

Girls on Vargon are taught domestic skills from their cradles. We learn from our mothers, who learned from their mothers, who learned from their mothers, all the way back to Elissa, the first woman whom the Holy Ones created – and since her teachers were the Holy Ones, it had to be the correct way.

When we asked our mothers why we do things a certain way, they frequently answered, “Because Elissa did it that way!”

Well, maybe she did and maybe she did not.

I remember, Betru, a woman who lived upstairs from me. For special occasions she always baked a shoulder of fondraako. The meat was a rich brown when finished and always sweet.

Many families served fondraako the way Elissa must have served it to Aldan. It was placed in a large bowl in the center of the table and surrounded by smaller bowls of vegetables like white, starchy soeta, green-topped iloccorb and long, thin green laykumes. The vegetables were not cut into small pieces, but were left whole. When the table was set, the only thing else that was added was a carved wooden eating bowl, there were no utensils. We ate with our fingers.

This meal is called “The Generations Meal” because as many family members who can, come and share the table. The oldest member always receives the first piece of the fondraako.

Betru always cut the end off of the fondraako before she put it in the pan to bake. One time my family shared "The Generations Meal" with her and my mother asked, "Betru, why do you always cut the end off of the fondraako before you bake it?"

Her answer was no surprise to any woman of Vargon: "Because my mother did."

I was only seven or eight years old at the time, not yet sufficiently schooled in the ways of tradition to take "Because" for an answer, so I asked her mother, Carta, "Mother Carta, why did you always cut the end off of the fondraako?"

She gave the proper reply, "Because my mother did."

Old, white-haired, toothless Reetaricka looked at me, her eyes dancing with mischief, awaiting the question. I obliged.

Reetaricka said, "I always cut the end off of the fondraako because the cooking pan my idiot husband gave me as a wedding gift was too short!"

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Girls on Vargon, I said, are taught domestic skills from their cradles. Every girl, I believe, except me. My mother would not allow me in "her kitchen." I made too many messes and made them much too frequently.

I distinctly remember the last time I asked her to teach me something in the kitchen. She slapped me across my face with her open hand and screamed, "Learn that I do not want you in my kitchen! If there was a way I could do it, I would not even let you in my house!"

She found a way the day she put all of my belongings into four small packages and told me to leave.

When I rented my first flat, I went to the street peddlers to buy things I would need for my own kitchen. I purchased one cooking skillet (with a lid), one deep pan in which to make soup (with no lid) and a pot for boiling kafe. I bought enough plates and utensils so I could eat four days without needing to wash the dishes.

The first day Anatorr used the key I had given him, he found every dish I owned dirty. The small sink was piled full. Even all of the drinking glasses and cups were dirty. Everything!

When I walked in I was surprised to see him standing at the sink, washing dishes.

He turned to face me, his hands and arms covered with soap bubbles.

“Princess,” he said, “you need a dishwasher.”

I ran to him and jumped into his arms, squealing with delight. I was overjoyed to have him in our apartment – every hour together was more precious than tabersk stones. And the sight of him being so domestic filled me with indescribable happiness.

“Anatorr,” I said, “it appears that I have one – you!”

He picked me up in his arms and carried me to bed. It was several hours before he washed any more dishes that day.

CHAPTER TWELVE

On the bridge of the Vargon star vessel, *Repelator*, the helmsman announced, “Home World is within range of our long-range scanners. Recommend we reduce speed for approach to the system.”

There must be some primal instinct which causes ship designers to place the command area where they do. Logic, of course, dictates that the bridge or conning tower on old-fashioned surface and underwater vessels be at the highest point of the structure. But in a modern starship with its computer supported scanners, trans-optical view screens and rapid access turbo lifts, the bridge could have been placed anywhere in the ship.

Federation designers positioned the bridge on the upper surfaces of the configuration, away from the engineering section. This gave it the traditional feel from the point of history, and a position of relative safety away from the leading edge of the vessel. That position was indeed relative because offensive weapons on board starships frequently destroyed a victim with only one well-placed high energy discharge.

Within the Vargon psyche, safety was not a prerequisite in ship’s design as it related to positioning the command structure. The bridge was always the forward most structure. Accordingly, they charged the entire leading edge of their ships with a static shield device. During battle situations, this was augmented by security shielding, making a formidable defensive screen. Because of the bridge’s position, a Vargon captain was not forced to rely on a view screen for his anterior perception. He could, if

he choose, look through a special transparent metallic window. Viewing the star system around the Home World as it naturally existed and not as a computer-generated image was one luxury Organ Moss-Kuib always indulged in.

“Secure from light speed,” he ordered, “and open the outer shield aperture.”

Moss-Kuib enjoyed this moment almost as much as a battle or an execution of a prisoner. The giant dust fields were the most distinctive feature in the Var-Dohkad, what the Federation called the Pleiades Cluster. The illumination from the Var-Dohkad’s stars formed patterns of swirling beauty which could only be seen by a vessel entering the outer edges of the Cluster. The bridge crew of the *Repelator* had standing orders to use an approach vector which would bring the panorama to center screen just as the vessel went sublight.

His crew would have been surprised to hear Moss-Kuib’s thoughts at that moment: “No where in the galaxy is space more splendid than here.”

When Moss-Kuib spoke, however, it was not with poetry, but with orders.

“Communications Officer, signal the Sovereign. Tell him we have captives who await his pleasure.

“Helmsman, make standard orbital approach, then steer for the Battle Dock.”

As he watched his crew perform their orders with flawless precision, he said, “Satisfying. Imminently satisfying.”

That satisfaction would be very fleeting.

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James Kirk was suffering from the effects of a sentence of execution by torture. The Vargons had been most effective in their preparations. The Captain of the *U.S.S. Enterprise* had endured ritual beatings for three days before being placed into the Time Chamber where he was continuously abused for 24 Standard days. Now he was suffering from reconversion syndrome, a condition brought on by the combination of physical and mental abuse, plus time travel through 24 days back to the present. Reconversion syndrome was not unlike the bends – nitrogen bubbles forming in the blood streams of deep sea divers who surface too quickly.

As a self-defense mechanism his mind had switched off and his body had collapsed. But as James Kirk was placed onto an anti-grav stretcher for transport to a medical facility, his subconscious mind reached out for a lifeline which had been dangled just in front of him: “You will not die today, Captain Kirk,” the Vargon healer had said.

“Kortach!” Security Chief Aireb ordered and moved after the medic and his patient.

The healer continued to push the stretcher towards the turbo lift. He did not stop as ordered.

Aireb grabbed the healer by the long hair-braid and roughly halted his progress. He spun the medic around to face him, seizing his shoulders, forcing him to release the stretcher.

“Is Vargon a foreign language to you, healer?” Aireb growled. “Why did you not stop when I spoke to you?”

“I was thinking about my patient, sir. His condition distracted me,” the healer replied. “I know that Organ Moss-Kuib is very concerned that Captain Kirk is well enough to be presented to the Sovereign.”

“The next time you are distracted from obeying an order, healer, you will join your patient in needing medical treatment,” Aireb said, then added, “Continue.”

There it was again! “My name,” James Kirk thought. “He said my name. I am Captain James T. Kirk.”

This time Aireb also realized what the healer had said.

“Kortach!”

The medic, the stretcher and Captain Kirk paused as the turbo lift doors opened to receive them.

“Sir?” the healer asked.

“What did you say?” Aireb asked, the threat in his voice was obvious.

“Sir, I merely said, ‘I know that Organ Moss-Kuib is very concerned that our prisoner is well enough to be presented to the Sovereign.’”

“No you did not,” Aireb answered, his words spaced and deliberate. “You called him Captain Kirk! That is a violation of the Organ’s specific orders not to use the Earth Man’s name.”

“Sir, I am sorry,” the healer answered, “it will not happen again.”

“What is your name, healer?” Aireb asked, slowly moving his hand to his weapon.

The healer moved swiftly to the Security Chief and plunged a Federation hypo-spray into the surprised Vargon's chest.

"My name is Ensign Bakor K'Yle, of the Federation Starship *Enterprise!*" he answered as the Vargon slipped into unconsciousness.

And then speaking only to himself, Ensign K'Yle added, "My concoction worked, but I wonder if I have killed him."

James Kirk was now fully conscious.

"He would certainly have killed you, Mr. K'Yle, and me as well," the Captain said. "I approve of your disguise."

"I felt that it was our best chance for escape, Captain. Now I fear I have severely jeopardized our chances."

"Let's not stand here and debate it, Mr. K'Yle. I trust your plan has more details."

"Just one, sir. Flight. Immediately."

For the first time since their capture in the Beta Tarnopol star system, James Kirk smiled. "A good, simple plan, Mr. K'Yle. Rescue and escape. You definitely exhibit command potential. What do we do with our prisoner?"

"He is indeed an unexpected development. Perhaps a hostage?"

"Hostage, it is," Kirk said. "Now, let's get moving. I'm still pretty shaky and someone is bound to notice an unconscious Security Chief."

They pushed into the turbo lift, and Ensign K'Yle keyed the comm-panel, "Docking bay. Immediate passage."

"How long can you maintain your disguise, Mr. K'Yle?" Kirk asked.

“Approximately another 17.329 minutes, sir,” the Antosian answered.

“Approximately?” Kirk queried.

“I do try to be accurate, sir, but the excitement of discovery temporarily disoriented me. I cannot be more specific, Captain.”

“Close enough, Mr. K’Yle. Close enough.”

“Thank you, Captain,” K’Yle said, then adding, “In addition to the hypo-spray, I fashioned two weapons, one for each of us. I used rubindium crystals and energy cells from the telemetry probes.”

“How long will they function, Ensign?” Kirk asked.

“The configuration should provide three discharges for each phaser.”

“Six shots. Well, Lieutenant Sulu, with his appreciation for antique weapons would enjoy that,” Kirk said.

“Sir?”

“Later,” Kirk said, as the turbo-lift stopped and the doors opened, revealing four Vargon security personnel, their hand weapons drawn and leveled at the lift’s occupants.

K’Yle quickly threw his arm across Captain Kirk’s chest, holding him captive, placing a phaser into the Captain’s hand as he completed the maneuver.

