. The air was thick and oppressive. There were no fires burning - there was nothing left to burn. The buildings had been reduced to ashes.

"My God!" McCoy stumbled out of the smoke, dirty, uniform torn. His face was a mask of horror.

"Jim..."

Kirk shook his head, reaching for his communicator, the dread clawing at him. What if there was no answer?

"Kirk to Enterprise. Scotty!"

"Thank the lord! Captain, are you all right? I tried to warn you, but they attacked so fast - and blocked our transmission."

"Mr. Scott, your report will have to wait. Are the transporters operative?"

"Yes, sir. I think so."

"Start beaming down emergency supplies and personnel. Lidda has been destroyed - completely. Use these co-ordinates."

"It's being done. How many - survivors?"

"We don't know yet. Kirk out." He glanced at McCoy and Spock. "Let's go."

* * * * *

Kirk poured himself another drink, and then slumped into a chair, worn out and near to dropping. It had taken the relief ship forty eight hours at top warp speed to reach Arda from the nearest base. The Hobhouse personnel had now taken over, setting up emergency tents and facilities, and had had the injured and dead transferred from the Enterprise.

Kirk squeezed his eyes shut. Thirty out of the seventy five colonists dead, and five of his own crew, plus ten badly injured. Why? That was what he refused to understand. Who were these attacking aliens, and why were they bent on destruction? Images of the scene haunted him. There were a few children on Lidda, and the

stricken face of one little boy, as his mother's lifeless body had been carried away, ate at him. Young Laurance Hartly had also been amongst the fatalities. And his own crew; that cut deeper to home. What could you say in the cold, official message that would reach their kin? In the end, they were only empty words from a stranger who informed them that they would never see their sons and daughters again. In the line of duty. Starfleet was shocked, of course, but had as yet no idea of where to start pursuing these swift phantom forces. 'Keep us informed.' Yeah, sure.

His door chimed, admitting McCoy. He looked as exhausted as Kirk felt. He dropped into a chair opposite the Captain.

"They're crazy."

"What?"

"After what happened, the colonists are staying, even though they will have to start from scratch."

"It's what pioneering is all about, Bones. These people are of a hard mettle. They won't give up, no matter what. It's their home now."

"I guess. How are the repairs going?"

Kirk drained his glass. "Scotty has given the green light. For some reason, the ship wasn't their target. She suffered minimal damage. All fire power was concentrated on the surface, with a few fighters up here to keep the Enterprise busy and away from Lidda."

"Has Mr. Spock come up with anything yet?"

"No."

A lopsided grin touched McCoy's lips. "That must infuriate him. What now, Jim?"

Kirk got to his feet and poured himself another drink. "You want one?"

McCoy shook his head.

"What happens now, Bones, is that we go hunting. Starfleet wants answers, and have put us to finding them. We are going to turn this sector inside out."

"Like looking for a needle in a haystack," McCoy grumbled.

"Aptly put. Here's to that needle."

* * * * *

The Enterprise pulled out the following ship's morning. Kirk kept her on continual yellow alert, with her sensors on full sweep. The days went past slowly, as each planet, asteroid and piece of space junk was investigated. On the tenth day, in a section of desolate space, Spock spoke quietly from the science console.

"We are being shadowed."

Kirk was at his station in two strides. "How long?"

"A mere ten minutes, sir. I was not at first certain. Now I am. There, that dark speck on the scanner. He fades and then reappears."

"Only one ship?"

"Affirmative."

Kirk looked thoughtful. "Drop to warp two, Mr. Sulu. Let's see if we can entice him closer." He went to his comm. link on the command chair. "Mr. Scott."

"Here, Captain."

"Scotty, I want you to be ready to deliver all that she's got, when I give the word, and stand by on the transporters. We've sighted one of those ships and if we are lucky, we'll be beaming a guest aboard."

There was a slight, incredulous pause. Indeed, the whole bridge was staring at him. Eventually Scott said, "Aye, sir, but the timing will have to be precise. The tractor beam could break that ship apart."

"This one is not going to get away, Mr. Scott," Kirk said softly.

McCoy protested. "Jim, you can't be serious!"

"I am deadly serious, Bones. Uhura, send out a distress call, and make it look good."

"Engine trouble?"

"That'll do. A sitting target for him which I hope he will investigate. Mr. Sulu, go to warp one."

Uhura's hands flew over her board. She was smiling to herself.

"The alien craft is slowing to our speed," Spock said.

"Stand by on phasers, Mr. Chekov. Cripple him, and don't you dare miss!"

"No chance, sir!"

"He is coming closer."

"Blank out the port side of the ship," Kirk ordered.

They waited tensely, and then, "Visual contact, sir," Sulu called out.

The silver craft sailed towards them, but cautiously.

"Closer. A little closer," Kirk begged. "Now, Mr. Scott! Full power. Go, Sulu!"

The Enterprise shot forward, and Chekov outdid himself. The cross-hairs aligned, and he fired, aiming for what he hoped were the steering vanes. The alien craft shuddered, but that did not stop it. It corkscrewed, letting off a volley of its own, and the game of cat and mouse began. Sulu's hands danced grimly as he kept the

starship on its tail.

"This is ridiculous," McCoy muttered. "We should have had him ten times over."

"I told you before, it's not the size that counts. Stand by tractor beam. Scotty, stand by in the transporter room. Keep him in limbo until security arrives. Lt. Uhura, send down a detail, phasers on full stun."

Chekov made another hit.

"Alien craft is slowing," Spock reported.

Uhura suddenly stiffened. "He is transmitting, Captain!"

"Let's make this fast before his pals arrive. Increase speed, Sulu." The sweat trickled down his back. The seconds crawled past.

"Tractor beam range, sir," an ensign called out from his station.

"Scotty, are you locked on to the transmission source?"

"Aye, sir. We're all set."

"Shoot the beam," Kirk ordered.

The fighter staggered.

"Now, Scotty! Security, stand by."

He was running for the lift before the sentence died, Spock and McCoy at his heels. The turbolift shot down on emergency speed, and he shouldered out between the doors before they fully opened, racing towards the transporter room. He heard Sulu's voice over the speakers. The craft had broken up.

Scott grinned at his anxious face. "We've got him."

Kirk heaved a sigh of relief, then turned to Security Chief Damino. "Cover the transporter. Bring him in, Scotty."

The engineer worked the console, the pitch intensifying. Eyes narrowed, Kirk watched the golden tube of sparkles appear, with a darker shape forming within. Humanoid. The sparkles faded, and his eyes clashed with two shining green lanterns, and then there was a sharp crack as the transporter room flared with blue light, the concussion forcing him to his knees. Someone cried out sharply, and the whine of a phaser and thump of a falling body sounded simultaneously. Kirk smelt the acridness of smouldering circuits, as shocking as smelling salts, jarring the fog from his brain. In a glance he saw Spock standing with an emergency extinguisher, and Scott sitting on the floor, his left sleeve smoking, with McCoy next to him. The transporter console was a lump of melted slag.

"What happened?" he asked incredulously.

"I'll tell you what has happened!" McCoy growled. "We have brought a volatile package aboard." He hastily cut away Scott's sleeve. "Hold still, Mr. Scott."

Damino toed the slumped form. "He's out cold, Captain."

Kirk thumbed the comm. unit. "Mr. Sulu, get us out of the area, and make it fast. Spock, let's see what we have got."

The alien was sprawled face down over the lip of the platform, one tapering hand hanging limp, six fingers curled in unconsciousness. Kirk saw a long, copper tail twined around one leg. It started at the base of the spine, free from the restraints of clothing through a slit in the black jumpsuit.

They rolled the alien over.

Long, unbound hair, the same colour as the tail, and held back by a headband with a blue stone, framed a face that was almost beautiful in its perfection. Pale skin covered the finely chiselled features and high cheekbones. Silken eyebrows feathered out at the points, sweeping up into the hairline, and Kirk knew that brilliant green eyes lay beneath the closed lids. The plain, black jumpsuit was unadorned, the only accessory a wide, silver belt around the hips, and a sword scabbard. Kirk drew out the long, tempered blade, careful not to touch the stud set in the hilt.

"Parker, take this down the the labs for analysis. Don't touch that button."

The security man took it gingerly, still awed by what he had seen.

"So this is what's been beating the stuffing out of everybody. Looks helpless now."

"Don't bet on it, Bones. How is Scotty?"

"Superficial burns, but they smart. You taking our friend to the brig?"

"It's the safest place. Damino, put him in a high security cell." He turned to McCoy. "I think you had better examine him while he is out cold. Go grab your gear, Bones. I want to know everything I can about him."

* * * * *

Security had cleared the corridors while manhandling the alien to the brig. They stood waiting as McCoy and a medical technician took endless readings and samples, watching for a sign of returning consciousness. Kirk also waited with Spock just outside the cell, pacing impatiently. He had wanted to slap the alien in stasis cuffs, but McCoy had objected. They would interfere with the readings.

"How much longer, Bones?"

"Hmm? Oh, a few more minutes. Take these samples down to the lab., Harding, and start the techs on analysing them. What's this?" His fingers found a catch in the back of the jumpsuit. He gave it an experimental twist, and the material parted.

"Good grief!"

A band of copper fur ran down the alien's spine from the neck to where the tail started.

"Could be feline descended," McCoy muttered. "Yup. Third

eyelid. The teeth are more pointed, too." He looked with interest and then closed up the suit. Something else caught his eye, and he peered closely at a thin, gold mark on the alien's throat. A birthmark of some sort?

The tail twitched slightly; a movement that went unnoticed.

"Hurry up, Bones. A stun doesn't last forever."

"Captain, may I remind you that you wanted me to examine him? Go let me do my job. Go run your ship or some....thing."

Two frost green eyes stared at him, and the effect on McCoy was unnerving. He felt as if his soul was being laid bare to that steady gaze, and then it passed.

The alien was on his feet, lithe and slender, the movement swift and silent. McCoy heard Spock's shouted warning, but hands were already reaching for him, closing around his throat like bands of steel, squeezing. McCoy clawed at those hands, choking, aware of the intent green eyes and vicious smile. The blood roared in his ears.

Spock launched himself towards the weakly struggling McCoy, pushing Kirk out of the way. He heard his Captain fall, but ignored him. He wrenched a phaser from a stunned security guard's hand and fired, enveloping McCoy and the alien in the beam. They both dropped to the deck, entwined in a tangle.

"Get the medics," he ordered, pulling the Doctor free, swiftly checking his breathing and the red marks around his throat.

"Bones?" Kirk was limping.

"He will be all right, Jim, although he will not thank me for the headache he will have," Spock assured him drily. "I apologise for pushing you, Captain," he added, seeing Kirk wince, one hand hugging his shoulder.

"Never mind, Spock. You saved McCoy's life. Damino, clear the Doctor's equipment out of here, and double the shock screens and the guards on this cell. Don't take any chances." Kirk sighed. "I brought him here, but now what do I do with him?"

* * * * *

Kirk strolled into sickbay to find McCoy up and dressed.

He was surprised. "Bones! I thought you would be still asleep."

"I've slept enough, thank you," McCoy said sourly. "Ten hours, Christine tells me, after Dr. Kerwin pumped a sedative into me."

Kirk grinned. "I'm glad you are your cheerful self again. Any after-effects?"

"No, and it's no thanks to Spock, either."

"Bones, he saved you from being throttled," Kirk protested.

McCoy's face softened a bit. "I know. Have you grilled our visitor yet?"

"As a matter of fact, I'm going down now. Do you want to come?"

McCoy shrugged. "May as well."

Spock was waiting outside sickbay. He raised an enquiring eye. "Dr. McCoy. You have sufficiently recovered from your ordeal?"

"Yes, Spock... and thank you."

"You're welcome," the Vulcan answered him, face deadpan. "I believe that is the correct response."

McCoy bristled, and then he suddenly remembered an incident nearly forgotten, on a planet far away.

"You're still a pointed-eared hobgoblin," he grinned.

"Am I missing out on something?" Kirk asked mildly.

"Not at all, Jim. Let's go."

The alien was sitting on the floor, back against one wall, legs folded beneath him. He looked up at their arrival, eyes cool and steady.

"Has he tried anything, Damino?"

The security officer shook his head. "No, sir. He's been sitting like that for hours. I get the feeling he's waiting for something." He sounded uneasy.

Kirk went up to the shock screen.

"I am Captain James T. Kirk, commander of this vessel. You were purposely beamed aboard in the hope that you would talk to us. Who are you? Where do you come from? We are prepared to talk with your leaders."

The alien remained silent, no emotion showing except for the slightly twitching tail.

"Do you think he understands me, Spock?"

"Unknown, Captain. The translator may fail us."

Kirk turned back to the prisoner. "A lot of people have died for some cause we know nothing about. Why? Is there some purpose behind this senseless killing, or is it your way to provoke innocent citizens for pleasure?"

The alien's eyes shifted slightly onto McCoy's figure, and slowly he smiled, one hand rubbing at his throat.

"A sick sense of humour," Kirk murmured.

"That's not funny, Jim!" And then McCoy staggered.

The red alarm klaxons sounded even as the Enterprise lurched.

"Captain Kirk to the bridge, we are under attack," Scott's voice said urgently.

Understatement, Kirk thought, then glared at the alien who was on his feet, triumph and hate in his face.

"Whatever your game is, it cannot last."

"It is no game, genna Kirrk." Kirk blinked at the clearly spoken words. "The blood price will be paid. Only then will the dead be avenged!"

The ship shuddered again. "Watch him, Damino," Kirk ordered, then raced with his two officers for the bridge. The alien's ringing laughter followed them.

"Yes, Damino. Watch me. Watch me very closely!"

Scotty was relieved to hand over the centre seat.

"They came from nowhere, attacking from all sides, and yet they seem to be taking care not to obliterate us like the Klingon ship."

"Continue evasive action. Damage report?"

"The shields have held so far."

"They're regrouping for another run," Sulu warned.

"Arm photon torpedoes. Phasers fire at will." Kirk settled back in the command chair, absently nibbling on a thumbnail.

* * * * *

Down in the brig, the alien smiled at the security team's uneasiness. It was time. His people had picked up his message and had come for him.

The ship staggered. They would keep them busy. The rest was up to him. He uncoiled, noting the guards' positions and studying the shock screens. His eyes clouded, becoming vacant. The stone in his headband started to pulse softly.

"Look, Chief!"

What the.... That was Damino's last rational thought.

The air glowed blue. The shock screens detonated with an ear-splitting crack, showering sparks and spewing acrid smoke.

The alien moved.

Stunned, Damino clawed for his phaser, but found himself in an arm lock, and then the world exploded as he crashed through live circuits, his head cracking on the floor. He screamed once, his hand a living agony, and in those few seconds it took, his companions joined him in darkness.

Breathing heavily, the alien looked out into the corridor. It was deserted. He passed lift doors, searching for another way out. He found the stairwell, drifting into the circular metal tube, heading down into the bowels of the ship until the stairs ended. Cautiously, he opened the door and looked out. The rumble of engines told him he was in the engineering section. Keeping to the

shadows, he slipped out.

One lone man stood watch in the cargo bay, keeping an eye on the atmospheric panel for cracks in the massive doors, while the Enterprise shook from the continuous assault from outside. He never heard the light step behind him.

Pushing the unconscious Human aside, the alien studied the panel, frowning over the strange circuits and symbols, and then he saw what he had been searching for, cutting off the override relay from the bridge. The circuitry was child's play, once he had it sorted out. He sequenced the doors for automatic release, then sprinted for the one shuttlecraft. The bay doors opened ponderously, and the Galileo's boosters fired, shivering under leashed power. She lifted, gliding out into the blackness.

* * * * *

"Captain! I have a red light. Bay doors are opening!"

"Override, Ensign," Kirk snapped.

"I can't, sir. I have no control!"

Swearing, Kirk signalled the cargo bay. There was no answer.

"Uhura, notify engineering and security. We cannot afford to let them inside the ship."

"Look, Captain! It's our shuttle!" Sulu was half out of his chair, staring at the viewscreen.

Kirk did a double take. "What the devil...."

"The alien," Spock stated. "There is no answer from the brig."

"He's transmitting, sir."

