

C. WALSKE

The valkbar is very weary.
The valkbar is getting bleary.
The valkbar just finished this story.
The valkbar is basking in glory.

With love from Kiki & the Valkbar

THRESHOLD

and
Fern
Marder

by Fern Marder and Carol Walske



Little eep was here

• also both the creeps

With love
Carol Walske *

Artwork and Calligraphy by Carol Walske

Poetry and Music by Fern Marder

Edited by Devra Langsam

* p.s. I don't
think the commander
would like it!

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To Barbara,
my major moral support
from J. J. J. J. J.
W. J. B. Sherna



627 EAST 8th ST. • BROOKLYN, NY 11218

As I sit here, surrounded by piles of half-printed paper, with the ravages of two-half-grown kittens everywhere, I wonder how I got into all this. Once I was a more-or-less normal person, notable mainly for my warped tastes. Then, my friend Sherna lured me into watching *Star Trek*, and I--well--but that seems so far off. I was trying to remember, this morning, what I'd done in my spare time before I published a magazine. That was when it struck me--ten years. Dear grief. In ten years, I have published eleven magazines; written four stories, helped run six conventions, attended at least sixty others---the record of a mis-spent time. Well, a spent time, anyway.

This issue is a first for me--the first really long story I've ever published, as well as the first issue ever written by only two people. And strange, it's been that too. The amount of work involved in editing a seventy-five page story is greater than the equivalent number of short stories and articles--perhaps because I'm so argumentative. And it came as a nasty shock when the Daring Duo handed me their little work, smiling, and said, "There are a few scenes we haven't finished yet." Guileless sneakies! That manuscript had gaps, gaplettes, gaping chasms, and a Grand Canyon! Still, they *did* warn me.

I'm not really sure how we got to now, anyway. I *do* know that the original idea was a story not to exceed one hundred pages, including illos. Sigh.

I dreamt I made a Ashkrifikh of myself in my *masiform-D*. B.S.L.

Normally, in my editorial, I bitch about production. Let this issue not be different. My new, very expensive typewriter doesn't like quotation marks, which it cuts very lightly. It also tends to ignore the letter 'c', producing dashes instead. And the second mimeo, ostensibly repaired, won't eat its paper nicely. And two electrostencils suffered an inexplicable *f-a-d-e*, and had to be recut. And it's Thursday night, and I still have forty-three stencils to run, and the food for the collators to prepare, and I'm starting to suffer from the Klingon equivalent of Vulcan mind mold (those

spots that appear after too-frequent melding--) All my friends and family are very kind and patient at this point, while I prowls around the house screaming, "NEVER AGAIN!"

Chicken fat, anyone? It's that time of year again.

After counting the number of times I'd have to change type fonts per page, I've yielded to the ~~pleas~~ ~~threats~~ wishes of my authors, and several alien words are not italicized, due to their extreme frequency of use.

Aku, fem., *Akuo*, masc.--Ashkrifikh, honorific, similar in meaning to 'Milady', or, perhaps, 'Mister'

kiling, *kilingau*, plural--Agavoi--Klingon(s)

kilingaven--Agavoi--of, or relating to Klingons

That strange-looking date in the poem 'Changeling' is NOT a typo (we have enough of those elsewhere). It is a date expressed in the Klingon calendar--a thousand years after the founding of their Empire. The events of the story are actually about ten years after *Star Trek's* 'Errand of Mercy'.

Darth Vader is a Sithie. J. Y.

I've had some weird times doing this issue (and I don't refer to the odd hours at the pasting board and mimeo); how did we ever get onto oil wells in Venezuela? Still, to paraphrase Ruth Berman's character, I've enjoyed myself, after a fashion. . .I think.

And so, this production is dedicated

from

Janet and all the Kershu fighters

to

the Klingons, with love

Devra



Nu Ormenel

AUTHORS' ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Threshold is dedicated to Devra Michele Langsam--for her time, patience, hard work, encouragement, and, most of all, for her faith in us. We couldn't have done it without her.

Thanks also to Winston Howlett, Kyrol Waters and Barbara Wenk for all their support through trying times.

And to our friends, acquaintances and zine editors who've put up with unanswered mail and delayed copy for the last six months or so, this is "where we've been" and "what we've been doing."

Sinish!

I have taken the parts of my characters for so long that it's sometimes difficult to speak for myself.

At one time the *Ormenel* was a game I played for private enjoyment. It began nine years ago with the development of Kor and Roan and the basic conflicts between them. Writing stories was a pleasant energy-consumer, and researching reference material for the universe was a challenge.

Writing is addictive. The *Ormenel* grew from a harmless diversion to a habit--and all further creative endeavors were designed to somehow fit into the universe. The *Ormenel* took over me.

To the extent that a science fiction universe reflects its creator, I suppose the *Ormenel* represents me: my background, some of my beliefs, etc. The keynote of the series is cultural and ideological conflict. Living in a number of different countries as a child, I had a chance to experience 'cultural conflict' first-hand. As such, the *Ormenel* is also my story.

I hope that there's something here for everyone to enjoy.

Be welcomed to the *Ormenel*
Sto nu Ormenel, aroi rakishul!

Carol Walske

Greetings:

What is a poet and a musician doing co-authoring a novella? Much less a series? I'm not quite sure, myself. When I first got to know Carol, and *Nu Ormenel*, about two years ago, writing fiction was number one on my list of things better left for someone else to do. Three months later, we were working on our first collaboration, "A Broken Sword," and I was hooked.

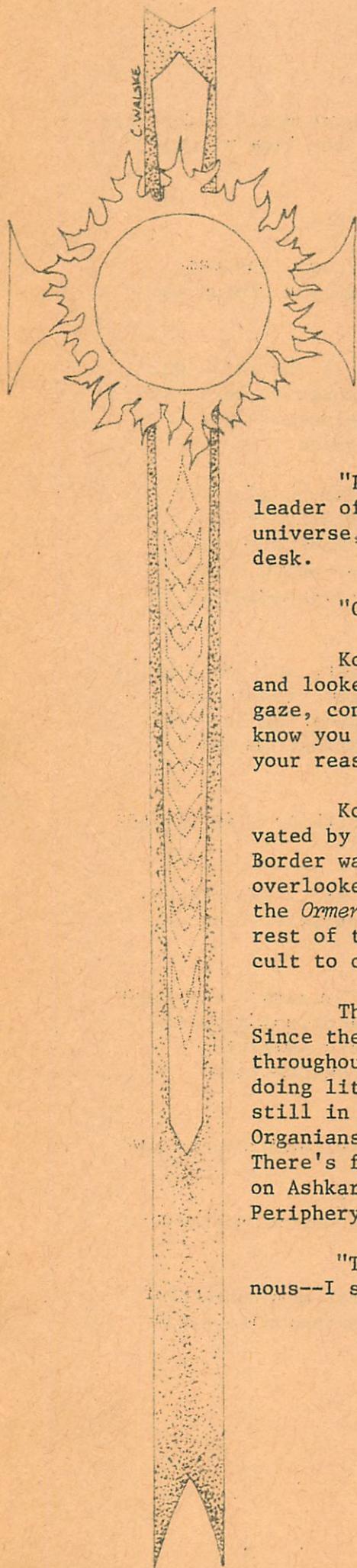
Threshold is without a doubt the most ambitious project I've ever tackled as a writer (my poetry portfolio for Interphase notwithstanding). As I was learning about *Nu Ormenel*, one of the first things Carol gave me to read from her files was a short piece which is now part of Chapter 2, and I am very pleased that she let me take part in the writing of Threshold, one of the turning points in the series. I also look on this as a turning point in my career as a fiction writer--I'm no longer afraid to say "I think my version of Chapter 3 is better than your version" (even if Carol is bigger than I am).

There are eight poems and one song in Threshold (thanks for putting up with me, Devra). I tried to make them as different as I could, and to shed some light on the feelings and backgrounds of the characters from their own points of view. I had a lot of fun writing the song, "Changeling." For those brave souls who will try to sing it, bear in mind that, as in all old-style ballads, fudging is both expected and permitted. My thanks to Carol for the Agavoi rendition of "Brothers."

I hope you all enjoy Threshold as much as I've enjoyed working on it.

Until Alkarin Warlord,

Fern Marden



Chapter 1

"I don't like your motives," declared Theremir Keorl, an officer of *Ormene* Intelligence. A friend of the Emperor Alkarin, he had no compunctions about speaking plainly. "And I don't think we're ready for war with the Federation."

"Let me be the judge of that, h'mm?" The *Ormen* Kor Alkarin, leader of one of the strongest military governments in the known universe, walked with confident poise across his office to the desk.

"Of course, sir." Both men sat down.

Kor caught the touch of quiet laughter in Theremir's voice, and looked at him. Theremir, prompted by the direct, commanding gaze, continued, "I was with you during the revolution, sir; I know you would rather fight than rest. But I would like to hear your reasons."

Kor frowned, but decided that Theremir's question was motivated by honest concern rather than impertinence. "When the Border was established, the planet of Ashkaris must have been overlooked. For two-thirds of the year its orbit puts it in the *Ormene*; it crosses the Border into the Federation for the rest of the year. Technically that's illegal, but it's difficult to charge a planet with trespassing."

The *Ormen* paused, considering. "I see it as a portent. Since the Organian supernova there have been flare-ups and raids throughout the Border Zone--bold, lightning nuisance attacks doing little damage to anyone. No one knows if the Treaty is still in force. And, after ten years in the shadows of the Organians, people are wary of stepping into even an empty room. There's fear. Each person distrusts his neighbor. Naturally, on Ashkaris tensions are even greater than elsewhere on the Periphery.

"This affair has the feel of something potentially ominous--I see the *Federen* making a great noise over the location

of Ashkaris and their claim to it. A diplomatic offensive would bring them political gain, and they would come around quickly to the idea of war." Kor Alkarin hesitated. "No doubt you disagree. . ."

"You're the strategist," Theremir said, reluctantly.

Both of them looked up as a woman entered the room. She came forward confidently. "I just now found the message that you wanted to see me, sir," she said. "Excuse me for being late."

"Join us," said Kor. He watched her pensively as she sat down. "Kirashai Kelos, expert on the culture and people of Ashkaris; beside you is Theremir Keorl, who has just come from that Border planet." Kor filled Kirashai in briefly on his and Theremir's discussion.

Kirashai showed no surprise at the mention of forthcoming war. "The Federation does show an inclination to break the Treaty of Or-gania," she remarked. "Moreover, if the government of Ashkaris tries to force all kilingau and Federation colonists to leave--which seems imminently possible--there's bound to be trouble. The Federation is as determined to stay on Ashkaris as we are."

"Your insight is excellent," said Kor approvingly, and got a brief smile from Kirashai. "One small planet's ultimatum might propel the *Ormenel* and the Federation into war at a time inconvenient for me. If events on Ashkaris develop the way I think they will, I want to be there to direct the action."

The two advisors exchanged glances, but said nothing. Kor waited for a reaction. "Well?"

"You shouldn't be going out near the Border at all. Too risky," Theremir said. To Kor's impatient look, he added defensively, "You asked."

Kor's gaze turned to Kirashai. "I agree with Theremir," she commented carefully. "Granted, few people could judge the political position of the planet as you could, *Ormen* Alkarin. However, Ashkaris itself, and the customs of the Ashkrifikh people, may confuse your judgment."

"If I had hidden in a stronghold during the revolution, would we have won?" asked Kor acidly.

"The Federation is not to be trusted," Theremir went on determinedly.

"You can mistrust anyone who manages to come near me. Both of you, and perhaps three or four others, will be accompanying me to Ashkaris," said Kor.

"Will it do any conceivable good if I continue arguing?" asked Theremir.

"No, but it could conceivably do you harm," replied Kor. "Kirashai, I want you in particular to train me thoroughly in the ways of the Ashkrifikh."

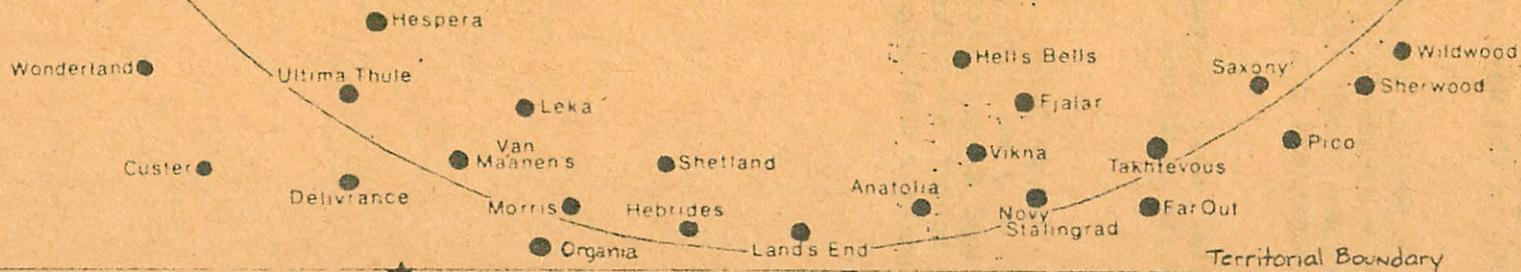
That idea seemed to appeal to her. "Well, if you go, sir, I suggest that you name yourself differently. The *Ormen* Alkarin's appearance is not known on Ashkaris, but his name is. Aku Taswir Chiau, the planet's ruler, may speak more candidly if she considers you less important than she is herself."

"He'd be unimportant just because he's a male," said Theremir sardonically. "Few men are even allowed to hold public positions."

"There are exceptions," said Kirashai.

"I will go as one of Kirashai's assistants," Kor declared, looking amused. "Stop complaining, Theremir. I will go as a warrior, a hunter intent upon meeting his prey, not as a political target fearful of his own shadows. Who brings home more game: the hunter who waits, silently, then strikes; or the hunter who runs screaming a Challenge to every beast in the forest?"

FEDERATION



NU ORMENEL

SENTINEL

One large universe,
a line divides it in two,
drawn through the heavens
by men at war,
looked upon as both truce and threat.
A place for both sides to meet,
to talk, to fight,
to learn of one another.

One small pawn
watches over the line,
a sentinel, marching back and forth,
eyeing its neighbors,
even as they watch it in turn.
A place for every man
to consider his ways,
to confront his distant brother.

Chapter 2

Kirashai Kelos, the *Ormen's* representative to the planet Ashkaris, walked unopposed through the underground halls and chambers of the Chiau domain, at the top of the world. Perhaps twenty thousand Ashkrifikh--all who were left of a former planet-wide civilization--were gathered here, in caverns painstakingly restructured beneath the barren mountains and desert at Ashkaris' North Pole.

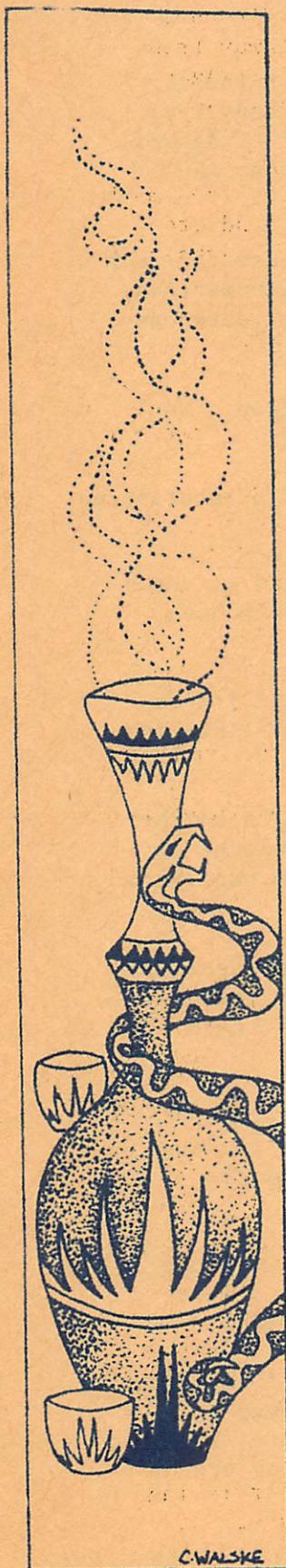
She had first walked here while doing research to complete her training. Fascination with the strange culture and patterns of the Ashkrifikh brought her back again and again, until she knew the planet and its people as well as she knew her own extended family. Now she strode confidently to the central chambers inhabited by Aku Taswir Chiau, an extraordinary woman having a rare combination of intuition and ability to command.

Being recognized as a noblewoman enjoying the favor of the Chiau, Kirashai was not stopped as she entered Aku Taswir's private rooms. She paused a respectful distance from the black-haired, indigo-blue-skinned leader of the Ashkrifikh. Aku Chiau and several others were grouped in a circle, listening to a storyteller. Not wishing to disrupt the flow of the tale, Kirashai waited, and listened.

"...On a day remembered only in story and song, a hissing, as of hot raindrops, was heard, and a silver cloud was seen in the sky, and waterpearls fell to land and became women and men."

The tale, just beginning, was familiar to Kirashai; it described how kilingau first came to Ashkaris. The storyteller, an older woman with a soft voice, sat in an honored position between an urn of water and a bowl of fresh fruit, a food more prized than any other on Ashkaris. The storyteller took a drink of water and continued.

"No gods these sky people, merely strangers, wanderers looking for a home. They were unlike us; tall, dark-eyed women and men colored in shades of rock and earth. They thought differently from us: their science was one of creation, whereas ours was then of alteration. They spoke differently, smiled and frowned differently, lived and died differently."



Aku Taswir Chiau looked up from the circle and noticed Kirashai. She beckoned to her, looking pleased and surprised, and moved away from the audience. She greeted Kirashai in the Ashkrifikh dialect of Agavoi. "Your visits to Ashkaris are more appreciated than your absences, Aku Kirashai. Welcome back."

"I would make my visits longer, save that I fear to impose too much on your hospitality." Kirashai joined in a ritual they always undertook. "Where you are, Aku Taswir, the sun never sets; but in my home, darkness comes." She smiled and handed her knife to the leader.

Aku Chiau gestured at a pile of pillows. "Please sit down. We can talk while the legend is being recreated."

They sat down, a courteous distance from the others. "An interesting choice of tales," commented Kirashai in low tones.

Aku Taswir gazed at her. The fur under her eyes bristled as she smiled faintly. "Legends are lessons from the past. Your people have created more change than the kindling of the World-fire did."

Kirashai knew that she referred to the holocaust that had irrevocably changed Ashkaris more than a thousand years before. Half-listening, she caught a few ironic lines from the tale:

". . . We gave them the gift of hospitality. They gave us another tongue to speak, a new philosophy to argue over, increased knowledge of sciences to consider. They also gave us their lives, for those wanderers could not return to their distant homeland."

Aku Taswir was also listening. "Both you and the *Federen* seem determined to alter us. When you *kilingau* first came, six generations ago, you offered us knowledge that pushed at the barriers of all our senses. We took what we wanted, and remained ourselves.

"However, today we don't have any choice: either we conform and become citizens of the *Ormenel*, or we change our ways to become citizens of the Federation." She paused as the speaker neared the end of the legend.

". . . And so the star-wanderers remained and gave into our blood their blood, in children that grew of the sky and caverns. But always those having the stars within them were restless in the caves below."

The storyteller bowed her head at the close of her tale. Aku Taswir spoke up, in a voice that all could hear. "Now it is we who sleep restlessly. I am not even allowed to be leader to my people any more; I am a mediator between two giants, an animal caught in darkness among predators."

The Chiau looked at the storyteller. "You have a gift for making the legends come alive. Please take the bowl of fruit as a gesture of my thanks."



C. WALSKE

"You honor me, Aku Chiau," said the woman. She rose, holding the bowl of fruit close to her, and left quickly.

The audience dispersed. A male in the group came over to Aku Chiau. She acknowledged him with an upward glance. Kirashai recognized Akuo Sastam Chiava, the Chiau's favorite, the highest ranked of all Ashkrifikh men.

"Aku Chiau, I do not mean to disturb you; I came to welcome Aku Kelos," said the Ashkrifikh deferentially.

Kirashai gave him a look full of suspicion. She didn't like Sastam, considering him a thief and a liar. "Oh?"

"Yes. Did you come alone?"

"That's little concern of yours," Kirashai answered, perhaps more irritably than she'd intended.

"Leave us to speak in private, Sastam," said Aku Chiau.

After he had gone, Kirashai commented, "Your mate is overly forward, Aku Chiau."

"He's been aggressive lately," said Aku Taswir neutrally. "He doesn't see why we ever allowed visitors from space to land here. He resents their intrusion."

"Because we've done and seen things that he hasn't?" Kirashai asked. "I should think that you'd find his directness offensive."

"Actually, there are times when his aggressiveness can be exciting," replied the Chiau. "That's of little matter. Aku Kirashai, you may not have wanted to tell Sastam about your visit, but I would like to know why I am graced with your company. Or is your purpose here secret?"

"I come to admire your leadership, Aku Chiau," said Kirashai pleasantly. "I want to see how you deal with the Federation, so that I may advise the *Ormen*. I also brought someone with me whom I wished to acquaint with your skills. It is a male."

Aku Taswir didn't look overly interested. "I have more than enough males in my household, Aku Kirashai. But thank you for thinking of my pleasure."

"Frankly, I do not offer him to you as a gift; he belongs to me. But, because I admire his capabilities, I would like to share them with you."

"His capabilities?"

"He, too, is very skilled at leading people; he is a warrior."

Also, he is uncommonly intelligent. However, my judgment would not be the same as yours, Aku Taswir. You are free to see through your own eyes." Kirashai was deliberately vague, hoping to tantalize her.

"I will meet him," replied Aku Taswir, trying for a bored tone, but not managing to conceal a flicker of interest.

Kirashai didn't hide her satisfaction. "Thank you, Aku Taswir. I will send him to you."

"Can I offer you Sastam to take your male's place?"

Kirashai frowned at the note of mockery in Aku Taswir's voice. "No, thank you, Aku Taswir; he does not appeal to me." The Chiau looked mildly offended. Before she could get annoyed, Kirashai excused herself and left.

* * *

Kiling and Ashkrifikh stared at each other. Differences in race--in the shapes of their bones and muscles, in the color of their skin, in their physical reactions--were not so noticeable as the similar cast of their eyes, the affinity of their personalities. Their expressions of poised wariness were alike in intensity.

The Ashkrifikh put her hands on her hips, one hand never straying too far from the long knife hanging from her belt. "Aku Taswir Chiau; you may call me Aku Chiau. What is it you want?"

Kor kept his silence. He sat down slowly on the blue and gold mosaic of the floor, sitting with legs crossed under him and hands clasped inside the long cloak. He watched the Ashkrifikh impassively.

Aku Chiau waited, her right hand smoothing out an imagined roughness in the leather of the knife-sheath. She clucked in impatience. "Are you Aku Kirashai Kelos' male?"

Silence.

Finally Aku Chiau gestured at the man-servant and ordered irritably, "Bring *tsifaia* and food for our guest. Attend to his needs." She sat down opposite Kor. She grinned at him in contempt and irony. "Does that please you now, impudent kiling?"

The slave came back with a beaten copper tray laden with two wide cups, a steaming pot, and a large plate full of various foods. This he placed on a low table and set the table down beside Kor and Aku Chiau. Making a small courtesy to the guest, he poured out a cup of the *tsifaia*, an aromatic magenta beverage that tasted alcoholic and spicy.

Kor picked up the cup in elegant disdain and deliberately up-ended it over the tray. The servant recoiled in dismay, but guest and host faced each other levelly. "I will not eat at the table of my enemy," said

Kor firmly.

"You have just spoiled good food," returned the Chiau.

"You have already spoiled my taste for it."

"I will spoil more than your appetite, outsider." Aku Chiau drew her knife. She held it lightly, menacingly, as if judging his vulnerability.

Kor measured her easily stirred anger, and the delicate, dangerous position of the knife. His mission greatly depended upon winning the Chiau's confidence. It was crucial, for now, to be tolerant rather than be overly proud. He said formally, "Either turn me away as an outsider, Aku Chiau, or welcome me as a guest. I am not one of your servants." Cautiously, he removed his dagger from a neck sheath hidden by his robes. The Chiau tensed. Kor offered the knife to her. "Otorok Akharai. I extend to you the privilege of naming me Otorok."

Aku Chiau put away her knife, smiling slightly at his assessment of their relative positions. She reached across for his knife, and tucked it in her belt. "Hamad, clear this away and bring out the best. Bring cushions as well." She turned back to Kor. "Well, Akuo Otorok, Aku Kelos comes to me to speak for the *Ormen*. Are you here merely for her pleasure?"

