

*I have written earlier in these pages that Anatorr and I were strangely drawn to the serkor, the places of worship. I have also written of the day we took refuge from a rain storm in a serkor which had been abandoned. That was the first time we went inside of one together. It was not the last.*

*The legends of Resenka tell us that Aldan and Elissa built the first serkor not long after the Holy Ones had created them. That is what we read in The Words and no one can offer any convincing disproof – although the Bolskars certainly have tried. However it happened, our devotion to the Holy Ones and the building of serkor precedes our written history.*

*When the Bolskars emerged victorious from the War of Vengeance, they began a subtle movement against our involvement in all religious activities. They began by suggesting that our deliverance from the Chekart was accomplished through their skill, and not our devotion to an ancient religion. Their subtlety did not last very long. They began by suggesting that worship was foolish and progressed, by stages, to ruthless persecution. Gradually a saying developed on Resenka: “You can pray freely, but just so the Holy Ones alone can hear.”*

*A subdepartment of the ExComm was established just to deal with “the religion problem.” The “Committee for Counterrevolutionary Examination” spearheaded a wave of terror first against the Keepers and then against their flocks. In every village, town*

*and city there were arrests, mock trials and imprisonments. At first the CCE executed Keepers, but eventually they learned that a dead Keeper was harder to fight than one who was simply locked away in a yachenka where he could be forgotten.*

*In all of the thousands of arrests and trials, no one was ever charged for keeping faith in the Holy Ones. If there was a charge brought against an individual's religious beliefs at all, it was for spreading them. Personal worship was allowed. Proselyting was not – and the ban extended to instructing one's own children in The Words (that was called spreading propaganda against the Bolskars) or inviting a non-believer to attend the serkor (that was simply called sedition).*

*Although Elissa was created second by the Holy Ones, she was first in devotion to Them. Maybe it has something to do with the mothering instinct, but women on our world have always taken an active, nurturing role at the serkor. Not many women wanted to become Shepherdesses, but it was the women who most strongly maintained their devotion and who suffered the most for that piety.*

*One story from those dark days is of two groups of women who were arrested, tried and sentenced – all on the same day. One group was composed entirely of prostituka, women who gave themselves to men for money. The rest were Shepherdesses, women who gave themselves to the Holy Ones for love. Both groups were put on the same prison wagons and sent to the same yachenka.*

*At the yachenka, the tukies were allowed to continue the practice of their trade – in fact, whoring was their only duty, a duty for which they continued to receive pay! The*

*hardest labor, the most degrading jobs, the most horrible disciplines were reserved for the Shepherdesses. After three years the tukies went back to their homes with bags full of elbur. After three additional years the Shepherdesses were released, but they were forbidden to return to their homes, their husbands or their children.*

*For reasons which were never explained – maybe the Bolskars simply grew tired of harassing the serkor – ridicule replaced overt persecution. Still, not many people ever entered the serkor and even fewer studied *The Words*. On those rare occasions when we were able to go to Ingal-Karbe together Anatorr and I always went to serkor. I do not know if we ever met the Holy Ones at serkor. If we did not, that is our fault, not *Theirs*. But it was there that we met and joined “*The Others*,” the underground resistance, organized to overthrow the Bolskars.*

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Mr. Spock, the Romulan ship ahead has launched a spread of photon torpedoes,” Ensign Chekov reported.

“Time to impact?” Spock asked.

“Twenty-seven seconds at present speed,” Lieutenant Sulu replied.

“Not very subtle are they,” McCoy said.

“Subtlety is a Vulcan trait, Doctor. Evidently our Romulan cousins left more than logic behind when they separated from us,” Spock said.

What had been a rescue mission only moments earlier, now became a battle for survival. It was obvious that the commanders of the two Romulan Warbirds were confident of victory over the Enterprise. They did not bother to recloak.

“Twenty seconds,” Sulu reported.

“Position of the following ship, Mr. Chekov?” Spock asked.

“There is no change in their course, sair. Their wessel weel overtake us in forty-two seconds,” the Russian answered.

“But we will have been blow to bits by their friend’s torpedoes unless we change course soon,” Doctor McCoy said. There was no evidence of banter in his voice now.

“It appears that battle has been forced upon us,” Spock said. “Very well. Mr. Chekov, program a full spread of our own torpedoes. Mr. Sulu, prepare for emergency deceleration from warp. Set course at nine zero mark seven, make your attitude Z-

minus 10,000. Mr. Scott, the engines will need your careful attention during such a maneuver – imbalance is almost certain.”

“Course is ninety mark seven. Impact in thirteen seconds, sir,” Sulu said.

“Mr. Chekov, launch aft torpedoes at nine seconds from Mr. Sulu’s mark. Mr. Sulu, decelerate to sublight two seconds after torpedoes are away,” the Vulcan ordered.