“The Earth Man feigned unconsciousness. He overpowered Chief Aireb and forced me to activate the turbo-lift. Help Mr. Aireb. He may be dying,” K’Yle ordered.

One guard stepped into the lift and bent over the fallen Security Chief. As he did so, K’Yle jammed the hypo-spray into the Vargon’s back, emptying it of its contents.

Kirk spun loose from Ensign K'Yle and got off two quick shots, killing two of the guards before they could react. The third guard shot wildly, giving Kirk a chance to fire once more. The modified phaser's final blast only stunned the Vargon.

"Very satisfactory, Mr. K'Yle," Kirk said, scooping up the weapon the guard had dropped, and handing it to the Ensign.

"No alarm has been sounded," K'Yle said, "but yet they were waiting for us. I do not think this new development will aid our escape."

"I'm still your prisoner," he said, "for as long as you can maintain transformation. Let's get to the shuttlecraft if we can."

"What about our hostage?"

"Leave him. We can't spare the time."

Within seconds, Kirk and K'Yle were inside the docking bay. No more Vargons were in sight.

"Evidently they have underestimated our resourcefulness, Captain," K'Yle said.

"A mistake you can be sure they won't make again," Kirk replied.

"The security relay which hindered you before has not been reactivated, Captain. Your triggering device for the door will function," K'Yle said.

"Go!" Kirk ordered, arming the activator probe's twist ring and dashing for the shuttlecraft.

"The *Newton* is at 84 percent power, but navigation systems are barely functioning," K'Yle reported.

"Dead reckoning, Mr. K'Yle. Dead reckoning. Now, let's get the hell out of here."

Captain Kirk and Ensign K'Yle jumped into the shuttle craft just as an alarm klaxon went off. Kirk hurled himself into the pilot's seat as K'Yle secured the hatch. K'Yle staggered against the door and allowed his Vargon disguise to dissolve. His body trembled and he gasped for breath as he broke the transformation. He was still shaking as he dropped into the co-pilot's seat.

"Welcome back, Mr. K'Yle. Are you all right?"

"Thank you, sir. I will be in a few seconds, however, you did suggest we depart with haste."

"That I did, Mr. K'Yle," Kirk said with satisfaction as the docking bay doors opened and unfamiliar stars came into view.

"Full power, Mr. K'Yle."

"At your command, sir."

James Kirk pushed the controls and the *Isaac Newton* lifted out of the cavernous docking bay and into the welcome void of space.

The docking bay was on the starboard side of the *Repelator's* twin cylinders. Kirk flew straight out of the doors and then turned hard to port, circling under the Vargon starship, using the giant vessel as a shield for his tiny craft. The new course took them directly under the bulge that was the Time Chamber. As the *Newton* passed under the Time Chamber, the shuttle craft's scanning sensors dropped off-line.

"All stop, Mr. K'Yle," Kirk ordered.

"Sir?"

“The sensors just went blank. That projection is emitting a field which either disabled them or...” Kirk did not complete his thought.

“Wait a minute!” Kirk said excitedly. “That must be the Time Chamber. I’ll bet that this dampening field is a reaction to the time displacement capabilities of the Chamber. There were no devices of any kind in the area outside of it. If I am right, we may not be able to be detected here.”

“Surely the Vargons will send out search vessels. There are two of them in the bay we just left,” K’Yle said.

“How many telemetry probes did you disable when you modified our phasers?”

“I used the energy cells from only one probe, sir. The other two will function,” K’Yle answered.

“Set all three telemetry probes for proximity launch and jettison. Steer them down and away from our position using our previous trajectory as their course. As soon as they clear the damping field, overload the two good probes and detonate all three. Hopefully, they’ll think it was us,” Kirk said.

Ensign K’Yle’s hands danced over the controls as he made the necessary settings.

“Probes away, Captain. I suggest you close your eyes. Now!”

The area forward of the *Isaac Newton* flared into intense light and the shuttlecraft rocked upward and back on the energy wave. Kirk struggled with the controls, trying to stay hidden underneath the Time Chamber. The wave pushed the *Newton* backwards, and the sensor panel’s lights flickered as the scanners peeked out of the field which

cloaked them. Kirk powered the engines to counter their reverse momentum, added forward thrust and the sensors dropped off line again.

“As long as they stay at sublight speed, we may just get away with this,” Kirk said.

“For the moment, I can think of no other action, Captain,” Ensign K’Yle replied.

For a time there was silence inside the shuttlecraft, and then Kirk looked at the forward view screen and spoke to the stars, “Where the blazes is Mr. Spock and my ship?”

“You were expecting the *Enterprise* to be here, Captain?” K’Yle asked. “I do not understand the logic of that assumption, sir.”

“Then you do not understand your First Officer,” the Captain replied.

Resenka is the fourth planet in the outward journey from our star. The star which lights and warms our planetary system is called "Adzeva." It once had another name, but that was before the Vargons came.

Many things were "before the Vargons came," before those ugly giants whose faces lack noses and ears turned our world into their possession. When their terrible space vessels landed, the rape of our world began. And they found willing helpers among our own people, but I get ahead of myself.

Vargon is the third planet in our system. We called it "Palen," but they changed that, too. Until their star craft landed on Resenka, we did not know of the existence of beings other than ourselves. Many times we looked up into the night sky and wondered, but we did not know. We have not developed ships that can fly outside of our atmosphere. A few scientists looked at the stars through their glaz-ochkey, but they never saw other creatures.

The Vargons made no overt changes in the way we lived. They demanded that we call our star and their planet by their Vargon names. They did not change the name by which we call ourselves. The two new words were enough for us to learn their lesson: Resenka and every being on it belonged forever to Vargon. We were the first world to be annexed into the Vargon Sovereignty.

Within a few short planetary cycles, the Vargons went beyond our system, conquering and enslaving many worlds. Just as I weep for Resenka, so I weep for them, but their story is not for my telling.

At first the Vargons were content to strip the mineral wealth which lay beneath the Frozen Lands in the north section of Resenka. We objected, but not too strongly.

Our protests were mild. We had no way to harvest the underground wealth. In fact, we did not know it was there. So why protest about the loss of something you never knew you had? Furthermore, when the Vargons promised our planet a share of the wealth, the Bolskars agreed to support the Acquisition (acquisition sounds so much nicer than rape or piracy or ecological destruction).

Backed by the power of the Vargons, the Bolskars began "The Cleansings," and millions of people were murdered or simply disappeared into the yachenkas. When the Bolskars instituted their rule by force, we feared them. When they became the Vargons' puppets, we despised them. That was when the resistance began.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Where the blazes is Jim?” Doctor Leonard McCoy growled at no one in particular.

Since he was at that moment facing the Vulcan science officer, Commander Spock replied, “Out there, Doctor. 46.921 light years ahead of us, the captive of an alien ship. Destination, unknown.”

“I know that, Spock. It was a rhetorical question.”

“Indeed. Why didn’t you say so, Doctor?”

“I didn’t expect you to be so literal, you pointy-eared Vulcan hob-goblin.”

“My ears are indeed pointed, Doctor McCoy. I am unfamiliar with the reference to a ‘hob-goblin,’ unless, of course, you are referring to an imaginary earth creature also known as a ghost, spirit, phantom, wraith or haint. There are however, no such creatures on Vulcan, so your allusion is incorrect.”

“Mr. Spock, I think Doctor McCoy was only voicing the concern for the Captain that we all feel,” Lieutenant Uhura said, trying to defuse an explosion before it detonated.

“Blast it, Uhura, Spock knows what I meant. He’s only happy when he’s trying to get my goat,” McCoy said.

“I did not know you owned bovidae capra hircus, Doctor McCoy,” Spock said with perfect innocence.

“A what?” Mr. Chekov chimed in from the helm console.

“A goat, Mr. Chekov,” Sulu answered.

“Careful, Hikaru,” Uhura laughed, “you’ll only pour gasoline onto the fire.”

“Miss Uhura,” Spock said, his face touched with just the slightest hint of surprise, “why would the navigator wish to discharge a flammable liquid into a combustible environment?”

“Why, indeed, Mr. Spock?” Uhura said, slowly shaking her head. “Why, indeed?”

McCoy fumed. Spock maintained his Vulcan serenity. And the bridge of the *U.S.S. Enterprise* shook with laughter.

The doors of the turbolift opened and Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott stepped out. Immediately everyone turned towards him and the laughter stopped.

“It’s all right. There’s nae a problem. New data from the last probe indicates that the alien ship has dropped out of warp and is headed for a system in the Pleiades Cluster. Lieutenant Uhura was right. It appears to be approaching a planetary system orbiting Alycone,” Scotty said.

“That is good news, Mr. Scott,” the Science Officer said, “but even at maximum warp we are still more than three Standard weeks out from Alycone.”

The Vulcan clasped his hands behind his back and walked to the forward view screen, turned and addressed his shipmates.

“Miss Uhura, see that everyone on the bridge has the data to study. Then order Beta shift to duty in one hour. At that time, all department heads will meet me in the conference room. Doctor McCoy, if you will accompany me we can begin to analyze the data from the position of life-sciences. Mr. Scott, you have the conn.”

“Aye, Mr. Spock,” the Scotsman said.

As the door of the turbolift closed behind the First Officer and the Doctor, Mr. Spock said, “Doctor McCoy, if I did not know you better, I would say that you provoked our ‘exchange’ earlier on the bridge just to, I believe the expression is, ‘break the tension.’”

“Spock,” McCoy answered, not willing to concede that the Vulcan was correct, “It is not imperative that I create a rationalization in order to abduct your bovidae capra hircus.”

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The calm on the bridge of the *Repelator* was shattered by the harsh wail of an alarm.

“Organ Moss-Kuib,” a startled security officer said, “my board shows docking bay depressurization and bay doors opening!”

“What do you mean the docking bay doors are opening! I gave no orders for them to be opened. Close them you degenerate spawn of a three-legged Groyskorth!” Moss-Kuib roared.

If the security officer felt umbrage at the Organ’s description of himself and his parentage, he kept those feelings to himself. His only response was to toggle switches and activate relays as quickly as his hands would respond to his brain’s instructions.