Kor noted the addition of the title 'Akuo' to his name. He smiled, for more reason than the Chiau could know. "You may speak to me in full confidence of political relations, for in this I have the highest power--as high as Aku Kirashai Kelos--and I am liable to no one."

"You are liable to me," said Aku Chiau. "You surrendered your knife to me, thus acknowledging me as your master. Remember that."

Kor reflected that, on the Kilingarlan, his gesture would be taken as one of courtesy, not surrender. 'Is every courtesy on the part of a male seen as submission?' he wondered.

Hamad came back with a gold tray and repeated the ritual. Kor picked up a cup when it was full and took a sip, remarking, "Let all our meetings be as rewarding as this sharing." Then he put the cup back down.

Aku Chiau matched him. "Let my guest receive the same regard as a welcomed stranger of high rank." She drank deeply.

"I'm honored, Aku Chiau." Kor sampled some of the foods, finding them interesting if not particularly delectable.

"May I show you the hospitality and full welcome of this domain by giving you water?" She gestured for them to rise.

The sand boots they wore were so soft that they made no noise at all as Kor and Aku Taswir walked through the halls and rooms of the Chiau's household. Her domain was wide-reaching and impressive, the architecture splendid and ambitious.

"It took forty-eight years and the lives of several hundred to build," said Aku Chiau, noticing his curiosity. "We Chiau claimed it for ourselves a mere two hundred years ago."

Kor lost track of direction in the maze of rooms through which Aku Chiau was expertly guiding him. They went by groups of people at work, and waded through a playful tangle of children and several domesticated beasts. Then all sounds died as they passed through strange, alluring caverns full of gloomy trees, and chambers that were sandy, salty reminders of lost rivers.

Rough-hewn stairs at the far end of a tunnel led them deeper into the underground domain. Kor felt fresh water in the air.

"This level was left as it originally looked," whispered Aku Chiau as they completed the final turn of the stairs and walked out into a huge cave. The place was dark and black and not particularly attractive. "The limestone drippings that covered the walls were all cleared out," the Chiau explained. "They were fouling the water."

The cave floor dropped away sharply. About three meters down, the water moved peacefully in small waves against the stone. Kor lifted his head but couldn't see the other side of the lake. He stood silent, impressed.

"The Federation doesn't know anything about this," said the Chiau. "They think our planet is almost completely without water. They don't know that there is a lake such as this for every thousand of us." There was an angry intense look in her eyes with which Kor sympathized. She gestured abruptly. "Come."

Well-fashioned doors had been set into the rock at the side of the lake, and they went through these, back into a room decorated with the now familiar blue and gold mosaic, the standard of the Chiau domain. The room housed a huge, empty, blue-tiled bathing pool.

"Do you want hot or cold water?" Aku Chiau asked, a malicious tone in her voice.

"Boiling hot, of course."

Aku Chiau went to the deep end of the pool. She knelt at its edge and reached over the side to pull up a metal cover. A spill of water tumbled out, then slowed to a steady flow.

To Kor's surprise, the water was boiling hot. Aku Chiau laughed at his expression. "Hot springs," she said triumphantly.



Kor laughed and watched the water pour in. He began to disrobe in a leisurely manner. It was surprising how long it took the pool to fill. Aku Chiau added her clothes to the heap against the wall. "You're very fit," she remarked, walking around him. Kor replied courteously that such was true for her, as well.

The Ashkrifikh laughed. "I'm not trying to be polite. If you are to be one of us, I must know you." She looked at him critically. "A fighter, h'mm?"

"Yes," he said simply.

"Would you be willing to fight with us?"

"I will fight with you, if it does not conflict with my honor as a killing."

"Good," said Aku Chiau approvingly. She took a closer look at his back and her eyes narrowed. "Deep scars. From what?"

Kor didn't answer, and Aku Chiau, seeing the expression on his face, didn't pose the question again. She bent down to push the metal cover back into place.

"You may get in now if you want, Akuo Otorok," said the Chiau.

Kor glanced at the surface of the water, from which steam was still rising. "Thank you, but I prefer my skin left unburnt," he replied dryly.

They stood and watched the ripples in the water for several minutes. Aku Taswir moved again, to push a button set in the wall, but stopped. She turned to him. "Do you wish someone to bathe you?"

"No, I'm used to doing it myself," Kor answered gravely.

She hesitated, her finger posed above the button. "I'm not," she said. "Are you willing to wash me?"

Kor had difficulty deciding whether she was serious or not. He answered impassively, "Would that diminish or enhance my status?"

"That depends on how well you do it," countered she with equal gravity, and they both laughed.

Aku Chiau dived into the water at the deep end. Kor let himself in rather more slowly, stepping into the shallow water and walking forward until the water was at shoulder level. He stood, rocking on his feet a little, blissfully aware of the hot water soaking into him.

Kor swam, slowly at first, then with increasing vigor, back and forth across the pool. He dived under and swam to the far end. When

he reemerged Aku Chiau was there beside him, grinning. "You're no stranger to water, are you, Akuo Otorok? The Kilingarlan has more water than Ashkaris, doesn't it?"

"Yes," Kor murmured, treading water easily. "But not so much more that we don't regard water as the blessing it undoubtedly is."

"I'm glad you feel that way. I too often hear the *Federen* complain about the lack of water here. When they do find it, they despoil it, because water is like air to them." Frustration crept into her voice and expression. They looked at each other briefly, united again in their common dislike, and nodded.

Aku Taswir climbed out to go to a closet behind a panel in the wall. She returned with a jar filled with something metallically red and a stack of towels. She put all of it down at the shallow edge and waded in again. Sitting in the water and leaning against the side she opened the jar. Kor joined her curiously, and she took his hand and emptied part of the jar into it. He looked from the small glittering red crystals to her.

"Soap," she said and leaned back, head and neck resting comfortably on the edge.

Kor added water with his free hand. Kneeling beside her, he applied it to the Ashkrifikh's shoulders, working gently and systematically downward. He washed her thoroughly, front and back. They were both quiet, enjoying the sensuous feel of hot water and soap and hands moving purposefully over soft skin.

Kor hesitated when she told him she would return the favor, then sat back and yielded. Finding it very enjoyable, he closed his eyes and let his mind wander.

After she'd washed the soap away, Aku Chiau continued to touch him, a small curving smile on her face. Kor noticed what she was doing and said abruptly, "Don't!"

She stopped and looked at him inquisitively. "Why not?"

"I don't want to become one of your males, Aku Chiau."

She moved away a little. "I had heard you kilingau were different in attitude, but I hadn't believed it."

"I am alien to your planet, Aku Chiau," said Kor with dignity. "We have already discussed my status here; you have nothing to gain by claiming me sexually. I would rather that you stop playing games with me and treat me as what I am--a guest in your household."

"An unclaimed man in my household is a bother and a hindrance," said Aku Chiau. She turned her back on him and climbed out of the pool.

"Do you refuse hospitality to me, Aku Chiau?" Kor asked sharply.

"You sound like a child scolding its mother," said Aku Chiau. She picked up a large yellow towel and draped it over her shoulders.

Kor came out of the water. "You must pardon my aggressiveness," he said, trying not to convey the irony of his words. He reached down to take a towel from the pile.

"What I don't pardon is your mouth," replied Aku Taswir. "Why don't you be still?"

Kor swallowed all of his annoyance, and, without a word, began rubbing himself down with his towel.

The two bathers finished drying themselves and put on their garments. In silence, the Chiau led the way back to her apartments--a different, more direct route than the one they had taken coming down.

Aku Taswir took him to one of her audience chambers and seated herself in a large throne-like chair, leaving Kor standing before her. "So, Akuo Otorok," the Chiau began, "you do not wish to be taken as an Ashkrifikh male. Why did you come here? You certainly did not come just to annoy me."

"Aku Chiau, as you know, the government of the *Ormenel* has changed. I come to reaffirm loyalties, to confirm the old order of honor. That is my main mission here: to establish bonds, perhaps even friendships."

Aku Chiau was silent for a while, studying him intently. "This is a peculiar situation, outsider. We have a language in common, but very little else. You obviously know many of our ways, but you speak from a very distant viewpoint. The other killingau I have spoken with have not been so complex."

Kor chose to say nothing. Aku Taswir watched him. "How is it that you know so much of Ashkaris?"

Kor didn't want to tell her that many of her social forms were derived in part from his own culture. "I respected you, so I made it my business to learn your customs before I came."

"A male who takes the trouble to learn. How unusually considerate." The Chiau smiled. "You may stay, Akuo Otorok," she said, perhaps too pleasantly, "at least for a short time."

* * *

Late that night, Aku Taswir summoned Otorok Akharai to her bed-chamber. She was determined to break his self-assurance. The killing was obviously not going to accept her position with the simple-minded

obedience of the Ashkrifikh males--he would have to be taught in a day what the Ashkrifikh had learned through generations of cultural norm.

She prepared a pot of *tsifaia* for him, to which she added the contents of a small jar of clear liquid. Then she sat back and waited for him.

Thinking about the strangers on Ashkaris made Aku Taswir all the more eager to rid herself of the petty arrogance presented by Akharai. The *Federen* were not a very great threat--what they wanted was obvious enough, and the Chiau knew that dealing with them would cause few problems.

Kirashai Kelos and her party, however, were a different matter entirely. Kilingau, her close kin, were as familiar as one's face reflected in water's mirror, and as suspect as that reflection's depths.

Finally, Otorok was brought in. He responded with weary courtesy to Aku Taswir's greeting and gratefully sat down at the foot of her bed. He could not imagine why the woman would choose such an absurd hour to send for him.

Aku Taswir poured out two cups of *tsifaia*, and offered one to him. Otorok accepted it rather than risk offending her. He sipped it slowly as the Chiau rambled on about her family's history, a topic he was totally uninterested in. The drink made him even more drowsy, and her chatter made him irritable.

The Chiau set aside her untouched cup of *tsifaia*. "You aren't listening, Otorok," she chided.

Kor said ruefully, "Aku Taswir, you woke me out of deep sleep. We only arrived this morning and this has been a long day of formalities and discussions."

"That's why our males are never a part of political council. If they were, at night, when the air is cool enough for play, they would complain of being too tired."

If Kor had been paying more attention to her, and less to his own weariness, he might have noticed the derision in Aku Taswir's expression. He would also have seen her casually untie the rope belt at her waist and play with it a bit, working and loosening knots in the cord. Then she made a slipknotted noose out of it.

Kor came to sudden waking as the rope dropped over his head and tightened around his neck. He tried to fight, but Aku Taswir pulled on the rope immediately, choking him.

Once Otorok was in her control, Aku Taswir found prolonged pleasure in mastering him. Finally, she put the life-mark on him to remind him that the flesh was all that mattered, in the end; neither pride, nor honor, nor the mind's strength was sufficient to overcome one's physical needs.

DECEPTION

It is written that
honesty and honor
above all things
are to be maintained,
cherished and guarded,
and that the Ormen
should be honest and honorable
above all men.

And yet I am here,
living a lie.

I go by a name
that is not my own,
with a status and place
drawn from the air.

I chose a fiction
to mask my life,
I show a face
that is not mine,
and bear a mark
which claims I belong
to the one I deceive.

I suppose it is fitting,
this turn of my charade,
for now I must learn to live
with the character I have made.

Chapter 3



Everyone was busy on the *USS Explorer* as the ship slowly settled into a small figure-eight orbit over the North Pole of Ashkaris. Sensor probes were taken; last-minute calculations were made; rapid correlations of new data were put into the computer. People throughout the ship moved to take up new stations, picking up extra duties for planetfall. Information in the form of rumors and fact spread quickly through the crew. 'No, no shore leave this time; it's a hell of a planet; you say you're on a planet exploration team? Tough luck, kid; hope we get out of here soon.'

In certain sectors of the ship things were less chaotic, if not less noisy. 'Where the devil did I put those planet readings?' 'Why don't you look in front of your face, stupid?' 'Oh shut up--you're being disrespectful to my status as an officer.' 'Officer-ossifer. Go calcify yourself.' 'Stop griping, or I'll make you lead one of the planetside teams.'

"No, I will." Tavia Nelson, First Officer of the *Explorer*, put an end to that particular argument as she headed for the Captain's quarters. Soon they would both have to beam down to the surface of Ashkaris, and she wanted to ask him about the doubts he'd been showing about their mission.

Captain Roan Morgan was looking through copies of Star Fleet communiques as she came in. He grinned at her, and with a gesture of relief pushed the papers away. "You have wonderful timing, Tavia. What's up?"

"Planetside teams are all set to go. I talked to the colony administrator, very briefly; he'll be ready to meet with us when we arrive below."

"Mmmh," said Roan negatively.

"How do you feel about having to deal with Klingons again, Roan?" Roan automatically opened his mouth to correct her, but she beat him to it. "Sorry--'kilingau.'"

Roan grimaced. As thoroughly as he understood Tavia and the motives behind her questions, he resented the way those questions made him feel. Since his 'cause celebre' a year before, he'd become the instant expert on anything to do with the Klingon Empire. He hated it. He hated the attention, detested answering questions, and backed away from anyone who was curious. "Noncommittal," he answered shortly.

Tavia looked at him and smiled wryly. "Do you remember the night, about a year and a half ago, when you woke up in the middle of a bad dream? I came, and told you who you were."

"I remember."

* * *

Roan Morgan, Captain of the starship *Explorer*, had been a spy for the Klingon Empire. For ten years he had been in the Federation, working his way through the ranks of Star Fleet, all the while giving loyalty to the *Ormenel*. And why not: Roan, known to the kilingau as Kirin Kothir, had spent his youth in the *Ormenel*, and had been made to believe that he was, himself, a kiling.

But the *Ormenel* had gone through chaos and political disorder, and Roan had heard nothing from his contacts for four years. Alone, waiting, he continued to behave as his human persona would and wondered. Then a ship came racing across the Border, and his Federation starship had captured it. It held three kilingau.

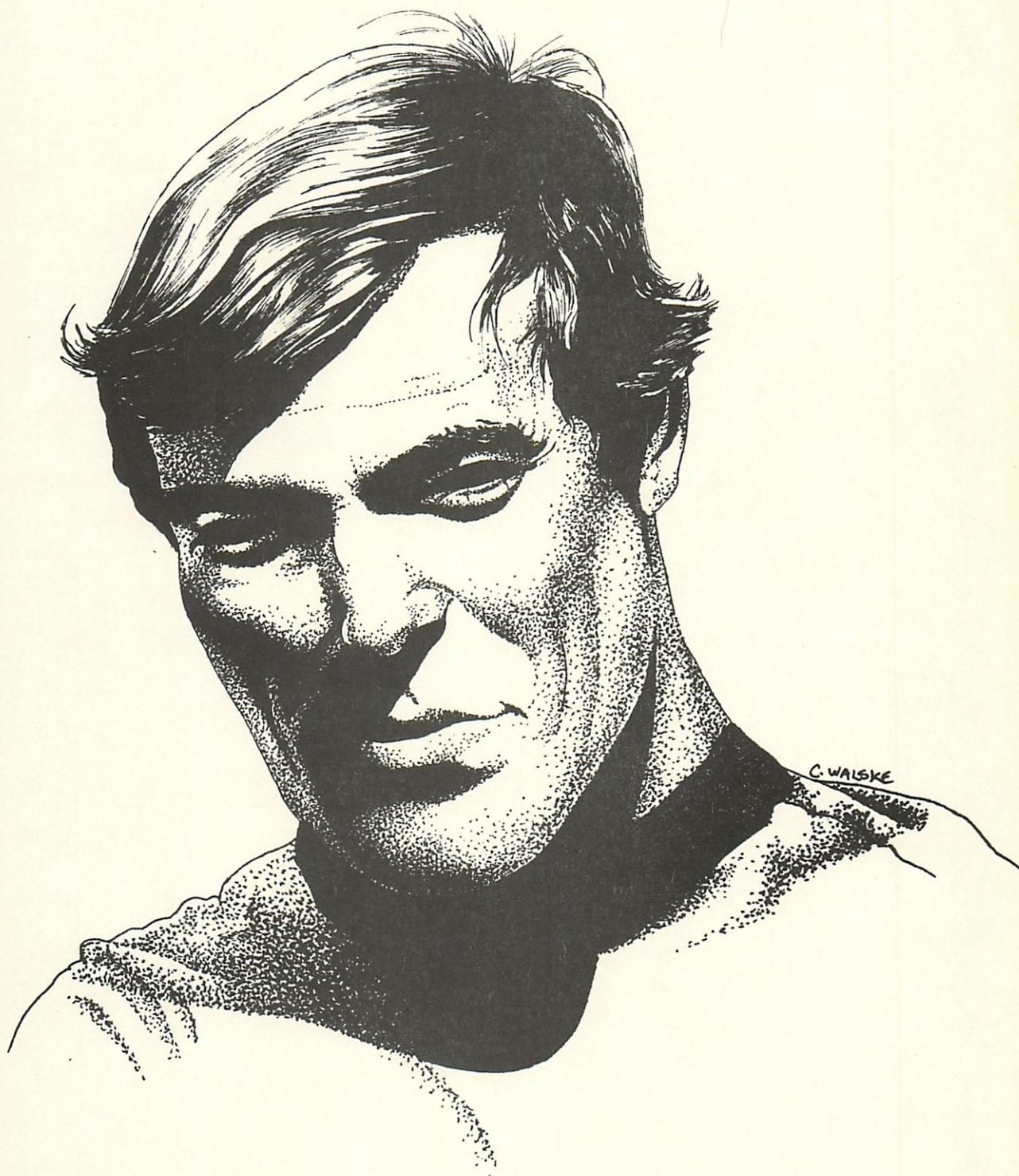
Roan was faced with an intolerable choice: being forced to turn them over to Star Fleet Intelligence, or letting them return to the *Ormenel*. Either action would betray his uncertain status. The one would ruin his integrity as a kiling, the other would destroy his position in Star Fleet. In the end he helped them escape, and then turned himself in as a spy.

Tavia, Roan's First Officer, was also a member of Star Fleet Intelligence. Having known Roan personally for a long time, she was able to get a place on the Intelligence team that questioned him. To her and everyone else's astonishment, interrogation revealed that the intensively trained *Ormenel* agent was by birth a human. The kilingau had taken him away from his home in a raid and brainwashed him.

Star Fleet, recognizing the enormous value of this cultural hybrid, helped him to remember his childhood as Roan Morgan, and retrained him to fit into the Federation. He returned to command of the *Explorer*. Tavia went with him, having gotten a strong warning from Star Fleet Intelligence to watch him and to help keep him in line.

* * *

Tavia went over to stand behind Roan, and gently began to rub his neck around his ears and along his shoulders. He visibly tensed the



muscles at first, but started to relax after a moment, as he recognized her desire to help. After a long pause he began to talk. . .

"I feel more of a spy now than I did a year ago. I can't go anywhere without being called 'the Klingon' or 'the defector.' Fleet Command is constantly asking questions--I'm sure most of them still distrust me. They ask questions, they have me record things for the files, they listen and they read, but they don't understand. They don't show any interest in the culture or the people, just in what's important to the Federation Council: military capabilities, technology, exploration policies, politics. I don't know, Tavia. I made a decision a year ago. Will I regret that decision the rest of my life?"

"Give it time, Roan."

Roan went on as if he hadn't heard her. "The trouble is, I know the main reason I was allowed to return to Fleet is that they need my background knowledge. So I'll always be dealing with the *Ormenel*, whether I like it or not." He sighed. "But what a way to be reminded of one's errors."

"They need you, yes. They also respect your abilities. That's why you're here. That's why you're part of the team going to Ashkaris. Just remember that I'm on that team, too." Tavia smiled, almost sadly, not knowing how much she'd be able to help him, once they were down there, in the thick of it.

* * *

The weather on Ashkaris was always horrible. So much so, in fact, that Federationers who had come to the planet had deemed it 'unfit for humanoid life.' The Ashkrifikh, however, had refused to give them space underground, so the pioneers built themselves a bio-bubble, that was nestled between two peaks of the highest mountain, the Ag'naknauhn. The clear plastic dome held more than one hundred and sixty colonists, living and working in close proximity.

When the twenty-five Federationers from the *Explorer*--mostly humans, a few Vegans, three Mraruis, a couple of Oanuina and an odd Ptkk--descended on the colony, the settlers showed no surprise or curiosity, but with much courtesy and helpfulness took them all to temporary housing. To the colonists, their arrival was cause for festivity; any news from home was a welcome event.

Everything, seemingly, was temporary in the colony 'town,' thought Captain Morgan as he walked along with the *Explorer's* research team and several colonists. The buildings were all made of a light strong plastic, the kind of snap-together, bend-here, weld-there stuff that could be thrown together in hours. Only one building, which Roan glimpsed at the far end of the town's 'street,' seemed to be made of rough-grained white stone.

"That's one of our main laboratories," replied one of the colonists when questioned. "Most of the flimsies--the houses made from plastic--just can't take the vibrations of heavy equipment. All the big labs are in Main I--the radiation lab, desalinization lab, meteorology, and so forth. Our big telescope, on the other side of the mountain, is also in a stone building." He laughed. "Only the die-hards work in the observatory; you have to go outside, go around the alkali flats, and climb a difficult pass to get to it. We're working on a tunnel, but there's so much else to be done. . . ." He gestured vaguely at a group of unfinished buildings.

"Do people go outside the Dome much?" asked Roan casually.

"Not if they can help it. I've been here two years, and I haven't been out once."

'Strange outpost,' thought Roan, 'where the colonists despise the idea of going out. How much could they learn about a planet they wouldn't even look at?'

The Captain sent the exploration teams off with the colonists to get equipment set up, working procedures established, and so forth. He and Tavia were directed to the colony administrator's office, where they were introduced to a variety of bureaucrats, scientists, and research technicians. The colony admin, a Vegan by the name of Tinginja Ek-Ubi, seemed pleased to see them, and refused to talk business until they'd given him all the latest news.

Finally, Ek-Ubi, a harassed look settling over his features, turned the conversation to more important issues than the Alpha Trianguli swerfball tournament results. He began, "Before I forget, there's an Ashkrifikh who wants to see some member of Star Fleet from your delegation. His name is Akuo Sastam Chiava. I suppose he's fairly important, as native men go around here--he's the planet leader's favored bedmate."

Roan and Tavia glanced at each other. "You go, Tavia," ordered Roan almost immediately. "You've got the necessary qualifications--aggressive, and female."

"Thanks," said Tavia, grimacing. "And since I'm sure he speaks no System English, it'll give me a chance to practice my Agavoi." Ek-Ubi called in an assistant to show her the way. Roan wished her luck and she left.

Ek-Ubi started idly playing with a stone ornament that lay on his worktable. He faced Roan, who was looking at him inquiringly. "Captain Morgan, the natives don't like us here, but frankly, we'd like to stay. This is a five-year-old colony. We've put a lot of money into our operation and we're just now beginning to see a return."

"I'm sure the Federation wants its colony to achieve maximum profits," agreed Roan, dryly. "What was the colony's initial purpose?"

"To find out why there was so strong a Klingon strain in Ashkrifikh bloodlines," answered Ek-Ubi candidly. "Planet and culture information was purely secondary. Since then, of course, the Federation's grown interested in the physical planet itself. For instance, we wondered, when we arrived, why there was so small a native population. Apparently the entire planet was populated once. Some kind of disaster, probably a natural one, inspired a world war which culminated in a holocaust. The survivors went north, and they began to rebuild their former culture."

"Yes, we know that," Roan commented. "Star Fleet Command gave us a summary of your findings here. There isn't an abundance of metals here at the pole, I gather."

"No, there isn't," agreed Ek-Ubi, "but it certainly is marketable. We export most of the ore that comes out of our fully automated mine over in Ironmount."

"I should think the Ashkrifikh need iron more than the Federation does," Roan said, a little sharply.

"They trade with us for some of the refined ore," answered the outposter, a bit startled.

"They trade for something that was theirs to begin with?" Roan realized that he was thinking from the *Ormenel's* point of view, not the Federation's. "I see," he muttered.

"I don't think you do, Captain. We made the strike and set up the mine. Their mining technology isn't far enough advanced yet to delve that deep. For our production, they pay. If the Ashkrifikh carry out their threat and order us out, we'll lose everything."

'Which is exactly what you came here with,' thought Roan wryly.

They spoke briefly about the Chiau's demand and Roan saw that he would get nowhere by listening to the colonists state and restate their position. He decided that when Tavia returned they had best go speak with Aku Taswir Chiau.

* * *

Tavia entered the room where the Ashkrifikh, Aku Sastam Chiava, was waiting. She had no idea of what he might want, but was interested in the chance to establish an inside contact so quickly.