The fighters broke off their attack, forming a protective shield around the shuttle, slowing to her speed.

"Do we follow, Captain?"

"Negative. Get us out of here, Mr. Sulu. Uhura, have Dr. McCoy and a medical unit meet us in the brig. I have a feeling they will be needed."

He left the bridge at a run.

* * * * *

It was a sober group seated in the briefing room.

Kirk rubbed a weary hand over his eyes. They felt gritty from lack of sleep.

"Dr. McCoy will be a bit late. He is finishing off his findings on the alien, so we will start with the preliminaries. Mr. Scott, I seem to be repeating myself, but what is the damage report?"

"Amazingly light, Captain. My people shouldn't take long to repair it all. The main damage was caused by the alien inside the

ship. Whatever he did, he managed to blow every circuit and microchip in the detention area. Exactly like in the transporter room. The whole unit will have to be replaced from scratch."

Kirk grimly recalled the sight that had met them, and of Damino lying on the deck, one of his hands burned to a crisp.

"The transporters are technically working," Scott continued, "but I would like to check them first before beaming anyone down. Perhaps we could put in at a safe planet while I test them?"

"What's safe?" Chekov muttered. Kirk let it pass.

"Of course, Scotty," he answered absently. The engineer and his team had rebuilt the whole console, replacing everything due to a backlash along the circuits.

"Lt. Uhura, have you succeeded in cracking that transmission yet?"

"No, sir. Mr. Spock and I have tried everything. It's foolproof."

"Any more transmissions of attacks on colonies and shipping?"

Again she shook her head. "All shipping has been diverted from this sector. The Lexington was involved in a light skirmish with minimal damage, but now reports the area as quiet. Sources say that the other side of the Zone is decidedly tense."

"Let's hope that our old neighbours will stay there. Ah, Bones. You're just in time."

"Sorry I'm late. This is amazing stuff, Jim." He deposited a handful of written notes onto the table, taking his place.

Kirk leaned back. "Let's hear it, then."

"Of course, I could be way off the mark, not being able to examine him in sickbay." He cleared his throat. "What we have is obviously humanoid. External appearances closely resemble Human form. Sorry, Spock - and Vulcan." He grinned at the Vulcan. "The only noticeable difference is the tail appendage and a band of fur down the spinal area. I wonder if it ruffles when they get mad? Well, never mind. Six toe and finger digits, plus a third eyelid." He sat back.

"Is that all, Bones?" Kirk asked weakly.

"Well, not quite, Jim. Their bone structure is weaker than the average man's. As to his innards, Christine and I found a heart in the normal place, unlike someone else I could mention." Spock raised an eyebrow. "There is only one lung, larger than a Human's. As for the rest, I couldn't even begin to unravel the puzzle without an autopsy. Except for one thing." He paused.

"What is that, Bones?"

"They're geared for reproduction."

"Most life forms are, Bones," Kirk said patiently.

McCoy looked at him acidly. "What I meant to say is that our

departed guest is capable of conceiving."

Kirk was stunned. "That was a female?"

"Nope. Neither female nor male. At a guess, androgynous, capable of siring and producing young."

"Fascinating."

"I knew you would say that, Spock," McCoy replied happily.

"What about Damino and the others?"

McCoy sobered. "Not good. Damino lost his hand; nothing could have saved that burning. Of course he won't be handicapped, not with the wonders they do with artificial limbs, but he's off starships for good. They will have to watch him for psychological problems. The others will be fine. Nothing worse than broken bones and concussion. It is ironic to see the damage the alien caused, and yet he - it, whatever - saved us."

"But now we have lost our main lead," Kirk added gloomily.

"I doubt whether you would have got anything out of - him? Blood price? What does that mean?"

"That, Dr. McCoy, is a very good question. If there is nothing more to discuss, we'll go find a planet for Scotty. I could do with some soil under my feet."

* * * * *

The planet they orbited was smaller than Earth. It was an M-type, with three green moons and only listed in the computer as T55-9-Q3, with a flag as a possible future colony planet.

The climate was temperate, but at night fell to below zero. The land forms were small, the majority of the surface covered with oceans. What foliage there was, was lush, filled with birds and insects, but nothing else had been noted.

"We can make another survey while down there. Spock, organise two landing parties, and security backup. Scotty, do you want to come along?"

"No thank you, Captain. I want to check on the beamdown, although the transporters are in safe working order," he added hastily, seeing McCoy's face.

"Very well. You can take the con."

Sulu and Lieutenants Baillie and Greco joined Kirk's group. McCoy groaned at seeing Baillie.

"Not again!" His voice was plaintive.

Baillie grinned. He always seemed to pull the landing party the Doctor was in.

"Consider me your guardian angel, Doctor."

"Funny looking angel," McCoy muttered, the rest lost in the transporter effect.

They materialised on a grass slope, which rolled down into a sheer ravine. A fast running river foamed over rocks below them. Behind, thick clusters of trees spread towards a rock formation, with purple mountains towering into the lemon sky.

"Scotty is an artist," McCoy said appreciatively, drawing in a lungful of crisp air. "I wonder why this place hasn't been colonised yet?"

"It is peaceful," Kirk agreed. He turned to Baillie and Sulu. "Off you two go, but keep within communication range. Meet us back here in two hours."

Nobody had anything for him to do, so Kirk strolled around enjoying the open skies, putting the troubles in the Federation on hold. He sat down on a rock near the lip of the ravine, flinging stones into the rushing waters, simply soaking up the sun.

McCoy strolled over. "Kind of quiet," he remarked, settling near Kirk.

"Hmm. Where's Spock?"

McCoy flapped a hand. "Over that way, enjoying himself. Scientists!"

Kirk's communicator beeped.

"Kirk here."

"Captain." Sulu's voice was a strained whisper. "It's here, sir. The Galileo... here."

Kirk's communicator whirred with sudden static. "Repeat that, Lieutenant."

"The Galileo... parked... Baillie and I..."

"Sulu! Sulu, come in!" Kirk turned the frequency dial. "Damn it! Enterprise. Mr. Scott!"

McCoy looked alarmed. "What's wrong?"

"Interference," he said shortly. "Go and collect Spock and Greco. From what I could gather, Sulu has found the Galileo."

"But Jim, that must mean -"

"Nothing yet. They could have just ditched it."

The four went quietly up the ridge.

"That way, Captain," Spock said, pointing to where Baillie stood waving at them.

"It's sitting in a hollow, Captain," Baillie reported. "There doesn't seem to be anyone around."

They followed him to where Sulu waited, crouched behind some rocks.

"She's shut down. Nothing registers on the tricorder. The area is clean."

"Let's go take a look, but be on your guard."

They scrambled down the slope, phasers ready, spreading out. The hatch of the Galileo stood open and Kirk cautiously poked his head inside. It was empty. He climbed in, the others following. His mouth tightened at the smashed console. Everything else had been left intact.

"They ditched her, all right, but she needs major repairs before we can get her back on board. Mr. Scott, Enterprise, this is Kirk, come in." The communicator remained dead. "I have a funny feeling about this. Spock, take another reading."

Spock went to the hatch, and then stopped. "Too late, Jim."

The aliens were standing encircling the Galileo, each armed to the teeth, their eyes hostile and watchful. Kirk felt his unease peak as another pushed through the circle, face amused, green eyes mocking. They had met before, not too long ago.

"Well met, genna Kirrk. Please, step out of the craft and keep your hands away from your weapons." He glanced at his companions. "Confiscate everything and secure the prisoners."

Helpless, the men of the landing party had their hands tied behind them with thin metal cuffs. Spock discreetly tried testing them, and nearly cried out at the electronic shock that flashed up his arms. Only the alien seemed to notice his discomfort, and he smiled.

"These are extremely delicate mechanisms. The flexing of a muscle can set them off, and the effect is painful."

"How long have you been watching us?" Kirk demanded.

"Ever since you put into orbit." The green eyes were cool.

"They will miss us," Kirk argued, "and start searching."

"Not for a while yet, and by then there may be something for them to find. Come, my veda will be growing impatient. S'a is looking forward to meeting with you. Bring them."

They were herded up the slope, strong hands aiding them over the rocks. Baillie swore as he had a taste of the shock cuffs. Surrounded by these mercurial people, they swung into the thick, tree-covered vegetation, branches slapping against flesh.

The alien walked along beside McCoy, his mouth suddenly twitching.

"If you feel the need of another throat massage, let me know," and then, shaking back his long hair, he strode, laughing, to the front.

* * * * *

They began climbing towards a rock face at the base of the mountains. The trees thinned out and the terrain grew rougher. They were moved out onto a ledge, escorted one at a time, and there, tucked out of sight, was a tunnel entrance. They stumbled in the dim light, except Spock and the aliens. Ahead, a pinpoint of light grew larger the further they walked. They emerged high above a

natural cavern. Below, rows of fighters stood parked around a black space cruiser of unknown design. More aliens swarmed around and over the craft, hoses and feedlines covered the floor in a crazy jumble. A few looked up curiously.

"This must be their base," Kirk murmured.

The captives were urged on, turning off into another tunnel. Green phosphorous lights glowed along the rough walls, the ground rocky beneath their feet. The way twisted and turned, taking them deeper into the mountain side. Water dripped somewhere, and Kirk wondered how the Enterprise's sensors had missed all of this. Caves started to emerge, all bearing witness of use.

They halted before a heavy red curtain. The alien swept it aside, revealing a richly decorated room, and they were pushed inside, their steps silent on thick carpeting.

"Here they are, Samiel."

The figure reclining against a pile of cushions at the far end of the chamber got to his feet, studying them with large, golden eyes. He was taller than the other, dressed in black, long, tawny hair caught up with a comb. He smiled pleasantly.

"Welcome. Which is the genna Kirrk?"

"I am Kirk."

"Ah. Jegon told me a little about you, genna Kirrk, although, understandably, s'a did not remain long enough to get better acquainted."

Kirk stared back evenly. "Exactly who are you?"

"I am named Samiel, the leader of this small Raktal - but where are my manners? Remove the cuffs, Zatriel."

The guards leapt to obey him. The captives relaxed as the cuffs were removed; they had all experienced the effects of the things at some time on their walk, and all sported bruising around the wrists.

"Please, be seated," Samiel indicated the scattered cushions. "Jegon kirra, fetch some refreshments for our - guests."

"What do you want with us?" Kirk demanded.

The alien looked surprised. "I? Why nothing, genna Kirrk - but perhaps I will think of something later."

"Then why were we brought here?" McCoy demanded angrily.

Samiel stared at him for some time, and then ignored him, turning back to Kirk. "Perhaps you would be so kind as to introduce me to your party, genna Kirrk."

Bitting down irritation, Kirk complied.

"So you are the healer," Samiel said to McCoy, and the Doctor didn't care much for his tone, although he smiled. He smiled too often.

Jegon came back, guiding a grav-trolley, with tall, frosted glasses filled with a golden liquid. He handed them around, and then settled down next to Samiel, green eyes sparkling with hidden malice.

Kirk took a tentative sip of the drink, finding it pleasant and refreshing.

"Very nice." He set his glass down. "Samiel, what do you intend to do with us, and why were we forced here?"

"It was a mere whim. We only intended to keep a watch on you, but then Jegon identified you with the one party, and I recalled you had told t'sam that you were willing to talk with t'sas leaders." His face grew serious. "Talk, genna Kirrk. I am listening."

Kirk controlled his breathing, but icy fingers clutched at his heart. They were being toyed with.

"What we want to know is why you have been attacking the Federation. Just exactly who are you, and what is it you want?"

"Those are questions, genna Kirrk," Samiel chided, and then a look of interest crossed his features. "What is this Federation?"

Spock answered for him. "The Federation of Planets is the governing body whose citizens your forces have been attacking without cause or provocation."

"Oh, but there is a cause, and there most certainly was provocation," Samiel contradicted softly. He got to his feet, lifting the jug of refreshment, turning to where Baillie sat. "Have some more qeela, young one. You look nervous. Are you nervous?"

Baillie flinched, finding himself the centre of attention, but he only shook his head, not trusting himself to speak, certain that his voice would shake.

Samiel laughed richly. "Of course you are, as is Greco." He reached out his hand, gripping the security guard's wrist, and trailed a finger over the swelling bruising. "Perhaps your healer should take a look at that." He released Greco, moving around the circle. "You, Sulu, are unsettled but not afraid. You have the build of a fighter, light and swift, and warriors are never afraid." His stare clashed with McCoy's, a faint smile on his lips. "Defiance, and anger." He looked at Kirk, and then finally at Spock. "Only you reveal no emotion, and I find that interesting. Zatriel, go and request our Komage to join us."

He walked across to a screen, switching it on to show the second landing party, obviously immersed in their tests.

"In a way I am sorry you found this planet. I liked it here." He pushed a button and an older alien's face filled the screen.

"Yes, Veda?"

"Madra Donel, we are evacuating in two tras. Inform the carriers and order the Raktal genna to see to it. Clear everything."

"As you command, Veda."

Zatriel came back, accompanied by an alien of unidentifiable age. His eyes were as pale and dead looking as the rest of him, and Kirk shivered.

Samiel waved the newcomer to sit. "This is Komage Tural. Priest of Azarah, witch and mindsearcher. You wanted an explanation, genna Kirrk. Very well. I have a story to tell, so please, make yourselves comfortable.

"Many ages ago, a group of explorers and scientists came to this space to do research. They came in peace, and took great care to avoid contact with the inhabitants. They selected a couple of backwater planets to set up their bases. For a few seasons they went about their business, analysing and studying the space and its stars, until one fateful day, a strange ship put into orbit around one of the planets, and the aliens also began exploring the surface. Every day they came closer to the burrow, and discovery was inevitable. So, it was reasonably argued, contact should be made, and knowledge exchanged. And so it was done, but instead of friendship and knowledge, the scientists were offered treachery, pain and death." Samiel's voice dropped to a menacing whisper, eyes mere slits, his tail lashing furiously. "Terrible death, Kirrk. They ransacked and they murdered and they stole." He broke off, calming himself, and refilled Baillie's glass yet again, singling out the young man as a target for cruel teasing.

"But one they did not kill, for s'a had been quickly hidden by a foster parent. This youngling hid, trembling and afraid, under a rest cot, listening to those s'a loved being tortured and killed. Eventually the murderers left and this infant was left alive, but alone in a burrow full of dead. Parents, babes - everyone.

"S'a found t'sas true parent with the others in the laboratory, strung up like dead carrion from the cooling pipes. They had been mercilessly tortured, and then their throats had been slashed.

"After days had passed, the young one was rescued by a pack coming to check on them. Everyone dead, Kirrk, and the fourth Xhephan of Azarah gone. I swore then to avenge my people, and now I have returned to carry out my vow."

"By killing innocent people who had nothing to do with it?" McCoy demanded.

"No-one is innocent!" Samiel shouted, flinging his glass across the room where it shattered. "This is your domain, therefore everyone is responsible!"

"No-one is denying that what happened was cold-blooded murder, but how can you blame the Federation? The killers could have crossed from outside our borders," McCoy argued.

"It happened inside *this* space," Samiel hissed.

"So now you will kill us," Kirk stated, eyeing the lashing tail.

Samiel suddenly smiled. "No. I was not completely honest with you, genna Kirrk. I have a little task for you. The Xhephan stone. We want it back, so you will have to persuade this glorious Federation of yours to find it, and those who stole it."

Kirk's mouth went dry. "That's impossible."

"For your sake, I hope not," Samiel said softly.

McCoy was incredulous. "A stone? You want us to find a stone?"

"The Xhephan is a very special stone, Healer, one of four given to my people by eternal Azarah. It is emerald green with a rough surface, and it is so small, it can fit into the palm of your hand. Dormant it is cold to the touch. Find it, Kirrk, and we will leave your space in peace. Fail, and your Federation will be at my mercy. What you have so far experienced was a game, as to amuse younglings. What you will experience will be war, as we know it."

"You're insane!"

Samiel laughed malevolently. "No, genna Kirrk. I assure you I am quite sane." He clapped his hands. "Guards!"

The chamber filled with aliens, all grasping swords which pulsed with blue light.