“Doors are closing, Organ, but they will not be in time to stop the Earth Man’s vessel from launching,” the officer replied.

Moss-Kuib leaped from his command chair as he realized the meaning of his crewman's words.

"Activate security procedures. Show me the interior of the docking bay," Moss-Kuib ordered. "And find Aireb. If he has allowed the Earth Man to escape, I will personally start him on his journey to Nakazitvat."

As much as it was possible for a Vargon to perform three duties simultaneously, the security officer complied. The wail of the security alarm changed to a rapid pulse as an alert condition was sounded. Then the viewscreen dropped into place, and the peaceful view of the Var-Dohkad star field was replaced with a shot of the *Isaac Newton* lifting off from the dimly lit docking bay. Finally, the security officer punched in the code for the Security Chief's locator implant and activated it.

The startled bridge crew watched as the Federation shuttle craft cleared the docking bay, maneuvered rapidly to port, spiraled downward and out of view.

"Tactical!" Moss-Kuib ordered and instantly the docking bay dissolved into a graphical display of the approaching planetary system. In the center of the screen the shape of the *Repelator's* twin connected cylinders and the huge bulge of the Time Chamber were immediately recognizable. A small flashing red light indicated the position of the *Isaac Newton*.

"Localize, you idiot!" Moss-Kuib shouted. "Use the tracking scanners."

"They will be ineffective, Organ," the security officer said, "until the Earthers navigate clear of the Time Chamber's sensor-energy distortion."

As he spoke, the *Newton's* blip dropped underneath the Vargon starship, sailed at an angle under her beam and disappeared into the distortion field. It momentarily drifted backwards then flew again into the distortion, reappeared, following its initial trajectory and then winked out.

“Organ, the vessel has exploded. There is debris forward and aft of their last position,” the security officer said.

“I am not a first year trainee, idiot. I can see that. Where is Aireb?”

“His locator implant shows he is on Deck 17, just outside of the docking bay. He is unconscious.”

“Order a force one security contingent to meet me at his position. Continue course to Home World. Have a scanning crew analyze the debris. And shut off that infernal alarm!”

Much to the relief of everyone on the bridge, Organ Moss-Kuib, commander of the Vargon flag ship *Repelator*, stepped into the turbolift and disappeared. Each breathed a silent prayer of thanks that he was not Security Chief Aireb. A second silent petition also was offered – that the Organ's wrath would be fully vented before he returned to the bridge. When the Organ's rage was uncontrolled, people were known to die.

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Security Chief Aireb sat with his back against a bulkhead. The chemicals in Ensign K'Yle's hypo were slowly working out of his system. The humiliation he had suffered at the hands of the human called Kirk would take longer to erase itself – if

Organ Moss-Kuib allowed him to live that long. The chances of reaching the end of a full Vargon life cycle were now problematical.

Two members of his security staff were dead and the third would be executed if he did not die – that was a small matter, enlisted security personnel were supposed to die, that is what they were trained to do. Security Chiefs, on the other hand, were trained to survive. And Aireb intended to survive long enough to fashion a ritual dressing garment from the flayed skin of James T. Kirk.

As his mind cleared, Aireb remembered the words of the Vargon who had aided the Earth Man in his escape. He had said his name was Ensign Bakor K'Yle from the Federation Starship. He could not possibly have told the truth. That would have meant that their security scans were ineffective. Discounting that explanation would mean that a Vargon had defected to an enemy whose existence had been previously unknown.

While it was possible that they had experienced some sort of technical failure, no Vargon, in the entire history of their race, had ever been disloyal to the Sovereign. If there had been such a creature, he did not live to tell of his sedition and no record of his deeds existed. There had to be another explanation, and if he was going to survive Moss-Kuib's interrogation – and the Organ would interrogate him as surely as Vargon orbited Adzeva – he would have to gain that knowledge.

Aireb pushed himself unsteadily to his feet and staggered to the docking bay. The indicator light on the entrance panel showed that the outer bay doors were open. A passive force field system meant that when the exterior bay doors were retracted, the docking bay did not have to be depressurized. Aireb ordered the security doors to

release and then looked inside. In addition to two scout vessels, the bay contained one naked security guard who was either unconscious or dead.

Aireb knelt by the man and was gratified to see he was alive. It was Yakub, his second-in-command. Aireb grasped the man by the shoulders and shook him roughly.

“Yakub, what are you doing here? What happened? Where are the prisoners and their vessel? Answer quickly or your wife will soon be searching for a living mate,” Aireb ordered.

Yakub rolled onto his stomach and pushed himself upright. His mottled skin was pale, his normally red eyes were a sickly orange shade. He swallowed hard, fighting a rising nausea. His body shook from a combination of fear and the effects of Ensign K'Yle's tranquilizer.

“And where is your uniform?” Aireb demanded.

“I came down to relieve the guard you had stationed here and I heard a noise inside the docking bay,” Yakub replied. “Since all of our scans and inspections revealed the presence of only three of their kind, one which we found dead, one who was killed and one who was being executed, I was unprepared to find another off-worlder working inside of their vessel.

“He sprang at me from the darkness and plunged a medical spray into my chest. I was aware of nothing more until I opened my eyes and saw you staring down at me. I guess my attacker took my uniform, but it would not be a good disguise since we are so much taller than they.”

“Before this puny being overpowered the second-in-command of the *Repelator’s* security section, did you actually see this creature?” Aireb asked with scorn.

“Yes, sir, and except for a minor differences in skin coloration, he appeared much the same as the others.”

Aireb considered this new information in silence and then when he spoke it was with evident hesitation.

“Yakub, a being who called himself Ensign Bakor K’Yle also injected me with some noxious chemical. He identified himself as a member of the Federation. But he was wearing what I now know to have been your uniform and was to all appearances a Vargon. I admit, I do not know how to explain it.”

“You do not know how to explain what, Aireb,” a voice thundered from behind the security chief.

Both Vargons looked up to see Organ Moss-Kuib stride into the docking bay, dressed not in the command clothes he normally wore on the bridge of his ship, but outfitted in full battle armor. He was accompanied by four guards. Two carried phaser rifles held across their chests and two brandished only side arms. The Organ was evidently ready for a physical confrontation, although with whom, his underlings did not know. Each fervently hoped he would not be the chosen victim.

“My careless admission could cost me my life,” Aireb thought.

Aireb hesitated for a moment and then said, “It appears that there may have been four aliens onboard their ship. The fourth was probably a shape-shifter. Yakub was overpowered by someone who was definitely not of our kind and I was attacked by

one of our own medics who identified himself as a Federation crewman. I believe our attackers were the same creature.”

“And the current location of this fourth being?” Moss-Kuib asked.

“I do not know, sir,” Aireb answered matter-of-factly. “He evidently escaped with his captain.”

“Are you sure of that Security Chief?”

“No, sir. And because of that uncertainty, I recommend that we seven immediately withdraw from the docking bay and then vent the interior to outer space. Any life form still in hiding, in whatever shape it has assumed, will be sucked into the vacuum and destroyed.”

“Make it so,” Moss-Kuib said, turned and marched out of the docking bay, his retinue in tow. He stopped at the corridor and turned back to Aireb and Yakub.

“Shortly after the Earthers escaped, their craft exploded. Much of the vessel vaporized, but an analysis of the debris indicates that it is of alien origin. We can, therefore, report that Captain Kirk and his rescuer are dead.

“The news of a shape-shifter among their crew will be interesting to the Sovereign,” Moss-Kuib continued, “although you may both eventually regret that we do not have a specimen to present to his Excellency. I will recommend that we prepare an invasion force. Such creatures, firmly within our control, would be most valuable.

“I have given orders to the helm to continue to the Home World at sublight speed. When you are certain that only the Spirit of the Great Pateetsa still lives in the

empty bay, join me in my quarters. And try to think of reasons why I should let you both live.”

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“Captain,” Ensign K’Yle, “the *Repelator* is underway.”

“I see it Ensign,” Kirk replied. “If we are going to hide in this blind spot underneath the Time Chamber, I will need all of your skills as a navigator to keep us there.”

“Aye, sir. Do you have a speculation as to their destination?”

“While the Vargons were executing me they talked about taking me to their Sovereign. My best guess is that we are on our way to their home world.”

“I was obviously not able to gather much data while I was hiding in the docking bay, but the star pattern around us appears to be the Pleiades Cluster,” K’Yle said.

“Federation probes into this area have been almost non-existent, Ensign. Except for knowing the names of the major stars, we have little additional concrete data. Theoretical evidence suggests the presence of Class M planets. Obviously at least one exists,” Kirk said.

“How will that knowledge aid us, Captain?”

“I only wish I knew, Ensign. I only wish I knew.”

I remember an occasion when I took my evening meal with Anatorr's wife.

Anatorr had heard of a new supplier of tabersk stones in Ingal-Karbe so he and Mitork went there to purchase stock for the store. Because he was going on business, during a normal business day, it would have looked suspicious if I had accompanied him on the trip. So, reluctantly, but prudently, I stayed in the store.

About midway through the day, Lubeme came in. She came to the store once or twice a week, stopping to visit or to catch up on some bookkeeping. Because Kerrioff and I were alone, Anatorr asked her to help us close up for the day. Even with Anatorr gone, Kerrioff asked for permission to leave before closing hour arrived. I looked at Lubeme with a questioning expression and she laughed, "Yes, Kerrioff. Tend to whatever is so important. We will finish up here."

As we locked the door behind us, Lubeme asked, "Elena, do you have plans for this evening?"

When I answered in the negative she said, "I eat alone so much of the time. Would you share tonight's meal with me? I know a place that serves excellent latt-beast and Anatorr says they have the coldest kvasale in Zenyuk."

And that is how Anatorr's wife and his mistress became companions at mealtime.

Lubeme is well-mannered and well-bred. When written by her husband's lover those words sound cold and calculating, but I do not mean them to be so. There is a gentleness and a sensitivity about her that I find warm and compelling. My uneasy

feeling about sharing a meal alone with her quickly evaporated because of her poise and grace.