Tavia took a long look at the man. Multihued robes of sand colors and greens hid his form and most of his face. His only visible characteristics were dark eyes and a patch of curling hair along a dark-blue cheekbone.

'He's part Klingon,' realized Tavia, startled. The cloak over his head shifted a bit to reveal the crooked edge of an undeniably

bifurcate eyebrow. The skin color was darker than that of a normal Ashkrifikh--less blue, more brown; his black hair carried no trace of blue in it at all.

The Ashkrifikh unfastened the piece of cloth that covered the lower half of his face and threw the hood of the cloak back. The features of his face were very good, but they were marred by his expression of sulky anger. He stared at Tavia, scrutinizing her curiously. "Why has the Federation come here?" asked Sastam in an atrocious mixture of System English and Agavoi.

Tavia didn't like his tone of voice any better that she liked his expression. "Try to speak so I can understand you, please," she countered in slow, clearly enunciated Agavoi.

"Too many enemies," said Sastam with a flash of surly anger. "Do you bring weapons?"

She gazed at him warily. She hoped the Chiau was aware of her mate's hostility. "The Federation has weapons," she said cautiously.

"We do not." Sastam yanked a curious-looking tool from an inside fold of his voluminous robe and handed it to her.

The thing appeared to be a handgun made of hard-baked ceramic. Sastam showed her its ammunition--needle-sharp glass darts. "Very little metal now," he said, and pulled out a steel knife. "This is from ages ago, when we lived at the center of the world. All metals today are owned by Aku Chiau, or stolen by colony."

Tavia frowned, not quite knowing how to approach the problem he presented. "Why do you want weapons?"

"You are too curious. We are willing to trade for weapons of metal."

"I'm not interested, unless you give me a reason."

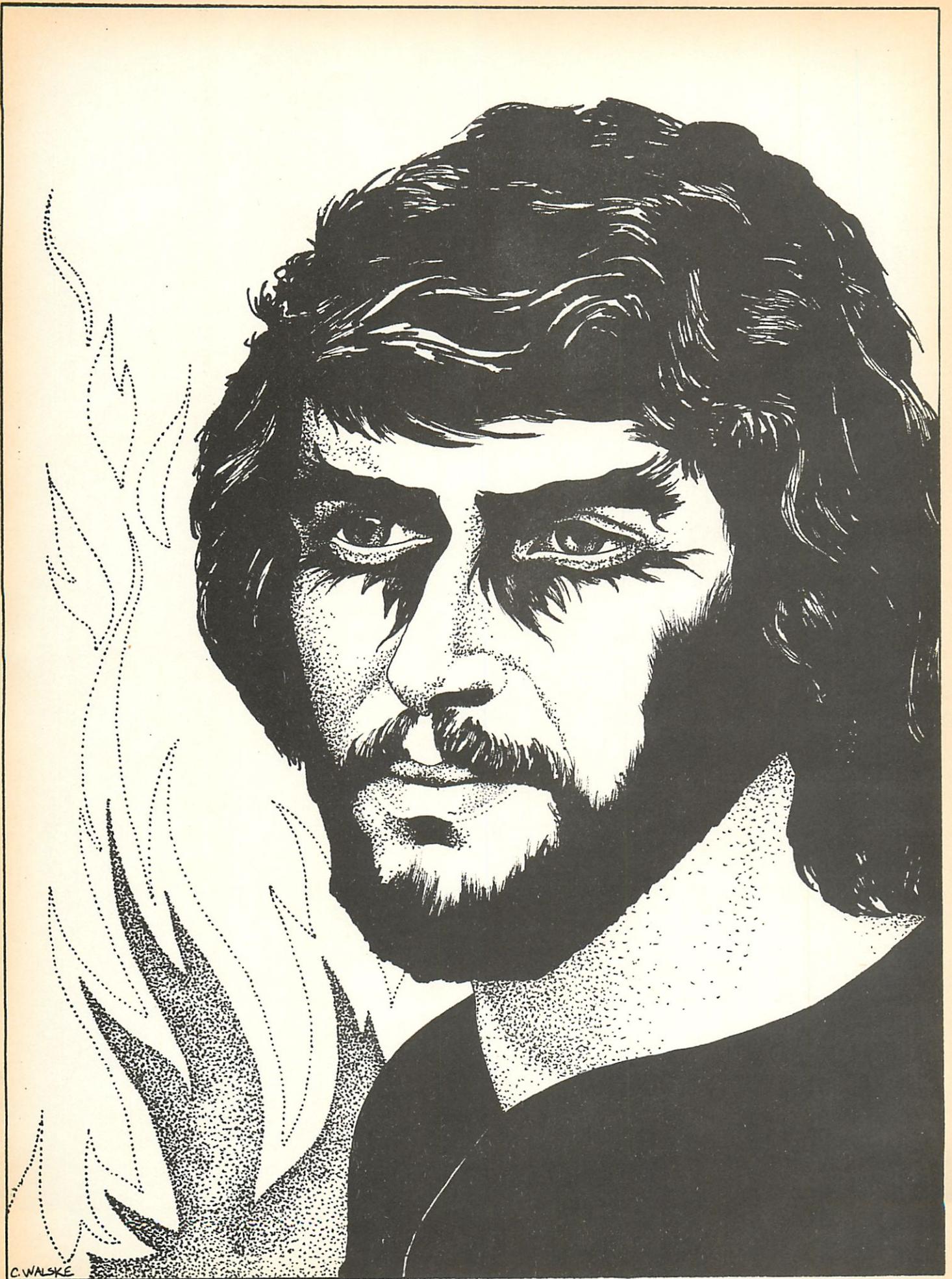
Sastam pulled his cloak closer around him. "Don't trust outsiders, especially *Federen*."

"Then you could hardly trust me to deliver the goods, correct?" Tavia carefully estimated the effect her deliberately sharp tone was having on him, wondering if he would volunteer the information she wanted.

The Ashkrifikh stood up. "We will talk again." His robe swirled around his ankles as he strode out the door.

"You blew it," said Tavia to herself, unsympathetically.

* * *



Roan and Tavia met outside Ek-Ubi's office. "Ek-Ubi isn't overly interested in what the Ashkrifikh or Star Fleet Command have to say," remarked Roan. They started walking down the hall. "I'd like to go see Aku Chiau. Ek-Ubi's aide will show us the way. How'd your meeting go?"

"I didn't learn much. Just that the planetary leader may have a minor revolt on her hands. Her favored bedmate wants weapons."

Roan stopped to look at her. "He wants weapons? Why?"

"He wouldn't say, but I got the distinct impression he doesn't care for his second-rate status, and might be angry enough to do something about it. But without weapons, he can't get very far. . ."

"Wonderful," Roan grumbled. "Stuck on a planet where everyone is plotting against everyone else."

One of Ek-Ubi's aides joined Roan and Tavia as they walked down the corridor. "We have access to the underground domain, but we aren't allowed to use it very often," he said as he led the way. "We're literally on top of things, but that's all."

They came to a door painted blue and clearly marked 'Ladies' Room.' Roan and Tavia paused, but the colonist opened it and went right through, onto a spiralling stairway lit by torches.

Roan realized, once underground, that he had never really liked caves: too dark, too enclosing. They enforced privacy and independence to the point where they were no longer luxuries. He recognized the gloomy turn his thoughts were taking and thought wryly, 'No matter where we were for this mission, I'd find something to complain about.' He tried to listen to what the colonist was saying.

"Originally, there was a honeycomb of caves. . . the Ashkarians took advantage of the natural formations. Be careful; it's very easy to get lost. And the Ashkarians don't appreciate Federationers wandering around."

At the bottom of the stairway Ek-Ubi's aide pointed out a corridor leading directly to Aku Chiau's chambers. He told them an old joke about the Ashkarians being like honeybees, wished them luck, and left.

Before Roan and Tavia could go very far, they were stopped by two male Ashkrifikh, obviously sentinels. "Halt," one of the Ashkrifikh ordered. "*Federen* are not permitted to come here." Tavia noted that the guard spoke better System English than did Akuo Sastam Chiava-- or maybe this line was the extent of the guard's vocabulary.

Roan answered in Agavoi. "We are official representatives from the Federation, here to speak of important matters with the Chiau."

The two guards looked at each other, each apparently hoping that the other would take the initiative. The Ashkrifikh who had spoken gestured for Roan and Tavia to follow him.

As they walked briskly through the corridors, the two Star Fleet officers were struck by the sharp contrast between the rough natural state of the outer walls and the polished living environment of the Chiau domain. The planet's leader lived and governed from a set of rooms so expertly decorated and refined that they no longer even looked like a part of the cave system. Sunlight from deep-delved bores in the ceiling gave the rooms luster and beauty.

Roan and Tavia had to wait a while, until the Chiau's hour of audience, but finally they were allowed into her presence.

"Let us keep this meeting brief," said Aku Taswir. "How many more outsiders will invade my home?"

Roan frowned at her lack of welcome. "Aku Chiau, I am Captain Roan Morgan; this is Commander Tavia Nelson. Star Fleet Command and the Federation's colonial offices have decided to---"

"You didn't answer me," interrupted the Chiau.

Beside Roan, Tavia suppressed a chortle. "Star Fleet has sent me as its emissary, Aku Chiau," said Roan. "They've heard of your ill feelings and would like to act in your behalf, not against you."

"I notice that you don't speak for yourself, only for them."

Roan tried to keep his growing irritation from showing. "I share their interests."

"Then you take responsibility for all their stupidity and criminal actions here on my planet?"

Roan, who didn't much care to be giving out Star Fleet doctrine anyway, looked at her resentfully. A part of him felt like reacting to her in frank anger.

Tavia took her chance and stepped in. "You misinterpret, Aku Chiau. I myself am unhappy with some of the Federation colony's practices; we would like to discuss them with you."

Aku Chiau seemed mollified by Tavia's respectful tone. "I do not want to hear any demands, from you or your government. Understood?"

"I will issue no demands, Aku Chiau," replied Tavia. "Rather I ask enlightenment concerning some of yours. We look forward to speaking with you formally."

"We?" the Chiau snapped.

"Captain Morgan, Colony Administrator Ek-Ubi. . ."

Aku Taswir cut her off. "Are you empowered to speak for the Federation?"

Tavia hoped Roan would keep his mouth shut. "Yes, Aku Chiau."

"Good, then you will speak in Council. I and Ashkaris are receiving much attention," commented the Chiau. "So be it--let those who want favors come to me." She paused and eyed Tavia and Roan. "Do you stay in the colony? Do you follow their ways?"

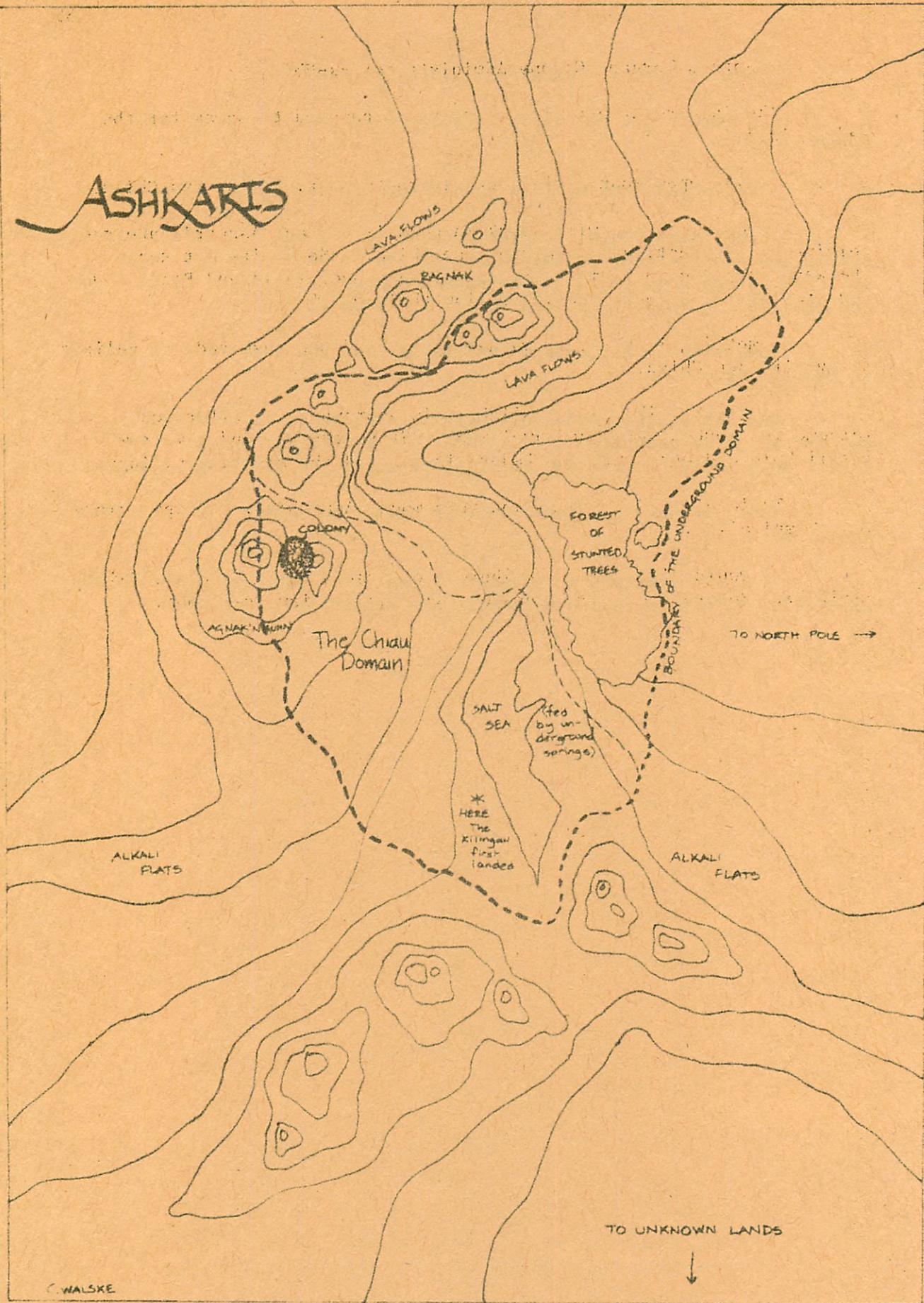
Something in her tone warned Tavia, and she answered, "I believe in myself, Aku Chiau."

The Ashkrifikh nodded slightly in approval. "I offer you a welcome in these underground dwellings. Stay with us, and tomorrow I will hold audience with you Federationers and the visiting kilingau."

Tavia grinned. "Thank you very much, Aku Chiau. We appreciate your hospitality."

"I would like you to be where I can watch you," said the Chiau candidly. Before Tavia could answer, Aku Taswir dismissed them.

ASHKARTIS



A land where the sun never sets,
S on the border of two rich and mighty powers,
Still, the people live below, in darkness,
H trying to keep to themselves, and others out.
Here the women rule over all
K and the men serve them as best they can.
Kilingau and Federen bow to the Chiau—
A as each seeks to maintain their hold on her.
Aku Taswir dictates the law
R with an iron will and unfailing purpose,
Recognizing only her own authority,
I her own position and point of view,
S Ignoring the claims of the Ashkrifikh males,
for equality and freedom in life,
She tries to rid her land of the strangers
who could force Ashkaris to change.

Chapter 4

"The *Federen* have arrived," remarked Aku Taswir idly to Kor, sipping her cup of *tsifaia*. "A Captain Roan Morgan and some others. They are wonderful talkers. Will you be in council to interpret for me?"

Kor straightened as if a blow had landed on his back. "What is it?" asked Aku Taswir curiously. "Don't say that you object to being my interpreter. You can give me the *Ormenel's* viewpoint when you translate Federation words. I need that service. Also, *Akuo Otorok*, you'll be able to speak without worrying about your mouth's mistakes."

Kor wasn't listening. How could he explain his blood feud with his adopted brother? Aku Taswir knew him only as Otorok Akharai, aide in council--the *Ormen*. Alkarin's private affairs had no place here. Moreover, he didn't trust the Chiau to keep his confidence. "I may be known to some of these *Federen*. If this is true, I would prefer to go unrecognized. Can you help me to be disguised in some way?"

Aku Taswir regarded him critically. "Why is it so important?"

"Just a safeguard. I would not wish my past meetings with *Federen* to affect your dealings with them."

"Are you in a position to interpret honestly for them at all, then?"

Kor considered the role of 'interpreter.' It was not a role he took to very well, but he decided it could have unusual side benefits. "I will serve you in this Council as I have in the past, *Aku Chiau*," he said sardonically.

* * *

In three hours Kor looked every inch a half-breed Ashkrifkh. He had submitted to having an evil-smelling blue-grey dye slathered all over



him; with less patience he had sat while his eyebrows were extended into his hairline and trimmed into a different shape that lent him an expression of vicious anger. He resisted, to no avail, when blue-black hair was carefully attached to the line of his cheekbone. It grew thick and curly under the inner corner of his eye, along his nose.

Aku Taswir let him lose his temper. "Do you want us to change you back?" she inquired sardonically. When he reluctantly answered no, she laughed, and stood back and observed--an amused smile on her face, head cocked slightly to one side. "It is well. Do we remove your beard?"

"No!"

"Don't get upset, Akuo Otorok. It was your idea to be changed."

When the ordeal was over, and Kor had put on full Ashkrifikh desert-dress, he examined himself. The effect was startling. He thought the blue dye color over his normal red-brown skin was the most revolting combination he'd ever seen.

Aku Taswir, however, was pleased. "I think. . . I think I like you this way, Otorok."

Kor ignored her remark. "Where do you hold audience?" he asked.

"In the Chamber of the Birds of the Sun."

* * *

The royal council chamber was large enough to comfortably fit twice the number of people gathered there. The sun poured in from a skylight cut directly above a platform at the far end of the room. On the dais sat Aku Chiau, flanked by her advisors. The delegates and onlookers--kilingau, Federationers, and Ashkrifikh--assembled in groups before her.

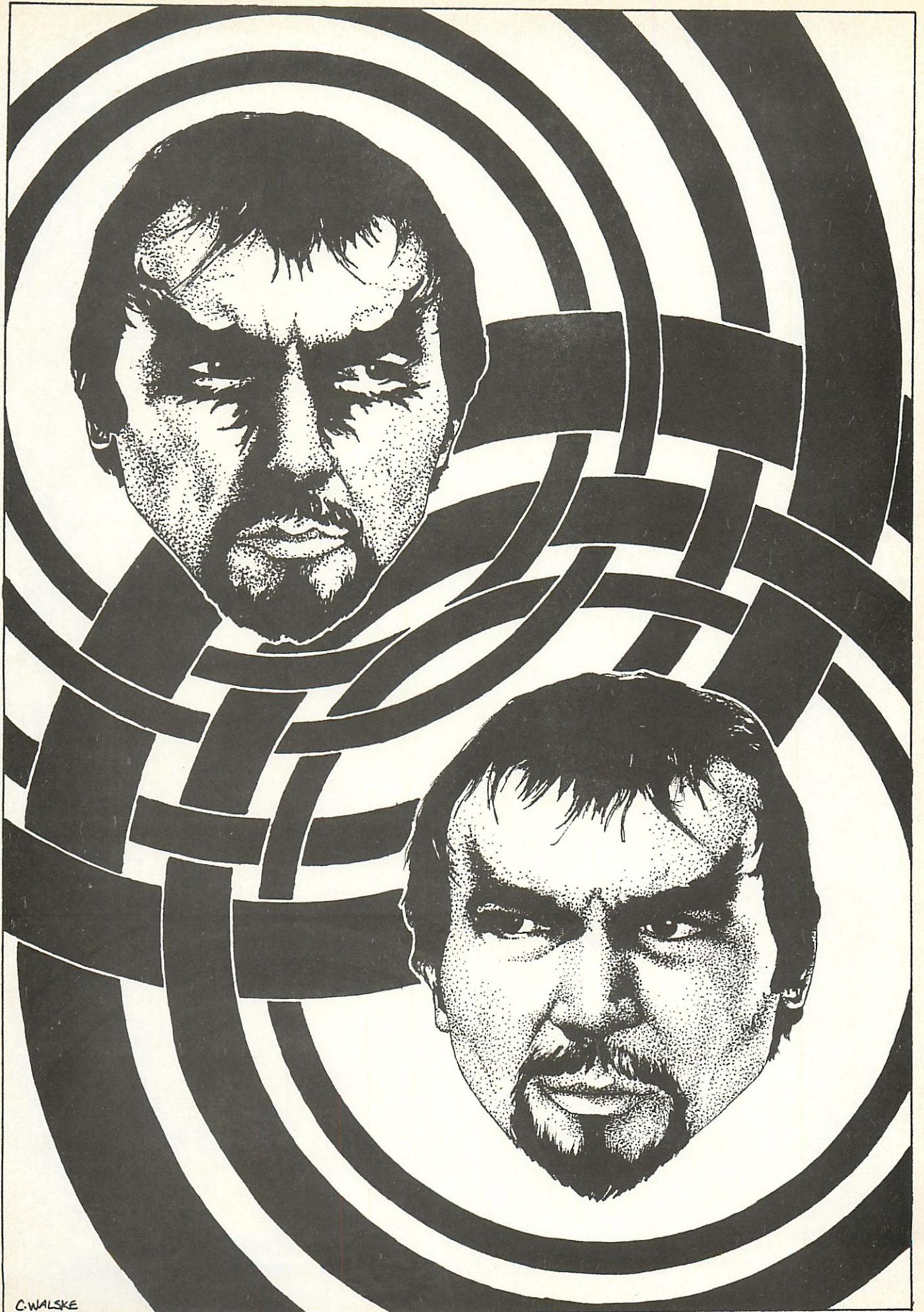
Captain Morgan, Commander Nelson and the colony administrator stood directly in front of the Chiau. "Is this how she keeps meetings short, by not letting people sit?" muttered Tavia to Roan.

"Wishful thinking," he commented. "I've heard that the Ashkrifikh like to talk."

"Well, I can follow a lot of the Agavoi, but probably not all. If I nudge you, Roan, fill in the gaps for me."

"Sure." Roan surveyed the assembled Ashkrifikh. As he looked over the dais, his eyes met Aku Taswir's and she gave him a very brief, cool glance. Roan was not looking forward to arguing with her.

Aku Taswir introduced herself and several of the others gathered around her. The man who sat next to her, presented as Akuo Otorok Akharai,



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interpreter, caught Roan's interest. Something about him looked compellingly familiar. . . . 'But it's probably just his part-kilingaven blood,' Roan reflected.

The Council began, slowly, predictably. The colony administrator pleaded his case, for the fifteenth time. Once again, Aku Taswir declined to comment on most of the points he raised--when he asked for better supplies in exchange for metal production, she replied, curtly, "Out of the question."

Amid all the rhetoric, Kor was quickly losing interest in the council; and his purpose in coming to Ashkaris. Translating automatically, he let the flow of the debate pass over him.

He spent most of the session staring at his long-absent brother. The image he held in his memory was of an eager and aware young kiling full of joy. A mature human stood before him.

He noticed lines of frustration and sorrow in Roan's face, and the signs of a recurring internal struggle. Kor found it hard to reconcile the differences between Roan Morgan, Star Fleet Captain, and little brother Kirin, sharer of his heart.

His attention returned briefly to the discussion as he heard anger grow in Aku Taswir's voice.

"Both Federation and *Ormene*l posts here expect a great deal from us, and give very little in return," she began. "You kilingau have lived on this planet for several generations, and have interbred with us." Aku Taswir looked directly at Kirashai as she continued, "But you should not expect me to obey all of the *Ormene*l's wishes without question."

Kirashai replied formally, "Aku Chiau, you had best decide whether you seek friends or enemies. You should not poison your own food."

The Chiau ignored her. "As for you of the Federation, you settled down on Ashkaris before you even asked my permission. Also, you take our metals and sell them off-planet."

"Sure, we take the metals," said Tavia, defending the colony. "We came in and shared new technology with you. The iron ore is our price for the skilled labor and materiel that we've provided to you."

"You may eat the metal if you want, but don't steal it away from Ashkaris!"

"In the future, to prevent a reoccurrence of this ill-will, we can write a strict agreement to regulate the colony's activities," declared Tavia.

"You assume too quickly that there will be a future for you on

my world," retorted Aku Taswir.

As the Council meeting dissolved into vague threats and unreasoned opinions, Kor withdrew his interest again. He decided that Aku Taswir had made him her interpreter merely to keep him harmlessly occupied. Just as well; he had no patience for any of this.