"I'll bargain with you, Kirrk. I give you one season to accomplish your task; that is three of your measured months, and in that time your space will have peace, while my forces rest. If you succeed, return to this planet, but if you fail, two of your friends will die before your eyes as my parent died. Now, who shall it be?"

Kirk hurled himself at Samiel, and bounced painfully off an invisible wall. Tural smiled. Samiel raised an eyebrow.

"Thank you, Tural. Our fiery genna has spirit. Hold them!"

The landing party was seized.

"Zatriel, fetch two collars and chains while I make up my mind," Samiel ordered, eyeing them lazily.

"You bastard!" McCoy spat.

"That word holds no meaning for me, but I doubt whether it is complimentary. Consider yourself my guest. You and the Vulcan."

"No!" Kirk struggled in the clutches of his guards.

"I think so, Kirrk. They mean a lot to you, and I shall have pleasure in keeping them for the humiliation inflicted upon Jeqon. S'a objected to being handled and studied like a specimen. Zatriel, these are the ones. Collar my new pets."

Kirk struggled futilely, watching his friends as they were held, blades at their throats. The collars were snapped into place, trailing lengths of chain which fastened wrists and ankles. McCoy looked horrified; Spock expressionless.

Samiel examined them critically. "Hmm. We'll clothe you more appropriately later on. Take them to my ship."

"Wait!" Kirk cried hoarsely, but they were dragged out in a ring of guards.

"Three months, Kirrk." Samiel's eyes glittered. "Take them to the surface, Tural, and put them to sleep for a while. Farewell, genna Kirrk. Come, kirra."

Without a backward glance, Samiel swept out, Jecon at his side.

Kirk and the others were dragged through another tunnel to the surface and thrown to the ground with force. Landing hard, Kirk rolled, twisting around in time to see a bolt of red energy fly from Tural's fingers. He felt the bolt of paralysis hit him in the chest, and he collapsed.

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A rough hand was clamped on his shoulder, gently shaking him.

"Captain! Jim!"

That's Scotty's voice, Kirk decided, and carefully opened his eyes. The heavens swirled sickeningly. He groaned.

"Take it easy, Jim," Scotty said worriedly. "Rawlings, how are the others?"

The paramedic shook his head. "Not good, Mr. Scott. They are disorientated, and their balance is shot to hell. They've been beamed up."

He stooped over Kirk who waved him away, struggling to his feet. He clung to Scotty's arm like a drowning man, the world swinging on a pendulum. Flashing prisms of light played with his eyes, and his head and chest were one seething mass of fire.

"Scotty, they've got Spock and Bones." His breath crushed with the effort to talk. Scotty lowered him back to the ground.

"Who, Captain? Who has them?"

"Aliens... taken them as hostages. Damn. Can't think straight. Head hurts."

The engineer hunkered down beside him. He didn't like Kirk's colour.

"Rawlings! Give him something, man!"

Rawlings shook his head, noting Kirk's dilated pupils and pale complexion. "I'd rather beam him up, Mr. Scott. They have all been hit with something I don't care to tamper with. I'd rather Dr. Kerwin attend this."

They helped Kirk to his feet, supporting him.

"Stretcher bearers, stand by. Three to beam up. Energise."

They materialised on board, with Kirk still clinging for support.

"Scotty, I want...planetwide search. Not leaving 'til....sure Bones and Spock not hidden."

"I'll see to it, Captain. If they are down there, we will find them." He helped Kirk onto the grav-stretcher.

"Been given an ultimatum, and if we fail...."

"Don't worry, sir. Nothing will escape our attention." He

spoke gently, signalling to the orderlies to take Kirk to sickbay, and then he went up to the bridge at a run.

Uhura met him with a troubled face. "What happened down there?" They had searched for the landing party for hours.

"I don't rightly know, lass. It appears they ran into our old friends who have taken Mr. Spock and Dr. McCoy hostage. The Captain is in too bad a way to explain coherently. They are all suffering from severe spatial displacement and trauma. Lt. Kyle, start extensive sensor sweeps. Uhura, get a security team to the transporters. A large, armed one. We are not leaving until that planet has been turned inside out."

* * * * *

It was a sober group which sat in the briefing room, including Dr. David Kerwin who was acting as temporary Chief Surgeon.

The official reports and statements had long since been made and sent to Starfleet. Now they sat informally.

"You found nothing, Scotty?" Kirk asked again.

"Only the Galileo, sir. Repairs on her have been completed and she is back on board. The patrols found the tunnels and caves." He spread his hands. "Nothing. Clean as a whistle with not so much as a fruit pip left behind. They must have moved like lightning to pack everything up in the allotted time, and we saw nothing!" He smacked his fist on the table in frustration. "They must have a cloaking device which surpasses that of the Klingons a hundred fold. How else could they have left without us picking up something?"

Kirk sighed. His head ached, but at least he wasn't seeing double any more.

"An unknown race with a highly advanced technology, but we still do not know *who* they are, or where they come from. Their motive is, however, perfectly clear."

"I think the Klingons started all this. If what Samiel told us about the massacre of his people is true, it fits the Klingon's known methods before the Organian Peace Treaty leashed them. Whatever they cannot have, they turn savage and take by force, with dire consequences to the holder."

"We cannot make accusations against them without hard evidence, Mr. Sulu, and if this stone is somewhere in the Empire...." He shuddered, knowing that it would be then forever out of their reach. He ran his fingers through his hair. "There is nothing more we can do here. Prepare to break orbit in one hour."

PART II

Events had occurred so rapidly that McCoy was not sure if what he had experienced was real or whether he was the principal player in a privileged nightmare. His head whirled as he retraced his steps from the disbelief of being put into chains, to the agonised look on Kirk's face and the horror in his voice, as he and Spock had been hauled off at breakneck speed down the tunnels into the main cavern housing the ships. He had tripped and stumbled over lines

and hoses, his feet catching in the links between his ankles, and, impatient, his guards had eventually dragged him on his back to the waiting black ship. He had fought and yelled all the way up the ramp and had then given up, nearly throttling on the collar chain as pressure was increased. The deciding factor had been the backhanded crack across his face by one alien as a warning to behave.

Dazed and shocked, McCoy huddled in the box-like cell they had flung him into. He was alone and in pitch darkness, and was worried about Spock. Where had they put the Vulcan? He had yelled his name, but only his own voice had rebounded back at him. And what of Jim and the others? Samiel would surely not have harmed Jim, not if he wanted his piece of rock found. The others were a different story, and could be considered expendable. McCoy squeezed his eyes closed. *Please, don't let anything happen to them. Sulu - and Baillie, my guardian angel. How long ago was it that they had joked in the transporter room? Then there was Greco. Such a thing to have happened on his first tour of duty.*

McCoy realised he was in the grip of a temporary insanity, his body curled while he fought for breath in harsh gasps. He forced himself to relax, taking deep breaths, and slowly the tightness in his chest eased, his heart rate slowing to normality. He unwound into a sitting position, his back against a hard surface, the rattling of chains ominously loud. It was time to examine this box.

Drawing his legs under him, he stood up, swearing as his skull connected with the ceiling. Half bent, he felt his way along the walls. Two steps and he was against another surface. In less than twenty seconds he had circled the whole area.

"Box I said, and box it is," he muttered to himself.

He panicked, suddenly thinking of air, but relaxed when his fingers touched a grid in the floor. Defeated, he slumped against the wall. He had tried, but there was no way out. Chained and caged like an animal, he was close to breaking again. Where was Spock, and how was he reacting to this?

Damn fool Vulcan. I can only try and look after him, if he lets me, and if Samiel doesn't separate us.

Exhausted, he dozed for a while, and then jerked awake at the vibrations beneath him. He must be near the engines. The take-off flattened him, and he thought he would pass out from the high G-force, and then it released him. Wherever they were being taken, they were on their way.

Unbeknown to McCoy, Spock was in an identical cell not far from him. The Vulcan had immediately looked for a way out, but had found none. His night vision, far superior to the Human's, had adjusted to the pitch dark, picking out the smooth walls of the box, with no unbroken lines giving a hint of where the opening was. It was as secure and unbreakable as the fetters that imprisoned him. Now he sat thinking. There was no doubt in his mind that he and McCoy were in serious trouble. Samiel was dangerous and unstable. The alien had allotted Kirk three months to find the stone, which could be a figment of his imagination, or something he had simply invented. The Xhephan might be non-existent, and his crusade against the Federation for an entirely different reason.

For now their predicament was complete, but once planetside, and he hoped that was to be their destination and not a base ship,

an attempt could be made to gain their freedom. Deliberately he relaxed, slipping into meditation so completely that he was unaware of the ship leaving orbit.

* * * * *

Time lost all meaning for McCoy. Hours or days could have passed, but all he was aware of was utter despair. He slipped in and out of periods of dozing, and once, when he woke, his hand brushed over a bowl of food and a small ration of water, but he had no appetite and only picked at the mush he couldn't see. There had been no concessions made for sanitary needs, and this outraged him. He wished he had Spock for company. His ear became attuned to the steady throb of the alien ship's engines. He had not taken much notice of where he had landed in the cruiser, but from the tremulous vibrations in the deck and the muted thrum of engines, he assumed it was somewhere in the aft section.

The beat changed, alerting him to a coming change in the G-force, and sure enough, the ship landed. The fear rushed back and he waited anxiously after the tremors in the deck had ceased. He waited a long time, and then flinched as gyros whined close to where he sat. The box cell lurched free of its brackets, throwing him flat, then swayed ponderously as it was unloaded, the movements throwing him about. He cursed as the box dropped heavily onto a solid surface, and then one side fell open with a crash. The brilliant light lanced at his eyes, and instinctively he threw up his hands to protect them. Rough hands pulled him to his feet, urging him out. He stumbled as his feet hit dirt. He blinked his watering eyes furiously until the shadows before him solidified into a group of aliens, with Spock standing, all Vulcan, among them.

Shipped like freight, McCoy thought in disgust as he was pushed next to Spock. The Vulcan lifted an elegant eyebrow.

"Are you all right, Doctor?"

McCoy managed to nod, then grinned with all the defiance he could muster. "Perfectly all right, Mr. Spock, considering the third class accommodation."

The group surrounding and staring at them suddenly broke apart, making a respectful path for Samiel who, resplendent in white robes, strolled forward and looked his captives over with cool amusement.

"Dear, dear. They don't travel well at all." He wrinkled his nose delicately. "What a disgusting odour. Punja! Where is that lazy Shrrak?"

"Here, d'jan," a high voice squeaked.

McCoy stared in amazement at the comical little figure struggling through a sea of legs. The round midget barely reached to Samiel's waist. His legs were short, and his arms hung nearly to his ankles, with long fingers. His feet were too big, and he was covered in soft, white fur.

"Welcome home, d'jan," he piped, grovelling at Samiel's feet, button eyes fixed on the alien's face.

"Thank you, Punja," Samiel said, reaching down to pat him on the head. "You may get up."

The little alien scrambled to his feet, automatically brushing down his patched clothing. "What is your bidding?"

"I have two new pets for you to look after." He waved a hand at Spock and McCoy. "Wash them down, clothe them and then cage them. Here is the lash." He handed him a long, thin, flexible rod. "They are to be fed once a day, and do keep the cages clean."

"Of course, d'jan."

The little alien bowed, taking the lead chains in one hand, the lash in the other. He clicked his tongue, pulling on the chains, while the aliens burst into laughter.

"Talk to them, Punja," Samiel said with exaggerated patience. "They are not complete imbeciles."

"Oh, really? How interesting. Come along, you two."

"This is too bloody much!" McCoy exploded, pulling away. "Tethered and taken walkies by a midget! Who the hell do you think you are? This exceeds all - "

"Punja, teach t'sam some manners!" Samiel barked.

"Oh dear." Eyes half closed, face screwed up, Punja raised the lash, striking out.

Pain exploded across McCoy's shoulders. He buckled, breath hissing between his teeth at the intensity of it. A foot booted into his side.

"Get up."

Shakily he made it to his knees, seeing Spock move to help him.

"Stay where you are, Vulcan, or you will get a taste of the same!"

McCoy got to his feet and glared at Samiel. The alien's eyes glinted, his tail twitching dangerously.

"That was only a warning. Punja is a sensitive creature and he is gentle with the lash. I am not. Keep your place and your tongue. Now move!" His voice was a sibilant of sound.

Punja hastily took hold of the lead chains, visibly quaking, his eyes pleading, and the two Starfleet officers could do nothing but follow, McCoy stumbling at nearly every step. Spock walked easily, judging the slack, even slowing down so as not to overtake the waddling figure in front.

"Are you injured, Doctor?" he asked, once out of Samiel's range.

"No, only my pride," he denied, but he did hurt. The lash stroke may have been light, but the charge it had released had been agonising. His eyes picked out the base, noting the row upon row of fighters, the storage sheds and fuel tanks.

"What do you make of this, Spock?"

"A very large fleet, Doctor. This is obviously their main

base." He glanced up at the red sun. "An M-class planet, but where, I cannot tell."

McCoy grinned. "Don't trouble yourself about it. I doubt whether it will make any difference to us or to the Federation. That bastard means business, and even if we ever manage to escape, where can we go? Those craft are as alien as our host, and probably just as mean."

Spock didn't answer.

Punja stopped them, reaching down towards a hatch that lay flush with the ground. It slid smoothly aside, revealing a wide entrance to a drop shaft.

"In here," he said cheerfully, and McCoy wanted to strangle him.

They stepped onto the disc, and McCoy took a last look at the open sky as they dropped down. The hatch slid closed.

Unlike the natural caves of Samiel's smaller base, this complex was man-made and much larger, dropping three levels below the surface. An intricate network of tunnels and chambers spread out in a roughly circular configuration, and the place hummed with activity. The walls were concave, constructed of a material that was smooth and slightly metallic, giving off a sheen in the light of glowing discs set into its surface. The floor covering was tough and springy underfoot, dampening all sound. It made McCoy feel claustrophobic.

They had descended to the bottom level by two more drop shafts, stopping before a metal door which opened by a punched sequence on a control unit. The sight of the bare flagstone chamber had stopped McCoy in his tracks.

Two cages stood in a shafted alcove against one wall, but what had turned the Doctor's blood cold were the chains and cuffs hanging from the ceiling.

"What perversion is this?" he had demanded of the little alien.

"It is the punishment block," Punja had said nervously, gripping the lash more firmly.

Now, hosed down like an animal, dressed in baggy white pants and a long tunic top, and feeling utterly degraded, McCoy prowled his cage, his bare feet making no sound on the fibrous floor, thankful that at least they were no longer manacled.

The bars were firmly set, thick and unbreakable. Besides a compartment that Punja helpfully pointed out was for sanitation, the cages were bare.

After the little alien had left them, he sank wearily against the bars.

"What does your logical mind make of this, Spock?"

The Vulcan settled near him. "A precarious position, Doctor."

"Can we get out of this precarious position?"

"Unknown."

"And Jim?" he asked carefully.

"The odds are impossible," Spock said flatly.

McCoy blinked. He had not expected that answer. "So, it will mean war for the Federation and slavery or death for us."

"I hope not."

McCoy looked at him, lips quirking. "Hope, Spock? That's an emotion."

"Yes," the Vulcan said calmly.

The cages suddenly jolted, rising upward into the shaft with the whirring of machinery.

"What's happening?" McCoy flinched with alarm.

"I would presume to say that we have an audience with Samiel," Spock answered drily.

McCoy backed away nervously from the bars as the cages rose over the rim. The luxurious chamber beyond was filled with aliens, all watching curiously.

"We appear to be the main attraction," he murmured to Spock.

Samiel stood near a control panel, then flowed towards his two captives, a slight smile on his lips.

"I hope you find your quarters satisfactory. What? Nothing to say, Healer McCoy? You had enough on your mind a short while ago!"

A few others had come closer.

"Not very attractive beings," one said. "And such short hair, almost like the Reha. Can they understand us, Samiel?"

"Their translators seem to work." He shrugged, losing interest, seating himself next to Jekon and another on a pile of cushions.

"What are you going to do with them, Samiel?"

The alien picked up a cup, eyes fixed on McCoy, gleaming.