She is an attractive woman. Lubeme showed me a kartina of herself which was taken shortly before she and Anatorr were married. It is an old fashioned kartina, reproduced only in monotonous, but it shows a proud, elegant woman. The pride declares confidence rather than haughtiness.

From what Anatorr has told me, Lubeme had every right to exhibit superiority, but I experienced only graciousness. In the days of the Chekart's power, her family had gained the attention of the Ryssart and had achieved influence over certain commercial transactions in Zenyuk. Their contacts and position were important to the uneducated Bolskars when they tore power from the Chekarts and so the family survived.

Although no one stays in favor with the Bolskars for very long, Lubeme's grandfather had been able to keep the family from falling into total disfavor through his shrewd business dealings. While there was little of the family's former status remaining today, Lubeme retained the nobility, but hid it beneath a surprising, almost girlish, charm.

Lubeme's short black hair is generously sprinkled with white. She wears no face-colorings, but her appearance is only enhanced by their absence. Her body is no longer the trim girl of 18 years she was when her image was captured on the kartina, but she has not developed the thick waist and hips and ponderous breasts that so characterize older women on Resenka.

Two of Lubeme's features seem most distinguishing of the woman to me – her hands and her eyes.

She does not "talk" with her hands in the wide, sweeping gestures which her husband utilized. No, there is an economy and a reserve which seems to characterize her movements and are used only for punctuation, not constant expression.

Lubeme's hands are small, her fingers thin and tapered. They could have been the hands of a spoiled, pampered aristocrat, but they are not. When I first shook hands with her some months ago I felt a woman's touch that was hidden underneath years of hard work. Like the rest of her, it was a quiet strength.

But her pale blue eyes, I think, are her most compelling feature. They show the expressions which her face often seeks to hide. Sometimes they are softly lit with delight, other times they are fiery with emotion. Her eyes reveal much about Lubeme while the rest of her tries to be secretive and discrete. Tiny lines, lines caused by age, by worry, by passion, by neglect – all of those I would think, and more – highlight her face when she smiles or when she frowns.

I tried very hard not to like Lubeme. After all, it was she who slept beside of Anatorr night after night, and not me. It was she who heard his snores and felt his body change positions as he rested, and not me. It was she who set most of his meals before him, and not me. It was she who was his wife, and not me. But as we ate and talked I found her compelling and found myself wishing we could be friends.

Anatorr once told me that Lubeme rarely drinks kvasale, she finds its stimulating powers disturbing because it lowers her reserve. He told the truth, because as we ate and drank she began to speak more about herself and about Anatorr and their relationship than I suspect she has ever revealed to anyone.

There were a few times when I thought she was telling me, "Elena, I know about my husband and you," but I do not believe that guile is part of her nature. Direct confrontation, I think would be her way.

There was one point, near the end of the meal, when I looked up from my plate and saw Lubeme's eyes filled with tears. She quickly wiped them with her fingers and then without preamble, said, "Anatorr does not love me. I love him more than I could ever love anyone else. He is kind to me, but there is a distance in him which hurts me so much. When he came home from the yachenka the Ex-Comm had torn something out of him. They stole him away from me and he will never be mine again. On rare occasions, he would come to me for his physical needs, but that stopped months ago."

I said nothing, shocked by her openness. What could I say? Yes, Lubeme, I understand. I now fulfill him. It is me he loves. I have found what the Ex-Comm took from you.

No, because of what my father did to me and because of the other men before Anatorr, I, too, understand pain. I knew I was the cause of much that Lubeme felt, and I could not be so coarse, so callous.

Lubeme turned her face away and stared at the wall. I think she was seeing the past, not the inside of a building. After a few moments she shuddered slightly as though she were cold and took a deep breath. When she let it out she said, "I think that Anatorr has fallen in love. There is a peace about him when he sleeps that was not there since the time he came home to me from the yachenka."

I do not know what my face said, but I would not allow my voice to speak.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

In the eight annuals during which Aireb had served with Moss-Kuib, he had never been inside of the Organ's personal quarters. Such privileges were rarely extended. The Organ had little concern about social contacts, least of all with members of his crew. And his private domain would hardly be considered the place for a reprimand or an execution.

Now as Aireb stood outside of the entrance, he wondered what he would find inside – life or death, reduction in rank or a simple torture. Just slightly to his right, but two paces behind, as befit his lesser stature, Yakub was entertaining similar dark thoughts.

In the turbolift from the docking bay to command quarters, they had not spoken. As the doors to the lift hissed open Yakub asked, "What do we say? How do we keep our lives?"

Aireb said nothing as they exited from the lift, turned right and started down the corridor. He stopped five paces from the Organ's door and said, "As to our heads, their fate is beyond our capability. As to our words, Yakub, the truth. We were careless. The Earther escaped because of our negligence."

"But, sir," Yakub demanded, "our scans did not show the presence of another being. We cannot be held accountable for a shape-shifter."

“Yakub,” Aireb replied, “the Organ can hold us accountable for a rain storm or an eclipse of Adzeva if he chooses. I may die today, but I will not cower behind words. Now, silence!”

He stepped forward and reached out to activate the visitor annunciator.

When the door immediately slid silently open, Aireb felt his knees buckle and his resolve of a few moments earlier, weaken, but he stiffened himself and stepped just inside the open door.

“Security Chief Aireb and Assistant Yakub seek admittance into your presence, Organ,” Aireb announced formally.

“Enter and be at rest,” the Organ’s voice reverberated from within the darkened chamber.

Aireb turned and motioned Yakub to precede him. As his assistant passed, Aireb allowed a smile to flick across his face. The expression said, “We may make it. We may just survive.”

“Kortach!” Organ Moss-Kuib ordered and both security officers turned their bodies into stone, as rigidly as if they had been held in an ak-borok.

Suddenly two spot lights flashed on. One, bright and glaring, illuminated the two officers, the other, more muted, shone on the Organ. All Aireb and Yakub could see was Moss-Kuib seated in a replica of his command chair, the fingers of his left hand curled over the end of one armrest, an energy weapon gripped in his right fist. Moss-Kuib stood slowly, assuming a posture which generated more fear than most creatures’ words could produce.

“So, Assistant Yakub, you do not believe that you should be held accountable for the presence of an unknown, unsuspected shape-shifter,” Moss-Kuib said without preamble.

Aireb closed his eyes. “Recording sensors in the corridor. I should have known,” he thought.

“Answer me!” the Organ roared.

Yakub struggled to keep from fainting and to keep his body from releasing waste and embarrassing him. But he could not speak.

“Very well, assistant,” Moss-Kuib said, “I will not hold you accountable for the shape-shifter.”

Yakub relaxed visibly.

“Organ Moss-Kuib,” he began, “by the sacred honor of the Sovereign, I am grateful.”

Moss-Kuib raised the hand weapon and fired. The beam struck Yakub squarely in his chest and spread out through his torso like a family of enraged fire spiders and into his head and extremities. Yakub screamed in terror as the weapon was raised. His brain did not have time to register the intensity of the pain as the weapon disintegrated him.

Smoke curled into the air and the sickening order of seared flesh spread through out the room. Against every wish of his brain, Aireb’s throat gagged at the smell.

If Moss-Kuib noticed Aireb’s discomfort, he did not speak to it. Instead, he turned and walked back to his chair. As he climbed the platform and seated himself

grandly, he spoke to the smoke that had been Yakub: "By the sacred honor of the Sovereign, I hold you accountable for stupidity and for cowardice."

Moss-Kuib toggled two switches, the spot lights were extinguished and dim room lights came on. He activated a third control and a soft, whirring fan began to pull the smoke and odor from his chamber.

In the soft light Aireb could see much of Moss-Kuib's private residence. The wall behind the Organ's replica command chair was oriented in the direction of the *Repelator's* travel. This forward facing wall was dominated by a view screen which was tied in by the bridge computers to every section of the ship. A darkened cavern immediately to the right indicated eating and sleeping quarters. Soft footsteps from that direction were evidence that the Organ did not sleep alone.

To the left, a deep-set alcove held a shrine to the Sovereign. Such devotion was not regulation and Aireb was surprised by its presence. A highly stylized statute of the Sovereign was the centerpiece of the shrine. The Sovereign's right hand clutched at his overcoat and his chin thrust forward, in a very characteristic pose. "It was," Aireb thought, "the Sovereign's favorite pose, showing his fearless stand against all enemies and his unceasing devotion to leading his world to greatness."

If Moss-Kuib had detection sensors in the corridors, it might be possible that he had some device which was capable of reading minds. Although it was not probable, Aireb immediately banished such less than patriotic, decidedly disrespectful thoughts from his mind.

Moss-Kuib stood and walked towards the shrine. The space between the command chair and the left wall held an old-fashioned seating platform. Aireb could not be sure, but the covering appeared to be feathers from the Giant Winged Pipok, but that enormous bird had vanished from Vargon's skies centuries ago. Such a possession was a sign of great wealth and even greater power. The platform would command the ransom of many an insignificant planet.

A low table was positioned in front of the platform. The table was actually a slab of raytorium granite from the Conqueror Mountains on Vargon. Crystal drinking vessels crafted by artisans from Vargon's southern continent held a sparkling amber liquid. "Proklinat, the finest stimulant-beverage on Vargon!" Aireb thought. A large carafe, filled with the same liquid held the promise of a brain-numbing trance. The dreams of passion which the trance induced were sought by many, but experienced by only a few.

Moss-Kuib stopped in front of the shrine and very slightly, inclined his head. If Aireb had not been looking directly at the Organ, he would not have seen the gesture, but coming from Moss-Kuib, it was like the devotion of a fanatic zealot.

For the first time since entering the room, Aireb was aware that Moss-Kuib was not wearing body armor or a uniform. His costume seemed to be one large piece of dark green cloth, draped over the Organ's shoulders from the rear and fastened in the front with a fist-sized piece of polished Resenka dzhhunk, the fastener as golden as the liquid in the carafe.

Moss-Kuib positioned himself directly in front of the statue of the Sovereign, turned to Aireb and commanded, "Join me."