The debate went on. Finally, in the middle of one of Ek-Ubi's fervent statements, Aku Chiau abruptly declared, "I'm bored." Ek-Ubi stopped short and glared at her.

The Chiau rose and pulled her robes close around her. "I can see that words are more hindrance than help. Your deeds speak much more eloquently."

Roan, made bold by frustration, interrupted. He spoke in Agavoi, wishing to bypass the translator. "Aku Chiau, there is a minor matter troubling me." The Chiau turned her head to acknowledge him.

"You let the kilingau live among you underground, and allow them full privileges, but our colony must live apart," said Roan. "Considering your apparent distaste for all of us, why do you show this prejudice?"

"Kinship," said Aku Chiau. "However, even sisters may be eliminated, if they dispute my place and power--kin, as well as strangers, can be turned away from Ashkaris. I call an end to this Council."

* * *

The council session having gone so badly, Tavia wondered at the meaning of a summons from Aku Taswir. She hurried to the Chiau's quarters, feeling a mixture of curiosity and apprehension. She entered the sitting room and found Aku Taswir speaking quietly to her interpreter.

"Greetings, Commander Tavia," said Aku Chiau, looking up.

Tavia bristled somewhat. She was irritated by the Chiau's familiarity in using her given name, while Tavia and almost everyone else had to address her deferentially, by her formal title.

"Good evening, Aku Chiau."

The Chiau indicated her companion. "My interpreter in council, Akuc Otorok Akharai. He was recently made Chiava."

"Then I give you my congratulations on your fine acquisition," remarked Tavia politely.

Kor looked at her with faint surprise. It wasn't the formal answer--but it was entirely fitting. He couldn't help admiring her self-assurance.

"I hope you will find it the same," said Aku Taswir, a smile on her lips.

Both Tavia and Kor glanced at her, startled. "Aku Chiau?"

The Chiau grinned nastily at Kor, for a second, then smiled as she turned back to Tavia. "To aid you in your work here, Commander Tavia, and as a gesture of hospitality. He speaks Agavoi and System English fluently. He's politically aware and very sensitive, for a male. Furthermore, he's strong and exceptionally able."

Kor couldn't resist a slight bow. "Thank you for your kind words, Aku Chiau."

"The truth," she replied without looking at him. "Will you accept his company, Commander Tavia?"

Tavia grinned to herself: she'd been waiting for that. She only wished she knew why the Chiau was doing this. "Yes, thank you. I regret that I have no one to take his place with you."

"No. The courtesy is mine to show as I please." Aku Taswir drew the triangle of dark fabric attached to her hood across her face, a sign of dismissal.

She smiled an unseen smile behind her veil as they left. Things had not gone as expected in council--rather than fighting with one another, killingau, *Federen*, and colonists had united in opposing her. Her opinionated Otorok would certainly react differently in close quarters with a human woman. She counted on him to both collect information on the *Federen* and, if only in angry complaint, to come back and report to her of the events between themselves.

* * *

Tavia led Otorok to her suite. The rooms provided her by the Chiau were high-ceilinged and full of light and clean air. She pulled the entryway's curtain shut and looked at him.

Kor observed that away from Aku Taswir's presence, the Commander seemed more at ease, as if she no longer had to worry about remembering the proper lines. Her expression was full of a lively interest in him; she scanned him from head to toe and suddenly burst out with a joyful laugh. "I just accepted the goods sight unseen! I'd make a terrible body-trader."

'Even if you could see under the layers of clothing and hair, you still wouldn't see me,' thought Kor. 'Thank Maraku for that.'

Tavia walked around the living room slowly, occasionally picking up objects, her eyes probing everywhere. She descended the steps into her bedroom, looked around in there, and investigated the storage closet. She returned to Kor, apparently relieved.

Kor realized that she was looking for evidence of tampering with her belongings or for some hint of surveillance. He remarked cautiously,

"When people watch or listen here, they do it discreetly. Also unavoidably."

"I'll remember."

"What purpose do we have in common, Commander?"

Tavia gazed at him curiously, intrigued by him. "You mean why did I accept you?" She took his lack of response to mean that she had interpreted his remark correctly, and continued. "It would have been rude to refuse, and we do have a purpose in common. In council, we represent both different and similar interests." She laughed cynically. "Believe me, I'm not in the habit of taking blind dates, especially when the blind date turns out to be part Klingon."

"In council, I represent the Chiau's interests," said Kor.

Tavia made a wry face at that. "I wonder. I know how much can be lost in a translation--an interpreter can make or break a council."

"It's very easy to control those councils, since---" he caught himself and finished slowly, "since no one is really capable of taking command of the situation."

Tavia threw him a curious look. "You're out of place here, Akuo Akharai." She sat down cross-legged on the floor and gestured for him to do the same.

There was a low stone bench along the circumference of the room. Kor tossed a pillow down on it and sat down, leaning against the wall. "Where should I be, to be in place?"

"When have you dealt with the Federation and humans before, Akharai? How is your System so good?"

"How is your Agavoi so practiced?"

"I had a good teacher."

"So had I."

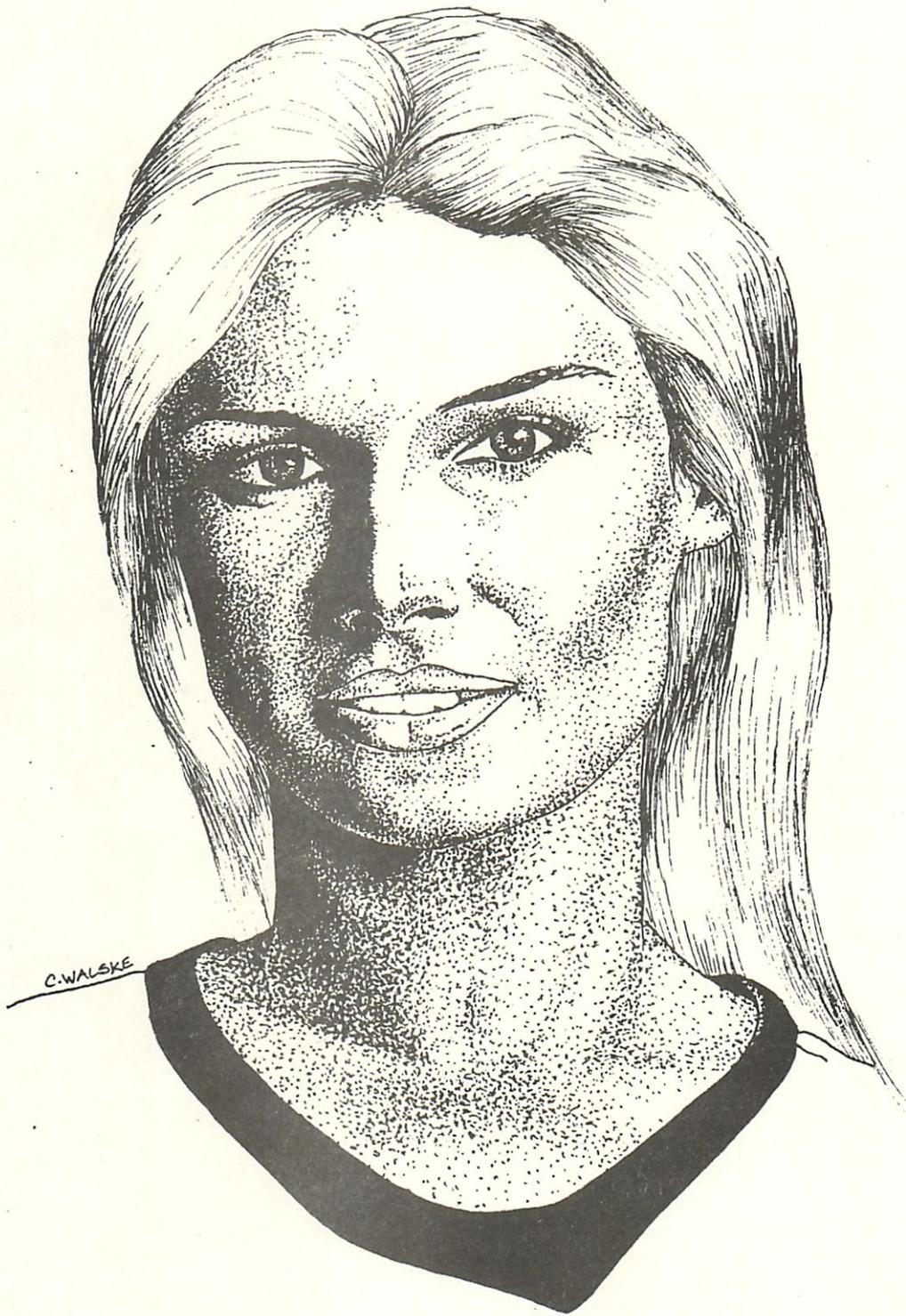
They smiled at each other briefly, both excited and pleased to challenge the other's wits. Tavia remarked, completely at random, "I don't think Aku Chiau's offer was meant to lead to this."

"Do you want to make me a bedmate?" Kor asked with disarming frankness.

"That's what the Chiau wants."

"Let's leave it till later. . . . when people are less attentive."

Tavia took the hint. "You're as evasive as Aku Chiau. I wonder why I even trust to let you in my room."



"Commander, I'm not trustworthy," said Kor, half-wishing she'd believe it.

"Crooked but honest, huh? How is it that a part killing is so practiced in System English?"

Kor answered gravely, pleased to hear her use the proper word. "Caught between the *Ormenel* and the Federation, we quickly learned about both. . ." He paused, but Tavia gave no visible reaction. He continued, "Does your starship stay in orbit over Ashkaris?"

"Yes, it does." Tavia let him lead the conversation his own way, for the moment. "The *Explorer* will remain as long as Captain Morgan and I are here. We both have a job to do."

Kor looked at Tavia, thinking about how valuable she could be to him. Captain Morgan and Commander Nelson. . . Kor had noticed how close a team they formed. How much did she know about 'Roan Morgan,' and how much would she tell?

"Did your Captain teach you Agavoi?" Kor asked, almost too nonchalantly.

Tavia sent him a sharp glance. "As a matter of fact, yes. What led you to guess that?"

Kor shrugged. "I have good ears."

The ambiguous reply, with its far-reaching but inconclusive implications, thoroughly confused Tavia. She shifted position, curling her feet under her. "It seems we have more in common than I thought," she said cryptically. "Whatever Aku Chiau's motives or intentions in throwing us together, I'm glad she did. You intrigue me, Akharai."

"When you acquired me, you automatically acquired full rights to my person and privacy, including the use of my personal name. I welcome it: call me Otorok."

Tavia smiled at the formal courtesies that he used so naturally. "Thank you. If you can pronounce it, I give you leave to call me Tavia."

"Tah-vya," repeated Kor, and added, almost snidely, "I think I say that better than you say Akharai." Tavia grinned in the middle of a yawn, and he looked at her compassionately. "Are you tired?"

"I don't know whether I should be. . . but yes, I am. What are you thinking of?"

"Nothing," said Kor dryly. "You're supposed to do the thinking for me."

Tavia grinned widely. "I think the Chiau gave you to me to embarrass you--putting you with an Earther."

"I feel no embarrassment," answered Kor with dignity, "merely irritation."

"Any of it at me?"

"Only for mocking my position."

Tavia's eyes narrowed. "Apparently, Ashkrifikh are just as rudely honest as kilingau."

"Remember that we learned many customs from kilingau," said Kor.

Tavia laughed. "Meaning that if they wouldn't apologize for being rude, neither would you."

"Was I discourteous?" Kor asked, puzzled.

She made an exasperated sound, then realized that his confusion was assumed. "Damn you," she said, and snickered. "I think you should sleep out here tonight. Or would you rather go back to the Chiau?"

"I'll stay here," answered Kor. "My thanks."

* * *

There was no sleep for Tavia. She'd been through too much that day for rest to come easily. Otorok Akharai was uppermost in her mind. He fascinated her.

She almost regretted that she hadn't invited him to her bed. She could find no better reason for excluding him than the fact that the Chiau wanted him there.

"Why not admit it? So do I," Tavia finally said out loud, almost angrily. She felt a little frustrated and she had an uncouth liking for Klingons. Grinning, she slipped out of bed and went noiselessly into the outer room.

At her approach Kor became instantly awake. He looked up. The dim light showed a dark figure in silhouette against the room.

"I'm interested in something kilingau call '*kinjata*,'" Tavia said quite directly. "Did the Ashkrifikh borrow that custom as well?"

Kor stood up, yawned, and stretched. He remembered that she might not share his indifference to nudity, and bent over to pick up the light undercloak of the desert-dress. "Your breadth of knowledge amazes me," he observed.

"Oh, Captain Morgan taught me about *kinjata*," said Tavia, offhandedly. Kor almost choked. "Does it mean 'play' for Ashkrifikh as well?"

"Yes." He could see a little better now. She was smiling. "Why do you want me?"

"I like you, I respect you. Those are my basic criteria for a human male; I don't see why they should change for a hybrid killing/Ashkrifikh. Besides," she added sardonically, "you're here."

"As you wish," said Kor. "The bed would be more comfortable than the floor, I think."

"Since you haven't learned the value of plush carpeting, I agree." Her eyes had fully adjusted to the dim light by now. The soft shadows of his form blended together; the rich darkness of his skin was sensual, powerful. Smiling to herself, she wished he hadn't put on his cloak. She inquired frankly, "Do you want this? And don't give me any garbage about Aku Chiau's gift and what it means."

Kor laughed. "Yes, I do," he answered simply.

"Why?" Tavia insisted, despite herself.

"I have decadent tastes."

Tavia's smile widened into a grin; that answer appealed to her sense of the absurd. Feeling that the darkened room was inappropriate, she found and pulled the lever on the wall that uncovered the light-bores in the ceiling. The polar sunlight poured in, and they blinked at each other.

Tavia gave him a close, searching look and seemed satisfied with what she found. She turned and went down into the bedroom.

Kor followed. He looked at her bed, which was made of a number of square, flat pillows stitched together. A sleek quilt decorated with a simple blue and gold diamond motif was spread across the bed.

Tavia noticed the direction of his gaze and smiled. "It's more comfortable than it looks. But I imagine Aku Chiau has something much better."

"You can leave her out of our conversation," said Kor.

"If you want," said Tavia, slightly surprised by his cold tone. She came close to him and put a hand flat against his chest. He looked down at it and she pulled away. "Star Fleet would scream if they knew I was 'fraternizing' with the enemy."

"You're avoiding the issue," observed Kor. He removed the light cloak and put it at the foot of the bed. He stood and looked at her, waiting.

Tavia smiled slowly, a warm, delighted smile. "Mmm," she murmured, gazing at him. "But what the hell is that?"

Kor looked down at what she was pointing at. The red and blue snake tattoo wrapped itself around his thigh twice and reached up with mouth open, fangs arching to bite. "That is the life-mark of the Chiau domain, borne by all of its males," he declared grimly. "Aku Taswir herself put it there."

"Barbaric custom," said Tavia, fascinated.

"I agree," Kor replied savagely.

Tavia undid the ties of her robe at the waist and below the breast, and stepped out of the light fabric. She shivered--in anticipation, not from cold.

Kor took a long moment to study her, to watch her small reactions and her body's movements. They reached for each other at the same moment; Kor grinned, grabbed her arm, and bit it.

Tavia came out of his grasp, laughing, and pulled him toward the edge of the bed. They wrestled briefly, each trying to find the other's weakness, and fell, off balance, onto the pillows.

Tavia landed on top. At once she attacked Kor with a lustful ferocity that surprised both of them. Kor matched her aggressiveness. They fought playfully, discovering each other's sensitive spots. Kor pinned her down and began biting her lightly, finding her skin not cold and damp as he'd expected, but warm and pliant. The taste was pleasant.

Tavia relaxed in his grasp. With a stranger, particularly an alien, she sometimes remained tensed, withdrawing slightly from total involvement. The blue-and-brown Ashkrifikh male, however, approached pleasure with such joyful abandon that she could not help but meet it.

He drew back just enough to give her room to find a more comfortable position. She moved underneath him, and suddenly the fire ran through his blood, and power came to him. He moved with her in a joyous, frenzied heart-dance. Tavia's sense of humor merged with her desires, and she tantalized and teased him with her fingers and teeth. Their rhythms matched.

Tavia wondered at the terrifying gentleness of his hands. There was untested strength in him, held closely in check.

Kor discovered for himself how sexually potent the mystery of an alien could be. His curiosity had brought him to this; instead of finding flaws, he took delight in seeing the woman respond in ways different from a killing.

There was a long moment in which Tavia relaxed against the man, letting him cradle her against him. His warmth enveloped her, his hands moved on her skin. . . the spicy taste of him was sweet in her mouth, the rhythm of his heartbeat was loud in her ears.

Most human males, after climbing to the fever pitch of climax, lost themselves in their body's excitement. After it, they returned to their reserved selves, a little ashamed of the moment of madness, afraid of what that outburst of emotion might bespeak. Otorok Akharai had not; the excitement and tension had run through him, instead of exploding, and he had unleashed his feelings on her with a feverish tenderness and passion that had both scared and delighted her. Then, his body's energy spent, he had pulled her even more closely to him, touching her on the face softly, almost as if reassuring himself of the life within her.

He touched her now, gently, on the forehead. "The fire runs beneath your skin," he said, letting his fingers wander over the curves and planes of her face. Her eyebrows seemed to fascinate him; he returned to them again and again with his fingertips, tracing their outline. "I did not know that a human, so cold on the surface, could be so warm and vital. You are sensitive; you feel. You understand taking and giving, and the measure of one's individuality. I did not know."

His voice and words sounded different to Tavia; his accent had subtly shifted. Even his expression, and the movement of muscles under his skin, had changed, to reveal, momentarily, a different man. Even as her always curious mind began to ask questions, he stirred, moving slightly away from her. "You have given me a gift," he said, a touch of formality once again in his voice. "I honor and thank you."

"Something different is always nice," Tavia said dryly.

He caught her wrist in his hand and held it tightly. Her skin turned white under his grasp. "Do not jest to hide deeper feelings," he declared, almost angrily, and then let go of her.

Tavia looked at him, shocked and feeling slightly annoyed. Inside, she knew that her feeling was actually one of outrage at being so well perceived. . . "You invade my privacy," she said stiffly.

"Yes, I have. Several times," he answered, trying to keep the mockery out of his voice. "For you, there is a doubly strong emotional barrier beyond the physical one, isn't there?"

She pulled away from him. The bed contained them both, but they no longer shared it, and she felt suddenly chilled. "I thought Ashkri-fikh males were supposed to be submissive. You're not behaving properly."

Kor's eyes narrowed, and for a long moment he subjected her to close scrutiny. "Forgive me for not adhering completely to the stereotype," he commented.

"In fact, I'd say Aku Taswir probably feels the same way. Your back bears witness to many punishments. . . you might be something of a renegade, I suppose."

A plausible, if uncomplimentary, interpretation, Kor thought wryly, but fortunately not the right one. "Whatever you say, Commander."

Tavia was regarding him with a critical eye. "I should probably ask Captain Morgan about you. He's much better at dealing with killingaven psychology than I."

Kor felt a flash of irritation at the mention of Roan Morgan once again, but concealed it. The Commander was smart enough to have noticed that something was wrong; she was obviously looking for more information. He said casually, "We are of different species. Looking for something profound in the light pleasures of *kirjata* will only bring confusion. If you enjoyed it, that should be enough."

Tavia grimaced inwardly at the deft reply. She had enjoyed it, perhaps too much, and now she could not even justify the encounter with a practical gain. She didn't trust herself to respond. Instead, she pulled him close to her and buried her face in his chest. She fell asleep that way.

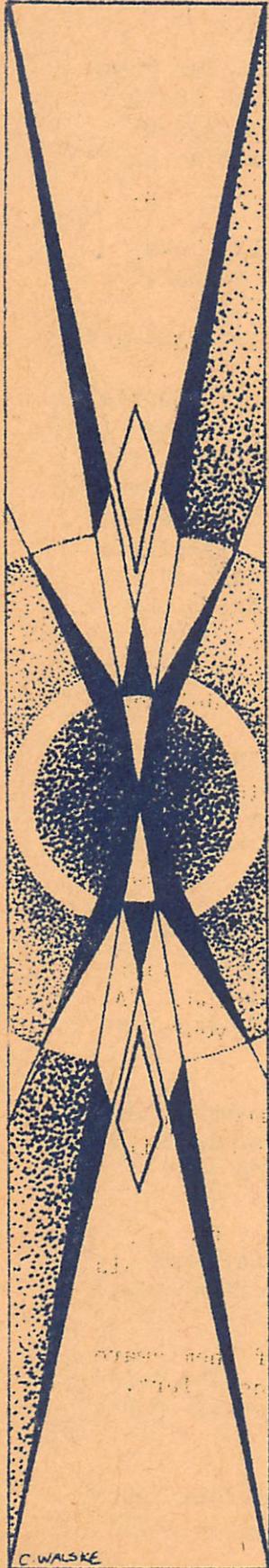
STRANGER

How strange you are
with your dark-hued flesh,
your soft black fur and haunting eyes.
It's good to have you
without your doaks,
and see you now without disguise.

But there is something
stranger still
in your gentle strength and curtailed will.

You remind me of another
who, like you, held
his thoughts and differences concealed,
until he learned
he was as I,
and that his heart could be revealed.

But you are a stranger
even more than he.
A fire burns within you deep;
it beckons to
my intrigued mind,
and keeps me restless as I sleep.



Chapter 5

"Aku Taswir?"

The voice cut through Aku Taswir's sleep. She sat up, furious at the intrusion, and frowned as she recognized Sastam. "You have the sense of a sandworm. Go away; I don't want you now."

"Aku Taswir, there is a spy among the killingau." Aku Taswir hissed at his words, startled.

Sastam sat down on her bed, leaning forward so that he could feel her breath on his face. "He is trying to cause trouble by persuading the males to assert themselves. I fear that some are listening to him."

"Who is he? How did you find him? And where is he now?"

"He is Theremir Keorl--he came with the diplomatic party. I overheard him talking. I attacked him, but he broke away."

Aku Taswir rose and paced across her bedchamber, hands clenched into fists. "I will send for Aku Kelos and her male. The trouble-maker will be found quickly. Go back and calm those who heard his words."

Sastam bent his head and hurried out. Aku Taswir pulled a robe around her shoulders and stalked over to the bell that summoned her attendants.

* * *

A noise, and the sounds of someone entering the living room, woke Tavia and Kor with a start. Tavia caught up a robe, and drawing it about her as she went, moved swiftly to the outer room. She returned a moment later. "The Chiau wants to see you. Immediately," she said to Kor with an ironic smile.

Kor dressed quickly and left, wondering what could have happened and why Aku Taswir would have gone through all that trouble to give him to the Commander, only to interrupt them.

Sastam rejoined his friends in a hall far from Aku Taswir, far from all the other households. He was smiling. Revenge was pleasant. He'd enjoyed listening to the trouble-maker speak of equality and individual potential--but Theremir had caught him with stolen equipment, and so he had to be dealt with.

"We have enough time now," Sastam said triumphantly. "While Aku Taswir worries about what to do with the spy, we will go on to Ragnak."

"Why do we have to go to Ragnak?" asked one of the men complainingly.

"So that we will be remembered." Sastam ordered two of his cohorts to carry a heavy crate between them, and distributed the smaller items among the three others. It had taken weeks of careful work to 'acquire' everything they needed--the explosives, the wire, the various other pieces of equipment. Some had come from the Federation colony, some were taken from the kilingau. Either group would have looked on the poor collection of scraps and laughed, but to the Ashkrifikh males who had diligently amassed this hoard, it was treasure. More importantly, the pieces, when put together correctly, could have a rather startling impact.

* * *

Aku Taswir looked at the air of contentment in Kor's features and reflected sourly that that would change soon enough. "Putting a trouble-maker among the restless of my people was not a courteous thing to do," she declared. "I have already sent for Aku Kelos and told her to deliver Theremir Keorl to me--under pain of both your deaths."

Kor stood very still. "What has he done, Aku Chiau?" he inquired carefully.