"Keep them for a while. Study them." He touched his tongue to his lips like a predator.

"I would like one when you have finished with them."

Samiel's golden eyes widened in surprise. "Whatever for, Rashin kirra?"

The alien next to him pouted. "As a servant. Punja is never around when I need t'sam."

"Perhaps, but I cannot promise. They may not be in a serviceable condition."

"What about this Kirrk? Will s'a find the Xhephan?"

"S'a will do the utmost to save t'sas noble friends, while we rest for the final confrontation."

Spock stiffened, moving swiftly to the front of the bars, his voice accusing. "That was not the bargain you made with my Captain."

The room hushed. Samiel looked annoyed.

"Do not concern yourself with my affairs, alien. For you, this Federation and your genna Kirrk do not exist any more. Remember that your very life depends on me."

They were ignored after that.

McCoy watched Punja scuttling back and forth with food and drink, and he watched Jekon. As the party continued, the green-eyed alien turned paler, eventually whispering to Samiel. They stood, beckoning to Rashin.

"Punja, return the cages and then see to the comfort of the genna."

"Yes, d'jan." Punja bowed.

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It was some time later when the little alien brought them their meal. It was the same mush McCoy had encountered on the cruiser. It was tasteless, but McCoy was too hungry to notice.

"Punja, of what race is Samiel?" The Vulcan's question halted the little alien in his tracks and he stared in amazement at Spock.

"Why, s'a is of the ruling Chirray clan. Did you not know that?"

"He never informed us," Spock answered drily. "And yourself?"

"I am of the Shrrak. We have served the Chirray for generations. It is a great honour," he said with importance.

"And your place of origin?"

"The Domains. But why are you questioning me? You must not ask these things," he said firmly.

"I was curious," Spock said.

"Oh." Punja came closer, then asked almost shyly, "What is your name, and the other?"

"I am Spock, and the other is McCoy, a healer."

"A word of warning. Do not anger Samiel. S'a has no mercy when angered." He shivered, fastening button eyes on McCoy. "Otherwise you will need the services of your healer."

"Why do you stay with him then?" McCoy probed.

Punja's eyes widened. "But...s'a is Chirray and of the

Jhiberdan's Burrow. It is a great honour to serve t'sas clowder!" He shook his head in wonder. "I must go, or I will be punished for neglecting my other duties."

"Interesting," Spock murmured as the door closed. "We may have found ourselves an ally, Doctor."

"Punja? I doubt it, Spock. He is proud of being associated with Samiel and his clowder. Clowder? Wonder what he meant by that?"

"Perhaps, but he is also unhappy and afraid of Samiel."

"Who isn't?" McCoy growled.

This is what a caged animal must feel like, McCoy thought, endlessly pacing up and down. He envied Spock's ability to slip into meditation. His nerves were shot from being cooped up, and from the daily sessions in Samiel's chamber. *Put on display*, he thought sourly, *stared at, talked about*, while Samiel took malicious pleasure in their plight. McCoy sighed, sinking into a corner. Washed down like an animal, the food meagre. What he wouldn't give for a steak. He was losing weight, but had refused when Spock had offered his food.

"No, Spock," he had said firmly. "You may be able to exist on less food than Humans, but if we ever get out of here, I will need your strength."

At Spock's insistence, he did exercises every day. And they talked, without the usual bantering arguments that were legendary on the Enterprise, and he knew the Vulcan was lending him mental strength to continue. But he did despair. They both did.

Punja often stayed with them during meal times, as fascinated with these two tall aliens as they were with him, listening to their stories of their home worlds, and telling them a bit about his, but refusing to tell them where it was. He wasn't being secretive, for although he would never admit it, he didn't rightly know where it was.

Spock and McCoy were able to piece a part of the aliens' social structure together. They were ruled by a Jhiberdan, or Supreme Keeper, with a council in each domain. Most dwellings were below ground, for as Punja explained, the beauty of the land was created by Eternal Azarah. They lived in groups, or what they called a clowder.

Then, on one such visit, he came in subdued, silently handing them their food. One eye was swollen shut.

"What happened?" McCoy demanded.

"Samiel is most displeased with me. I am not allowed to talk with you any more."

"Did he beat you?" McCoy persisted, blue eyes hard.

"I deserved it. I talk too much." His dejected little figure left the basement.

"Poor devil. It's our fault. We did squeeze him for information."

"Most regrettable," Spock agreed.

* * * * *

Donel, the fleet commander, hurried into the chamber to where Samiel sat and spoke urgently in a low voice.

McCoy watched with interest as Samiel's eyes narrowed, his tail flicking with obvious irritation.

"What is s'a doing here?" he snapped.

Donel shrugged. "They have only just emerged from synchshift, and s'a notified me that they would be landing immediately."

"Very well. I will have to see t'sam. Zatriel," he called his head guard. "Go meet them and escort them here. Also have the watch guard alerted."

"What is it, Samiel?" the red-robed komage asked. The room quietened.

Samiel sighed. "We have visitors. None other than the Na'id Rafiel and t'sas entourage."

"Something must have happened if Urel has sent t'sam all this way," Jeqon murmured.

Samiel chuckled. "Perhaps the old fool is dead."

The chamber grew tense.

"They are here," Tural muttered, eyes closed.

McCoy and Spock watched, not understanding the apprehensive glances of some of the Chirray, only that this was someone important.

* * * * *

He walked into the room with no hesitation, leaving the others to follow in his wake. The genna were on their feet bowing, but he didn't acknowledge anyone, or stop until he was before Samiel. The Chirri was also on his feet but unsubservient.

"Rafiel. This is a surprise." Samiel held out one hand to the lithe alien.

"Sherra," Rafiel acknowledged, fingers touching lightly. His eyes were very dark. Raven black hair hung loose to his waist. At his throat a black gem glowed. He stared at Samiel. "You look well."

"Full of health, sherra. Ah, you have brought Damin and Remiel with you. Be welcome." Samiel clapped his hands. "Punja, bring refreshments for the Na'id and t'sas clowder. Come, sit."

Rafiel folded down onto the cushions, his group around him.

"How is Urel?" Samiel asked.

"He is well, sherra. Thank you, Punja." He took the offered glass, giving the Shrrak a warm smile, and the little alien glowed.

Rafiel took a sip, eyes roaming the room lazily. The dark gaze held Spock's for an instant, and then dismissed him to light on Jeqon. One brow went up, thin lips quirking, as he noticed the pale gold mark on Jeqon's throat, and the alien flushed. Finally he turned back to his brother. "You have a large and impressive burrow, Samiel."

"I have a large staff." He shrugged. "But come now, sherra. You have not travelled these distances to pass pleasantries about my burrow. What brings you here, Rafiel?"

"Urel has summoned you back home. All of you."

"Why?" Samiel barked.

The room fell silent.

The Chirri placed his glass on a floor table, turning dark, unfathomable eyes on Samiel.

Oh oh, McCoy thought, moving closer.

"You are wasting your time here, Samiel. Urel gave in to this - obsession of yours to return here and investigate the lost stone, but you have neglected to report back. The only transmissions we have received from you were demands for more packs and more equipment, which you must admit is unusual for a mere search party. Your time here has been terminated. By command of our Jhiberdan, you are to return. I suggest you start packing." He leaned forward earnestly. "Sherra, forget the past. Leave the Xhephan to lie asleep wherever it is. If it is to be found, Azarah will guide us. Stop tormenting yourself so, and start living for the future. Urel has a new command for you on council."

Samiel got to his feet, face filled with fury. "No! I will not!"

A few Chirray stirred uncomfortably. Jeqon looked worried.

"You defy our Jhiberdan? Our parent?" Rafiel asked softly. Dangerously.

"S'a is not my parent! Never *my* parent!" Samiel screamed, tail lashing, and then he turned his back on Rafiel, fighting for control. "I will not throw away everything I have worked for on an old fool's whim," he grated through clenched teeth.

Rafiel also stood, eyes flashing, the black jewel matching their fire. "Remember of whom you speak! S'a raised you and trained you. You mean as much to Urel as t'sas own flesh born, and now you insult t'sam so. How dare you!"

Samiel whirled, and the two glared at each other. Fire and ice, the crowded room forgotten.

"I dare, and I defy Urel! I know what our beloved Jhiberdan's true feelings are towards me. I may have been raised in the Imperial Burrow, but I was never a part of it. Always reminded in various ways that I was living on *the* gracious sanctity. Well, not any more. I have freed myself from all that is Urel; from you and your siblings. I despise you!"

Rafiel looked stricken. "Samiel! How can you say that? I

love you as true kin; we all do. We grew up together." He extended an entreating hand. Samiel didn't move, and Rafiel dropped his hand, his own face hardening. He surveyed the room, picking out recognised faces, and those unfortunates flinched, eyes downcast.

"This burrow smells of corruption and treason. Genna of the Dynastic Raktal, and a Komage priest." Hands behind his back, he looked at Tural coolly. "You are far from the temples, ancient one."

Tural bowed. "I serve Samiel, Na'id."

"I doubt whether that has anything to do with t'sas soul," Rafiel snapped. He walked over to the cages, staring at McCoy and Spock. "I wonder where you fit into this," and then swung around to Samiel without waiting for an answer. "You have flung your contempt into my face. You have disowned Urel and me as your kin, but now, not as sherra, but as Na'id of the Domains, to whom you swore an oath, I demand to know what is going on here. What are you up to, Samiel, and who are those two aliens you have caged? Answer me!" His voice cracked like a whip.

"Very well. Since you ask so politely. Those two are - how shall I put it? - under my personal care and protection, as part of the final plan."

"Plan? What plan?" Rafiel's eyes narrowed.

"I intend...." Samiel grinned. "No, I have already begun to invade this space."

Rafiel stared at him in amazement. "You are insane. Urel will never stand for this!"

"Urel again!" Samiel snarled. "S'a is not here to stop me!"

"So, the heartbreaking plea to look for the stone was all a ruse. You never cared about its fate."

"Oh no, Rafiel. I care very much. With it, nothing can stop me."

"Do you have it?"

Samiel shrugged. "No, and perhaps I never will, but the noble genna Kirrk, friend to those two, is probably doing t'sas utmost to find it for me."

"You are willing to instigate a war, killing innocent beings, to bolster your own bruised ego? Have you any idea of what you are doing?"

"Of course I know what I am doing!" Samiel snapped. "Here I will rule and the stone will make it complete. None would defy me."

"By using it to subjugate and kill! This space will collapse under its darker forces, and you with it. Jegon's psychic ability will not help you, and you are not talent-born to handle Xhephan," Rafiel shouted.

"That is why Tural is here," Samiel gloated.

"Tural!" he spat. "What does s'a know?" He rounded on the

robed priest. "Do you have the gift, viper?"

The komage looked calmly at Rafiel. "I am confident in my ability, Na'id."

"A very noble and foolish attitude. May Eternal Azarah have pity on you, for Urel will show none. You are all traitors!"

"Oh, come now, Rafiel," the Chirri waved an irritated hand. "It is not such a big issue. What does Urel care for this space?" He smiled slyly. "Join us, Rafiel. If we find the Xhephan, you are well trained in handling it. I would make you my chief advisor."

"You insult me," Rafiel spat. "Never!"

"Then you give me no choice but to keep you here, so no tales reach the noble ears of Urel. Guards, seize them!"

Steel hissed through the room.

"This is treachery," Rafiel warned through clenched teeth.

"I call it self preservation. I have you, Rafiel. You are mine to do with as I please, and there is nothing you can do about it."

"You dare to lay hands on t'sam," an angry voice shouted, and a figure pushed forward in the guards' grip.

"You are in no position to stop me, Damin. Hold your tongue, or I will have it removed. But now, what to do with you? Ah, first, the most important thing. Tural, remove my sherra's azur."

Rafiel flinched, paling. "No!"

"That frightens you. I understand it will not kill you, sherra, only leave you vulnerable." He thrust his face nearly into Rafiel's. "I would rather live in a nest of tcol than leave you with that toy."

Rafiel spat in his face.

Rage flooded the Chirri. "Do it, Tural!"

"Kirra, no! Please. S'a is Na'id. Don't do this!" Jeqon pushed forward, face white.

"Where do your loyalties lie, Jeqon?" Samiel asked softly.

"That is not fair. You know the answer, but Samiel, to remove second sight, it goes against the laws of Azarah."

"You are not well, Jeqon. Stay out of this," Samiel said gently, and then his voice hardened. "Tural, I am waiting."

Rafiel struggled desperately in the grip of his guards as the priest walked towards him like a predator. Suddenly Tural was flung backwards by an invisible force. Eyes glinting, he got to his feet.

"Do not play those games with me, youngling," he whispered reprovingly. His hand lifted and a bolt of red hit Rafiel, who doubled over with a cry. The komage advanced once more, and the room watched breathlessly as his hand fastened on the stone. It flamed once, then dimmed to a dull glow as he snapped it off.

Rafiel's eyes went wide with shock, his body stiffening, and then he screamed, and went on screaming. There was a violent scuffle at the end of the room, ending with a bubbling moan. Not many noticed.

Staring with sick fascination at the tableau before them, McCoy clutched at the bars in horror.

"Spock, what are they doing to him?"

The Vulcan closed his eyes and did not answer.

The cries faded to a gasp as Rafiel slumped. His guards let him go, and he fell to the floor, face ashen, breathing harsh. A trickle of blood ran from his nose.

"You murdering traitor! You have killed them!" a voice shrieked.

Samiel stood coiled like a spring, his face almost a mask of lust as he gazed down at Rafiel. His eyes glittered, and then he smiled horribly at the fair-haired Chirri.

"Only one, Damin. Remiel should have known better than to attack my guard. Remove the corpse. It offends me."

The guards stooped over a bloody, huddled form. Damin lunged for Samiel with a snarl, but was held fast.

"As for your kirra," Samiel continued, toeing the slumped form, "s'a is not quite dead. Zatriel, take them down to the lower level and keep them separated. Have my sherra flogged when s'a recovers t'sas senses; pain will give t'sam something to think about."

They grabbed the Chirri under the arms, dragging him out, with Damin at the rear, fighting every step of the way.

"Control t'sam!" Samiel snapped, and a lash cracked.

Samiel turned to the cages with a terrifying grin. "You look pale, Healer. Never mind. You will have refreshing new company." He hit the switch and the cages dropped from sight.

"Spock, what did they do to him?" McCoy asked in horror.

"The stone is obviously linked to telepathic powers, Doctor. In essence, they stripped him of that extra sense by removing the stone."

"And it was agony," McCoy added. He shivered. "One hell of a public family squabble. Samiel has a real identity problem."

"Insane, Doctor. Dangerously insane."

* * * * *

They heard the booted feet outside the door, and then it crashed open as the group of guards manhandled Damin, who was screaming obscenities at them, inside. The Chirri was dishevelled, his clothing torn, but still he resisted, kicking and clawing.

"By the nine hells, get t'sam inside," Zatriel barked, opening Spock's cage. "Stay back, you," he growled at the Vulcan.

The panting guards picked up Damin bodily, flinging him inside, and he fell hard. He rolled to his feet, throwing himself at the bars.

"Rafiel!"

"Bring the other in," Zatriel ordered. "Punja. Lower the chains."

The little alien's face crumpled with horror. "But... but surely you won't..."

"You heard Samiel, or do you want to take t'sas place?"

Rafiel was dragged in, eyes half open. Wrists secured in the cuffs, clothing torn from his back, they hauled him up, his feet barely touching the ground.

"Shock t'sam well, Meterin," Zatriel grinned, "but don't kill t'sam."

The lash cracked on flesh. McCoy shut his eyes, sliding to his knees as the body jerked with every stroke, his own recoiling in violent sympathy. Noise assailed him - the cries of pain, laughter from the guards, and Damin's snarls of fury. Someone was weeping. It sounded like Punja.

"Enough. Take t'sam down."

McCoy opened his eyes. They threw the unconscious body in with him. The outer door slammed shut.

McCoy dropped down beside the alien, swiftly turning him onto his front. The Chirri's back was one mass of swollen bruising. In places the flesh had split, oozing blood. Chunks of the fur band had been flayed from the spine.