When Aireb was seated, the Organ picked up one of the crystal vessels and drank deeply. He replaced the crystal on the granite slab and refilled it, emptying the glass a second time. When he again placed the glass on the table, he leaned against the back of the platform and spoke to the view screen.

“Playback security tape 7729-004.”

The image which filled the screen was the corridor outside of the Organ’s chambers. Aireb winced as he heard himself say, “As to our heads, their fate is beyond our capability. As to our words, Yakub, the truth. We were careless. The Earther escaped because of our negligence.”

“Stop,” Moss-Kuib ordered.

The Organ leaned forward and ran his index finger around the rim of the empty crystal, hesitated and refilled it from the carafe’s dwindling supplies. This time he looked at the glass, but did not drink. He stood up so that his subordinate would have to lean backwards to look at the Organ’s face.

“Aireb, I can excuse such negligence only once and that only because you have served me and the Sovereign so well these past eight annuals. Compound or repeat your error and your fate will not be so gentle as Yakub’s,” Moss-Kuib said.

“By the sacred honor of the Sovereign,” Aireb started, “I will not fail you again.”

“Very well,” Moss-Kuib replied and he turned towards the sleeping chamber, extended his arm and spoke to the darkness. “Myahkee. Soft One, attend me.”

From the darkness stepped the most beautiful female Aireb had ever seen. The fact that she was from Resenka, not Vargon, did not diminish her charms in the Security Chief's eyes. Her smaller stature actually added to her allure.

A garland of small blue and yellow flowers, wrapped around her left wrist was her only covering. If the woman was embarrassed because of her nakedness and the presence of a stranger, she did not show it. She raised her arm in duplication of Moss-Kuib's gesture, crossed the room and took his hand in hers. Moss-Kuib turned so that the female had to walk in a circle. When Myahkee was directly in front of the seating platform, the Organ released her hand and she sat down.

"Would you like a drink, Aireb?" Moss-Kuib asked, enjoying his Security Chief's discomfort.

Aireb mumbled, "Umm. No. Sir."

"Very well, Security Chief. Leave us," Moss-Kuib replied, his eyes seeing only Myahkee. The Proklinat was working.

Aireb stumbled to his feet, nodded to Myahkee and saluted his commander. Moss-Kuib did not see either gesture.

As the doors closed behind his fleeing Security Chief, Moss-Kuib said, "Computer, restart security tape 7729-004, from the last position."

On the view screen the late assistant security chief was speaking.

"But, sir, our scans did not show the presence of another being. We cannot be held accountable for a shape-shifter."

“Yakub,” Aireb replied, “the Organ can hold us accountable for a rain storm or an eclipse of Adzeva if he chooses. I may die today, but I will not cower behind words. Now, silence!”

The screen went dark. Myahkee lifted a crystal and drank as though thirst had consumed her. Moss-Kuib sipped from the second goblet and then handed it to his companion. She consumed the liquid in a single swallow.

When Organ Moss-Kuib spoke, his voice was thick from the effects of the Proklinat.

“I do not, in fact, hold my Security Chief accountable for an eclipse of Adzeva, Myahkee, but I do hold you responsible for my pleasure.”

“By the sacred honor of the Sovereign,” Myahkee whispered as she drew the dzhhunk clasp from the folds of the Organ’s flowing green garment and pressed her flower bracelet against the front of his face, “I will not fail you. Now, silence!”

* * * * *

Outside in the corridor Aireb staggered, fell to his knees, and vomited. For several minutes he did not move. Then he stood and activated his personal communicator.

“Security Chief Aireb to all personnel. Unless Adzeva explodes or the Sovereign personally signals, Organ Moss-Kuib is not to be disturbed. Aireb, out.”

Aireb stepped into the turbolift and rapidly dropped away from the command suite. “Proklinat!” he breathed. It was both a prayer and a curse.

At least, he thought, I am alive.

* * * * *

The shuttlecraft *Isaac Newton* had been underway for almost seven hours. Captain James Kirk and Ensign Bakor K'Yle had both sat watch as they struggled to keep their craft within the sensor blind spot caused by the Time Chamber. Finally, Kirk ordered K'Yle to rest for two hours and then relieve him. They knew that their growing fatigue would cause carelessness. If they dropped outside of their invisibility screen, they would certainly be recaptured.

Ensign K'Yle was moving forward to relieve his Captain, when Kirk said, "Mr. K'Yle, what do you make of this?"

K'Yle followed Kirk's gesture out of the forward viewer to the star field beyond. A planetary body was rushing toward them. From their angle of approach, the terminator of the system's star drew down across the right third of the planet, keeping two-thirds of it in darkness. The outline of a large landmass dominated the northern hemisphere. To the south was only water. Most of the landmass seemed to be frozen beneath snow and ice. Only the southernmost tip of the continental area, about one fourth of its expanse, showed signs of green vegetation.

"Is it Class M, sir?" K'Yle asked.

"There is no way to be certain, Ensign. The same distortion that shields us, blocks our own sensors," the Captain replied, "but from all appearances – water, vegetation, even the arctic conditions at the north, that would be my guess."

They studied the view screen for several minutes and then Kirk said, "Mr. K'Yle, look 90 degrees mark 14 away from the planet. What do you see?"

“It appears to be another planetary body, sir. And based on the course alterations you are making to maintain our invisibility, it appears that the *Repelator* is tracking directly for it,” K’Yle answered.

“If that is the case, and I agree that it is, I think we should take our chances and try to land on this world,” Kirk said.

“When we drop outside of the distortion area, will the Vargons not detect us?”

“Probably. If we are lucky the trailing debris from the three exploded telemetry probes will confuse them. But I think we have no other choice. We buy our tickets and we take our chances. Mr. K’Yle, steer us for a few minutes.”

Kirk did some rapid calculations and then looked out of the viewer. Satisfied, he punched his figures into the shuttlecraft’s computers and waited.

“Their orbital approach is taking us across the face of the first planet. As they pass, I plan to drop into orbit and fly directly toward the darkness west of the terminator. If they do not have close proximity sensors activated we should be all right. Even if they see us, maybe we’ll get lucky and disappear into that star’s shadow. Stand by, Mr. K’Yle. It could get rough from here.”

* * * * *

Eight times Vargon had completed an orbit of Adzeva since Organ Moss-Kuib had been given command of the *Repelator*. During those eight annuals he had never made an error in judgment. His overconfidence, the puny Earther had once warned him, would be the flaw by which he would be defeated. Deep within the twin tethers of

the Proklinat and the Soft One, Moss-Kuib was unaware of his first mistake. He assumed that James T. Kirk was dead.

The bridge crew of the *Repelator* did have their proximity sensors on full alert. When the *Isaac Newton* flew out from under the Time Chamber, it immediately appeared on the helmsman's board. Since it was neither the destruction of Adzeva, nor the articulation of the Sovereign, he obeyed Security Chief Aireb's orders and ignored it.

The sensor anomaly was logged as debris from the exploded Federation vessel pulled from its position by the forces of planetary gravitation. By the time the mysterious blip was reported, the *Isaac Newton* was in orbit on the far side of Resenka. Kirk and K'Yle had escaped.

In the ancient folk lore of our world, the four great seasons are each controlled by a magical being. The most powerful of these creatures is winter's Snow Princess. The tilt of Resenka's axis, its position in orbit around Adzeva, its distance from Adzeva, and the planetary location of our world's central land mass all contribute to the six months when Resenka lies frozen by the Snow Princess' icy breath.

I do not know how such things are calculated on other worlds, but we mark our new year at the time the Snow Princess begins to lose her power. Then she is transformed into an old hag and slinks back into the ground.

Snow Princess is defeated by an unlikely hero, the Flower Girl. When the last snows of winter are finally a murky gray slush running down the streets of our cities, we know that she has driven an ice spear into the Snow Princess' cold heart. The blossoms of the first tiny Crystal Plants which push themselves out of the cold soil are red, the color of her blood.

The rich, black soil of our world becomes a syrup of mud. Even places that will be trampled hard in the summer are places of thick, sucking mud. The old roads which have not been paved become impassable bogs. As the snow drains into the Wikfa River, the River Zenyuk and every other river, lake and stream on Resenka, we watch for those Crystal blossoms as a sign that the Flower Girl has once again rescued our world.

Spring is a beautiful season, but it passes quickly. Very soon Flower Girl meets the Sower, the only male figure in our ancient mythology of the seasons. As they fall in love, the warmth of their affection dries the ground and chases away the heavy gray clouds which cover our world for most of the Snow Princess' reign. The time when the spring air is still cool, before summer has the chance to warm the ground, we call the Lover's Time. More couples on Resenka marry in spring than join throughout the rest of the year.

During the half of our year which is winter, we will see Adzeva for less than twenty days. The gray settles over everything, even our hearts. We become as gloomy as the sky. Once Anatorr surprised me with a ride in an airship. As the great craft rose from the ground we passed through thick layers of clouds. When we burst out of them into bright, blue sky, everyone on board shouted with joy. We did not want to land and have to live again beneath Snow Princess' shadowy breath.

But almost over night Resenka becomes a blanket of green to cradle the Lovers' embrace. The Maroezh trees burst open with white blooms which fall to the ground like flakes of snow. The spring winds quickly blow them away and pale green leaves appear. The music of birds and insects serenade the Lovers as their passion grows.

Nourished by the Flower Girl's love, the Sower quickly becomes strong and conquers Resenka. The ground responds with life. Warm breezes nourish the land. First, green plants to eat and then tiny berries grow. Fish awaken in the Wikfa and are caught by clever fishermen. Animals grow fat, and occasionally, so do we.

When the Flower Girl appears, the days begin to grow longer. As the Sower works his magic, night almost vanishes, lasting only three or four hours and then it is only a shadowy time, never the blackness of winter. But slowly the night time lengthens and we know that summer is about to give way to Harvest Woman, fat with the plenty of our land, ready to give birth.

When the Bolskars defeated the Chekart they demanded that we farm areas that had never felt a plow. They took farmers from plots of ground which had fed their families since the days when the Holy Ones taught Aldan and Elissa how to plant and how to reap. They forced them to till common fields and then before the farmers could feed their families with their labors, the Bolskars stole the harvest. Because of mismanagement, crops rotted in the fields and in barns while waiting for transport. Everyone went hungry, the old starved and the children grew lean.