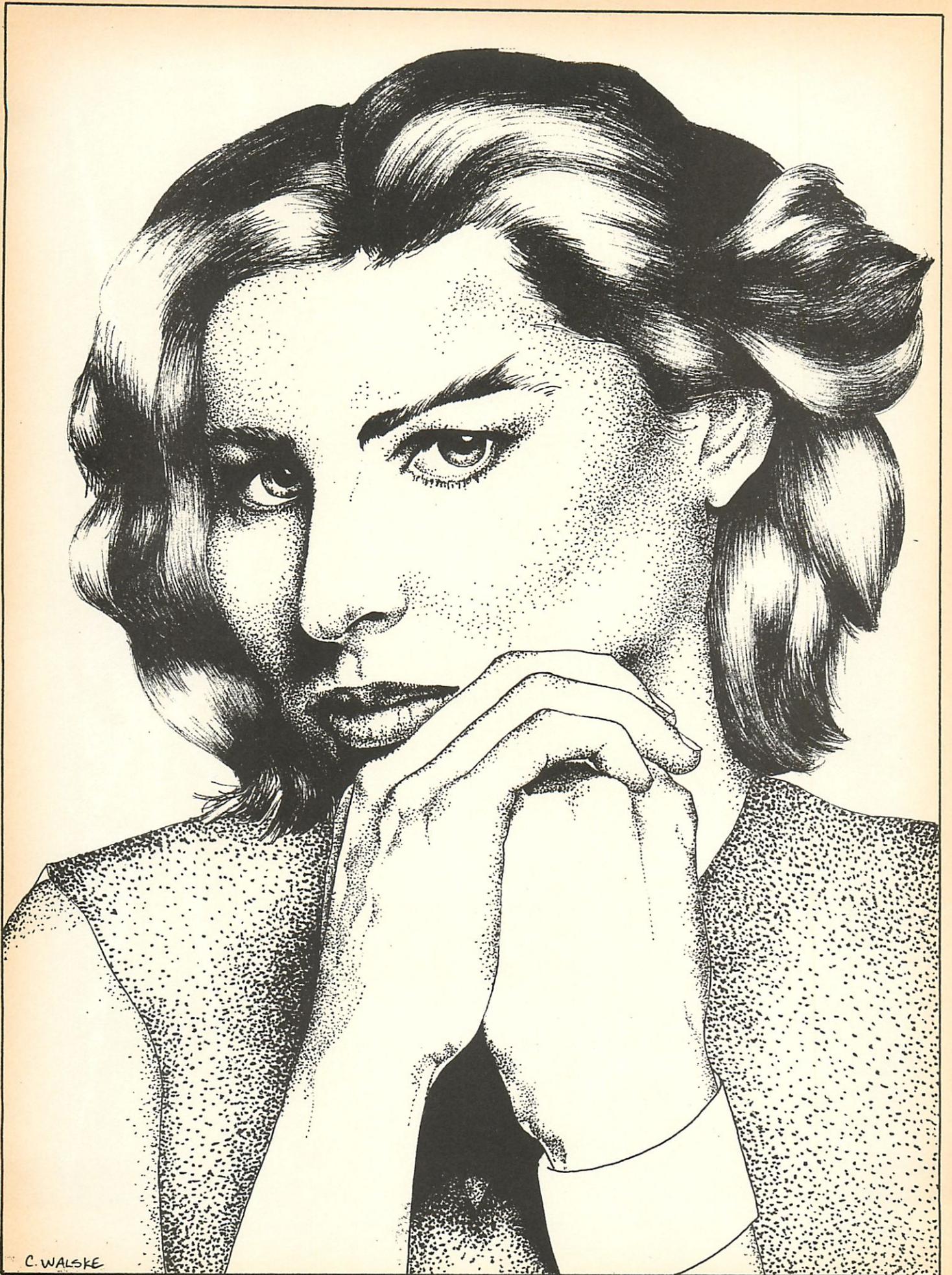
"He is a spy. I found him out through Bedwarmer Sastam." Aku Taswir's voice held a note of triumph.

Sastam Chiava had been the most ardent of the rebellious Ashkrifikh. Kor wondered at the man's treachery, then dismissed it from his mind. "As you tried to take me by violence and abuse, Aku Chiau, so I took your men."

"Well spoken," observed Aku Taswir. Her complete formality made her about as approachable as the heart of a fire. "But your actions will not matter. Like you, my people have no choice."

Kirashai Kelos and Theremir Keorl entered at that moment. The left side of Theremir's face was bruised and there was a fresh knife-cut on his neck below the ear. He looked thoroughly angry.

Kor greeted them both with a nod. They were all three of them aware of the tension and danger that surrounded them and stood waiting, alert.



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Aku Taswir rose and stepped down from the dais. She walked up close to Theremir and studied him. "Males are always so much more trouble," she said conversationally. She pulled out her knife and struck suddenly, viciously. Theremir didn't make a sound. "For being a spy," she said and smiled.

Theremir had gone white; he held a hand to his side. "It has been a pleasure to serve you," he said.

Aku Taswir's eyes met Kor's. "Calm yourself," she commanded. "In a moment the full Council will gather here, along with all the outworlders we can summon. I will have something to say then, and would like you to listen unprejudiced by rage."

Kor paid her no attention. He went to Theremir, and put a supporting arm across his shoulders. "Your sacrifice saved my life. A life-obligation between us," Kor said to him, intently. Theremir nodded slowly. "We shall return in time for your Council, Aku Chiau."

There was a new note of quiet, even contempt in Aku Taswir's voice: "You will stay here."

"If I stay, it will be to bury my knife in you," said Kor savagely. Beside him, Theremir moaned and gave way to unconsciousness; Kor staggered under the increased weight. Kirashai Kelos moved quickly to help with the burden.

Aku Taswir seemed genuinely surprised by the threat. "Under what Challenge?" She looked at Theremir again. "Revenge for his death? How loyal. I didn't think he was that important." She waved a dismissal. "If that's what you wish, go tend to his wounds, Akuo Otorok. I don't think he'll die."

Kor snarled deep in his throat. Together he and Kirashai helped Theremir out the door.

* * *

The Council gathered. Apparently Aku Taswir's feeling of urgency had spread to her people and even to the offworlders, because they joined together quickly, looking wary and alert. Among them were Kor, Kirashai and Theremir, weakened but on his feet. His wound, once bound, had proved to be more of an encumbrance than a danger. Not far from where they stood were the Federationers, Roan, Tavia, and Ek-Ubi, the colony administrator.

As the crowd coming through the doors dwindled to one or two late-comers, Aku Taswir began to speak. She stood alone on a raised platform, looking coldly imperious. She addressed them in formal, imperative Agavoi.

"I will speak directly, even simply, to all of you who are alien to Ashkaris." Her lips almost curled into a sneer. The Ashkrifikh were looking at each other with varying expressions of shock and discomfort; to be direct was to be rude, so rude as to violate all sense of propriety.

"Your arrival here, supposedly to settle all our problems, has done nothing but stir up great discontent.

"You violate our peace; you encourage my people to ask questions, to think of things ordinarily beyond common comprehension. Contrary to your belief, this does not bring enlightenment; it breeds suspicion, uneasiness, and loss of self-respect. It also destroys the concern and esteem the members of a group hold for each other; and once the harmony of a group is shattered, discord of every kind is invited in.

"Ashkaris is mine. I demand your immediate departure. We no longer welcome you here. We refuse to greet you as guests or strangers; we declare you enemies and outlaws."

Aku Taswir's expression was coldly contemptuous as she surveyed the company. She smiled very briefly, in a fleeting sign of arrogant authority, and added, "I give you twenty days to withdraw from Ashkaris."

Kirashai Kelos pushed her way forward, astonishment and anger on her face. "After all the years of help and friendship between our peoples, how can you consider us with the *Federen*? They plunder your planet's limited wealth and give nothing in return. Yes, they are your enemy---"

The Chiau cut her off, glaring at her. "Is the pretended friend not the greater enemy than the obvious thief? You have shown me. . . you, who I welcomed to my house. . . have shown me that if we are to continue---"

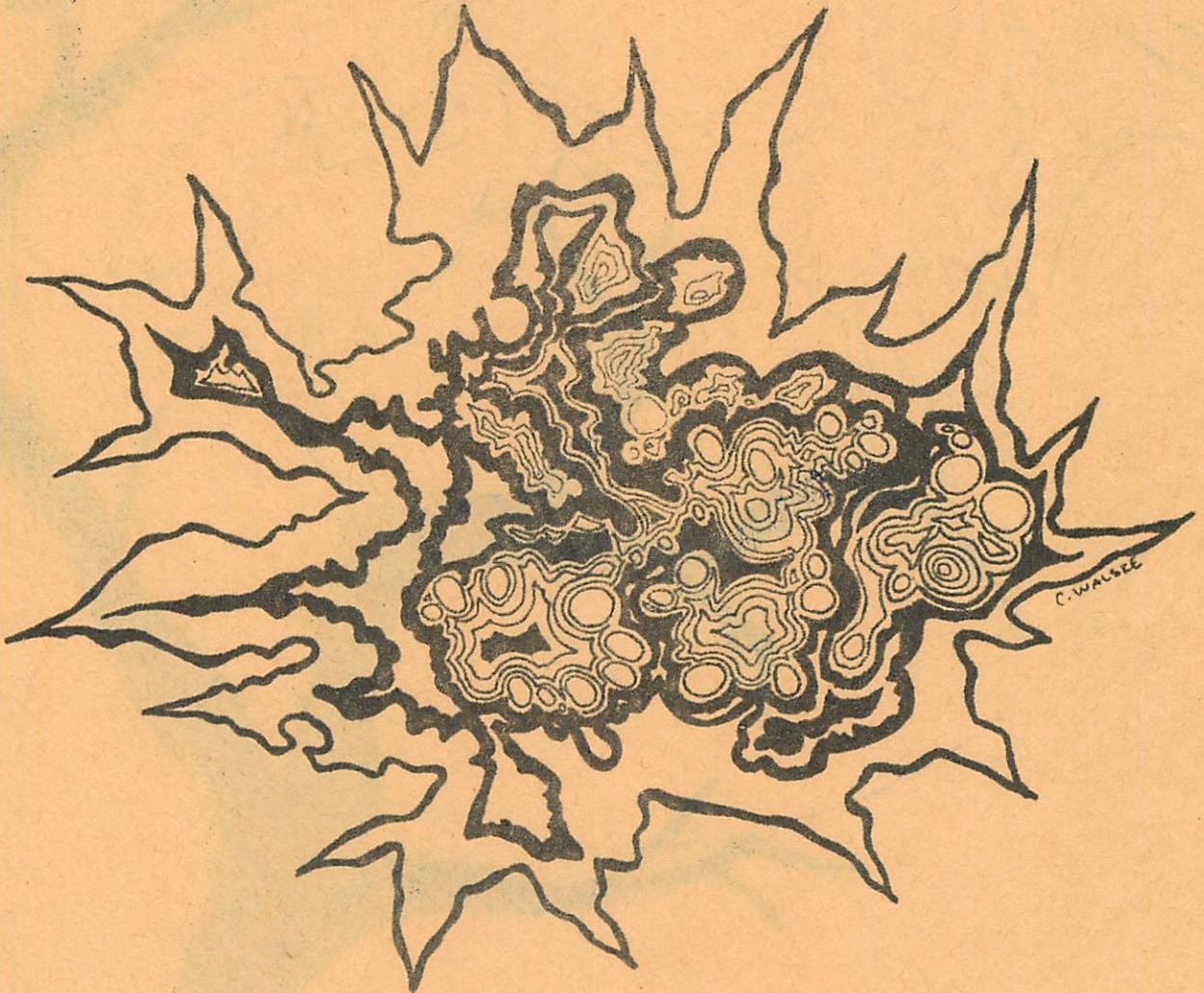
The rest of the thought was lost as a loud rumbling noise filled the room. There was general agitation as offworlders and Ashkrifikh shared the fear of an unknown, and yet hauntingly recognizable, threat.

Even Aku Taswir looked up, startled, at the tremor in the walls and the deep vibration. Someone in the crowd exclaimed "Ragnak!" like a swear-word. Aku Taswir asked a few sharp questions of the people gathered around her; about a dozen Ashkrifikh hurried off, looking alarmed.

"In Agavoi, '*ragnyak*' means volcano," Roan said meaningfully, pulling out his communicator.

"I think the volcano just stole Aku Chiau's show," Tavia muttered, looking half cynical, half worried.

Nobody there could know, not Star Fleet Intelligence nor shrewd kilingau nor his native kin, that Akuo Sastam Chiava had drunk a jug of icefire, toasting himself and the ever-reborn firebird Saichanat, and connected the tripwires that set off the explosives, deep in one of Ragnak's fire-rent chasms.





The Domain of the Birds of the Sun

How many times can you lose a home?
How many times can the world end?
How many times can you move a home?
How many times can you begin again?

* * *

Twice a thousand years ago,
when our ancestors lived upon the land,
and our skin was the color of ocean waters,
and our robes the color of the glistening sand,
when food was plenty in forest and field,
and children climbed the hills for fun,
there lived and ruled a household strong,
the Domain of the Birds of the Sun.

* * *

In peace and glory they ruled their land,
for half a thousand years or more,
but then the evil ones came up,
and brought with them the wrath of war.
The war raged on till all was lost,
and few remained alive to run,
to seek another place to build
a Domain of the Birds of the Sun.

* * *

They headed north where none had lived,
where windstorms howled and the land was dry;
they were mostly women, children and those
too weak to go to fight and die.
They worked together long and hard,
as their ancestors had done;
they set their minds to start a new
Domain of the Birds of the Sun.

* * *

They burrowed into caverns and caves,
and learned to live on what they had;
the women grew hard and strong and fierce,
and took the power they'd never had.
They set the laws and guarded well
the status they had newly won;
never more would males rule
the Domain of the Birds of the Sun.

* * *

They lived this way for centuries,
as peacefully as time would allow;
and finally the seat of power
came to those they called Chiau.
The Chiau held court in finery,
in gilded halls surpassed by none;
they brought to the caves the glory of
the Domain of the Birds of the Sun.

* * *

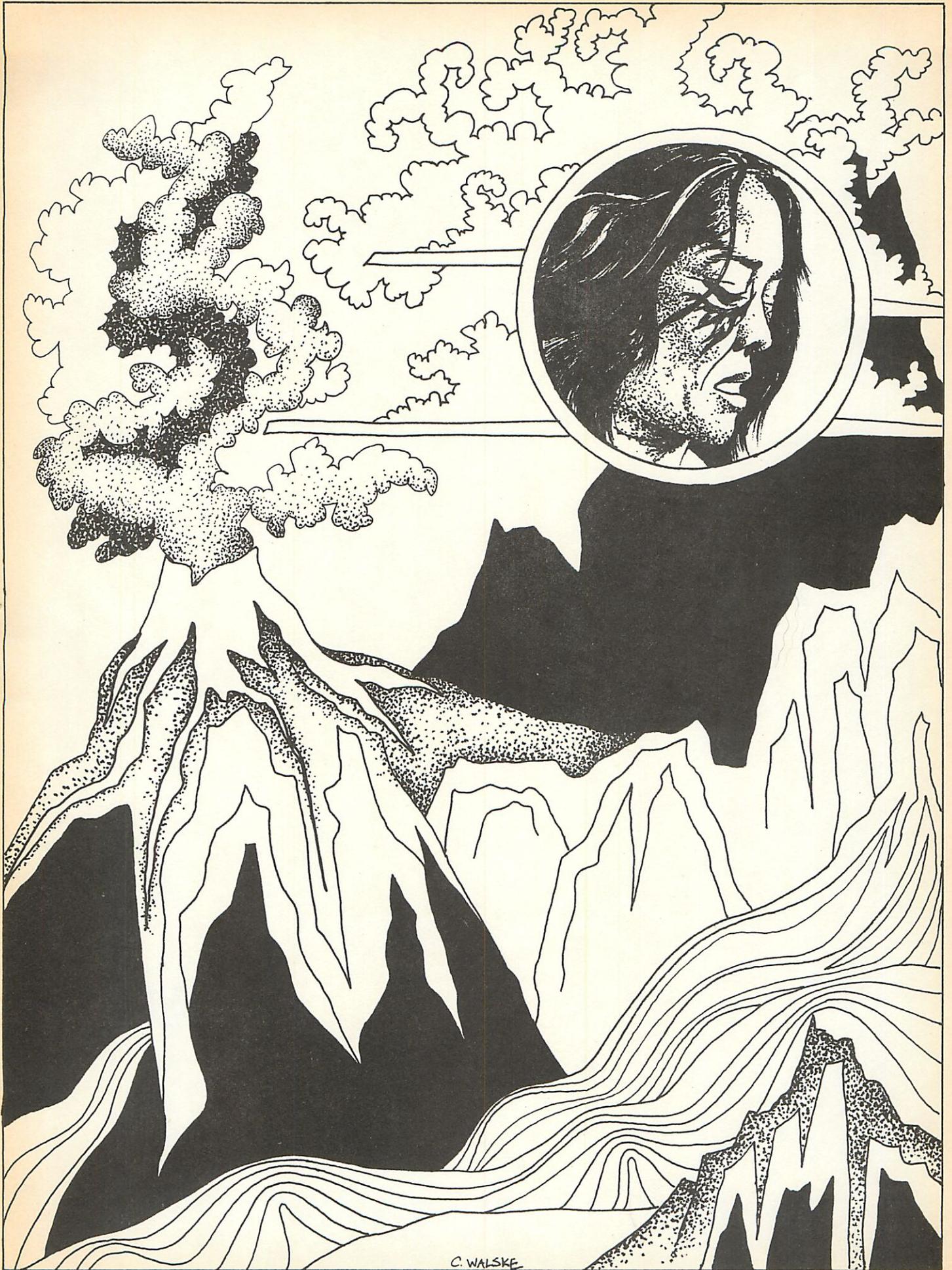
About the time of the Chiau ascent,
strangers came to the cavern land;
they joined the people, who willingly shared
all they had with the alien band.
But later other strangers came,
who stole their treasures and left none;
and they were told they could not live
in the Domain of the Birds of the Sun.

* * *

But both the stranger groups brought down
tales and thoughts of other ways,
lands where men had power, too,
and people lived in the light of the day.
Dissension grew among the powerless,
who thought a change was best begun;
they rose up and again destroyed
the Domain of the Birds of the Sun.

* * *

How many times can you lose a home?
How many times can the world end?
How many times can you move a home?
How many times can you begin again?



C. WALSKE

Chapter 6

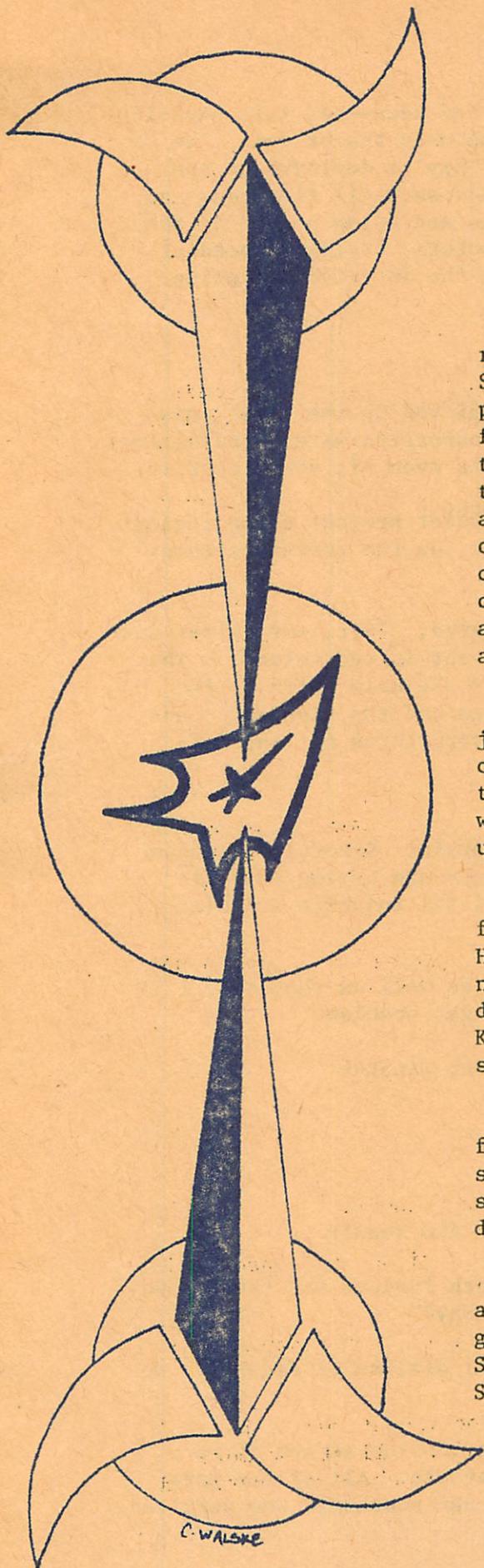
"Commander!" Lieutenant Tiekimiy went rigid at the library computer station. Samantha Shay, Chief Engineer, and, for this part of the trip, acting commander, crossed from the Captain's chair to the sensor monitor in two strides. A second later she slammed the button opening communications. Almost as an afterthought, she turned to the Communications Officer and snapped, "All decks," then continued, assuming the channels had been cleared. "Stand by to beam up landing party and passengers. There may be casualties. We are on red alert!"

The Captain's call came into Engineering just as the alert siren began to blare. His coordinates were fed into the transporter system and the evacuation of Ashkaris, beginning with those still in the council chambers, was underway.

Shay returned to the command post to give further instructions. "Engineering? Shay. How many people we got coming through right now? Thirty-one--that we can handle. Just don't lose them. Damn it, I know there are Klingons down there. Beam everybody up--we'll sort them out later.

"I need at least ten people to volunteer for pod duty. Two to a ship. One pilots the ship in close over the pole, the other takes sensor readouts. I want those ships out and down in ten minutes."

Roan walked onto a smoothly-running bridge a few minutes later. He looked a little haggard, still running on adrenaline. He waved Shay down as she started to rise. "Stay there, Sam. Give me a briefing, please."



"Yes, sir," she answered cheerfully. She had seen--and felt herself--the sudden release of tension as the Captain came onto the bridge. "We've got shuttlecraft down now with Security teams. They've deployed on the planet surface and are following emergency procedures. All five pods are out, relaying coordinates of 'safe' areas; people are being beamed up from those. Our geologists are working with the computers, trying to predict the spread of lava and volcanic ash fallout, but the information coming in is confusing and inconclusive."

"Fast thinking, Sam. Very nice work."

"I didn't do it alone, Captain. Tiekimiy picked up the first seismological ripples of the explosion. All six transporters were coordinating, and they had you off before the actual quake-waves even hit your location."

Roan nodded appreciatively. "Have the computer project a topological map of the Pole, showing the spread of the damage, on the forward screen. What's happening to the colony?"

Lieutenant Tiekimiy turned around and answered. "Sir, our colony was the first area hit. The explosion opened a new vent in the volcano. The instantaneous ignition of volcanic gases inspired the main vents of the volcano to erupt as well. Between the shock waves and the fissures opening along the fault lines, most of the colony's structures collapsed."

"The colonists?"

"Fortunately, very little loss of life, Captain. Reports are incomplete, sir, but it seems that most of the colonists are trying to pull themselves out of the wreckage. A lot of superficial injuries and bone fractures."

"All right. Sam, keep things running just as well as they are; I'll be helping Commander Nelson with the extra passenger problem."

"Yes, sir. We'll report to you every fifteen minutes."

* * *

"What do you fear, Akuo Otorok?"

Kor turned--too quickly. He looked hard at Aku Taswir.

The woman met his stare evenly. "You're both furious and tense, and working very hard to keep it all under control. Why?"

Damn her insight. "Ascribe it to my natural dislike of *Federen*," he answered sharply. "What concern is it of yours?"

Aku Taswir didn't comment further. She was looking at two of her friends sitting frozenly in a corner, almost catatonic. All of the more important Ashkrifikh, including those members of her household who survived,

had been segregated in a large briefing room. Aku Taswir felt one conspicuous absence.

Kor suppressed his own tensions; something far more important than his feelings was troubling her. He studied the Chiau, and saw the anger underlying her grief. "What troubles you, Aku Chiau?"

Aku Taswir fixed her eyes on a bulkhead far across the room. Her voice had no depth; it was light, colorless, unreachable. "Pakio comes to me. 'Aku Chiau, I have a message,' he says, for all the world like a voice beyond the pyre. 'Akuo Sastam Chiava asked me to tell you that now there is no one left. He and Ashkaris are at peace with the universe.' I stared at him, slowly untwisting the words, hardly daring to believe what they meant. Pakio went on to tell me that Sastam set explosives in the volcano. Ragnak's eruption was not natural."

Kor, caught by her words, stared, physically shocked. He demanded, "Why would he do such a thing? Why would he destroy his own home?"