"Get away from t'sam! Keep your filthy hands off t'sam!" Damin was doing his best to break the bars, his face twisted into a frightening mask, his tail a writhing lash of agitation. His voice peaked to hysteria. "Rafiel! Kirraa..."

Spock acted. He hit him, shocking the Chirri back into sanity, automatically tensing in case the alien attacked him.

Damin gasped, and found himself in a steel grip. He eyed the Vulcan warily.

"I apologise," Spock said to the now calmer alien, releasing him. "McCoy will not harm Rafiel. He is a healer."

"Problem is, I have nothing to heal with," McCoy said sourly. "Do you have any water left, Spock?"

"Unfortunately not. How bad is it, McCoy?"

"Shock. A lot of bruising, but not fatal, I don't think."

"Bring t'sam here. Please."

McCoy looked up at the other Chirri, who crouched at the bars, hands thrust through the spaces in anguish. Straining slightly, he moved Rafiel over. Damin clutched at one hand, and McCoy mentally

hammered another nail into Samiel's coffin. It went beyond cruelty to have separated these two. Damin's devotion to Rafiel was obvious.

"Give me your cloak," he ordered. "It's cleaner than what we have on."

Bemused, the alien bunched it through the bars, watching as McCoy tore it into long strips. Wiping away as much of the blood as he could, he bound up the alien. Taking off his tunic, he covered the Chirri.

"There isn't much more I can do," he said.

"Thank you." The alien looked at them uncertainly. "Who are you?"

"You heard Samiel. Hostages, or pets. Name is McCoy. That is Spock."

The alien nodded, then lay close to the bars, one arm stretching to hold onto Rafiel's hand.

Spock and McCoy moved to the back of the cages.

"That was stupid, Spock. He could have killed you."

The Vulcan lifted an eyebrow. "It was a chance I had to take, Doctor."

"Yeah, sure." McCoy glanced at the two aliens. Rafiel was gaining consciousness, moaning slightly.

"Damin?"

"I am here. Lie still."

The unfocused eyes fixed on Damin, and then they widened in panic. "It's gone. I can't feel it! Empty!" He clutched at Damin's hand in terror.

"Sshh. Somehow we will get it back. They cannot kill your azur."

Rafiel raised his head, eyes unfocused. "Where is Remiel?" he whispered.

"S'a is dead," Damin said woodenly. "Remiel attacked the guards. They... they killed t'sam."

"Azarah, no! It is my fault. Oh, Remiel, kirra."

"No! It is not your fault. Only Samiel is to blame," Damin said urgently.

"Why? Why does s'a hate me so? I loved t'sam."

"Do not torment yourself. Samiel has always been different. You could not have known," Damin soothed, voice breaking.

"I will kill t'sam," Rafiel murmured, and then he wept, while Damin held him awkwardly through the bars. Eventually it ceased,

and silence fell over the cells.

* * * * *

It was cold. McCoy hunched miserably in his corner, arms wrapped about his bare middle, and he wished he had his tunic back. He stood up, tiptoeing over to the Chirri, and lightly checked the makeshift bandages. They were still in place. He stood, undecided, and then lay down next to him, grinning wryly, thinking of how on other occasions he had slept thus with Jim, sharing body heat in lonely caves and other out of the way places. The alien was better than a hot water bottle, and sighing, he closed his eyes.

McCoy passed from deep sleep into waking without transition, and then he froze. Rafiel was curled into his side like a pup, one long, six-fingered hand flung across his chest. Rafiel stirred, fixing glazed eyes on him as McCoy gently disentangled himself. Spock and Damin were already awake, talking quietly at the back of their cage. The alien turned, fixing unfathomable eyes on McCoy, and the Doctor hoped he had not taken offence at the sight of his mate curled next to him, but all he said was, "How is Rafiel?"

"Seems to be sleeping normally."

"I am awake," a soft voice said, and the Chirri sat up gingerly, wincing, holding the bars for support. He looked about him. "Quaint accommodation."

Damin hovered anxiously as he pulled himself to his feet.

"Damin. Remiel - did I dream...."

Damin shook his head.

"Azarah keep him," Rafiel sighed.

The outer door opened, and all four turned as one. Samiel, looking refreshed, walked in. Two guards stayed at the door. He came up to the cages, eyes fastened almost hungrily onto Rafiel.

"What do you want?" Damin snapped, moving protectively forward.

"Certainly not to talk to you." Samiel noticed the bandages, and his lips twitched. "That must hurt quite badly."

Rafiel remained silent.

"No tongue? You had enough to say yesterday," Samiel mocked.

"Say what you have come to say," Rafiel rasped. "I am listening."

"Why I came, in all sincerity, was to offer you my condolences. Not only for Remiel, although t'sas sudden death was t'sas own doing, but also for your guards and crew."

The Chirri was at the front bars, hands clenched. "What have you done to them?"

"I did nothing." He sighed. "See how they condemn me. I let them go, but there must have been a malfunction in your ship. It exploded above the peaks. Tragic. There were no survivors."

"You killed them," Rafiel said dully.

"How unjust of you, sherra. I never touched them. I only let them go." He folded his arms. "It hurts me to see you like this, Rafiel. All you have to do to gain your freedom, and Damin's, is to swear your allegiance to me. Such a little thing."

"You are wasting your time."

"So it would seem. I had hoped...." Samiel's eyes hardened. "You always were a fool, Rafiel. So be it. Goodbye, sherra."

He swept out, the door closing behind him.

"I don't like the way he said 'goodbye'," McCoy remarked. "What do you suppose he meant by that?"

Rafiel gave a harsh laugh. "With Samiel, anything from leaving us to die of thirst and starvation to blowing up the planet."

"I wish you hadn't said that," McCoy complained.

Rafiel looked at him, amused. "We have not yet been formally introduced."

"This is Healer McCoy, kirra. S'a fixed your back as much as was possible. This Vulcan is Spock."

"Under different circumstances it would be a pleasure." He swayed slightly. "I must sit down."

"Be careful, Rafiel. You're bleeding again," Damin said worriedly.

"Here, let me take a look," McCoy instructed him.

"Samiel said your genna... Kirrk, was it? S'a is looking for the stone?"

"He is," Spock replied. "But the odds on his finding it are incalculable."

"Which leaves you in a very vulnerable position." Rafiel winced as McCoy probed.

"Tell us something we don't already know," McCoy muttered. "He's crazy."

"What is the function of this stone?" Spock asked.

"The Xhephan is one of four energy stones given to my people millennia ago by Azarah, the All. That is what legend says. They are greatly revered, and have great power, but they do not allow just anyone to handle them. Dormant, they are harmless pieces of rock."

"These rocks are alive?" McCoy asked. "Lift your arm."

"In a sense, yes, but only those talent-born can be trained as Jhiba to use them."

"What are they used for?" Spock enquired.

"Whatever the keeper commands. To heal, reverse crops - kill. Anything. That is why they are continually monitored. If Samiel gets t'sas hands on the lost one, and if Tural can control it, which I doubt, this space will be in deadly danger." His eyes grew hazy. "The manner in which this one was lost is true. Samiel, s'a has never forgotten or forgiven, but for that s'a cannot be blamed. Samiel was only five ages old. Urel, my parent and our ruler, took t'sam in, and raised t'sam with me and my other siblings." Rafiel sighed. "Samiel's treachery will break Urel when s'a finds out, and that is something I fear."

"What are we going to do, Rafiel?"

The Chirri smiled gently at Damin, touching fingers. "What can we do, kirra? For now, we are at Samiel's mercy."

* * * * *

The hours dragged past and nobody came. Not even Punja. Hunger and thirst gnawed at McCoy. *What a way to go*, he thought sourly. While he moped, the two Chirri slept and Spock prowled.

"For pity's sake, Spock, sit down!" McCoy growled. "You've checked these cages a hundred times!"

The Vulcan sat, inspecting the floor covering.

"You've checked that too," McCoy snapped. "There - is - no - way - out!"

Spock nearly sighed. "You are correct, Doctor."

"I wonder what Jim - what's the matter?"

"Someone is coming," the Vulcan warned.

Listening hard, they heard a stealthy sound at the door, and McCoy swiftly shook Rafiel, putting a warning finger to his lips.

"We have company," he whispered.

The door slid open and a cloaked figure slipped inside. It was Jeqon. McCoy gaped at him as, wordlessly, he unlocked the cages.

"If you are to escape, it must be done now," the green-eyed alien whispered.

Rafiel staggered to his feet. "Why are you helping us?"

"I have to, or I could never live with myself," Jeqon said.

"It's a trap," McCoy accused.

"No, Healer McCoy. I... what Samiel did was a perversion. Please believe me. I didn't want this." He took a deep breath. "Samiel is sleeping - very soundly, but we must hurry before the guard changes." He picked up a bundle he had left at the door. "Put these on." He handed them each a hooded cape. McCoy still eyed him with suspicion.

"There is a ship ready for reconnaissance for tomorrow. It is only a three-seater but there is storage space. We go through the kitchens to its exit hatch, but hurry. Punja is keeping watch."

They followed hesitantly, McCoy helping Damin to support Rafiel. Jegon led the way up to the next level, keeping to the shadows. They took another back tunnel, and only once had to dive for cover as a Chirri passed by.

The kitchens were deserted. Punja waited nervously by the drop shaft. With a small cry of relief, he dropped to his knees, hugging Rafiel's legs.

"Punja will take you the rest of the way, but you must take s'a with you. Samiel will blame t'sam first."

"And you, Jegon? When s'a finds out otherwise?" Rafiel asked.

The Chirri shook his head. "I cannot. I have to stay with Samiel. I am of his mate group and cannot leave t'sam. I wouldn't want to."

"S'a may kill you," Damin protested.

Jegon smiled. "No. That s'a will never do." He reached under his cloak, handing first a knife to Damin. "There may be a guard at the top of the hatch." He faced Rafiel, his palm held open. "Your Azur, Na'id."

Rafiel took it and they touched fingers. "I will remember, Jegon. You know how this must end. I...."

"I understand, Na'id." His eyes were filled with sadness. "You must go. Seek out genna Kirrk if you can. S'a will aid you. Healer McCoy, I am sorry - for the throat massage," and then he was gone.

They hissed up the shaft, stopping with a click under the hatch. It slid open, and Damin cautiously looked out.

"No-one about," he whispered.

They crept out, hugging the ground and shadows towards the perimeter fence.

"That one." Punja pointed out the craft.

"It will be a tight squeeze," Damin noted.

They crawled on their bellies to the ship. McCoy's heart hammered. *A little further*, he pleaded silently.

The hatch was open.

"Can you help fly, kirra?" Damin asked.

Rafiel nodded. "I still feel mangled, but it will pass. Get aboard, everybody. Punja, you sit at the back with the healer. Spock, you had better take the weapons station."

They scrambled aboard, quickly strapping in. The hatch closed with a hiss and locked.

"Fuel status?"

"Mixed and stable," Damin answered. "Everything seems to check. The anti-matter inducer curve is balanced. Let's get out of

here."

The ship purred silently, swinging up into the dark skies, lights off, and then they hovered.

"Open wings," Rafiel ordered.

A whine sounded near to McCoy's ear. A sudden thought came to him.

"How come Jeqon is so certain Samiel won't harm him?"

"S'a is carrying Samiel's infant. Accelerate."

The ship shot into space, the G-force squashing the surprise from McCoy's face. Damin twisted round in his seat.

"Where to, Spock?"

"The shipping lanes would be the logical choice."

"Which way is that?"

"Unfortunately, I have no idea," the Vulcan said mildly. "Do you have a star chart?"

"That screen. The control is to your left."

Holographs flashed past while Spock studied them. He stopped the projections. "This one. Alpha Moro Three. It appears to be the nearest recognisable system."

"It will do." Rafiel flicked a glance. "Programme it into the computer, Damin. Hold on at the back. We are going into synch shift. Execute now."

The stars exploded. McCoy closed his eyes to keep his grip on reality, not quite crediting what he was experiencing. Warp speed did not feel like this on the Enterprise, but then the ship was a thousand times bigger.

They jumped again and again, and every time he felt as if he was being pulled inside out. He tasted blood as his air passage tissues burned with the forces crushing him.

"It won't take another jump," he heard Damin say, and then he blacked out.

* * * * *

McCoy could no longer feel his legs. Sleep had claimed him for a few hours until Punja had thumped him in the ribs.

"Spock, if we don't find terra firma soon, I'm going to spend the rest of my life bent double!"

"Patience, Doctor. We are making for the nearest available star system."

"Yeah, sure. Hey, what's that?"

The craft lurched.

"We are too heavy for this speed," Damin said helpfully. "The engines are straining."

"Cut back, Dami," Rafiel ordered. The alien sounded exhausted.

"Just don't eject me," McCoy groaned as an alarm hooted softly.

"Perhaps we should attempt a mayday," Spock suggested. "Federation frequency."

McCoy felt his mouth go dry. To have come this far! He closed his eyes, listening to the repeated request for help.

* * * * *

McCoy's eyes flew open. "Spock! That's Uhura! It's the Enterprise, Spock!"

Spock sat back, stunned. "Our ship," he answered the Chirri's questioning looks. "Perhaps I should answer."

Damin twisted around, pulling a switch on Spock's console. "It's on audio."

"U.S.S. Enterprise. This is Spock aboard Chirray vessel. We are in need of immediate assistance."

There was a deafening silence, and then a gasp. "Mr. Spock!"

"Lt. Uhura, here are our co-ordinates. I recommend alacrity," Spock added as the craft shuddered.

"Spock! How?" Jim's voice. Disbelief.

McCoy could no longer hold out.

"Quit wasting time, Jim. Come and get us before this tin plate disintegrates around us!"

"Bones! Hang on. We're coming!"

The two Chirray fought to control the ship. Time ticked past. Seconds, minutes - forever.

"There." Damin pointed.

It was the most beautiful sight McCoy had ever seen as the Enterprise disentangled herself from the diamond stars and flowed towards them at top speed.

"Chirray vessel, we see you. Can you manage to land in the rear cargo bay? We cannot risk beaming you aboard while the ship is slewing like that." Jim sounded worried.

Rafiel nodded at Spock. "Advise for emergency entry. We'll be going in hot."

"It's being arranged," Kirk answered when Spock passed on the request.

The Enterprise slowed, and the Chirray made a dummy run around her, gauging the distance. The hangar doors rolled back, guidance lights winking.

"Stand by. We are attempting entry now," Spock warned.

"Hold on," Rafiel advised.

The thrusters cut in and the craft slewed, her nose dropping.

"Fold wings and cut power."

The doors loomed ahead, and they held their breath as she skimmed over the lip. They snapped through the first dragnets as if they were made from tissue paper. One wing casing buckled, the tortured metal screaming.

"Emergency thrusters!"

"We are running out of deck," Damin said mildly as the last net parted.

McCoy prayed, his body braced for the impact.

The craft shuddered violently, her belly screeching across the deck, scouring deeply, and then, with a spine-wrenching jolt, crumpled into the bulkhead, throwing the occupants forward, and then she stopped, all life drained from her.

"Too close," Rafiel breathed, his face covered in a film of sweat.

"We appear to be in one piece," Spock stated above the alarm that screamed from outside, while white foam poured out of vents, covering the stricken ship.

Punja unwrapped his arms from around McCoy, trembling violently, his little face screwed up in terror.

"We had better go first, Spock, in case security is phaser-happy."

"Agreed, Doctor."

McCoy crawled out of the hatch, lowering himself gingerly to the foam covered deck, and as he'd thought, looked into a circle of red-shirted security men.

"You blast me with that thing, Saunders, and so help me, I won't be responsible for what happens at your next physical!"

The security man looked startled, and then a wide grin split his face.

"Dr. McCoy! Mr. Spock! Welcome back," and then he stiffened as Punja's round form emerged from the ship.

"Don't panic, boys. They're on our side."

A whirlwind erupted amongst them. "Bones! Spock!" Bear arms hugged them.

"Easy, Jim." McCoy winced, and then he didn't trust his voice any more.

Kirk quickly dropped his hands, seeing for the first time in all his excitement their dishevelled state.

"I've been out of my mind with worry. So thin! How on earth did you get away?"