But even the Bolskars cannot stop Harvest Woman.

Each autumn, without much help from us it seems, the black soil of Resenka gives birth to a rich gathering of good things. We prepare Harvest Woman's children to sustain us when the Snow Princess will once again seize our planet. Even the War of Vengeance had to be stopped long enough to prepare for winter – the Bolskars and the Chekart may have been stupid, but they were not fools. No harvest. No Resenka.

Harvest Woman cannot delay the Snow Princess for very long. Leaves magically turned from green to red, yellow and gold and then to brown, falling from the trees as Harvest Woman's tears. The bare branches creak in the wind like the old,

dying creature Harvest Woman has become. And winter's icy breath blows the dead leaves through the streets of our cities and into the Wikfa.

At first, Snow Princess is welcomed as we play in her soft white blanket. Every year we forget how cruel she can be. Every year she soon restores our memory. But always we wait, because we know Flower Girl will come again. If the cruel Resenka winters cannot destroy our hope, then neither can the Bolskars. Just as Flower Girl will rescue us again from the Snow Princess, so some day we shall all be free. Even though that day will come too late for me, I watch for it with the same excitement with which every one on Resenka watches for the morning of Flower Girl's return.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Captain's Log: Stardate 5910.4

On Old Earth in the late 1860's, a writer named Bret Harte wrote a novel called, *The Outcasts of Poker Flat*. A few years ago I was able to locate an original copy. The old acid-filled printing paper had yellowed with the passing of the centuries and was threatening to crumble into dust. Fortunately, I was able to locate a restorer of antiques who returned the volume to near original condition.

Reviewing our current situation, I am reminded of a line from that book:

“Beneath this tree lies the body of John Oakhurst, who struck a streak of bad luck on the 23rd of November, 1850, and handed in his checks on the 7th of December, 1850.”

Ensign K'Yle and I have certainly struck a streak of bad luck. We have survived capture and torture at the hands of an alien race who call themselves the Vargons. Mr. K'Yle has effected repairs to our shuttlecraft and thanks to his ability to assume the shape of other beings and objects, we have escaped from their starship, the *Repelator*. Unlike John Oakhurst from Poker Flat, we are not ready to hand in our checks.

As Captain of the *U.S.S. Enterprise*, I hereby recommend Ensign Berek and Ensign Jackson Shelton for the Star Fleet Award of Valor. They died in the line of duty.

Our limited shuttlecraft control capabilities means we have not been able to established a synchronous orbit above what we now know to be the fourth planet in the

Alcyone star system. We are attempting to maintain a position within the shadow side of the terminator which will keep the planet between us and the Vargons.

This is one of two Class M planets within reach of our consumables. The other seems to be the Vargon's home world. We will stay here until we can complete Mr. K'Yle's repairs.

The *Newton* does not have warp capabilities, so we must get our communications systems back on line and signal Mr. Spock and the *Enterprise* – otherwise it will be a very long time until we reach home. Also our inertial navigation system is down, and while we can navigate by dead reckoning, I would prefer something a little more sophisticated. Mr. Spock once called such primitive efforts “stone knives and bear skins.” I wonder what he would think of our progress so far.

* * * * *

“What was that!” James Kirk asked as a sudden thrust by the *Isaac Newton's* engines caused him to stumble and fall to the deck.

“Captain, I believe we have a problem,” Ensign K'Yle said.

“With your capacity for understatement, Mr. K'Yle, I almost believe you Antosians are related to the Vulcans,” the Captain said as he pulled himself to his feet. He tugged at his uniform shirt to straighten it and continued, more to himself than to his crewman, “With all of the Federation's advanced technology, you'd think they would create a device which would keep us from being tossed out of our chairs every time we have an emergency.”

“Sir, in the antique petroleum-powered, combustion engine vehicles from your planet’s past, those devices were called ‘seat belts,’” K’Yle said.

“What would you call our sudden acceleration, Mr. K’Yle?” Kirk said with just a trace of annoyance.

“I would call it ‘unfortunate,’ Captain. Impulse power has failed. Our so-far unexplained increase in velocity has altered the shape of our orbit. We will pass the terminator in 41.483 minutes, unless we can affect the inertia of our vessel.”

“That means in about forty minutes we will be visible to the *Repelator*,” Kirk said, raising his index finger and pointing it at the Antosian in a threatening manner. His gesture meant that he felt his time estimate to be close enough. He did not need their possible discovery calculated to three decimal places. Ensign K’Yle understood the signal.

“That is correct, sir.”

“Use lateral thrusters on the starboard aft side to turn this ship perpendicular to our present angle of movement. Then fire both the port-side forward and aft maneuvering thrusters simultaneously. They may not be powerful enough to stop our momentum, but they should slow us down and buy us some more time,” Kirk ordered as he dropped to his knees and removed an access panel beneath the forward console.

“Firing thrusters, sir,” K’Yle replied.

The Ensign calculated the rate of change in their acceleration and announced, “Captain, we have ‘bought’ an additional 18 minutes, but our forward progress has not been stopped.”

“Understood, Ensign. I am changing the positioning of the impulse flow regulators. By altering the duomagnetic flux core I hope to be able to restart the engines. Monitor the D-14 grid and warn me if the sensors show an increase in proton emissions.”

“Monitoring, sir,” K’Yle answered precisely, “but there is an additional problem.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Kirk said. “Mr. K’Yle, the Admiralty could revise the *Kobayashi Maru* scenario by using the events of our little training cruise. What now? Orbital decay?”

“Exactly, sir. As you know we were not able to assume a standard orbit of 36,357 kilometers above the planet’s surface. Without a synchronous orbit we began to decelerate towards the planet. Our altered trajectory has caused our flight path to assume an elliptical orbit with an apogee of 241.545 kilometers and a perigee of only 144.927 kilometers. We cannot maintain orbit for more than two revolutions.”

“Do we have engine and thruster capability for a controlled landing?” Kirk asked.

“That will depend upon your current repair efforts, Captain.”

Kirk muttered a curse he learned from Ben Childress, one of the lithium miners on Rigel XII, and then said, “Well, we have about an hour. Mr. K’Yle, it is going to be a very long day.”

“It has already been one, Captain,” K’Yle answered solemnly.

* * * * *

Jim Kirk wiped sweat on the sleeve of his uniform, replaced the forward access panel and walked to the aft engineering compartment. He watched the readouts for a

time, made one adjustment and smiled with satisfaction. He had been able to generate impulse engine power to 37 percent of normal. It was not enough to maintain orbit, but it would allow them to make a controlled landing on the planet.

Ensign K'Yle calculated a landing trajectory which, although it would use up most of their energy, would allow them to stay hidden for almost their entire descent. There was a window of slightly less than two minutes when they would be visible to any scanners pointed in their direction. Once they dropped into the atmosphere, they were counting on the planet's natural magnetic resonance to give them additional cover.

In order to descend with stealth, they would not be able to predetermine a landing site. They were aiming for a green spot on the southern part of the planet's single land mass. Without environmental suits, they could not survive in the north which was dominated by severe winter conditions.

"Captain, outer hull temperature is now 2000 degrees."

"Our angle of descent is too steep. Compensating. Mr. K'Yle, we will complete entry into the planet's atmosphere in less than two minutes. I will need a landing site as soon after that as you can locate one."

"Understood, Captain. I will endeavor to do my best."

"Your best, kid," the Captain thought, "will do just fine." He watched the faint red glow around the *Isaac Newton* and adjusted his angle of descent. Under normal conditions, with full impulse power available for landing, such a fine trim would have been unnecessary. But with the care required because of damage to their ship, Kirk

was reminded of Earth's early manned space missions. A fiery reentry was a signature of those days.

"We are flying free, Mr. K'Yle," the Captain said with obvious relief. "Please input coordinates for landing into the computer."

"Course is laid in, sir."

Jim Kirk stretched his shoulders and breathed deeply. Just a few more minutes of good luck, he thought, and we will be on the ground.

"We are picking up slight turbulence, Mr. K'Yle. Because of the severe winter conditions which cover most of the continental land mass, it will probably get worse on the way down."

"Sir, we do not have enough power to fight a significant increase in atmospheric turbulence and still reach our projected landing site safely."

"Murphy's Law, Mr. K'Yle," the Captain said.

"Sir?"

"An old earth axiom, Ensign. It said, 'If anything can go wrong it will. If several things can go wrong, the worst one will, and at the worst possible time.'"

"Mr. Murphy was not very optimistic, Captain."

"That was the point of his hypothesis."

Kirk made still another adjustment to his flight controls as the buffeting increased. A red warning light flashed on, indicating main power reserves had just dropped under twenty percent. Although it would mean they would land in an area swept by the planet's winter storms, the Captain decided to fly with the wind patterns

rather than fight them. A safe landing on emergency battery power might be possible, but it was not a risk he wished to take.

“Captain, readings indicate our new course will take us close to a large population center,” Ensign K’Yle reported. “Pollution content of the atmosphere indicates they rate a four on the Scale of Industrial Evolution – Earth equivalent, mid-20th century. Unless the Vargons have been here, I doubt that these people have ever seen an off-worlder or a space craft.”

“From what we know about the Vargons, I would bet my last credit that these people have seen both,” Kirk said. “But I will keep the warning in mind. Mr. K’Yle, do you see a place we can set down and maintain a degree of concealment?”

“The city is bounded by large forested areas on its eastern and southern sides,” K’Yle replied. “The topography to the east shows a region of increased elevation and at least one underground cavern. There is a clearing in the vicinity of the cavern where it should be possible to land. However, weather conditions at the site will make visual flight rules impossible.”

“Instruments it is,” the Captain said. “I told you Murphy was right.”

“Evidently so, sir,” K’Yle answered.

Jim Kirk would have preferred the luxury of scouting the site before landing. Weather conditions and power consumption made that impossible. Because of the severity of the winter storm in the landing area, there was a good chance that their descent would not be seen by anyone on the ground. That, at least, was in their favor.