“That is cutting it pretty thin, Spock,” McCoy said.

“Once our warp field collapses we will immediately drop away from the area of the explosion. The ship following us will not have time to react,” Spock answered.

Lieutenant Uhura opened ship-wide channels, “All crew. Prepare for immediate deceleration from warp speed.”

Behind her, Sulu counted, “Four, three, two, one.”

“Torpedoes away,” Chekov announced.

“Going sublight,” Sulu said.

When Mr. Chekov launched photon torpedoes the *Enterprise* was traveling at faster than 152 million kilometers per second. By the time Sulu had completed his announcement, their speed had dropped to less than 300,000 kilometers per second. The laws of physics were faster than the ship’s computers and so the engine imbalance which Mr. Spock had predicted was unavoidable. Emergency dampeners activated as programmed. The matter-antimatter mix separated, but the flow regulators were not fast enough to compensate for the decrease in internal flux pressure, and the ship shuddered violently.

Pre-programmed life support controls responded to the emergency conditions and automatically began to increase shield strength. The shock wave generated by the explosion of two sets of photon torpedoes and one Romulan warbird reached the *Enterprise* as a force three impact. When the forward shields buckled, emergency protocol transferred power from port and starboard. The augmented configuration wavered, but held.

Standard bridge lighting dropped offline. Red emergency lights flickered on, then off and then stabilized. The forward view screen was black, as were the computer displays at the science station. Engineering and helm controls were functioning at near nominal standards. Exhaust blowers fought the acrid smoke of overloaded and burned out circuits. Because the artificial gravity gyros were out of calibration, the ship was listing two degrees down on the bow and five degrees to starboard.

Spock, Sulu and Chekov had somehow managed to stay in their seats. Dr. McCoy was able to wrap his arms around the bridge railing and brace himself against the sudden deceleration. Uhura and Scott were thrown to the deck. Spock quickly looked at each member of his bridge crew and pushed the intercom button on his command chair. "Emergency medical crew to the bridge. Bring an antigrav stretcher," he ordered.

"Thanks, Spock," McCoy said, then asked, "are you all right?"

"I am undamaged, Doctor. Miss Uhura and Mr. Scott do not appear to have been as fortunate," Spock replied.

"I'm fine," the chief engineer said, his attempt to mask his pain, not entirely successful. "It's just my arm. Probably broken."

"That's practicing without a license, Scotty," McCoy grouched. "Let me make that determination. You're an engineer, not a doctor!"

"Aye, Doctor, but what about the lass?" Scotty asked with obvious concern, moving to kneel beside Uhura.

The communications officer had not moved from where she had fallen during the ship's rapid deceleration from warp to normal space. Her right leg was twisted at an unusual angle and she was bleeding from a six centimeter long gash in the middle of her forehead.

McCoy checked Uhura quickly and then said, "That head wound looks worse than it is because of all of the blood vessels near the surface, but any time someone is knocked unconscious, there is additional danger of brain damage. I don't like the way this looks. Not one bit."

"That is not our only problem, Doctor McCoy," Sulu said from his navigator's position. "Sensors indicate that other Romulan ship is still out there and is closing on an intercept course. Since he is running without his cloaking device, he must believe that we are unable to either hurt him or to escape."

"Mr. Chekov, assist the Engineer," Spock ordered, moving quickly to the helm controls. "We need maneuvering capabilities and we need weapons."

"You can maneuver at impulse power now, Mr. Spock," Scotty replied with muted pride. "And phasers are at 93 percent."

“Mr. Sulu, can you target their engine room?” Spock asked.

“Based on the knowledge you and Captain Kirk gained when you ‘appropriated’ the Romulan cloaking device, I can adjust sensors for targeting,” Sulu replied.

“Do not use active scans, Mr. Sulu. If he indeed thinks we are incapacitated, we may be able to use that to our advantage,” Spock said. “Can you fire the phasers by manual control?”

“I can fire them, Mr. Spock. I’m just not sure what I’ll hit,” Sulu said.

“I have the utmost confidence in your abilities, Mr. Sulu.”

“The closer I let them come, the better chance I’ll have for a disabling shot.”

“Use your best judgment, Navigator.”

“Tracking, Mr. Spock. Ready. Now!”

Sulu’s fingers danced across his board and in response a concentrated burst of energy raced at the Romulan ship.

\* \* \* \* \*

Commander Koba was on a routine patrol near the Romulan-Federation neutral zone when he received word that a Federation starship was lurking four parsecs from the Home World. More than 12 light years distance was little reason for concern, particularly since the vessel was moving away from Romulan space. But when their highly placed spy at Star Base 17 risked his cover and his life to communicate by subspace radio that the ship was the *U.S.S. Enterprise*, Koba’s two ship squadron was detached at once.