"Later, Jim. Let me first introduce you to the others. They too are victims of Samiel." He guided Kirk towards the three aliens standing by the craft and being watched suspiciously by security. "Jim, this is Rafiel, Damin and Punja. Our genna, Jim Kirk."

"We appreciate your timely arrival, genna Kirrk," Rafiel said, and then he pitched forward into the startled Kirk's arms.

* * * * *

McCoy lay in his sickbay bed, clean and fed, wrapped in a languor of contentment. Spock had escaped sickbay, but had been ordered to his quarters to rest. Rafiel lay in the small side ward, with Punja and Damin keeping vigil over him.

McCoy frowned. The Chirri's collapse had been sudden, his already abused strength taxed to the limit. Dr. Kerwin had treated and dressed his flayed back, but otherwise had been baffled, hoping that rest and warmth would help. Kirk had offered Damin and Punja quarters, but they had refused, staying close to Rafiel.

McCoy, true to form, had protested when Kerwin had put him to bed, but until Kirk released him as acting Chief Surgeon, Kerwin had pointedly said he was still in charge. McCoy had given in, not too reluctantly.

Some rest, McCoy grinned, thinking of the endless stream of visitors, while Kirk had hovered, until Kerwin had put his foot down and had evicted everyone, the Captain included.

McCoy yawned, rolling over, and caught sight of a figure sneaking through the doors. It was Jim.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, settling on the bed.

"Oh, I'll be fine. It seems unreal, though, that we're back."

"It was terrible, wasn't it?"

McCoy nodded. Kirk knew the outline, but had refrained from pressing them. The reports would have to wait.

"Spock encouraged me not to give up, and yet, although we are back, the situation hasn't changed. The Federation is still threatened, and Samiel will probably renew his campaign now he doesn't have us any more. Jeqon saved our hides once again."

"I doubt whether he would have done so if Rafiel wasn't there," Kirk contradicted.

"Maybe not." McCoy sighed. "What now, Jim?"

"I honestly don't know. We are running out of time and ideas. Starfleet is in a panic. They are mobilising and trying to pacify the Klingons and Romulans at the same time. We could attack Samiel's base en masse, but by the time we get there, he could be long gone. Anyway, of the two who know exactly where it is, one is unconscious and the other is not talking."

"Captain Kirk! What are you doing here?" Christine Chapel

glared at them from the door.

Kirk held his hands up in surrender. "Just leaving, Chris. See you in the morning, Bones." He slunk out.

"You're a tyrant, Christine," McCoy complained.

She raised one fair eyebrow. "Really, Dr. McCoy?"

"Yes. No respect for your boss."

"You know that is not true, but," she smiled impishly, "how often do I get to order you around? Now go to sleep or I will sedate you."

His eyes widened uncertainly. "Don't you dare!" He rolled over.

PART III

Christine Chapel checked on her strange charges in the side ward. The little midget lay curled at Rafiel's feet like a pet dog. His companion lay stretched out on the spare bed, long blonde hair a mass of disarray. She went over quietly, checking on Rafiel's breathing. The monitor above the bed thumped reassuringly, and suddenly she was aware that he was watching her. Unnerved, Christine did her best to smile.

"Welcome back. How do you feel?"

"Surprisingly well. How long have I been here?"

"Two ship's days. Do you remember where you are and what happened?"

"Yes." He shifted carefully into a sitting position, brushing hair from his face, still staring at her. "Forgive, seera," he said, as Christine blushed from the intensity of that gaze. "I had not thought to find your species here."

She was bewildered. "I am not sure what you mean by that. I am Human, like Dr. McCoy and Captain Kirk," and then she remembered how Punja had also addressed her and the female staff as "Seera". Were women revered where they came from? She made a mental note to find out.

"Where are the Healer and Spock?"

"They have both resumed their duties, but right now they are busy with the Captain at a briefing. Now, can I bring you something to eat?"

"That would be most welcome, and also my clothing, I must speak with genna Kirrk." He swung out of bed before she could stop him, and stood wobbling.

"You shouldn't get up," she admonished.

He smiled. "I am fine," and to demonstrate this, walked to where Damin lay, shaking him and Punja. "Wake up, kirra."

The blonde Chirri looked confused at the strange surroundings, then he smiled with relief as seeing Rafiel. "You gave us a fright," he said softly.

"Na'id, you are well?" Punja asked, scrambling off the bed.

"Yes, Punja. Quite well. Dami, we must see genna Kirrk. Enough time has been wasted." He turned to Christine. "Respect, seera. My clothes?"

"If you insist, but Dr. Kerwin will not approve of your leaving sickbay without his seeing you first." She crossed to a closet, and laid them out. "I'll go and fetch your food and arrange for someone to show you the way."

"Go wait outside, Punja," Rafiel ordered, and the little Shrrak bowed, then followed Christine out.

Christine busied herself with a food tray, eyeing the little alien as he investigated sickbay.

"Punja, what does Rafiel mean when he calls me 'seera'?" she asked as he seated himself at the table.

"It is what you are. Your form." He hesitated. "The Chirray, they do not have seera, but greatly respect them."

"You mean women. Females. And your people? You are not Chirray."

"No, I am Shrrak. We have seera, as do the Reha, but please, do not ask me these things. I will be punished."

"You are not with Samiel, Punja," a voice said behind them, causing them both to jump. "You must have no fear of punishment. I do not run my burrow that way."

"Then... then I am to stay with you, Na'id?" His round eyes were full of hope.

"Of course." Rafiel looked surprised. "Unless you wish to serve elsewhere?"

The Shrrak fixed him with a look of adoration. "No, Na'id. My place is with you."

Christine called a security guard to take them to the briefing room, and they followed him through the labyrinth of the Enterprise, taking note of all they passed, and also aware of the many curious - and some hostile - glances from the crew. The whole ship knew of the passengers they carried. Many were still angry over the Arda incident, and of the abduction of Spock and McCoy, mistrusting these apparently friendly aliens.

Security man Saunders stopped outside the briefing room and, without breaking stride, Rafiel went in. The group at the table turned in surprise as another security man made to block their way, and then broke off in confusion at the mild glance Rafiel directed at him. It spoke volumes.

"It's all right, Hawks," Kirk told him as he appealed to his Captain.

"I apologise for the intrusion, genna Kirrk, but it is vital that we discuss this unfortunate incident."

"Very well," Kirk said slowly. "You are fully recovered?"

"Sufficiently, yes. I have as yet not been able to express my gratitude for your hospitality."

Kirk only smiled, waving the others to make room at the table, and introducing them.

"I have had full reports from Mr. Spock and Dr. McCoy on what happened at Samiel's headquarters. I must admit that you are somewhat of an unexpected element. Am I correct in saying that this... crusade of Samiel's is entirely his own doing?"

"You are correct. It came as a surprise to me as well, although we had our suspicions at home that something was not quite right. That is why our Jhiberdan sent me to check up on t'sam."

"How long has he been here?" Scotty asked.

"Quite a while. The advance scout group and engineers arrived nearly five seasons ago to choose a suitable base for the burrow. Samiel left soon after with t'sas handpicked packs." He gave a short laugh. "S'a must have been planning and recruiting for this for ages past, and not one of us caught on to t'sas intentions. The reports s'a sent held nothing about the stone's whereabouts, but there was always some excuse for more ships and equipment - and then Tural left." He gazed at Kirk evenly.

"Tural. Yes, I have already met him." Kirk shivered. "Where does he fit into this?"

Rafiel got to his feet with a frown and paced to the observation window. "S'a has the misconception that s'a can handle the Xhephan."

"Can he?" Kirk asked.

"No, but t'sas testing will come. Tural is power hungry. S'a has always been so, more than Samiel. Always more concerned with politics than following t'sas calling in the Temples. S'a has a strong power force, but it will not help t'sam this time. S'a is not talent-born, only a magician." His voice held contempt.

"What is the difference?"

Rafiel raised his brows at McCoy. "A great deal. T'sas power does not flow from within, but from around t'sam. S'a has no stability; no peace within, and so any slip could destroy t'sam."

"Do you know what he is talking about?" Scotty whispered to the Doctor.

"Not really," McCoy answered blandly.

"Samiel's ultimate goal is to rule here," the Chirri continued. "I could give you the planet's co-ordinates. What would you do then, genna Kirrk?"

Kirk spread his hands. "There is only one thing to do, Attack the planet - or do you have an alternative?"

"Perhaps." His gaze swept over them. "This space will be no match for Samiel's forces. It will crumble, and s'a will enslave you all."

"I cannot believe that," Scotty said hotly. "Starfleet - "

"You cannot win," Rafiel interrupted. "You do not know us. I am Chirray and I know our fighting ability. Call in your Starfleet, and you will have made the ultimate mistake. All it needs is one transmission and Urel will send aid."

"I thought you said he doesn't know of Samiel's plans."

"S'a doesn't, and who will tell t'sam? I have no means to inform Urel. All my sheerra need tell t'sam is that the barbaric aliens are attacking again, like the time before, and s'a will act, while Samiel sits on the fringes and waits to pick up the pieces."

"What would you do in my place?" Kirk asked carefully.

"Find the stone."

"Back to square one," McCoy muttered. "There is no way."

"Oh, but there is." Rafiel looked at Damin. "The Fire Watchers."

Understanding dawned on Damin's face and he paled. "They will not meddle in our affairs, Rafiel. This space is not under their charge. It is forbidden. Urel directed you in that from childhood."

"What are you talking about?" Kirk demanded.

"The Watchers of Azarah. Guardians of the Xhephan," Damin whispered.

"Watchers?" Kirk looked perplexed. "Who are they?"

Rafiel turned dark eyes on him. "Spirits, genna Kirk."

* * * * *

Kirk paced his cabin, hands clasped behind him. Spock watched his Captain walk a track through the carpeting.

"You will have to decide, Jim," McCoy drawled from a chair.

Kirk glared at him. Yes, he would have to decide. Rafiel was waiting for his decision to carry on with - what? The alien had become close-mouthed when pressed for details. In exasperation, Kirk threw up his hands.

"Magical stones, wizards, and now spirits! Can you imagine what Starfleet would say to this one? I would face an early retirement in no time!" He rounded on his First Officer. "He was so... Spock, do you think that there... that he can talk to spirits?" he asked finally in helpless confusion.

"What Rafiel defines as spirits may not be what we understand by the word, Captain. They are a unique race. Their psychic channelling of energy demonstrates this. These 'spirits' may be nothing more than a highly advanced lifeform comparable to the

Organians."

"Yes," Kirk mused. "Who watch over them, as the Organians keep us and the Klingons from tearing each other's throats out, I wonder what these watchers would do if war did erupt between Federation and Chirray."

"But Damin said they would not interfere in this space," McCoy reminded them.

"Rafiel appears confident that they will intervene. Space. They keep mentioning 'this space'. Does that mean they come from beyond our galaxy, or from an area that we haven't reached yet? Spock, do you trust him?" he asked suddenly.

The Vulcan steepled his fingers. "I feel that Rafiel's intentions are honest. The situation forces him to ally himself with us."

"But?"

"Were it not for Samiel's treachery towards this Urel, and his pathological vendetta against the Federation, which will probably spark an intergalactic confrontation, I would be forced to dispute his concern."

McCoy frowned. "Don't you think you are being a bit unfair?"

"No, Doctor, I do not. They are an unknown element. Mercurial, with a close-knit social structure and an even tighter mating unit. To threaten one would be to threaten all." He turned to Kirk. "I would suggest you let him continue with this experiment, Captain."

* * * * *

Kirk nibbled on a fingernail, eyes flickering uneasily at the flowing blackness beyond the viewscreen. He was sceptical, and felt silly at the charged tension in his body as he waited for something to happen.

The Chirri had closeted himself in the officers' lounge, barring everyone, including Damin, who sat guard at the door with the solemn-faced Punja. What was Rafiel doing? Making fools out of them all?

"Anything on the scanners, Spock?"

"Negative, Captain."

Kirk started to pace, absently rubbing his arms. "Ensign Carter, is it my imagination or is it getting cold in here?"

"Environmental temperature is normal, sir."

The lift doors opened, startling him slightly, and McCoy strolled in, appearing relaxed, but Kirk recognised the tense set of his shoulders.

"Anything?" He had asked the same question the previous hour.

Kirk shook his head, sat down, and went back to nibbling. The bridge was charged with a deathly stillness.

"One more hour, and then...."

"Engines slowing, Captain!" Sulu called out urgently. "We have dropped from warp speed. I didn't touch anything." The helmsman had gone pale.

The red alert klaxon gave one hoot, and then died.

"Spock?" Kirk was on his feet, feeling decidedly unsettled.

"Power levels are dropping shipwide. The sensors are inoperative." He watched as his monitor screens went blank. "Except for life support, the computer has shut down. We are dead in space. Fascinating."

"Uhura, any communications?" Kirk asked quickly.

"Nothing, sir. My board has also shut down."

"Negative response at the helm, Captain."

"Come with me, Spock," Kirk ordered, running for the lift.

Only at the last instant did he avoid smashing his face into the closed doors which had refused to open at his approach. Kirk threw up his hands to ward off the impact, and felt McCoy's hand steady him.

"Emergency stairwell," he directed.

They moved down the stairwell at breakneck speed, glancing into the corridors on each level. Crew stood in frightened groups, trapped. Muffled hammering could be heard behind the closed sheeted fire doors.

They reached their destined level, and suddenly a softness touched Kirk's awareness. His pace faltered, and then he stopped as he felt rather than saw a blue light seeping throughout his ship. He stared, hypnotised, and then quietly folded to the floor.

* * * * *

Rafiel sat cross-legged on the floor, t'sas azur cupped in both hands. T'sas mind was laid wide open, baring t'sas soul. S'a was one with the universe. Hours had slipped by unnoticed as s'a prepared. S'a was afraid. S'a was disobeying the cardinal rule of a talent-born. The room was closing in on t'sam, unbearably hot against the ice-cold jewel in t'sas hands.

"Hear me, Ja'arani, hear me." The words whispered into the stillness, while t'sas mind pushed upward to the forbidden plane. "Ja'arani, aid me, for our need is great."

Sweat poured down t'sas back, the fur-band soggy against t'sas skin, and s'a shivered, senses heightened to a feverish pitch s'a had never experienced before.

A dull, reverberating crack erupted in the room, the azur becoming so unbearably bright that t'sas third eyelid involuntarily sealed across t'sas eyes.

"Hreshr!" The oath escaped t'sam, and s'a nearly dropped the stone, and then the fur-band lifted, t'sas tail frozen in rigid

terror as s'a heard a whisper of sound behind t'sam - like a door being softly closed. Even as s'a turned, s'a felt the ship slowing. The light had turned to a pale blue.

It had chosen the form of a Chirri, but the painfully beautiful face held no trace of mortality, sapphire eyes holding knowledge and understanding beyond comprehensibility. Pale hair that flamed with light tumbled down its back in a wild mane. It stared at Rafiel, who shakily prostrated himself before it, critically. The truth be known, t'sas knees would have buckled had s'a remained standing.

"Rise, Rafiel." The voice was a shivering of silver, almost gentle. "I commend your courage, and your foolishness for calling us."

Shaking, Rafiel stood. "I had no choice," s'a almost whispered.

"Indeed?" It walked towards t'sam, the space it occupied warping and twisting around it. Heart hammering, Rafiel fought not to back away, aware of the slight smile playing on the Watcher's lips.

"Do the ritual teachings of Urel, your parent, mean nothing to you?"

Rafiel knew what it meant. "I revere them, Ja'arani, but..." He hesitated.

The Watcher lifted perfect brows.

"The law is passed down by word only. Nowhere is it so written that to call you is forbidden," Rafiel said in breathless haste. "Forgive, Ja'arani, but our need is great."

The Watcher's lips twitched with amusement. "Logical reasoning. You seek the stone."

Rafiel blinked. Of course. The Watchers would know. "Yes," s'a said simply.

"You place childlike faith in us. This space is not under our dominion, child of Urel. What makes you think it is within our right to help you?"

"Hope, Ja'arani."

"And compassion for these weaker beings?"

The question surprised Rafiel. Compassion? He had not thought of it that way, or of Kirrk being weak. "Perhaps survival for both our species," he answered carefully.