“Call it out to me, Mr. K’Yle,” Kirk ordered as he brought the *Isaac Newton* in on final approach.

“Thirty seconds, sir,” K’Yle began. “Three and one-half down. Nine forward. Five percent. Forty feet down. Two and one-half. Picking up swirling snow. Site looks good. Down one-half. Four forward. Drifting to the right. Contact light. We are down.”

Unlike the bridge of the *Enterprise*, the instruments and sensors on the *Newton* made no sounds. Inside the tiny craft its two occupants heard only the sounds of their own breathing, and outside, the howling of intense, brutal winter winds.

* * * * *

Organ Moss-Kuib stepped out of the turbolift and onto the bridge of the *Repelator*. He was in rare good humor, a fact which his bridge crew sensed immediately and breathed a collective sigh of relief.

“If I were a computer,” Moss-Kuib thought, “the combination of the Proklinat and Myahkee would have overloaded my circuits and caused my memory banks to have crashed. But I am not a computer. I am a Vargon and a warrior. Strong drink and soft women are the rewards of such Vargons.”

“Organ, we have passed Resenka and are in standard orbit around Vargon. I await your orders for approach to Battle Dock,” the helmsman reported.

“Decrease speed for intersection with the Battle Dock. Trailing angle on the view screen,” Moss-Kuib ordered as he stepped onto the pedestal which supported his command chair, and settled himself to watch the approach.

If the *Repelator* had stayed in standard planetary orbit, sensors would not have recorded a small blip passing out of the terminator on Resenka and into the side lit by Adzeva. But by changing their orbital path, an unexpected object was picked up by ship's scanners, automatically causing an alarm to sound.

In his stomach, Security Chief Aireb was still shaking with his brush with death earlier in the Organ's quarters. Outwardly, his voice was calm and proficient. "Organ," he said, "we have picked up an object in orbit around Resenka."

"Magnify," Moss-Kuib ordered.

"We are too far away to see it sir, but," Aireb paused as an involuntary shudder went through his body, "the computer has identified it as the Earther's vessel."

Moss-Kuib spun his chair to face the security station.

"So, Aireb, what your underlings earlier identified as debris from their exploding vessel was obviously a deception. Our Sovereign may yet see the Earth Man die," the Vargon commander said with obvious satisfaction.

"Helmsman," Aireb barked, "Lock all scanners on the Earther's ship. If you lose them, you will immediately regret your error."

"Scanners locked, sir," the helmsman said. "It is on a trajectory to land in the southern quadrant of Resenka."

"Your orders, Organ?" Aireb asked.

"Fix their position and continue our final approach. As soon as we are berthed, outfit an interplanetary ship for launch to Resenka. The southern quadrant is open

territory. It will make locating the Earth Man and his confederate a simple task for you, Aireb.”

Suddenly, Aireb did not trust his voice. He nodded gravely.

“Fail me, Aireb,” Moss-Kuib said in a threatening whisper, “and you will join your late assistant, Yakub, in Nakazitvat.”

Because Resenka is covered six months by the Snow Princess' frosty breath, we have learned to grow things indoors. Probably the least practical, but the most prized of our unseasonable plants are flowers. Flowers are a sign that spring is overcoming winter's icy grip. The flowers which we grow indoors are promises of that coming end. That is why when you enter a Resenka's home in the winter time, you will find at least one bowl filled with flowers.

No matter which home you enter on our world, whether it is the mansion of the Pol, the simple wooden construction of a peasant, or the towering gray buildings the Bolskars have herded us into, you will step into a hallway. This is so that winter's snow, spring's mud, summer's dust, and autumn's leaves will not follow us into the rest of the dwelling.

Because of those uninvited visitors it has become tradition to remove your shoes upon entering and be handed a pair of slippers to wear during your visit. The slippers are kept in a cubicle just to the right of the door. On top of the cubicle there is always a chasha-vaza in which to place the flowers.

Before Anatorr came into my life, I would buy flowers at the market or pick them from my yard in summertime and just drop them into the chasha-vaza. There was no artistic sense or fashion.

After Anatorr, my house was filled with flowers, arranged as though Resenka's most gifted painter had prepared his most exceptional canvas. If they had been notes on a musical score, they would have composed a symphony.

Perhaps love's memory causes me to describe those arrangements with words which are too fine. But I remember the first day I came home to find my house filled with flowers and although those bouquets soon faded, nothing can cause that memory to pale.

I remember my great disappointment when Anatorr announced that he was leaving work early that day. When I gave him a look which asked, "Why?" he did not reply. He merely asked Mitork to lock up and said, "I will see you all tomorrow."

I arrived home not a little angry, feeling his sudden and unexplained departure had cheated me out of a few hours of his presence. Because we could not be together constantly, we packed more into a few moments than most people put into days. The time we spent together was my life, as precious to me as my breath. Our time alone was more precious than all of the dzhhunk on Resenka. And he had withdrawn without explanation.

The darkness which the Snow Princess had cast over Zenyuk that wintery evening was nothing when compared with my mood. I guess my face showed my inner feelings, because as I walked home, people stepped out of my way.

I unlocked the front door, stepped inside and pushed the door closed behind me, hearing the lock automatically slide home. Without turning on the hall light I hung up

my coat and shook my boots into the corner. Then I turned and walked across the cold floor to the cubicle where my slippers were waiting.

It was then that I noticed a soft, sweet smell, the smell of Jassica on a spring day. At first I thought it was only my perfume, because the buds of the Jassica plant are made into an expensive bottled fragrance. Anatorr purchased my first bottle of it as a gift on our initial visit to Ingal-Karbe. When I switched on the lights I saw my chasha-vaza filled with pale yellow Jassica blooms, each one softer than the next.

Squealing with delight, I rushed into the living room and flicked on the lights, hoping to find my Beloved waiting for me in the darkness. Anatorr was not there, but across the room, the ledge in front of the window was covered with tiny green needles from the Always Tree. The heat in my flat caused tiny beads of sap to ooze from the ends of each needle, emanating a woody smell. It was like walking in the forest on a warm summer's evening.

I turned and walked on silent feet down the hall to the cooking and eating room. He had to be waiting there. He was not, but in the center of the table was a tall and narrow chasha-vaza which held three exquisite deep red Posys. All of the green leaves had been snipped off, except for two under each blossom which cradled it like a mother holding her newborn. The prickly thorns were all cloaked inside the clear glass.

I opened the door to the bath and found a drinking glass sitting on the basin. It contained a single Posy bloom, the largest I had ever seen. This one was not the traditional red, it was as white as the Snow Princess' gown.

Smiling with absolute delight, I walked back down the hall to my bedroom. On my nightstand was an short, delicately etched crystal chasha-vaza which I had never seen before. Tiny pink flowers of a kind I did not know peeked out of the top of the chasha and circled its lip. Standing tall and proud from their center were lavender Finger Flowers.

A single folded sheet of paper rested underneath this last arrangement. My name was printed on the outside in Anatorr's bold hand. Inside he had written, "As these blooms fade let them tell you that my love for you will never pale."

And then he knocked at the front door.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

First Officer's Log: Stardate 5910.4

The last data which we received from our Warp Probes has indicated the presence of two Class M planets within the Alycone system. Alycone IV appears to be a primitive world, while Alycone III seems to be highly advanced. Although the telemetry is incomplete, all department heads are in agreement that the Captain's captors are from Alycone III.

It will delay our arrival slightly, but I have decided to alter course and ingress from a non-standard angle, entering the Alycone system from the direction of the farthest planet.

Doctor McCoy described it as "coming in from down wind."

When I informed him that there was no wind in the vacuum of space, at least not atmospheric wind, he did not seem to appreciate the correction in his knowledge of meteorology. Nevertheless, his quaint imagery is correct – I have chosen an approach which I believe will keep us hidden from their scans. I believe this will give us our best opportunity to rescue Captain Kirk and his shipmates.

* * * * *

The wail of the alarm klaxon shattered the muted sounds of the bridge of the *U.S.S. Enterprise*. Instantly Lieutenant Uhura toggled a switch on her communications board and spoke with a calm that was in sharp contrast to the sharp howl of the alarm.

"Red alert! All hands, red alert. This is not a drill! Mr. Spock, to the bridge."

“Could you switch that banshee off, Miss Uhura?” Montgomery Scott asked from the command chair. “I think it has everyone’s attention by now.”

A communications channel chirped, followed by the Vulcan’s voice.

“Spock here. What is the emergency, Lieutenant Uhura?”

“A Romulan warbird has decloaked 100,000 kilometers off our bow, sir.”

“Acknowledged. Mr. Scott, arm all weapons systems and set for full intensity. Ask the Doctor to join us. I am on my way. Spock out.”

Less than a minute later, Spock and McCoy stepped out of the turbolift together.

Leonard McCoy looked at the viewscreen and demanded, “What is a Romulan warbird doing way out here?”

“Let us endeavor to discover the answer, Doctor. Open standard hailing frequencies, Lieutenant.”

“Hailing frequencies open, Mr. Spock,” Uhura said.

“This is Commander Spock in temporary command of the *United Federation Starship Enterprise*. Romulan commander, you will identify yourself and explain your position in Federation territory.”

“Federation territory?” McCoy asked, his voice almost a whisper. “You know we are the first Federation ship to be out here.”

“And as with the explorers of Old Earth, does our presence here not constitute a claim to this sector of space?” Spock answered.

Before McCoy could reply, the star field dissolved on the viewscreen, to be replaced by the face of the Romulan commander. The crew of the *Enterprise* had

made their initial contact with the Romulans during the first year of the current five year mission when four Federation outposts were attacked and destroyed along the Neutral Zone. Two years later, Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock had engineered the theft of a Romulan cloaking device and accidentally abducted the Romulan commander. Three years after it became common knowledge that the Vulcans and the Romulans were “distant cousins” it was still disconcerting to the bridge crew to see a face that so mirrored that of their First Officer as to be uncanny.

“Spock,” McCoy whispered, “it’s like looking up your family tree.”

“You are thinking of your own ancient history, Doctor. On Vulcan, families did not live in trees.”