"Sastam was both bitter and frustrated. But I did not know that his ache had grown so intense." Aku Chiau bent her head. From her expression, Kor gained a fleeting impression of defeat, of guilt. "He was never content. There were so many opportunities just beyond his grasp, he complained. I think he must have finally decided that others should suffer also."

"He was a fool," said Kor angrily. "Did he have help in his madness?"

"Yes. He probably told his friends that it was all a game. Sastam alone, no matter how inspired, could not have planned and carried out such a—"

Kor let her trail off, and for a moment stood watching her gaze blankly at nothing. He found little to say. He felt sympathy for Aku Taswir because he had come to understand her. He thought about Sastam's death, and was grimly pleased. That Akuo Sastam's violent act had also precipitated his unwilling presence on a Federation starship was a problem he couldn't begin to face.

One source of his fear was even now entering the room. Kor turned hastily and covered his face with his cloak.

Roan looked around and felt the emotion in the room: a savage sorrow that could lead to unpredictable hostility. The Ashkrifikh he had seen in the Chiau halls were all in this room, twenty or more sitting, standing, leaning against the wall, their expressions varying from inscrutability to sullenness to abject despair.

The Ashkrifikh leader Aku Taswir Chiau was standing to one side of the room, one hand absently touching the surface of a small table.

Beside her was the half-Ashkrifikh Otorok Akharai, who looked at him with such hostility that Roan felt an uprush of fear. Surprise at this unreasoning response made him look more closely at the man, but he could see nothing except the other's eyes. "Aku Chiau?" She raised her head in polite disinterest. He went on, "I came to show you my very worthless sympathy. . . there are eighty-seven Ashkrifikh safe aboard this ship. If there's anything I or the Federation can do for you, we'll try our utmost to achieve it."

'I or the Federation,' thought Kor grimly. 'I or the Federation. Need I doubt any longer? Almost twelve years, Kirin; you passed me with a scant glance. Maraku I would like to tear your heart out!'

Aku Taswir had lost all her liveliness, answering Roan's attempted courtesies dully and apathetically. She showed interest at only one point, when Roan declared, ". . . I'm not sure what the Federation will do. I'm sorry to say that you probably will not get a planet; more likely, you'll get space on one." However, not even this piece of negative news could rouse her out of her dejection.

As Roan stood awkwardly, poised to leave but not sure if he should, she finally spoke. "Thank you. We who survive, live because of you."

'Maraku, that's right--do I have to thank him for saving my life?' thought Kor in another fierce mixture of memories and emotions. He glared as Roan murmured some polite farewell and left.

Unmindful of Aku Taswir's look of curiosity, Kor chose a spot in a far corner where he could sit down. He felt tired and somewhat helpless. Surely it was only a matter of time before Captain Morgan recognized him.

The two obvious choices open to him were deplorable: maintaining his disguise as an Ashkrifikh and learning to live on some backwater colony planet in the Federation, or, proclaiming his real identity to Federation authorities, thereby quickly earning himself an honored place in one of Star Fleet Intelligence's prisons. Were the Treaty still in effect, he wouldn't have worried overmuch: he was expert at talking his way out of difficult situations. But given the uneasy political stalemate, he was not overjoyed by his prospects. . .

* * *

"Welcome to the refugee ship," Roan said dryly. He, Tavia, and Samantha Shay sat around the table in a briefing room. "Star Fleet agrees that, with our load of extra people, we should leave the planet immediately. They'll send a search and rescue ship to what's left of Ashkaris. We should proceed to Star Base 18 for 'inspection and classification.' Tavia, how's our cargo?"

"Secure. We have one hundred and twenty-nine passengers, Roan; eighty-seven Ashkrifikh, eleven outposted Klingons, twenty-two colonists, and the nine delegates from the Empire. The wounded were taken to Sick-bay--the medical team's got its hands full there. We've stuffed as many

people as possible into passenger quarters and vacant crew quarters. A large group, of course, ended up in a mess hall on emergency cots. I'd like to give Security an overall commendation, Captain; they've done a fine job."

"I agree," joined in Sam Shay. "There are still four emergency Security teams on the planet surface. With your permission, Captain, I think it's best if they stay on Ashkaris until Star Fleet's rescue ship arrives. Our people could maintain the shelters they set up, giving the natives access to food and water and so forth."

"Done," said Roan. He noticed with interest that both of his officers were avoiding his gaze. "Well?"

"This affair really did blow up in our faces, didn't it?" said Sam. "I don't know if the Ashkarians intended it that way, but they sure got rid of the Klingons and the Federationers fast."

Roan looked over at Tavia. "Do you have anything more lucid to add?"

"You seem a little. . . tense," said Tavia hesitantly.

"The sooner my ship is rid of these passengers, the happier I'll be," Roan said irritably.

"Why do you go looking for trouble?" asked Tavia. "Ashkaris isn't your problem anymore; it's Star Fleet Command's. As for what the Empire will do. . ."

"That's what worries me," snapped Roan.

"I figured as much. But that, too, is Star Fleet's concern. You'll go crazy trying to reason from both sides, Roan. You can't be both a Star Fleet Captain and a Klingon military officer."

"Why not?" Roan muttered, half to himself, thinking back on all the years when he had done just that. "Look, both of you, I appreciate your concern, but if you really want to help, you'll concentrate on the people of this ship--not on me."

Sam and Tavia glanced at each other. They'd seen the Captain in this mood before and knew better than to try to press the issue any further.

"I gather we're dismissed," said Tavia, rising.

Roan looked up at her. He wanted to say something more, something to reassure her, but he didn't want to leave himself open for any more questions. He pushed his chair back from the table. "Dismissed."

* * *

Kor Alkarin strode down the corridor; a Security guard looked at him, but did not follow. Kor stopped outside the room Aku Chiau was sharing with a few of her chief bodyservants. He buzzed the door and it opened.

At his entrance, Aku Taswir brightened. "Good company. Welcome."

"Thank you." At her nod he sat down. He cocked his head at her and observed, "You said little to the *Federen* Captain. You seemed rather subdued."

"I don't like it here," she complained. "What place do I have, away from my land, in the Federation? But what of you, Akuo Otorok? You seemed to be feeling ill-concealed anger toward the human. Has he earned enmity?"

"He's told you what place you'll have in the Federation," said Kor, determinedly ignoring her last words. "A piece of a farm-colony, or perhaps space on an asteroid. Eighty-seven refugees hardly merit a planet of their own."

Aku Taswir grimaced. She stared vacantly over his head for a moment, then sighed and returned to herself. "You don't take time to mourn, do you?"

"I don't mourn for you to see," Kor replied shortly.

"At least leave me the grace to feel and show mine as I wish!"

Kor got up, bowing formally. "You should have indicated that I was disturbing you when I came in."

"Don't be obtuse. What purpose do you bring here, Otorok? Speak and be done quickly."

"It's very simple: why go to the Federation, when the Federation has only Chaos to offer? Will you go willingly to the uncertain, almost necessarily intolerable future here, or are you willing to fight for a place in the *Ormenel*? There are still people on Ashkaris. Together with them, you could create a new homeland on an uninhabited planet. I give you my word that a planet will be given you in the *Ormenel*, a planet not exactly like Ashkaris, but like enough."

"Fight for a place in the *Ormenel*?" the Chiau repeated, looking at him inquisitively.

"It will be necessary to fight to get this ship to the *Ormenel*."

She opened her mouth, ready to dismiss him as a fool. She stopped and looked at him thoughtfully, reconsidering. "Why is it so difficult to listen to the ideas of a male, particularly this male?" she wondered. "I don't believe him, really. He can no more get us a planet in the *Ormenel* than Captain Morgan could in the Federation. But I would rather live among kilingau than *Federen*."

"Call Kirashai here, and I will call Harumi," she said. "We will discuss your plans."

* * *

One hundred and seven killingau and Ashkrifikh put a nearly intolerable strain on the resources of the *Explorer*. Moreover, it was hard to keep track of them all. Ashkrifikh, by nature, loved enclosed, complicated spaces, and wherever the crew went, they discovered three or four inquisitive Ashkrifikh. The visitors paid no attention to any sign they didn't understand, and so the crew found it impossible to keep them out of off-limits areas.

Once Aku Taswir had discussed and agreed to Kor's plans, she capitalized on the crew's resigned acceptance of the wandering Ashkrifikh. She put her people to work, asking them for detailed impressions of the ship, and directing them to particular decks. Theremir coordinated all the information to pass on to Kor.

Theremir and Kor met in a corner of a quiet rec room. The only others in the room were a group of Ashkrifikh at a table on the far side.

"We'll have to work quickly," said Theremir.

"Obviously. We're getting much farther away from the Border than I like," replied Kor. They shared understanding glances, both of them well aware of the dangerous, but absolutely necessary, risk they were taking.

"We'd be able to move a lot sooner if Aku Taswir wasn't so damned uncooperative."

Kor grimaced. "I warned her. . . ."

"It hasn't helped much. She still refuses to speak with me directly. On Ashkaris she made me an outcast and is determined to abide by her judgment. I have to get information third-hand from Harumi." Theremir was glad to vent his frustration to one who could sympathize with his situation.

"I'll speak with Aku Taswir again," Kor said wearily. "But I don't want to anger her now--we need her to fight for us, and we don't want to give her any reason, or chance, to try to take command from us once we've won. When the time comes, let her coordinate the Ashkrifikh on the lower decks. Rasht, who's an excellent technician, should go with Kirashai to Life Support Control in Engineering. His actions there will be the key to our timing. I'll take the Auxiliary Control room." Kor paused. "You'll have the bridge."

Theremir grimaced, not liking the honor bestowed on him. "Don't you want the bridge?"

"I certainly do not. Watch out for the Captain, Theremir; he thinks like a *Federen* and reacts like a killing. Use---

"Ah--would you mind explaining that, sir?"

"Later. Use any means necessary to secure the conn."

"Yes, sir. When?"

"We strike in the morning, when most of the crew is about. A good number of them may be eating, which means that they'll be in one place. Most of the first-line crew will be on duty--we'll need them at their post locations later."

* * *

Tavia was one of the luckier ones. She was off-duty, catching up on a little sleep after the emergency. When the surge of gravity came, she was flat on her back in bed. She woke to a feeling she'd had before only in nightmares: a terrible, unbelievable weight bearing down on her, and an inability to move. Unconsciousness came quickly, as her lungs could no longer meet her demands for air.

She remained incapacitated throughout the takeover: while decks were sealed off, inhabited areas gassed, and vital sections secured by sudden, swift force. She wasn't one of those who drowned in the ship's swimming pool, or who were injured or killed by falling machinery, or who were overpowered by the attacking Ashkrifikh.

The first Tavia knew of the successful revolt was when a hand shook her shoulder. She struggled to wakefulness, feeling sore all over and a little lightheaded. She saw a female Ashkrifikh, who held a knife in one hand and a phaser in the other. The intruder was looking at Tavia with detached, almost amused wariness.

To ask a lot of stupid questions now, thought Tavia, would be foolish. She got up when the woman gestured at her. "Mind if I use the bathroom first?" she inquired sarcastically in Agavoi.

"Out," the Ashkrifikh snapped. They marched.

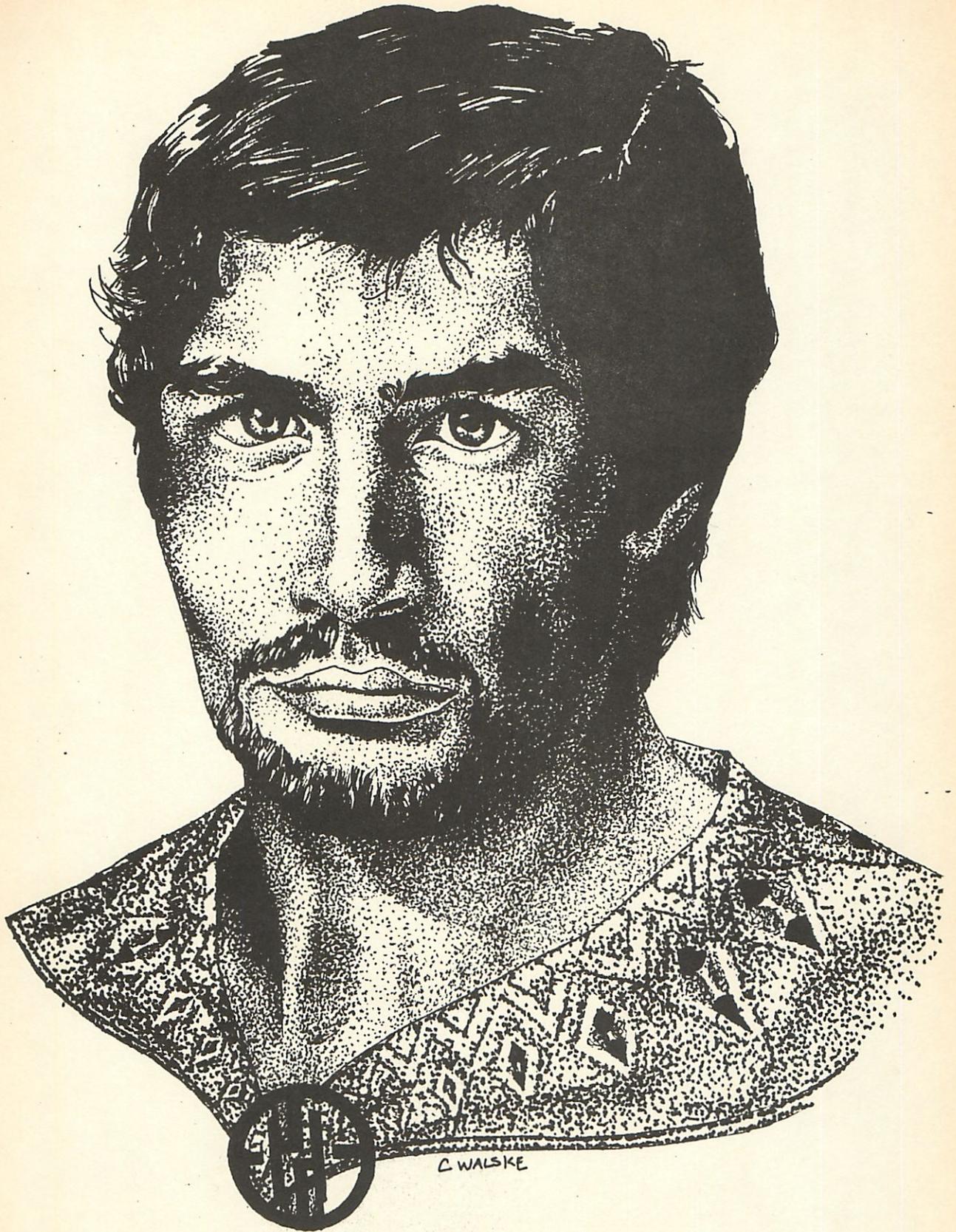
* * *

The bridge crew came to life slowly, waking from various painful positions on the deck. Groggy, they accepted the presence of armed, triumphant invaders as just one more woe.

Roan pulled himself into the command chair, and looked at the killing standing a few feet from him. "You're on strike for better service and accommodations?" he asked wearily.

"Better food at least," remarked the killing in fluent System English. Roan looked resigned. "My name is Theremir Keorl. I'm here to relieve you of command, Captain."

Roan looked at him blankly. "You're what?"



C. WALSKÉ

"I require your cooperation, Captain. Though we are very well prepared for military action and security measures, we are not skilled in starship mechanics. We need a few of your navigators and technicians to pilot this ship to the *Ormenel*." Theremir gazed at Roan, noting the Captain's stubborn reluctance.

Roan wasn't certain of what to say. He shook his head. "I won't help you."

"I will eliminate your crew, Captain, first here, then belowdecks, until I get at least your unwilling compliance."

Roan heard the tone of confident authority in Theremir's voice and half-believed him. From his point of view as a killing, Roan accepted and even respected Theremir's bravado. His human self reminded him, scoffingly, that it was probably a bluff. He wavered, not liking either choice.

Theremir watched Roan grow uneasy. He waited, knowing that the pressure of time and the feelings of the others on the bridge would begin to weigh heavily on the ship's leader. After a long pause he walked over to stand behind the helmsman, looked back at Roan, and said, "I claim this man's life for your stupidity, Captain."

"My stupidity or your arrogance?" asked Roan. He was still unsure as to whether or not the killing would carry out the threat.

"Is your pride more important than the man's life?"

Roan realized for the first time why making the choice was so painful. He wanted to be neither *Federen* nor killing, and hated the conflict between the two viewpoints.

He straightened suddenly, blindingly aware that there was a precarious balance between the two forces: in giving in, he did not deliberately act in the *Ormenel's* favor. As for Star Fleet Command--dead heroes were still dead; alive, they had a chance to regain control of the *Explorer*. Surrendering was no defeat, for him.

Roan rose from his chair. He held himself proudly, revelling in his momentary peace. "You don't want to kill him, do you?"

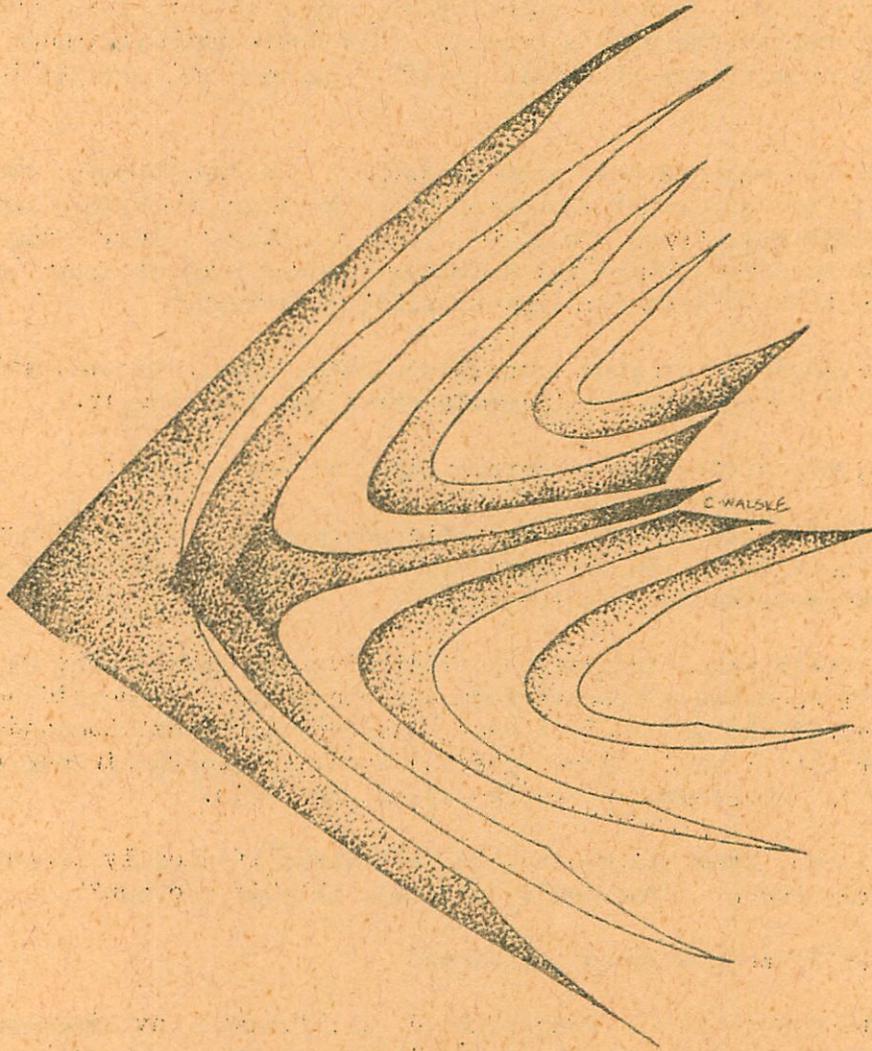
"He's done me no personal harm."

"Then don't kill." Roan smiled. "I'll take any blame given. The ship is yours--and you can take a flying leap into a sun with it."

"Thank you, Captain," said Theremir, quite satisfied. He glanced at the crewman before him, who had been watching them with a horrified expression. Theremir strode to the command chair and activated the intercom. "Auxiliary Control? Bridge secured."

'Well done, Theremir,' thought Kor as he switched off the intercom. 'One more successful rebellion.' Kor smiled. He would have preferred to be on the bridge at this moment of triumph, but he could not risk the distraction now of a confrontation with Roan Morgan.

In the relative quiet of the Auxiliary Control room, Kor had been able to coordinate the separate attacks on the key points of the *Explorer*-- and take his private delight as each team called in to report its victory. Besides, Kor knew that once in the command chair of a ship again, he would find it very hard to return to the bureaucratic duties of the *Ormen*.



WAR

It seems my fate;
it follows me wherever I go,
whatever I touch,
here again.

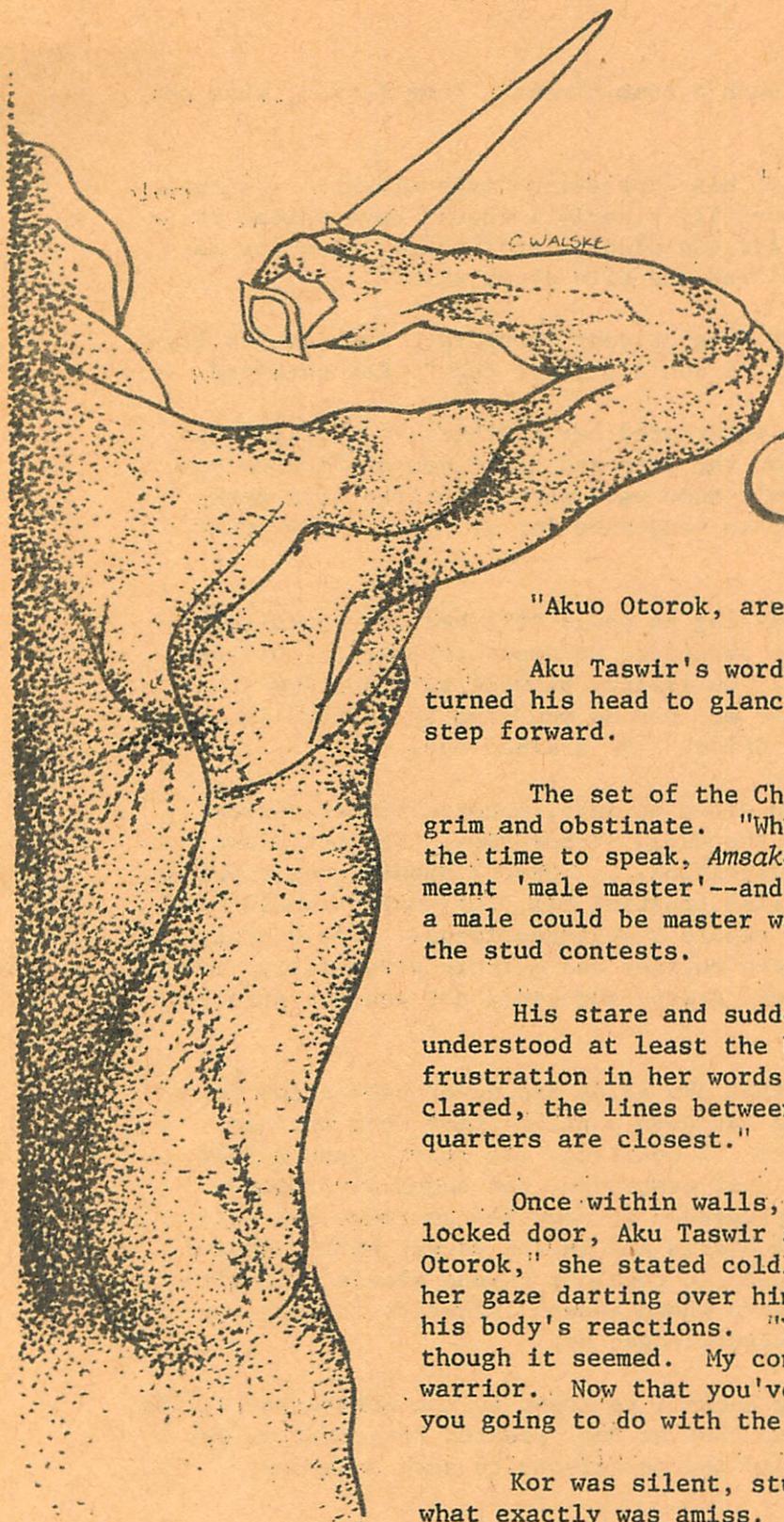
War—be it great or small,
all-encompassing and for noble cause
or for immediate good and little moment,
it is the same.

I lead; they follow;
we are triumphant.