The Watcher looked thoughtful. "Ah, survival." It walked slowly around Rafiel. "Tell me. If we allow the stone to be recovered, how will you use it? To destroy your misguided sherra?"

Rafiel gazed into the sapphire void. "No, Ja'arani. T'sas testing will be with me. For family honour."

"What of Tural?" The face became almost sly.

"That I cannot honour. S'a is a mockery of all that is

Chirray. It would be fitting."

"You are serious, and I applaud your honesty." The Watcher went to the view window, a soft nimbus of light playing around it. "And after, Rafiel?"

"After, Ja'arani?"

The Watcher's face hardened. "Once you have what you seek and Samiel's destiny has been concluded, what then, Rafiel? Will you succumb to the dark forces and follow the path of chaos to continue your sherra's ultimate goal of domination?"

Rafiel was shocked. The idea had never occurred to t'sam! "No, Ja'arani! That I will never do! The Xhephan will be returned home into the care of the Ashaie."

"Pledge this to me!" The Watcher held out a long fingered hand. "If you break faith, your soul will know no comfort."

Rafiel took the hand in his, dropping before the Watcher. The skin was ice-cold, but it burned in t'sas.

"I pledge it." The grip tightened, and a sudden lance of pain burned t'sas palm.

"So be it," the Watcher murmured, eyes closed as if listening to another voice. It released its grip, its tone softening. "Return to the beginning, for the stone was never truly lost. There it has slept for twenty-five ages."

Rafiel's eyes widened as s'a understood. "The stone was sought there and never found. It has lain there all this time, and no-one knew? How?"

The Watcher's lips quirked. "No-one thought to ask, as you have," it said drily. "Seek it out and use it, but do not lose sight of the virtues. Use your gift, and remember that you cannot summon me again. I have answered you this once. We can aid you no more."

The Chirri bowed t'sas head in subservience. The air whispered about t'sam, and even as s'a heard a faint rustle, akin to a feathered creature, the Watcher vanished.

Rafiel sank to the floor, trembling with the enormity of what had happened. The light had vanished, and the streaming starfields witnessed that the ship was under way again. Absently, s'a rubbed at the burning itch on t'sas palm, and then looked in astonishment at the four-rayed symbol etched into the skin. The Watcher had marked t'sam, perhaps as a warning to honour t'sas pledge. All this time, s'a mused, and the stone was still on the planet of their dead.

Rafiel rose, crossing to the door, which opened normally onto a strange sight. Damin lay curled outside, in a deep sleep, Punja not far from t'sam. The security guard genna Kirrk had following them lay further down the corridor, and s'a could see that this strange sleep had overcome others as well.

Rafiel knelt next to t'sas mate, shaking t'sam. "Damin? Wake up, kirra."

Damin stirred, eyes crossed with sleep, and then confusion blurred them. "What happened? I must have fallen asleep."

"You were not the only one, kirra. At a guess I would say that the whole ship has been affected." S'a indicated the snoring guard.

"This must mean... they answered you," Damin said with certainty. Rafiel wore a look s'a had never seen before.

"Yes," the Chirri answered, voice low. "I know where the Xhephan is." Rafiel felt suddenly drained, and sat down heavily next to Damin, leaning on t'sam for support, both physically and mentally. *Oh, my people, weep for the slain, for I cannot.*

Kirk opened his eyes and was instantly shocked into wakefulness. He was lying on deck five's floor. What had happened? He turned his head, and he gaped. Spock and McCoy were lying close to him. He was on his feet in an instant, suddenly remembering the ship's power loss, and a strange, blue light. He shook Spock, relieved to find his First Officer snap to instant alertness.

"Fascinating."

"Keep your scientific curiosity for later, Mr. Spock, and wake McCoy. I am not sure what has happened here, but systems seem to be normal."

Kirk went to a comm-link. "Bridge. Sulu, can you hear me?"

"Sulu here, Captain." The helmsman's voice was wary.

"Status, Mr. Sulu?"

There was an embarrassed silence. "I... ship's functions normal, sir. We are on our original heading at warp three. Captain, how did this happen?"

"I don't know. Maintain present course. Kirk out." He turned to Spock. "Your views?"

The Vulcan looked at him calmly. "We have been visited."

"Jim, what's going on?" McCoy looked awed.

"Mass somnolence, Doctor," Spock answered. "Fascinating."

"Is that all you have to say? Fascinating? Good heavens, the ship was a sitting target!"

Kirk looked grim. "I agree with you, Bones. I have some questions for our guests."

"Which I will answer, genna Kirrk."

Kirk whirled, startled by their sudden appearance. Did they always have to move so quietly? Damin had his arm around Rafiel's shoulders, and the Chirri looked as if he needed the support.

"My ship and crew were incapacitated, Rafiel. Do you have an explanation?"

"Not now, genna Kirrk," Damin rapped. "S'a is in no condition to explain."

"I think I have the right," Kirk contradicted.

Damin's eyes slitted dangerously, but Rafiel put a restraining hand on his. "It is all right, kirra. Perhaps if we could retire to our quarters? There I will explain everything."

The cabin was spacious, one of the units used by those travelling dignitaries the Enterprise sometimes carried. Rafiel sat on a rug, a cushion at his back, and again, McCoy noticed the Chirray's lack of interest in chairs. Furniture was obviously not used by them.

"You should eat, Rafiel. You have lost a lot of energy." Damin hovered, and then went to the automatic food dispenser, giving Kirk a dark look.

"I know where the Xhephan stone is, genna Kirrk."

"So you were successful. Where is it?"

"It never left the planet."

"Those... Watchers told you?"

Rafiel smiled slightly. "You are still sceptical. Oh, yes, it came." He closed his eyes, fingers straying to the mark. He closed his hand, reluctant for these aliens to see. It was personal.

Damin placed a loaded tray on the floor, folding down, face intent. "Can you tell us what it looked like?"

Rafiel nodded. "It came as a Chirri. Ah, Damin, you should have seen it. Perfect and beautiful. At first I was terribly afraid, but it only questioned and chided me." He ate ravenously. "It will not be easy to find the stone. By now the burrow will be overgrown."

"The ship's sensors and scanners can help locate it. Rafiel, why were we all put to sleep?"

The Chirri shrugged. "I cannot answer that. I did not know until I opened the door and saw Damin and Punja."

"Perhaps it was a precaution to protect us," Spock said thoughtfully.

"It didn't affect Rafiel," McCoy pointed out.

"But he is Chirri and talent-born, Doctor. Therein may lie the difference, as well as it was he who had summoned them."

"You are also a telepath, Mr. Spock, and yet you succumbed," McCoy snapped.

"Telepathic and psychic abilities are different, Doctor," Spock said patiently.

"And you are certainly not Chirray. Not with those ears," Kirk teased.

"Oh, but they are such beautiful ears," Punja exclaimed, touching his own wistfully. The cabin exploded into laughter,

relieving the underlying tension.

* * * * *

A thick, dirty mush of atmospheric turbulence swirled around the orange planet.

"A grim place for a scientific expedition," Kirk murmured,

"Indeed, Captain, but ideal for those who wish to remain hidden to outsiders," Spock answered. "Arid conditions. The flora appears to consist of desert vegetation. There are no life signs."

"Must remind you of home, Spock," McCoy drawled. The Vulcan let it pass.

Kirk turned to the two Chirray standing near Spock's station. "Rafiel, are you sure this is the right planet?"

"Positive." He stabbed at a screen readout. "The burrow's location should be around here."

"Spock, contact the seismological department and start sensor sweeps in that area."

"Will anything show up?" McCoy asked. "What I mean is, that if they wanted to remain hidden, they would have taken precautions."

"A logical thought, Doctor," Spock complimented him.

The work was thorough but painstakingly slow.

"I have something, Captain," Lt. Fallow called out from the depth gauge console.

Kirk crowded around with the others. "Spock, calibrate the sensors with the seismological station."

"Something; dark shadows. It could be the burrow, or caves."

"Perhaps we should beam down and take a look," McCoy suggested.

"An excellent suggestion, Bones. Uhura, notify the transporter room, and have a security team meet us there. Also get Mr. Scott up to the bridge. He has the con."

"Permission to join the landing party, Captain?"

"Very well, Mr. Chekov."

* * * * *

They materialised to a stark landscape of rock and clumps of scrub. The air was hot and dry.

"Spread out," Kirk ordered, "but stay in contact with each other. If you find anything resembling the underground complex, contact me first and don't tamper with anything." He saw McCoy frown. "Bones?"

"When we find the burrow, I want to check it for microbes before we enter."

"Your precautions are logical, Healer McCoy," Rafiel said. "The burrow has been sealed for a long time. Air will have to be recirculated."

They walked without talking, tricorders balanced, searching for the tiniest hint of the tunnels. Baillie sweated in the heat, then his boot caught in a tangle of scrub, and he fell.

"Big feet," Chekov teased, but Baillie was on his knees, pulling at the growth.

"Bingo! Look at this, Chekov."

A round, corroded disc lay half embedded in the ground, bits of wire still recognisable. Excited, Chekov checked the surrounding area. "Solid," he said disappointedly, and then called Kirk. "Captain, we have found a beacon of some sort, but there is no sign of any underground structure."

"We are close, genna Kirrk. That must be a guidance beacon." Rafiel looked out across the plateau. "Those trees. I think our direction is over there."

Kirk could barely make them out. The Chirri's eyesight was far superior. They carried on, climbing now, and came across another beacon.

"It is there," Rafiel shivered. "I can feel it." The alien increased his speed, breaking into a run, his blonde companion behind him.

"Damn him!" McCoy complained, puffing, as Kirk ordered them to follow. "One day I would like to meet a species who is slower than us poor Humans!"

"You already have, Bones," Kirk glanced behind at the struggling Shrrak.

"I forgot about him," McCoy grinned. "Give the little chap a piggyback ride, Mr. Spock."

They caught up with Rafiel and Damin at the trees. A depression in the land lay below them. The Chirri looked grave. "It is here."

It must have once resembled a compound, but now it was overgrown with decay. Some twisted structures could be glimpsed beneath the wild tangle.

"Where would the hatch be?"

Rafiel shrugged. "Any place. I will find it." He took the black gem in his hand, moving slowly, pacing out the circumference of the compound.

"Start looking for any metal surface," Kirk told his men, "but do not tamper with it." He opened his communicator, hailing the Enterprise. "Mr. Scott, we have discovered the burrow's location. Lock onto these new co-ordinates."

"And the stone, Captain?"

"Nothing yet, Scotty. Beam down some environmental suits with

charged hand lamps. I'll let you know if we need anything else. Kirk out."

McCoy was beckoning wildly. He ran over.

"It's the hatch."

Kirk took a closer look at what Rafiel had uncovered. The black, eroded metal surface lay flush with the ground. He could see no switches. "How do you open it?"

"It will have to be cut, genna Kirrk. It has been sealed."

"The ship is beaming stuff down; I'll get them to add a laser torch."

"And I want everyone suited up before you touch it," McCoy said firmly.

It took twenty minutes before everyone was dressed in the suits, and for the tangled vines to be cleared. A crewman carefully cut through the sides of the hatch. It fell, the echo of its crash reaching them.

"We will need rope to get down. The drop shaft has been taken out," Damin said, leaning over the dark hole, shining a light down.

A long length was brought out, made fast by pitons. The two Chirray went first, dropping lightly from view. Kirk went next, followed by McCoy, Spock and Chekov.

Kirk did not know what to expect. At the bottom, his feet touched a smooth surface, and he flashed his light about, picking out the walls and blackness beyond.

"It seems to be clear of contamination," McCoy announced, checking his tricorder, "but keep the suits on. You know the layout, Rafiel. Which way?"

"This is the main entrance tunnel. It should branch off further down. The living area will be on this level, the work area and laboratories below. We will need more rope."

He led the way down the tunnel, pausing at the branching fork intersection, choosing the left one, apparently at random. Their lights picked out cubicled rooms, sleeping mats placed as they had been left, all perfectly preserved in the dry air. Kirk shivered, his hand tracing a black mark in the wall. Fire, or blood?

There were no traces of skeletons. The bodies had all been returned to their home world. Rafiel paused at the larger room. "This would have been the nursery," he said softly. He went inside, stooping suddenly, his light showing a small, woven crib. "They even killed the babes." His eyes glittered.

"Don't get entangled in the past, kirra," Damin said.

Rafiel straightened. "You are right, but I feel it, Dami. The cries and the pain - it haunts this place. The spirits of our slain people still walk here." He shook himself with effort and moved on. They passed through the whole top level, and then, using a secured rope line, dropped down to the one below.

The door to the laboratory had been torn off its hinges. Inside, only the work counters had been left. Another doorway led to an inner room. At the far end stood a massive container, its lid hanging.

Rafiel went over. "This was where the Xhephan was kept." His eyes lifted to the overhead pipes, and Kirk remembered Samiel's words. *Strung up like dead carrion from the cooling pipes.* He shivered.

"They must have had time to hide the stone," Damin said, checking the container. "But where?"

"I'll get the lighting and air circulation set up," Kirk said. "This is a large place. We will need quite a few teams, and a base camp set up outside."

They made their way back to the surface. The men of the Enterprise laboured long hours setting up lighting and ventilation. Scotty's team of engineers made two sets of temporary ladders for the entrances, while Spock briefed the search teams.

Working above and below the surface, they fine-combed everything and found nothing.

* * * * *

"So much for sophisticated equipment," Kirk said gloomily. "There are no secret hidey-holes."

"It is here," Rafiel said. He moped in the laboratory.

Two days had passed, and in that time, the dark-haired Chirri had haunted the lower level, especially the laboratory. "The container," he muttered.

"It has been checked and rechecked. There are no hollow compartments," Kirk protested.

But Rafiel was not listening. "Use your talent, the Ja'arani said." He clutched at the jewel around his neck, then unfastened it, staring mesmerised at the container. "Under it. What about under it?"

Damin looked uncertain. "It's fixed solid."

"Get back, all of you," Rafiel commanded.

They did so, watching with puzzlement as Rafiel stood near the metal container, cupping the black gem. He took a few deep breaths, his body tensing. The stone flashed into sudden life, swirling patterns flaring in its light as the directed pressure built up and up.

"What is...." McCoy started to say as he walked in, and was silenced by Damin's warning look. Rafiel was gasping with the strain of lifting the box.

The walls contorted in torture from a force they could hardly contain. A titanic crack hammered out of nowhere, and then a blast hurled them all off their feet as the container was flung upwards, to land bare metres from them with a deafening clang. The lights had gone out, the only glow coming from Rafiel's azur.

The alien climbed shakily to his feet, moving in a trance to the container's plinth base. "It is here."

They crept over, peering onto the surface - a surface that was nearly, but not quite, flat. Lying flush with the metal was another object, its rough lines fitting snugly into the space carved out for it. They stared in fascination as the Chirri reached out a hand. There was a low hiss, and the ignited stone of Azarah lay in his hand, its green flame meshing with the energy of the alien, emitting a muted whine. No-one else dared to touch it.

"How did you know?" Kirk asked.

"I didn't. Something guided me, I think. This room - ever since I stepped inside, I have had a feeling of... of endless waiting."

The light died, returning them to darkness.

"Captain, are you down there?" It was Chekov.

"What is it, Ensign?"

"Sir, we felt a blast outside. Are you all right? The lights are all out."

"Perfectly, Mr. Chekov. Lower some hand lights, will you?"

"Better make it fast, sir. Part of the tunnels have collapsed. There may be another quake."

"My doing," Rafiel said apologetically. "You had better evacuate everyone, genna Kirrk. It is no longer safe."

They hurriedly climbed out to the top level, and then into daylight.

"Everyone should be accounted for, Captain," Chekov reported. "Was it an earthquake?"

"No, Rafiel found the stone."

The earth rumbled beneath them.

"Beam up," ordered Kirk.

"Your equipment, genna Kirrk?" Damin queried.

"Leave it. I will not put anyone into danger - and besides," he grinned, "finding the stone is worth the loss of the equipment."