Any retort the Doctor was about to make was lost when the Romulan commander said, “This is Commander Koba of the Praetor’s Flagship *Black Inferno*. And it is you who are in violation of Romulan space. Secure from light speed and prepare to be boarded. Hesitate and you will be destroyed.”

The Romulan made a swift gesture with his hand and his image faded from the *Enterprise’s* view screen.

Standing at the science station, Ensign Pavel Chekov broke the silence.

“Mr. Spock, another Romulan warbird has decloaked 50,000 kilometers to our stern.”

* * * * *

James Kirk toggled off the *Isaac Newton’s* landing lights and the interior cabin lights. Only the soft glow of his pilot’s console disturbed the blackness of the planet’s

night. Only the shuttlecraft's thin hull protected Kirk and K'Yle from the winter storm swirling outside.

"Captain," Ensign K'Yle said, breaking the silence, "our power reserves are now under ten percent. We have sufficient energy to maintain life support for one Standard day, less, if the intensity of the storm increases."

"Can you drain the Vargon phaser we 'appropriated' and boost our reserves, Mr. K'Yle?" Kirk asked.

K'Yle retrieved the weapon from the equipment locker and switched on a tricorder. A few seconds later he said, "It is a standard phased energy relay, Captain. I can adapt it."

"Begin at once, Ensign, and tell me as soon as we have enough power to maneuver. I want to hide the *Newton* inside that cave our instruments spotted on the way down."

"Safety margin, Captain?"

"Survival standard, Ensign."

* * * * *

From the time he could first hold the tools, Obolen followed his father as a worker with wood. It pleased him to look at a naked piece of lumber and see an object trapped inside, waiting for his touch to release it. Even as more and more the Bolskar factories mass produced things once made only by master craftsmen, Obolen's skilled hands kept him busy supplying the objects clumsy machines could not. The Directors in the government sent their underlings secretly to Obolen and his brother, Gernet. The

pieces they purchased for as few elburs as possible, quickly became prized treasure in Bolskar circles.

Obolen brushed wood shavings and chips from his trousers, laid down his tools, stretched and stood up. With practiced ease he struck a match and relit his smoking pipe. Feeling a stiffness in his muscles, he crossed the room to the windows which faced the forest. For a long time he remained silent, looking out of the window of his small house on the outskirts of Zenyuk. Such a wind, he thought. The Snow Princess is angry with us tonight.

Obolen drew the collar of his bulky winter sweater tight around his neck and shivered. It was not the wind which caused tremors to ripple through his body. He was warm enough inside the wooden house his grandfather's grandfather had built. Several years ago, he had been able to convince the Pol to run the city's central heating system to the 192 homes in the old district east of Zenyuk.

As the massive apartment buildings the Bolskars erected spread like a malignant cancer, the old homes were simply plowed down and burned. It appeared for a time that Obolen and his neighbors also would be forced from their ancestral dwellings. Then the Pol inexplicably stopped building to the east and grew his city southward to the River Zenyuk. Two years after the construction cranes had been removed, the ground was dug up and the heating system spread like a spider's web into their small living zone.

No, it was not the cold which chilled his tall, muscular frame. It was his memory. It was a night not unlike this one when he had received the word that Anatorr was dead.

It was exactly twenty years ago tonight that Elena had died in the woods where his gaze was now focused. Many of his friends had died on nights like this. Countless thousands and tens of thousands he had never known and whose names he would never know had died on nights like this – any night it seemed, was a good night to die at the hands of the Bolskars. Other deaths had moved him, but had not touched him deep inside, like those two deaths had touched him.

Anatorr had perished by a single bullet fired into the back of his brain as he knelt in the snow. Only his executioner had witnessed his death. Almost everyone in the village was forced to watch as Elena was murdered, so great was the wrath of the ExComm against her. When they finally ended her suffering, her death wail seemed as if it had been ripped from the soul of Resenka itself. Now when the wind blew through the Always Trees it sounded to Obolen as if Elena was screaming again and again.

“The Vargons appear to have developed a new landing craft, brother,” Obolen said.

Gernet moved quickly to the window as Obolen pointed into the darkness. The two men had been born from the union of the same man and the same woman, but they could not have been more different. Strangers often expressed surprise when told that they were brothers. Gernet was half a head shorter than his older brother, but no less trim. Obolen’s once thick brown hair was now mostly gray and thinning while Gernet’s was still jet black and dense with waves. Obolen had a face no one remembered, Gernet had the handsome appearance which caused everyone to be

attracted to him, especially the beautiful women of Zenyuk. Obolen could quietly disappear in a crowd, Gernet was almost never alone.

“That is not a Vargon craft, Ob,” Gernet said as he stood beside his brother. “They would never build such a thing with simple, flowing lines. Everything they construct looks like a blood-maddened Soracktor poised to strike its long fangs into its victim’s heart. No, Brother, an artist built that one. If it were made of wood, I would say we crafted it.”

“Then whose vessel is it?” Obolen asked. “Surely not the Bolskars.”

“I do not know,” Gernet said slowly, “but the Others will definitely want to know about this.”

“Let’s get our coats and see if we can find it. We should be safe enough. No one would be out on a night like this but a fool or an ExComm,” Obolen said.

“A fool or an ExComm? That is redundant, Brother,” Gernet laughed. “No, not even an ExComm is out tonight. They are all inside a building somewhere lounging in front of a roaring fire, drinking very old kvasale and caressing very young women.”

“Soft and plump, Brother?”

“Soft and plump. Definitely not the stick figures that you seem drawn to, Brother.”

It was an old argument, and one which brought them both pleasure, these two men who were brothers and because of what they had survived together and because they needed each other’s strength in order to survive, closer than brothers.

When Obolen opened the rear door of their house and stepped outside, the howling wind suddenly grew quiet. Maybe Elena will be able to rest tonight, he thought. As if he were reading his brother's mind, Gernet gently laid his hand on Obolen's shoulder. After a few seconds he said, "She is at peace, Ob. Quickly now, before the Snow Princess freezes us, let's see if we can find that ship."

The brothers silently moved off in the direction they had watched the strange craft descend, into the great forest of the Always Trees.

* * * * *

The *Isaac Newton* was completely covered with snow. The skin of the small Federation shuttlecraft had cooled to the touch almost immediately once the atmospheric friction had ceased. As the exterior cooled, snow began to lay on it, gradually covering the ship. Atmospheric conditions were so cold that even the area around the base of the ship where snow melting had occurred was now once again covered with the deadly white blanket. To an outside observer, there was no alien craft present, simply a large snow-covered mound.

Inside the *Isaac Newton* James T. Kirk monitored energy readings as Bakor K'Yle drained the Vargon phaser, boosting their nearly diminished energy supplies. Ensign K'Yle's earlier confidence that the alien weapon could easily be adapted was unshaken, even though the actual work was more difficult than he had projected. A slight difference in the amplification frequency forced K'Yle to proceed slowly, taxing the Captain's patience. There was, Jim Kirk, knew, no other way. The recognition of that fact did not make the waiting any easier.

While K'Yle worked, Kirk surveyed their consumables. The shuttlecraft carried everything in multiples of seven, based on its maximum crew compliment. The standard food rations were stocked for a two week period, so there was no immediate threat of starvation. Water purifying equipment would provide liquid sustenance. The fare was not elaborate, but it was adequate for sustaining their lives.

There were seven communicators, seven hand lamps, an extra tricorder and five empty phasers. An emergency medical kit included a medical tricorder, a hypospray with several common use drug ampules, various bandages, a hand-held bone regenerator and a portable sterile-field generator. Their single weapon was the remaining phaser which K'Yle had jury-rigged while they were still on board the *Repelator* and it had only enough energy for three full-power discharges.

The equipment locker was not prepared for arctic conditions. Seven standard issue field jackets and two maintenance jump suits constituted the entire supply of all-weather clothing. Because the field jackets were stocked in two different sizes, Jim set about removing the sleeves from two of the smaller jackets and stripping off equipment pockets. He fashioned two vests to be worn underneath the larger jackets. From the discarded sleeves he made mittens – they were not moisture repellent, but they would be warm.

He stripped the lining from the remaining three field jackets and made a crude type of long underwear to add as a layer of insulation under their uniform trousers. There was enough material to give them an extra pair of socks for changing, but the standard issue boots which they wore would not accommodate two pair at the same

time. A garment for their heads was constructed from the extra sleeves. We won't win any fashion contests, Jim smiled to himself, but these fabrications will help us to survive. And I haven't come this far to admit to any defeat.

"Mr. K'Yle," the Captain asked, "what is your race's reaction to these weather conditions?"

"I am susceptible to the debilitating effects of extreme cold, Captain, just like you," K'Yle answered. "However, because of our transmorph capabilities, Antosians do have the ability to hibernate for a brief period of time. That may be of value in these winter conditions."

"I hope it doesn't come to that, Ensign. That would mean that we only had consumables sufficient to sustain the life of one of us. Not a very pleasant picture," Kirk said.

K'Yle nodded in agreement as he continued to work. Finally, he straightened up and said, "We can maneuver now, sir. There is enough power to reach planetary orbit when you are ready to do so. When gravity begins to pull us down, there will not be enough in reserves to combat the drag for very long. We do not have sufficient power to achieve escape velocity."

"In that case, Ensign, we are just going to have to devise a way to let Mr. Spock know where we are. This time the mountain will have to come to Mohammed. For now, let's put this thing in the garage. Bring up the interior lights to one-fourth capacity and set me a course to that cave we recorded on our descent, Mr. K'Yle," Kirk said.

"Course is laid in, Captain. Maneuvering thrusters at your command."

The *Isaac Newton* seemed to shudder as it rose into the night wind. The ship's movement caused the feathery blanket of snow to slide away from the forward view screen. The only sound was the howling of the wind.

In the clearing off to the port side of the shuttlecraft, Obolen and Gernet watched in amazement as a pile of snow began to rise into the air. As Captain Kirk angled the *Newton* for its brief flight to the cave, they could see into the ship's interior and saw the faces of the human and the Antosian in the dim light.

"That is definitely not a Vargon craft, Brother," Obolen said.

"Nor are those men Vargons," Gernet replied.