I guided a war for honor,
to prove my worth, and depose a tyrant.
Thousands of people of different races
answered my call and stood at my side.
And here, a tiny war is fought,
to return us home, to help some in need,
to settle a score
with one I once called brother.

One and the same,
only the time and place are changed.
The Challenge is set,
the planning; the intrigue;
the power.

I lead; they follow;
we are triumphant.



Chapter 7

"Akuo Otorok, are you busy?"

Aku Taswir's words stopped Kor in mid-stride. He turned his head to glance at her. "Yes." He took a step forward.

The set of the Chiau's mouth made her look both grim and obstinate. "When will you graciously give me the time to speak, *Amsako* Otorok?" She used a title that meant 'male master'--and, obviously, the only place where a male could be master was in the arena, at the end of the stud contests.

His stare and sudden attention told her that he'd understood at least the bite in her voice, and the frustration in her words. "We'll talk now," he declared, the lines between his eyebrows deep. "Your quarters are closest."

Once within walls, knowing the security of a locked door, Aku Taswir struck. "I mistrust you, Otorok," she stated coldly. She stayed near the door, her gaze darting over him, noting all the details of his body's reactions. "Your takeover succeeded, folly though it seemed. My congratulations to the cunning warrior. Now that you've cleared the field, what are you going to do with the dung?"

Kor was silent, studying her, unable to identify what exactly was amiss. Aku Taswir didn't wait for an interpretation. "Where do we fit into your plans, strategist? You won this ship by trickery, just as you won our support. You know there will be no planet for us in the *Ormenel*; you couldn't possibly have the

authority or integrity to make such a commitment. Dung farmer, what do you grow?"

Kor answered sarcastically, his expression dispassionate. "I apologize for commanding the revolt myself; clearly I should have waited for you to make the decisions. As for the planet, it's yours. One joy is that you will then be unable to tear and bite at my skin!"

"Your words don't fit your face or your thoughts," snapped Aku Taswir, annoyed by his cold anger. "I don't believe you." Kor shrugged.

His lack of response only infuriated her further. "You lie!" she cried out. "You don't grieve for the dead and hurt; you don't know joy, or sorrow, or concern! You didn't show pain when I put the life-mark on you; neither did you try to take vengeance for it. How can I trust a being with such false skin?"

Kor stared at her, half-wishing he could tell her the truth about himself. Yet, it would serve no purpose. He could achieve all his desires easily enough, as Akharai. He limited himself to answering ironically, "You don't have to believe me; nor do you have to believe in my honor. The promise stands, Aku Chiau." He stalked out.

Aku Taswir slowly sat down after he left, unaware of her surroundings, focusing her sight beyond the walls of her room. Neither direct nor subtle, neither honest nor deceiving. . . Otorok Akharai was a puzzle. For a moment she strongly felt like trusting him, for what it would mean to her sense of purpose and her people's self-confidence. Yet Otorok, with his complex word-play, hidden motives and mutable personality, was beyond her intuitive and physical grasp--she could not honor a stranger whose heart she couldn't touch.

The Ashkrifikh reflected that Aku Kelos had never been a source of trouble; if anything, the killing had been a friend from whom she had learned much. All of the problems of politics, the males' open revolt, her own discontent, her loss of self-assurance, had begun with Otorok Akharai's arrival. Otorok had pretended to show her courtesy and deference, but, in his actions on Ashkaris and in the recent battle aboard the ship, he had arrogantly refused to consider anyone else's authority. He had ignored her--he had not even shown enough integrity to meet her in defiance; he had simply not acknowledged her.

Aku Taswir could not bring herself to trust in the future the killing had promised her. She recognized that he had defeated her, that he was more powerful than she was. Could she go quietly to such a shadowy future?

The Ashkrifikh leader wanted revenge. She rose, armed herself, and went down to the ship's brig.

* * *

Tavia came immediately to the edge of the force field of her cell, hope and surprise in her expression. She grinned as Aku Taswir released the field, and then stepped out cautiously.

Aku Taswir spoke in low tones. "The one who stands guard here serves me personally. I have sent him on a short errand; he will return soon."

"Why do you let me go?"

"Because you've done nothing to me. I don't know what Otorok is doing."

"I'd like to free Captain Morgan," said Tavia, alert, aware that Aku Taswir was unpredictable, that she could react violently to any idea that she didn't like. She added, "I will be responsible for him, Aku Chiau." Aku Taswir impatiently gestured for her to go ahead, and Roan came out of his cell, looking relieved but walking with extreme wariness.

"Go immediately to the space you gave me to live in," ordered Aku Taswir. "I will stay and turn aside the fury of my Watcher."

"What about the rest of my crew?" Roan ventured to ask.

"Go!"

Roan and Tavia left. They managed, by luck and quick action, to get back to Aku Taswir's quarters unobserved. There, relieved to find themselves alone, they relaxed into chairs around the cabin's worktable.

Aku Taswir came in shortly, walking confidently. "At least the one who guarded your prison is a man who still is faithful to me. He will remain silent."

"The ship's too quiet," said Roan. "What's happened to the crew?"

"The ones not kept to run the ship were collected in groups and sent down to a planet we passed. I heard Aku Kelos say that it was an uninhabited planet within Federation space," replied Aku Taswir neutrally.

Tavia knew that Aku Taswir was not favorably impressed by Roan, and might not wish to be too candid in his immediate presence. "Let me do the talking, would you, Roan?" she asked in a low tone. Roan nodded and pulled his chair back from the table, withdrawing from Aku Taswir's attention.

Tavia reverted to Agavoi to address Aku Taswir. "Thank you for freeing me," she said. "But I still don't understand why."

"I let you go, because you've been in Otorok's grasp and know a little of his character. I need your help to find his weakness and

defeat him."

Tavia frowned. "What's the problem, Aku Chiau?"

"Since he came to Ashkaris, he has shown undue insolence. He pretended interest in our welfare, but in fact he is arrogant and self-centered. He asks surrender of us all," said Aku Taswir. "If he were mine I would know of some way to control him." At Tavia's blank look, she went on, evenly, "Otorok Akharai is a killing of the Kilingarlan, Commander Tavia. He came with Aku Kelos as an emissary of the *Ormenel*."

Tavia nodded slowly; after a moment of disbelief. A lot of observed inconsistencies suddenly made sense. "Why should he trouble to disguise himself as an Ashkrifikh?" she asked.

Aku Taswir looked at her meaningfully. "He was afraid of being recognized by you *Federen*."

Tavia raised both eyebrows and glanced over at Roan. His expression had changed to one of unpleasant anticipation. "I think this Akharai knows you, Roan," Tavia said, speculatively.

"I'm certain of it," commented Aku Taswir.

Roan rejoined them at the table. "Excuse me if I intrude, Aku Chiau, but this appears to involve me directly. I don't know of any 'Otorok Akharai,' and I've never heard of a household called 'Akharai.'"

"That is the name both he and Aku Kirashai Kelos gave me."

Roan's thoughts turned to the Kilingarlan as he sat and stared at Aku Taswir. He called up the images of the people he had known. But he hadn't been able to get a close look at 'Akharai.' Anger, and a trace of helplessness, touched him briefly. "It could be anybody," he said finally, shrugging.

Aku Taswir looked from him back to Tavia. "Commander Tavia, this is your ship, your domain of authority, and not mine. What can be done?"

"Why don't you go to your people and ask for help? There are a lot more Ashkrifikh on board than kilingau."

"I cannot. Most of them would betray me to Otorok," Aku Taswir admitted in a low voice. "He has robbed me of all my power."

"So for the time being, it's the three of us against an indeterminate number," said Tavia. "That's not too good."

"It's terrible," declared Roan. He had discovered an emotional standpoint from which to fight, and was eager to act. But how? "They've already gotten rid of most of the crew, damn them. The most we could hope for would be to get off the ship in a shuttlecraft."

"Impossible," Aku Taswir countered. "An *OrmeneL* warship has been escorting us ever since we crossed the Border."

"If I could figure out a way," said Roan with sudden fierceness, "I'd blow up this ship."

Tavia threw him a faintly worried, inquiring glance. She lapsed back into System English for convenience. "We'd never be able to reach the bridge or auxiliary control, Roan. In fact, that's the main problem--we can't go anywhere."

"Then we each go out on our own and do as much damage as we can before we die," Roan said curtly.

Now definitely alarmed, Tavia answered irritably, "Suicide is pointless. Don't try to be a dead hero, Roan."

"I don't want to be a live anything in the *OrmeneL*," Roan exclaimed, harshly. "I'm getting out of here." In a fluid movement of escape he was up and out through the door.

"Roan!" Tavia bit back the rest of her shout. She stood, staring at the door.

"Where is he going?" asked Aku Taswir curiously.

"To make trouble," Tavia snapped in Agavoi. "Aku Chiau, I know this ship, but I can't help you--we'd need a good, well-armed Security team to get anywhere. I guess you shouldn't have let me out of the brig, because all it did was make me hopeful." She sat down again, deciding that it would be foolish to go after Roan, and safest to stay exactly where she was.

* * *

Roan headed in the direction of the Captain's quarters, where he was sure Otorok Akharai had lodged himself. Curiosity and a strong feeling of careless defiance spurred him forward.

He crept noiselessly around a corner, hugging the wall of the corridor, all his senses alert--and came face to face with an Ashkrifikh. It was Akharai.

Knowing that a second's hesitation would be too long, he launched himself at the man, aiming a blow at his neck. The long cloak of the Ashkrifikh hampered Roan's attack; they fell together to the deck.

Kor, at first astonished at Roan's presence, was then grimly pleased to have this unexpected chance to meet him violently. Locked together in a closely held battle of muscle and will, they fought hard and silently.

Abruptly Kor broke free and sprang to his feet. He pulled a knife out of his sleeve and hefted it in his hand momentarily--he didn't want to kill the man, at least not yet. He pivoted forward on his right leg and threw the knife in a flattened underhand curve.

Even as the blade left him, he knew that it was going to miss--the long heavy sleeve of his robe had shifted the balance slightly, just enough. He leaped at Roan.

The appearance of the knife had produced a sudden chill inside Roan. In an almost instantaneous reversion to a former awareness, to a self with conditioned fighting skills and a capacity to kill, he dove after the knife that had grazed his side.

Kor came down on him with his full weight just as Roan's fingers found the weapon. They grappled. Roan managed to inflict several minor cuts on himself and his opponent. Changing tactics, he relaxed his hold, and as Kor's hand shot out to take him by the throat, Roan took the weapon in his left hand and struck with all his strength. The knife jarred home in his foe's side.

Kor's back arched; he gave out a convulsed cry. For a moment he seemed blind and purposeless, and Roan could almost see him fight for control. "Arok," the man whispered, despairingly, and collapsed.

'Arok' had been Roan's nickname many years before. Only one person had ever called him by that name--his brother Kor. He stared at the unconscious form on the deck and edged away.

Roan felt torn between remorse at what he'd done and joy in fighting, the delight in physical violence that had been taught to him by killingau. He looked at Kor. It was so hard to believe that this was his brother--but the cry, 'Arok,' echoed in his ears, and he believed.

"I don't want to be responsible for your death," he said out loud to Kor.

Roan walked over to a wall intercom. "Sickbay." He went on, not bothering to wait for someone to answer. "Medical team to Deck 3, on the double."

The silence in the corridor and Kor's motionless form served as his only response. Afraid that Kor might have already died, Roan turned and slid away. Guilt impelled him to run.

To his surprise, he found an ache welling in his throat and tears in his eyes. He brushed them away angrily; a killing could cry openly but a human shouldn't. "I didn't know you were alive," he said, silently addressing his brother. "I attacked a stranger and found you. Ai Kisu-- I'm sorry!"

He climbed a ladder leading into the 'tween-hulls spaces. He wanted to hide. There were no words to ease the pain that he felt. Up until a few moments ago, Kor's death in the *OrmeneL*'s revolution had been an undisputed fact. But that information, like so many other seemingly solid facts, must have been another trick, another lie.

'What were you doing here?' Roan asked bitterly. 'What brought you to Ashkaris? What did you feel when you saw me again, Kor--fury, contempt, remorse? Did you feel anything at all?'

The unpredictable conflict on Ashkaris, the takeover of the *Explorer*--Kor had been a part of it all.

'Did you also take vengeance against me, Kor, in conquering my ship and crew? Did you smile to think of deceiving me once again, in your guise as Otorok Akharai? I wasn't in any of your plans; did you glory in my capture as a further reward?'

Roan squeezed into a corner behind some air conduits. He'd gained nothing. Most of his crew was down on some unknown planet; his ship was racing toward the heart of the *OrmeneL*. All he had succeeded in doing was wounding, perhaps killing his brother. 'We never even got the chance to talk,' he thought miserably. He leaned his head against the wall and waited to be recaptured.

CHANGELING

In 1001, a human child
was taken by a raiding band;
Kilingau fierce sent out to war
took him from his native land.

They brought him to the Kilingarlan;
his mind was young and free to mold;
they planned to make him over again--
the man-child was but ten years old.

Changeling knows not where to go,
who is friend and who is foe.

They made him think he was killing,
taught him customs, speech and more;
they named him Kirin Arkos Kothir;
he remembered nothing from before.

He grew up loving his new home--
the only home he really knew--
in mind and heart he was killing,
and so it was the man-child grew.

Changeling knows not where to go,
who is friend and who is foe.

They changed his home and life again
when Kirin reached his nineteenth year;
they sent him back to be a spy
against those whom he once held dear.

They forged a place for him among
the humans who had fathered him.
He had to learn again to live
with humans, now so strange to him.

Changeling knows not where to go,
who is friend and who is foe.

He trained to serve in Star Fleet there;
he quickly rose to full command.
He was a Captain strong and kept
his own starship well in hand.

But as a spy he was no use--
a revolution now had stirred;
Kilingau fought amongst themselves;
they sent to Kirin not one word.

The image shows a musical score for the song 'Changeling'. It consists of five staves of music in a key signature of two flats (Bb and Eb). The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of two flats, and a common time signature. The melody is written on a single staff with a treble clef. The accompaniment is written on a single staff with a bass clef. The second staff continues the melody and accompaniment. The third staff continues the melody and accompaniment. The fourth staff is divided into two parts: the first part is labeled '1. Cm' and the second part is labeled '2. (Chorus)'. The fifth staff continues the melody and accompaniment, ending with a double bar line and repeat dots. The lyrics are printed below the musical score.

Changeling knows not where to go,
 who is friend and who is foe.

One day his ship took prisoners:
 three killingau caught in space.
 Kirin helped them to escape
 and gave himself up in their place.

The Star Fleet doctors questioned him
 by every means they had to try.
 They thought to learn about his race;
 instead they found the Changeling spy.

Changeling knows not where to go,
 who is friend and who is foe.

They found this killingaven spy
 to be a human after all;
 they helped him to return to them
 so that his past he could recall.

And so the Changeling has returned
 to the world from whence he came,
 to the life he should have led,
 where Roan Morgan was his name.

Changeling knows not where to go,
 who is friend and who is foe.



Chapter 8

"If you move I'll make this even more painful for you," said a voice threateningly.

Kor opened his eyes and saw one of his own men. "I think you kill more patients than you heal, Doctor." He stiffened as the doctor's fingers probed the skin around the injury. "Where's Theremir?"

"Here." Theremir came over to the side of the bed, looking down at Kor with a half-alarmed, half-exasperated expression. "Who did this, Kor?"

Kor tensed in anger and pain. He exclaimed savagely, "Kirin Kothir."

"What?"

"Kirin Kothir and Captain Morgan are one and the same. He--" Kor paused and grimaced as the doctor gave him a shot. He went on, breathing painfully. "The human was raised in *krasaia* Kothir as my brother. Find him, Theremir. Also find out how in Maraku's name he got out of his cell!"

"Yes, sir." Theremir threw another doubtful look at Kor and hurried out.

"Doctor, get the blue dye out of my skin," ordered Kor with weary frustration. "And do something about the temperature. It's cold in here."

The doctor frowned, thinking unkind thoughts about difficult patients. He moved to do as Kor said.

* * *

Theremir returned several hours later. "We still haven't found the Captain," he said. "Commander Nelson was also missing from the brig. Aku Chiau let them both out."

"Why would Aku Taswir--"

"No doubt to spite you. We found the two women in Aku Chiau's quarters. They're being held."

"Send them here together." Kor sat up cautiously and leaned his head back.

Theremir nodded. "Are you sure you---"

"Shut up and send them in. And order a few Ashkrifikh to search for Captain Morgan. They must know all the hiding places by now."

Aku Taswir and Tavia came in side by side, a guard in front of them and one behind. Aku Taswir frowned, disappointed to see Otorok returned to his normal color and appearance as a killing.

Tavia stopped and stared. The absence of the Ashkrifikh disguise at first confused, then enlightened her. But the man she saw had no place being here. . . In amazement she recognized him as both Commander Kor Kothir and Akuo Otorok Akharai. She continued to look at him searchingly, imagining the horrified reaction Roan would have when he found out.

Aku Taswir stepped forward insolently, hands on her hips. She bent her head and surveyed Kor with an expression of contempt. "How imposing the warrior looks, lying in a sickbed, his face full of pain." Even though Tavia missed some of the sophisticated Agavoi, she caught enough to inwardly cheer Aku Taswir's defiance.

Behind Aku Taswir and Tavia, the bodyguards moved to punish the insult. Kor shook his head at them and gazed at her. "What shows in my face is how I feel," he said curtly. "I hope you can also see my fury, Aku Taswir."

"That's such a common expression for you that I ignore it," mocked Aku Taswir, taking what pleasure she could in baiting Kor. "Did Captain Morgan find you? Or did Kirashai Kelos wound you, for your incessant arrogance?"

"Why did you let him out of the brig?" Kor exclaimed, then closed his eyes in pain.

"I did it to hurt you; I'm glad it succeeded. What is the human Captain to you, Otorok? What are any of us to you?"

Kor, whose thoughts were centered on the knifewound in his side, could not cope with her defiance. "*Astlamash*," he said forcefully. "What was I to you? Your power, Aku Chiau, consists of brutalizing the weak."

"*Chiakash*," Aku Taswir hissed at him, venomously. One of the bodyguards drew his knife automatically at the obscenity; Kor gestured and the man stepped back, muttering words into his beard.

"You've lost your strength and are scared--rightly so," Kor went on. "You resent that you have no influence over me any more; desperate,

you look for any means to do battle with me. Why didn't you try to fight me yourself?"

Aku Taswir was silent. Her pose suggested that she was merely waiting for a momentary lapse on his part before she struck.

It was Kor who struck, instead. He looked from Tavia to Aku Taswir. "Aku Taswir Chiau, my name is Kor Alkarin." Tavia let out a strangled exclamation.

Aku Taswir was staring at him, her guard down. Kor smiled faintly and added, "Had you been more trustworthy, I would have told you before."

"The *Ormen* Alkarin, in the guise of Otorok Akharai, came to see me on Ashkaris," she said incredulously. "Why did you bother to deceive me?"

"Does a man go unarmed into war?"

Aku Taswir nodded her understanding, a newfound respect in her demeanor. "Word has spread even to us of your successful revolution. Why did you come to Ashkaris, War-leader Alkarin?"

Kor grimaced. "For reasons which no longer matter. The destruction of Ashkaris angered me as much as it did you, Aku Chiau."

"I insist that you should have told me of your identity. I would not then have let Commander Tavia out of the prison, or otherwise have tried to thwart you."

"You might have," said Kor. "You might still try. I don't trust you. You will find a guard posted outside your quarters from now until we arrive at the Kilingarlan."

Aku Taswir gave him a look that was almost rueful. "You are the master now," she observed. "The destruction of my world has changed everything, hasn't it?"

Kor felt unwilling compassion for her, realizing that despair and defeat were the only emotions that the Chiau was still able to feel. He said slowly, "My homeland was destroyed for me also, when I was made outcast from it. Revolution within and without changed me and the *Ormenel*, so I built a new home. You are master of yourself, Aku Taswir, and of a new planet. Will you now believe my promise to give you a new homeworld?"

For a moment, Aku Taswir looked almost hopeful. "I appreciate your words. But our number is very small."

"When we took over this ship, I sent orders for three warships to go to Ashkaris. They will pick up all surviving Ashkrifikh and kilingau. Since the Federation may have also sent ships there, the warships will

be ready to meet them. The conflict has not ended; I am prepared to carry minor battles into full war, if need arises. You will have a planet."

Aku Taswir stared at him. Though an aggressive fighter, she did not think in terms of large-scale wars. The Ashkrifikh were generally too independent to engage in more than brawls or skirmishes. "You continue to remind me of how insignificant a step I am, in the political dance you lead." She looked away, and took several steps toward the door.

"Perhaps," replied Kor noncommittally. "But remember how small I was in your eyes, on Ashkaris. Remember also that you alone can claim to have given a life-mark to the *Ormen*."

Aku Taswir turned back, startled; then a grin began in the corners of her mouth and slowly took over her face. For a moment, she looked much as she had before: alert, confident, and amused by life. "I hope you survive, *Ormen* Alkarin. It would be bad luck to lose you to Chaos so soon after mastering you."

"Thank you, Aku Taswir," said Kor dryly. "*Osta vinithald*."

Not 'good-bye,' but 'until a future day.' Aku Taswir wished him the same, as equal to equal, and went out. One of the guards strode out a few paces behind her.

Tavia came forward slowly. "I guess it's my turn now. So Otorok is actually the *Ormen* Alkarin."

Kor nodded, watching her.

"Only it goes deeper than that," continued Tavia. "Just to confuse things, you used to be Commander Kor Kothir. No wonder you froze every time I mentioned Roan Morgan."

"Your perceptiveness comes a little too late," remarked Kor.

With slightly embarrassed amusement Tavia thought about their short night together. "You take a lot of risks," she said candidly. "Exchanging intimacies with a human can't be too popular a sport among killingau. If I'd known before---"

Kor interrupted. "Don't bother to speculate. Commander Nelson, I think you could be valuable to me, not necessarily for your place in Star Fleet Intelligence---" he paused as Tavia uttered a sound of wry surprise at his knowledge. "But for your proximity to Captain Morgan."

Tavia, both outsmarted and outmaneuvered, said nothing. Inwardly she couldn't help being annoyed that Roan should be the underlying cause of all her problems.

Kor felt a strong respect for this woman. The vividness of her personality, her intelligence, cynicism, and stubborn non-conformism, impressed him. "I'm returning you to the brig, Commander. When we reach

the Kilingarlan, you'll be detained at the Rasethi Sarin for further questioning."

"Thanks," Tavia replied sarcastically.

"My pleasure."

Once she had gone, Kor sank back. The doctor, who had refused to leave the room, hurried over, his features showing both worry and irritation.

Kor cut him off before he could complain. "Give me a stimulant," he ordered brusquely, liking the healer less and less as the pain increased. He half-listened as the doctor made impolite verbal notes on his condition.

Theremir returned to Sickbay as soon as the women had been escorted back to their respective holding areas.

"Well?," Kor asked impatiently.

Theremir shook his head. "Are you strong enough to talk strategy?" he asked, with a glance at the doctor.

Before the physician could react, Kor snapped, "Always. Aku Taswir should be kept under guard in her quarters until we arrive on the Kilingarlan. She and her people should be made ready for immediate relocation on a suitable planet. The survivors brought back from Ashkaris are to be taken directly to their new home."

Theremir nodded in agreement. "I assume that the Star Fleet personnel still on board can be turned over to military intelligence?"

"Yes, except for Commander Nelson--" Kor paused as Theremir looked at him quizzically. "I would like to question her myself."

"As you say, sir," Theremir answered, sardonically.

Before Kor could go on, the intercom sounded. Theremir quickly rose to answer it. "We've found Captain Morgan and have him under guard," a voice reported crisply.

"Good," answered Theremir. He turned to Kor. "Should the Captain be brought here to you?"