* * * * *

Once aboard, the news flashed throughout the ship. Most crew were curious to see the object of all the trouble, and the Chirri showed it around, but kept its power dormant. All they saw was a piece of green rock, and the disappointment showed.

"It doesn't look all that wonderful to me," Sulu said to Chekov.

"It is alien. It is safer to stay ignorant," the Russian advised.

On the bridge, Kirk prepared to break orbit.

"I am glad the stone is in your possession and can be returned to your people, but what about Samiel?"

"My sherra will not trouble you for much longer, genna Kirrk, Samiel's destiny has arrived."

"And if he destroys us first?"

The Chirri shook his head. "No. Not if s'a knows we have the stone."

Kirk sat, undecided, and then finally sighed. "Destination?"

The alien crossed to the star chart. "The fourth planet in this system."

"E.T.A., Mr. Chekov?"

Chekov did a quick calculation. "Twenty hours at warp 6."

"Enter the directions into navigation, Mr. Chekov. Sulu, take us out of orbit."

PART IV

The klaxon blared as the Enterprise shivered under the barrage from outside.

"Captain, number three shield is weakening," Scotty's anxious voice called him.

Kirk sweated at delaying the order to return fire, watching tensely as Rafiel skipped through the various frequencies on Uhura's board. They were still out of range of Samiel's base, but the alien had picked them up and had sent a pack out. Finally, contact was made.

"Na'id Rafiel to pack leader. I order you to stop firing on this vessel."

There was an agonising pause, and then a voice answered, "Respect, Na'id, but we are not under your command."

"That's great," McCoy growled.

"You destroy us, Rashna, and Samiel will be very angry with you."

"You know me, Na'id?" The voice was startled.

"Of course. Contact Samiel. Tell t'sam I am aboard, including the object s'a is so anxious to have. Destroy us, and it will be lost forever."

"We will comply. Keep your channel open."

Spock swung around. "They have stopped firing."

"I bet the comm-links are red hot," McCoy muttered. The Doctor

was pale.

"Respect, Na'id," the voice broke in. "We are to escort you to the base where you will maintain guarded orbit, until Samiel contacts you on this frequency."

"Understood."

The fighters formed a guard around the ship, slowing to her speed.

"There it is," Damin pointed at the green and white planet with her red suns.

Kirk noticed McCoy's face harden. "Bad memories, Bones?"

"You're right. I only pray we will not find ourselves in the same situation."

"What will Samiel do, Rafiel?"

The alien shrugged. "I will not know until I am down there,"

"And if he captures you again?" McCoy demanded.

"Not this time, Healer. Not this time."

Kirk stood, facing the Chirri. "I have notified Starfleet. I had to. They are sending a backup."

"It will be over before they get here," Rafiel stated.

"Incoming call, Captain," Uhura called out.

"On audio, Lieutenant. This is Captain Kirk of the U.S.S. Enterprise."

"My, my. You do keep on turning up at the strangest places and times, genna Kirrk. Welcome. Is my sherra with you?" Cool amusement sparkled in his voice.

"I am here, Samiel."

"Well, sherra? To what do I owe this extraordinary visit? I would have thought you half way home by now."

"We have unfinished business, Samiel."

"I really cannot think what that could be."

"Do not play games with me, Samiel. I am coming down."

"Another confrontation, Rafiel? Remember what happened last time. Tread very carefully. But no matter. Come by all means. I will be waiting."

"Transmission cut, sir."

Kirk faced the alien. "We'll join your party, Rafiel. Bones, you needn't come."

"I'm going," the Doctor answered stubbornly, although his eyes held a hint of fear.

"Request permission to join you, sir," Chekov asked.

"Very well. . . Scotty, you have the con. At any sign of trouble, pull out and wait for the backup. Alert the transporter room, Lieutenant."

The security guards joined them, and the ten were beamed down inside the perimeter. Punja was trembling violently, keeping close to Rafiel.

Samiel was waiting for them, his personal guard at his back. Tural was amongst them, silver eyes dead. Jeqon was missing.

McCoy recognised faces. Zatriel, Donel, Rashin and many others who had remained nameless. Other Chirray stood in a rough semi-circle, silent but tense, sensing the coming confrontation.

"So that is the Cossack!" Chekov growled.

"That will do, Ensign!" Kirk snapped. "You men remain alert, but keep your hands away from your weapons. I want no heroics."

Rafiel stopped, looking only at his brother.

"What is on your mind, Rafiel?" Samiel's voice held a hint of wariness.

"Where is Jeqon?"

Samiel looked startled. "Jeqon? S'a is not well. The carrying taxes t'sam. Why? Did you think I had got rid of t'sam after t'sas part in your escape?"

"I would not be surprised."

Samiel laughed. "I admit I was very angry, but I would never harm Jeqon. I was also devastated at my guests' sudden departure, but I see you have returned them to me, including genna Kirrk." His eyes hardened. "And you, Punja! Ungrateful wretch. I'll have your hide for your treachery!"

Punja shrank back against Damin, clutching at his hand.

"Leave t'sam alone, Samiel. This is between you and me."

"Very well." Then he looked at them curiously. "The Xhephan. Do you really have it? Where did you find it?"

"That I have it is enough. The question is what are you going to do? Will you surrender to me, or will you force me to destroy you?"

Samiel laughed. "Destroy me? How arrogant! I need only give the word and my people will slay you."

Rafiel turned his back on Samiel, looking at the packed compound. "I will give you a choice. Disband and return to the Domains, or perish here with your leader. I cannot guarantee clemency on Urel's behalf, but s'a is well known for compassion. Think on it."

"They will not follow you!" Samiel snarled.

"So be it. Tural! Come forth, wizard, and dominate the stone!" Rafiel's voice rose in a challenge as he drew the stone out from under his tunic. It ignited into cold, green fire, and the assembly gave a sigh.

Rafiel hurled the stone at the group, and they scattered beneath its arcing flame, Samiel amongst them. The Xhephan landed at Tural's feet, and he looked at it in sudden fear.

"What if he can master it?" Kirk whispered.

"S'a will destroy us," Damin said.

"Pick it up, komage priest. We all heard your boast. Azarah and the Watchers heard it. Pick it up, dominate its fire," Rafiel taunted.

Tural's face flushed with anger. He visibly steeled himself, reaching down to the writhing flame.

"Be sure not to forget anything," Rafiel advised helpfully.

Tural flinched, then dropped his hand.

Rafiel smiled wolfishly. He extended a hand, and the stone flew back to him, landing with a slap in his palm, the flame dead,

"Anything your heart desires." His voice was a whisper of silver, eyes glinting, mocking. The flame flared again, brighter as he manipulated it. He turned to face the rows of attack craft, hand outstretched. Bolts of green streaked to three of them, and they exploded in fiery balls of flame. The Chirray gasped, moving back from the heat.

"Is this real?" Chekov gasped.

"Of course it is," Damin said mildly, and then he chuckled. "Rafiel is scaring the x'iauae out of them."

The flame in the alien's hand grew larger, the azur at his throat matching its brilliance. His eyes were pools of flames. He was a figure of light and awesome power. With one fluid movement he threw the Xhephan back at Tural in white, crackling anger.

"Control it, false priest! Control it, or be consumed!"

With a purely reflex action, Tural caught it, his face mirroring startlement, and then it changed to terror. He opened his hand to let it fall, but the stone clung to him, its flame green anger.

Rafiel watched calmly, without pity. "It knows what you are."

They looked on with horror as Tural screamed in agony. His clothing and hair ignited, and then his flesh burst into flame, melting before their eyes. The flames went out abruptly, and the Xhephan fell where Tural had stood. There was no sign of him, not even a scorched patch on the ground. The silence was deafening.

Rafiel walked over slowly. He picked up the stone, returning it to inside his tunic. They all watched, hypnotised, and he deliberately tied back his hair. He beckoned to two Chirray. "Your swords."

They hastily handed them over; Rafiel examined the blades critically, then he turned to face Samiel who stood as if carved from stone, the skin stretched tightly over his face.

"I call challenge on you, Samiel," he cried in a ringing voice, and then threw one sword to the frozen leader, where it quivered, point down, in the ground. "I need a witness." He looked at Donel, eyes merciless, and the Raktal leader stepped forward to stand between them, his face ashen.

"For what reason do you invoke the right to call Chi'Kra'hl?" The words were ritual.

"For treason, murder and family honour."

Donel turned to Samiel. "Samiel, na'Hokan'Rei'va, challenge has been called upon you. Do you accept?"

The Chirri shivered, face pale, and then he nodded. "I accept." He tied back his own hair.

"They are going to fight each other?" Kirk demanded of Damin.

"Yes. Rafiel is giving Samiel an easy way out, and s'a knows it, otherwise s'a will be returned home in chains. Death would be slow and agonising."

"What if Samiel wins?" McCoy demanded.

"We die, unless the others turn against t'sam."

"Crowds are usually fickle. Jim, aren't you going to do something?"

"There is nothing you can do," Damin warned. "This is Rafiel's affair. Stay out of it."

The crowd formed a large circle around the two Chirray.

"Let it begin," Donel said.

They circled each other, crouched and testing, and then Samiel made the first move. The blades clashed, sparks flying, and Kirk remembered that these swords were more than mere blades.

Both Chirray were evenly matched in strength and speed. He had never seen such fast and voracious fighting, as the two struck, parried and leaped out of the way. Then Rafiel slipped and was down, Samiel's blade already descending. The Chirri rolled clear, the blade flashing inches from his face, and he was on his feet. Clothing streaked with dirt, hair dishevelled, they continued, the crowd swaying and surging out of their path. Suddenly Samiel staggered, his sword dropping, as he stared down at the crimson bloom spreading across his abdomen. He clutched at the wound, falling to his knees.

The Chirray groaned.

Rafiel let his own blade fall, and knelt in the dirt, easing Samiel down, cradling him. "Samiel." It was a groan.

"You always were better... than me," Samiel gasped.

"Ssh. Don't talk, sherra," Rafiel whispered.

"No, before it is too late." He clutched at Rafiel's hand. "I ask no forgiveness, only a death pledge. Promise me, Rafiel... look after... my clowder. Especially Jeqon and... my youngling."

"I promise."

"That is good." He gave a choked cry. "It would have been glorious." Blood welled out of his mouth, and then he sighed, eyes closing.

"Damn it!" McCoy exploded brokenly. "He was the bad guy, so why do I feel such pity?"

The crowd stood silently while Rafiel sat in the dirt holding his brother, tears falling freely. Damin moved over to him, laying a hand on his shoulder. Carefully Rafiel stood, the body in his arms. He carried it to Rashin and another, and wordlessly they bore Samiel away.

Rafiel stood glaring at the crowd. "We are taking my sherra home. Contact the ships to report back here. Tomorrow this burrow will be dismantled and sealed. Do I have your fealty?"

Donel unsheathed his sword, and the landing party watched nervously as all followed suit, filing up to lay them at Rafiel's feet, to touch his hand and beg forgiveness. To swear their undying loyalty.

At last they left him, and the Chirri faced Kirk, his face drawn in grief and exhaustion. "It is over, genna Kirrk. We will leave in peace."

But the price had been high.

* * * * *

Kirk signalled the ship and they beamed up. On the bridge, Scott relinquished command, and Kirk filled them in.

"We had a message from Admiral Fitzpatrick's flagship. They should be here within the hour, escorted by the Hood and the Excalibur. What will you tell them now that it's all over?"

"I'll send a message from my quarters. Keep the ship on yellow alert. There may be a few hot-heads left."

* * * * *

It was with some relief that Kirk stripped off his uniform and stepped into the shower. The image of Samiel kept popping into his mind. Samiel smiling, charming, vicious - dead. The door chimed softly, and McCoy stepped inside. Kirk wordlessly poured two drinks, handing him one.

"You look like hell, Doctor."

"I feel it." McCoy slumped into a chair. "Damn it, Jim. What's the matter with me? I thought I had got over it all, but I keep on reliving those weeks on this blasted planet. He's dead but he won't leave me alone. I should feel nothing now that he is dead, but it isn't working out that way. At the end he was so pathetic I

could weep!"

"Your nerves are shot, McCoy."

"Why me and not Spock?"

"Spock is - Spock. You know him, Bones. He's had a lifetime of training in concealing his emotions, and I wouldn't bet on it that he feels nothing. We all realise what you went through, Bones."

"No, damn it, you don't! My greatest fear is that they will be back in greater numbers. They could do it, Jim. They could defeat us all. Federation, Klingons - the whole kaboodle. This could have been a testing of our strength." His voice rose.

"McCoy! Bones!" Kirk grasped his shoulders, worried at the Doctor's state of mind. "Bones, it can't be. I cannot believe you think Rafiel suffered like that as part of testing us. And what of the Watchers? And Samiel? He is very dead!"

"Is he? Nobody checked."

"Bones, he is, believe me. Let me call Kerwin. He can prescribe something for you."

McCoy shuddered. "No. I am being paranoid, aren't I? I need sleep, that's all. Sorry, Jim."

"It's all right, old friend. They leave tomorrow, and everything will return to normal."

"Yes. Give me the Klingons any day. This lot I can do without. Goodnight, Jim."

Premonition, Doctor? I hope you are wrong.

* * * * *

The bridge crew watched the huge armada collect in space. The burrow was empty and sealed as the Chirray prepared to pull out. Kirk was certain that every view-window on the Enterprise was crowded. It was quite a sight.

"Incoming call from Rafiel," Uhura said.

"On viewscreen."

The Chirri smiled at Kirk. "We are nearly ready, genna Kirrk. We will be rendezvousing with the carriers at the rim."

"Carriers?"

"For the fighters. The Healer is not with you?"

"No, but he sends his farewells. What will happen now, Rafiel? To Jeon and the others?"

"I have adopted Samiel's clowder into my burrow. As for the others, Urel will decide. I wish to thank you for your help, genna Kirrk."

"Will you return?"

Rafiel grinned. "For now, this space is not big enough for all of us, but perhaps one day we shall meet again under better circumstances."

"Where are Damin and Punja?"

"With Jegon. I will say goodbye on their behalf."

A siren sounded and Rafiel turned. Kirk suddenly tensed at the sight of a Chirri in the background, tawny hair cascading down his back, and then he turned, and Kirk sagged with relief at the unfamiliar face.

McCoy, you will be the death of me, he thought.

"Donel has signalled. We are ready." Rafiel held out his hand in salute. "Azarah watch over you."

"Goodbye, Rafiel, and a safe journey." Kirk didn't add that they would be monitored until out of Federation space. The screen broke up, replaced with the ships.

McCoy came in, taking his usual place behind the command chair.

"So they are really on their way. Did the Admiral get to talk with them?"

"No, and he is going to be upset about that. There they go."

Kirk could almost feel those alien engines throb with life as the armada swung out into deep space. And then they shifted into warp speed and were gone. He sank back into his chair. "The Federation has had an almighty scare. Let's hope we will be more prepared next time."

"Next time? Once was enough for me," McCoy grumbled.

"How do you feel, Bones?"

"I'm fine." He paused, and then spoke softly. "No-one falls low unless he attempts to climb high."

Kirk swivelled around. "What's that, Bones?"

"Oh, an old Earth proverb I know. I was thinking of Samiel. It seemed appropriate."

EPILOGUE

An infant sat in a corner of the nursery. Before it stood a spiral stand with coloured spheres spinning in intricate patterns. The colours shifted in the light, dancing across the floor and over its toes. It reached out, fingering them, chuckling softly as the spinning dance changed configuration.

Someone laughed, and it lifted its head, seeking that rich, beautiful sound in the crowded room.

A foster-parent sat not far from it on a pile of cushions, long, raven hair falling in a tumble over the babe it held in its lap, but what caught the youngster's attention was the glowing,

black jewel around its neck. It was prettier than the spheres.

It looked up at its parent who was busy talking, trying to attract the green eyes, but it went unnoticed. Frustrated, it grabbed at the parent's tail and pulled itself onto its feet, wobbling on uncertain legs. It had to touch that glowing jewel, but nobody was taking any notice of its plight. It bit its lips at the distance separating it from its goal. At last the foster-parent raised its head and saw it, and smiling, held out one hand. Golden eyes bright with determination, stumpy tail rigid with effort, the infant Samiel took its first step.