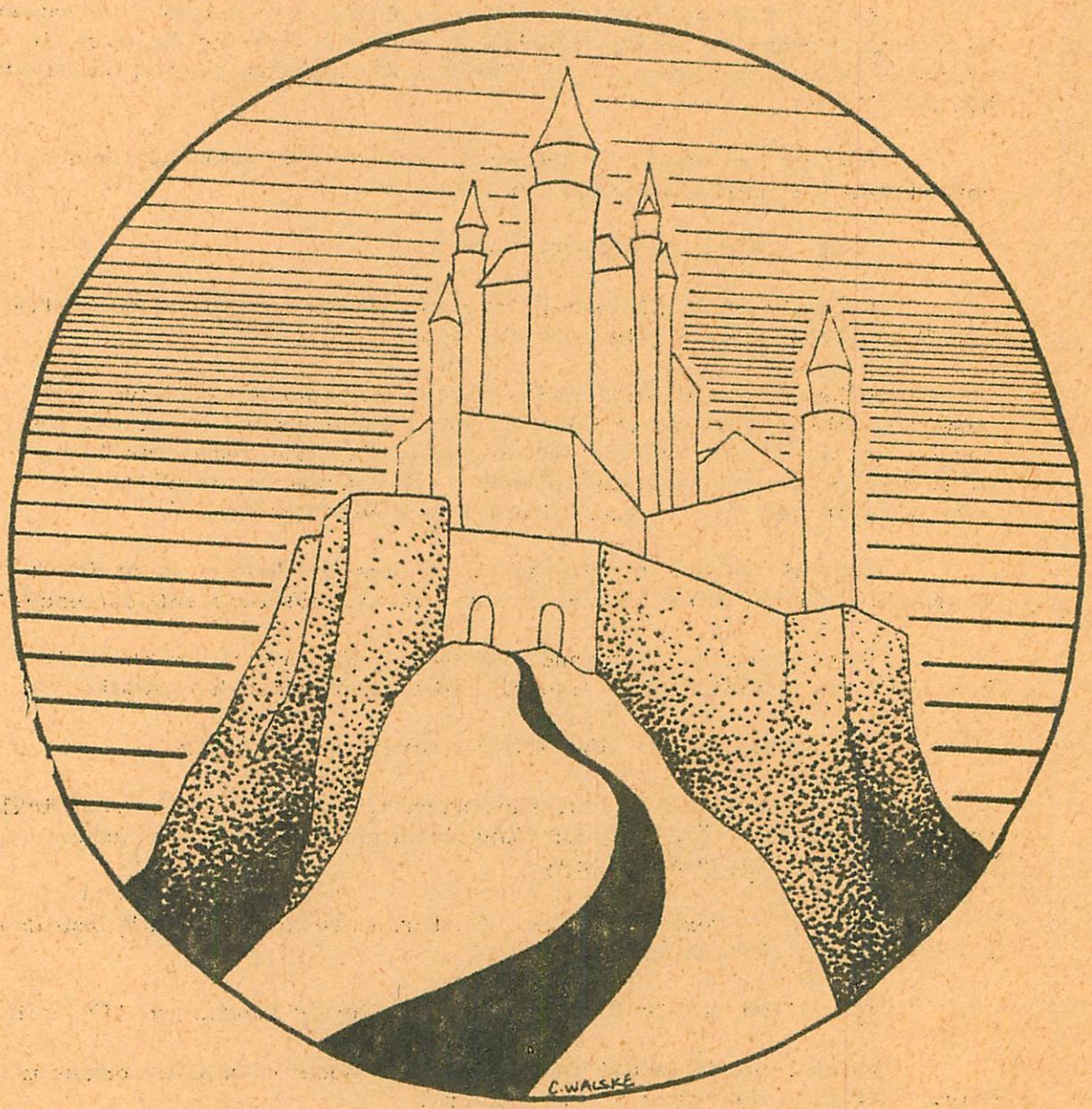
"No. I won't give him the satisfaction of seeing me like this."

Theremir reactivated the intercom. "Secure Captain Morgan in the brig. This time see that he stays there."

He returned to Kor's side. The news of Roan's capture seemed to

have brightened Kor somewhat. "The Captain, of course, is also to be imprisoned in the Rasethi Sarin," said Kor. "He is to be told nothing. Understood?"

"Yes, sir." Theremir laid a hand on Kor's shoulder. "I will see to it."



THRESHOLD

One day to laugh,
one day to cry,
one day to fight,
one day to die.

One home to build,
one home to choose,
one home to love,
one home to lose.

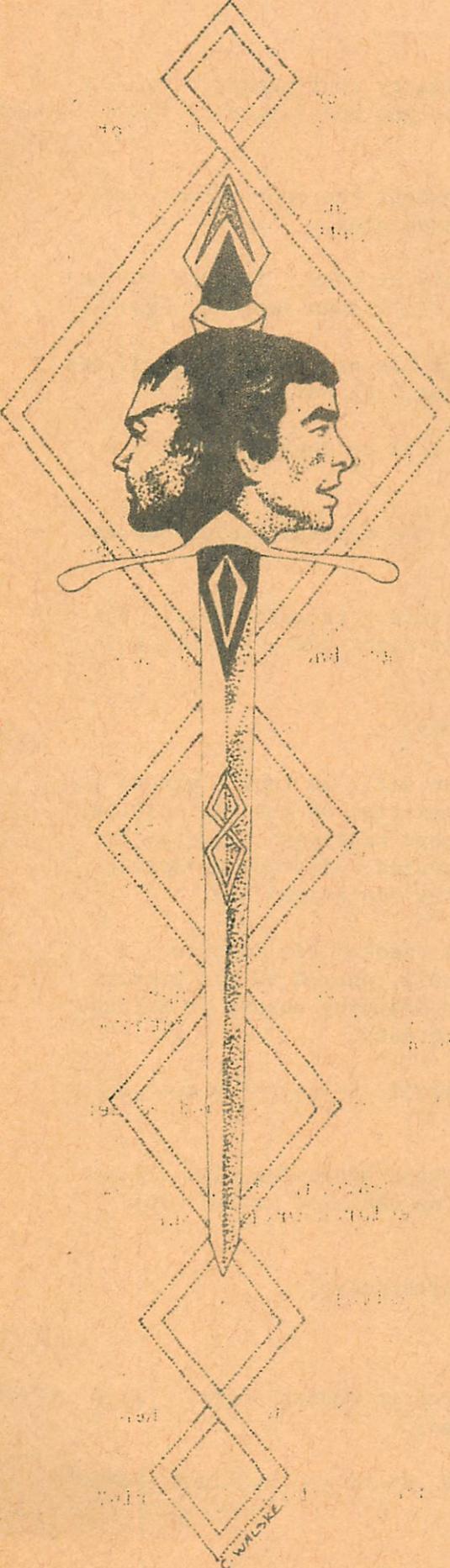
Living on the threshold
of a new tomorrow;
looking out on the world
with a new eye;
holding out your arms
to a new beginning;
hoping for a chance
to make a new life.

What lies on the threshold
of the future?
Sorrows and pain,
trials and war.
How will tomorrow
answer today?
In angry words
and frightening thoughts.

And so tomorrow
holds the key
to good and ill,
nightmare and dream.
For each new day
may change again
what yesterday
has ushered in.

Cross the threshold
a thousand times,
and find a thousand
different lives.

Chapter 9



Kor had escaped from his work for a little while. From his sanctuary in the highest part of the Rasethi Sarin, at the level of the rooftops of the *Ormen's* palace, he had an excellent view. When he had first come to power as the *Ormen* Alkarin, he had often walked here and gazed proudly at all the lands under his dominion, feeling his power as a tangible delight.

Interrupting his privacy, he called a personal bodyguard and asked him to bring up the male human held prisoner underground. The man left quickly, and Kor considered again the thoughts that had driven him to this place.

Aku Taswir and her people had been set down on an uninhabited planet with a number of necessary tools. A formal agreement now existed between the *Ormen* and Aku Taswir, to help prevent any future misunderstandings. After the minor space battle between *Ormenel* and Federation ships over Ashkaris, the Border patrol had been doubled. The current orders were to meet force with force.

These and other matters of strategy had sent him to Ashkaris and continued to occupy his time, but a personal affair held captive his thoughts and heart; the chance encounter with his brother, Star Fleet Captain Roan Morgan.

Roan Morgan/Kirin Arkos Kothir. . . raised on the Kilingarlan, in *krasaia* Kothir, for ten years. Kor's little brother Kirin, sent to be a spy for the *Ormenel*, had defected to the Federation. First brother, then Earther, now traitor.

The incident on Ashkaris, so disastrous otherwise, had brought Kirin to him. What Kirin would say now, Kor didn't know, but he was looking forward with fierce anticipation to their upcoming meeting.

* * *

Captain Roan Morgan found himself in solitary confinement. Twice a day someone brought him food. Roan was unable to get his jailer to react to anything, even to carefully chosen insults.

One day, after about a month of imprisonment, the door opened, and two guards appeared. "Out," said one. Roan obeyed gladly.

Once away from his cell, he looked closely at them. The one who had spoken was a young Lieutenant. "Where are we going?" Roan asked in Agavoi.

The Lieutenant seemed mildly surprised at his use of Agavoi, but was mostly annoyed that the human had spoken. "*Kuskun*," he said.

But Roan wouldn't 'shut up.' "At least tell me where we are," he said.

The killing glanced sidelong at him. "In the Rasethi Sarin," he answered. "Now just what does that mean to you?"

"It means plenty to me, you stinking vulture," retorted Roan. The guard cuffed him across the mouth. Roan tried to fight back, but was held securely by the other guard.

Now *kuskun*," ordered the Lieutenant coldly.

Roan went through a doorway into the open air. He took a minute to judge the weather, recognizing that it was harvest-time on the Kilingarlan. A short path between battlements led to a windswept courtyard. There, by the parapet, stood Kor. "You're alive!" Roan shouted, his face revealing sudden delight. He leaped forward, but the guards restrained him.

Kor himself started to move forward, but checked his impulse. A bare hint of pain and grief, of feelings in turmoil, showed in his expression. "Leave us," he said briefly to the guards, finding safety in authority. The guards withdrew to the edge of the courtyard.

Roan stood alone, unmoving. Despite himself, he felt joy and wonder at seeing Kor alive again.

Kor came slowly toward Roan, his direct gaze searching him. "I acknowledge your skill in knife-fighting, Kirin," he declared wryly, "but you should have done a better job."

"You won't even greet me?" said Roan apprehensively.

"Greet you as what? Enemy? Outlaw?"

"Is that your judgment?" Roan was spurred to sudden anger. "Then give me a knife and I'll finish the job I started!"

Kor looked at him condescendingly. "Who taught you to fight, Kirin?"

"You did," Roan said irritably.

"And would you really care to fight me today, here, as we are?"

Roan swallowed hard and didn't answer. He had struck Kor a potentially fatal blow, and yet here he stood, strong, unharmed. Unbidden, an image of Kor came to mind, as Roan had last seen him on the Kilingarlan: laughing, triumphant over some easy victory. No resemblance existed between that memory of his beloved brother and this stranger.

Kor's right hand went to the breast of his tunic. In a slow, deliberate movement, he drew out a knife. "Do you know this knife, Kirin?"

Roan did. It was a compact double-edged steel knife, with a hilt of gold, capped with a fire-opal. He remembered the day Kor had given it to him--the day he, Kirin Kothir, had returned after successfully completing his test of adulthood; the day he was accepted as a killing with status. Roan nodded, unable to speak.

"When I returned to the Kilingarlan and *krasaia* Kothir at the end of the revolution, I went to some trouble to find this weapon," said Kor, his tone level but edged with malevolent intent. "I wanted to give it to you when you came home, Kirin."

Roan winced. Kor stared at him. "If I gave this knife to you now, would you really dare to fight me?" He laughed at Roan's expression. "You're wise to refuse. Alargor himself died at my hands."

Roan looked at him in sudden shock. "You killed Alargor? But I thought Alkarin killed him."

"Kirin, Kirin. Use your mind. I am Alkarin."

"How?" Roan demanded.

Kor spoke thoughtfully, proudly. "It still seems an impossible feat, a combination of luck, many accidents, some skill--some skill."

"As I rose in the ranks of the military, I achieved too much power; Alargor was afraid. I was sent to the prison planet Salisa Alsa Orunar. I escaped. After my triumph in the revolution, I was given the *Ormen's* status."

"Don't you mean you took it?"

"No," snapped Kor in a flare of anger. "I earned it, and I accepted it. I wanted the *Emiskirsormen's* rank for power, and I needed that power. I had debts--debts of loyalty and conscience, which is something you wouldn't understand--to pay to the *krasai'in*, to many planets in the Central Suns, to a thousand people who helped me." He paused. "What of your debts, Kirin, to those who raised you?"

"What of your debts to me? I'd heard that you'd been killed on Salao. Knowing that you were alive would have meant everything to me. I would have come home to the *Ormenel* at any cost. But you sent no word--I didn't know!"

"Many others found courage while fighting far from their homes," Kor observed, "But, living in the Federation, you gave in to weakness, and surrendered. Your defection was not so much a change in loyalty as a lapse in strength."

"I had a choice. I could have turned the captured kilingau over to Star Fleet Intelligence, which was my duty as Captain of the *Explorer*. Or, I could have returned them to the *Ormenel*, which was my duty as the *Ormenel*'s loyal agent." Roan added bitterly, "I took the latter, confirming my allegiance to you."

He went on heatedly before Kor could interrupt. "But then I found out the truth about myself, and about the way you kilingau tricked me into being a traitor to my own kind. You, my own brother, betrayed me!"

Stricken, Kor whispered, "No. I didn't know. I never lied to you."

"You bastard! Of course you lied. You're lying now. You yourself taught me System English, claiming it would be 'useful.' You made me your protegee--you, the famed military commander who didn't even have time for his first-born son!"

His breath quickened; he shivered as he glimpsed Kor's eyes. "You tried to make me a man without honor, o brother, and expected me to deceive and cheat my way to an uncertain status. If I am a coward for regaining my honor, brother Kor, what crime is it? How are you to pay for the infinitely more heinous crime of robbing me of my true life?!" He shouted the final words at him, trembling, holding his hands tightly clenched at his sides.

After his outburst Roan could hear nothing. It seemed as if, for a brief moment, the wind and all the myriad sounds from the Rasethi Sarin around him had stopped in outrage.

Kor's hand tightened on the knife he still held, as he felt the desire for an intensely personal kill. His eyes no longer recognized his brother Kirin standing in front of him--he saw only a twisted changeling, an unnatural creation that defied honor and scorned self-respect. But Kor the killer was also the *Ormen*, who had a long memory and a conscience that would not let him take any prey too easily.

He lifted the knife and hit Roan, backhanded. The handle cut Roan's cheekbone and he stumbled back, blindly raising his hands to his face.

Kor took one long step forward. "Your own excuses condemn you. I Challenge," he began. "I Challenge you for your life--for treason against the *Ormenel*, for betrayal of honor, for"--his voice almost broke--

"for bringing death to the love and loyalty we had for each other--for all this I claim your life."

'He's going to kill me with my own knife,' Roan thought, horrified. In his half-human, half-killing self, Roan could not now find a way to act, a way to be. Honor had been denied him. Finally, what he'd been taught over and over again long ago came to his lips. "Brothers don't Challenge brothers."

Kor made an abrupt, impatient sound. "You are not my brother."

Roan retreated, and felt a stone wall behind him. It was the only barrier between him and the river Alruen far below. He said flatly, "Kilingau don't Challenge humans."

"You were once killing; that your dishonor makes you unfit to be my brother does not change what we taught you to be."

Roan wanted to watch the weapon, but his gaze was held by the brilliant darkness of his brother's eyes. Roan felt a pull on his shirt and then the knife was through, sliding easily into the skin over his breastbone, just below the neck. He wasn't aware of any pain, just patient acceptance, followed by utter astonishment as the knife stopped short of his throat.

A welter of divided emotions forced a cry from Kor, as he pulled the knife away and hurled it high over the stone battlement. It flashed silver as it caught the sunlight and dove out of sight.

Roan stared at him, his hand moving to check the flow of blood from the wound. "You can't bear to kill me," he said wonderingly. His voice strengthened as he found new courage. "It's always easier to kill a stranger than someone you know, isn't it?"

Kor stood frozen, his breath coming hard. His body had gathered into knots of tension. He seemed to have lost all purpose, all strength. "It's too soon to kill you," he said finally, his voice controlled. "You haven't suffered enough. I wanted to see you again, Kirin, since once you were my brother."

"I don't acknowledge kinship to you or any other killing," broke in Roan. "Let the Challenge stand, if you want it that badly. I've had enough reason today to despise you just for your selfish arrogance. What are you doing with my ship and the rest of my crew, *Ormen Alkarin*?"

Kor eyed him with cold contempt, than answered, "Your ship is being studied; the crew will probably be used as hostages. When our ships arrived at Ashkaris to take the survivors to their new home, they were met by Star Fleet vessels. The fight was swift and final--none of the Federation ships left the Border Zone.

"Ashkaris was to be a political test of wills; it became a military one as well. Now, knowing the Federation's weaknesses, we

shall prepare and then strike. You may consider yourself a prisoner of war, Kirin; I'm sending you to Salao."

"Salao," repeated Roan. "You maintain Alargor's hell-hole? That's a coward's means of execution." He shook his head ironically. "How many others who were close to you or who didn't agree with you have suffered for your loss of pride? Is war with the Federation your last blow against me?"

"It is a war-feud to correct all the mistakes made and crimes un-avenged," replied Kor. "It is the outgrowth of the Challenge which you yourself have accepted."

"A Challenge that you can't even meet honorably," retorted Roan. "How long will it be before you pay the price of your own arrogance and pride?"

Kor started to lunge at him, but held back. "Guards!"

In the minute it took for the guards to come forward and flank Roan, the two men looked at each other once more, knowing it would probably be for the last time. No words could alter what had passed between them; no words of leave-taking could comfort the man sent off to die or the man who sent him there.



RAFKIRSIIN

Usmos tsaven
Amivinith, rafkiril
Osharoi ip sikio
tio ornnak.

Usmos tsaven
Alul tiu roiul, rafkir iyel
Nusmalnel enu kaldirim
sto chatarmak.

Ne, Kirin?
Ne tiu sehla shihairak?
Alu tiu utulu kiling
usotha.

Nau, Kor?
Nau teresh tiu
Utaknuri u tio
iye alul?

Heranga tiu thursoi,
heranga tiu aroi,
sehla tio imannu.

Heranga iye turnu,
heranga iye alu,
enu iatand.

Aroi el Kor Alkarin thalau,
aska u nu Ormen
nushu iye tatamor
tio shihathtau.

Aroi el Roan Morgan thalau,
aska u enu keteng
nushu iye nissignor
tio hitayai.

Aska sor,
chanhaiand iyen tio afamhi,
nu kseketh aska nu taraik.

Iftlan talathal
emselan sehla teresh
thakinond sintoro
u rafkirsin.

BROTHERS

Twelve years.
A long time, little brother.
It should be so good
to see you.

Twelve years.
They told me you were gone.
I had no reason to doubt them,
my brother.

Why, Kirin?
Why did you betray us?
You were as much a killing
as any.

How, Kor?
How could you have let them
use me so, pretending I was
like you?

Everything you know,
everything you are,
we made you.

Everything I did,
everything I was,
a lie.

I am Kor Alkarin, now,
and as the Ormen
I cannot forgive
your treachery.

I am Roan Morgan, now,
and as a human
I cannot forget
your deceit.

And yet,
your words will haunt me,
the anger and the pain.

Perhaps someday
we can once more
accept each other
as brothers.

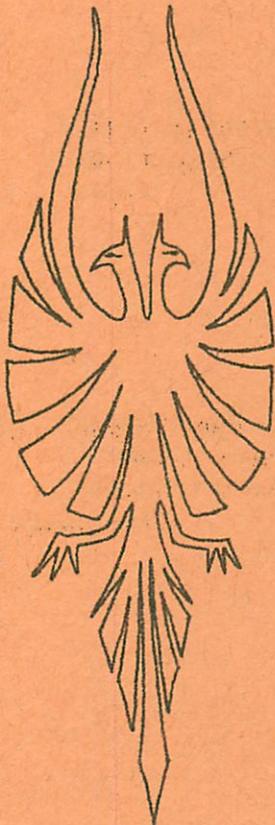
ALKARIN WARLORD

by Fern Marder and Carol Walske

The arrival on the Kilingarlan of the Starship Explorer, in the hands of the Ormen Alkarin, marks not just the end of an adventure but also a new challenge in the life of the Ormen and the Ormenel.

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Alkarin Warlord is a collection of stories, each of which forms a link in the chain that ultimately binds Kor and Tavia together.



- o Artwork by C. Walske
- o Poetry and music by F. Marder
- o up to 200 pages offset
- o Projected Publication Date:
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NU ORMENEL

(Stories are listed in chronological order of events depicted in the Nu Ormenel series.)

FIRST MEETING:

by Carol Walske, Tetrumbriant 4, Dec. 1974*

A warship of the *Ormenel* encounters a Federation starship for the first time. (Reprinted in Best of Tetrumbriant Vol. 1, Dec. 1976*.)

CHALLENGE

by Fern Marder and Carol Walske, Probe 11, Aug. 1977*

Artwork by Carol Walske; poem "Challenge" by Fern Marder

As the Treaty of Organia is signed, the conflict between Commander Kor Kothir and Captain James Kirk comes to a head.

THE TRIAL OF KOR KOTHIR

by Carol Walske, The Monkey of the Inkpot 3, Oct. 1975*

Kor is falsely tried and convicted of treason.

A SHADE OF TREASON

by Fern Marder and Carol Walske, Probe 12, Feb. 1978

Artwork by Carol Walske; poem "Exile" by Fern Marder

A revised and expanded retelling of the events in "The Trial of Kor Kothir"--to be considered the authoritative version of the story.

SEESAW

by Fern Marder and Carol Walske, The Other Side of Paradise 3, Jan 1978

Artwork by Carol Walske; poem "Alien" by Fern Marder

Kor's adopted brother Kirin, a spy in the Federation, puts himself in jeopardy when he helps prisoners escape back to the *Ormenel*.

The ensuing Star Fleet interrogation reveals how Kirin was able to play the role of Captain Roan Gordon so well.

THE CELEBRATION OF ALKARIN

by Carol Walske, Probe 10, Mar. 1977*

Artwork by Carol Walske; poem "The Judgment of Alkarin" by Fern Marder

After leading a long revolution in the *Ormenel*, Kor becomes the new *Ormen*.

THRESHOLD

by Fern Marder and Carol Walske, masiform-D Suppl. Issue, Jan. 1978

Artwork by Carol Walske; poetry and music by Fern Marder

After the Organian supernova, Kor goes to the Border planet Ashkaris to determine the proper timing for war with the Federation. There he meets Roan, now a loyal Star Fleet officer.

ALKARIN WARLORD

by Fern Marder and Carol Walske, Mpingo Press, summer 1978

Artwork by Carol Walske; poetry and music by Fern Marder

A collection of stories depicting the growing relationship between Kor and Tavia Nelson, a Star Fleet officer taken prisoner after the events on Ashkaris.

TO KNOW DISHONOR

by Fern Marder and Carol Walske, masiform-D 6, Jul. 1977

Artwork by Carol Walske; poem "Swordplay" by Fern Marder

Both Kor and his son Karras must pay the price when Karras wounds his swordmaster in practice. (This story is actually set during the course of events in Alkarin Warlord.)

A KILINGON HERITAGE

by Carol Walske, Tetrumbriant 7, Jul. 1975*

After peace is reestablished between the *Ormene1* and the Federation, Karras spends some time training in Star Fleet as part of a military exchange program--and is assigned to Roan's ship. (Revised and edited by Fern Marder and Carol Walske for reprint in Best of Tetrumbriant Vol. 2, Jan. 1978.)

A BROKEN SWORD

by Fern Marder and Carol Walske, Universes in Science Fiction Vol 2, Dec. 1976

Artwork by Carol Walske; music by Fern Marder

Trouble ensues when the only woman Karras finds attractive on Roan's ship turns out to 'belong' to another.

THE LEGEND OF AKIM KOROSTEN

by Carol Walske, The Monkey of the Inkpot 3, Oct. 1975*

A tale for killingaven children--a boy runs away from the test of adulthood that every adolescent faces.

VOICES OF *NU ORMENEL*

by Fern Marder, Interphase 4, May 1977*

Artwork by Carol Walske

A collection of *Ormene1* poetry--"Aroi Rakishul," an introduction to the language; "Reflections," a look at the Federation through Kang's eyes; "Challenge," Kor's thoughts during the Organian incident; "The Legend of Kerrekurasarm," an epic poem about the Firebird and the Huntress of the Kilingarlan.

AKNAUHRAIAND: A POLITICAL MATRIX

by Carol Walske, Universes in Science Fiction Vol. 1, Aug. 1976

Artwork by Carol Walske

A series of short explanatory pieces giving basic background information on the kilingau as a people, their language, government, etc.

LANGUAGE IN PRACTICE: AGAVOI AND KWAKYEN

by Fern Marder, Universes in Science Fiction Vol. 1, Aug. 1976

A discussion of Agavoi, the main language of the *Ormene1*, as contrasted with the language of another 'universe.'

*out of print