The Praetor's government was still smarting from the humiliation caused by the loss of the cloaking device and the kidnaping of that ship's commander. In addition, the terms the Romulans had been forced to accept in order to get a peace agreement with the Klingons had placed them in a decidedly inferior position – one evidence of that was the fact that the stolen cloaking device had been onboard a Klingon battle cruiser instead of a Bird of Prey. If they could defeat James T. Kirk and his glorious starship, then the galaxy would once again be on more agreeable terms with the Romulan Empire.

Koba had vowed on the lives of his unborn grandchildren – a pledge which, by Romulan custom, included every living member of his family – that he would not fail the Praetor. When his trailing ship, the *Praetor's Rage*, disintegrated in a barrage of detonating photon torpedoes, he thought to himself, "It may be that I have foresworn my family into extinction." Then he saw the Enterprise down by the bow and listing to starboard and he felt his family reborn.

Koba had been surprised to see the face of a Vulcan fill his view screen. The eater of roots said he was in command of the vessel. By the Elements, where was Kirk? True, it would give him pleasure to bring the one called Spock to justice for his part in their humiliation, but he would dearly love to offer Kirk's screams as a sacrifice to the Praetor's honor.

The voice of his sub-commander intruded on Koba's reverie.

"Commander, sensors indicate that their warp engines are off line. Their defensive screens are down, power to them is totally compromised. They are drifting,

apparently out of control. Life-sign readings are indeterminate. Energy distortion from the explosions make it impossible to make a determination about their weapons capabilities, sir.”

“When we are within optimum range, reduce speed and bring all weapons batteries to bear on their main propulsion system,” Koba commanded.

As the *Black Inferno* bore down on the *Enterprise*, Koba ordered, “Boarding parties, stand ready at transmission points. Full personal weapons array. Capture any officers you see. Kill everyone else.”

“Shall I raise defensive screens, Commander?” the helmsman asked.

“Are you afraid of a crippled, toothless old woman?” Koba sneered. “Nothing will lessen this moment of the Praetor’s victory. Leave the screens down! Stand ready to fire!”

Latent energy discharges from the destruction of the *Praetor’s Rage*, gave an eerie light to the drifting Federation starship. They would be using targeting computers, of course, but the scene brought the *Enterprise’s* warp nacelles into sharp focus. “Not even a blind man could miss such a target,” the sub-commander thought.

Koba’s thoughts were more personal. “After this victory, I will be able to put my own name upon my Bird of Prey: *Koba’s Inferno*, the pride of the Empire.”

The sub-commander spoke: “We are penetrating the zone of interference. Full readings are available.”

He paused, then shouted, "Commander! Their weapons are on line! They are firing!"

Only if Hikaru Sulu had been shooting at a phaser-locked tracking disk, could he have been more accurate. Two phaser bursts, less than one second apart, detonated 40 meters aft of the Romulan bridge. The first struck the port nacelle causing an immediate shut down of warp power. The second penetrated the hull, two sections forward of engineering. The Bird of Prey moved silently forward, drifting out of control. Inertial dampers brought the crippled ship to a full stop. Then as emergency systems came on line, the cloaking device automatically activated and the *Black Inferno* disappeared.

\* \* \* \* \*

First Officer Spock walked with deliberation into sickbay and stood by the bedside of Nyota Uhura. He looked at the diagnostic panel above her head and studied the readings.

Doctor McCoy came out of his small office and stood beside the Vulcan.

"There is no brain damage, Mr. Spock," the doctor said without preamble. "She regained consciousness soon after we brought her here. I gave her a sedative to help her rest. After all of the centuries human doctors have been practicing medicine, sleep is still one of our most effective prescriptions. I just wish we could learn your Vulcan healing trance."

"I am afraid, Doctor, that learning how to perform the trance would be impossible. It is an ability with which we are born," Spock replied.

“Might have known,” McCoy muttered.

“Did you say something, Doctor?” Spock asked, a wry look crossing his otherwise stoic features.

Doctor Leonard McCoy considered several remarks about his friend’s ears and then resisted the temptation. Instead he said, “What happened to the Romulans?”

“Their cloaking device activated just seconds after Mr. Sulu’s phaser shots struck their ship. We received very few sensor readings after he fired, but they sustained significant damage. We must assume, however, that they are still out there.”

“Any idea why they were in the neighborhood, Spock?”

“There is no data available from which to even suggest a working hypothesis.”

“Then do you have any idea how long we are going to be stuck here?”

“Thanks to your bone regenerator, Mr. Scott’s arm is well and he is hard at work down in engineering. He says his ‘bairns’ will be repaired in another two hours. We are already underway at impulse power, back on our original course to locate Captain Kirk.”

“Do you think that the Romulans are working with whoever shanghaied Jim?”

“Speculation is pointless, Doctor. And although I discount the possibility, I simply do not know.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Commander Koba, the Federation starship is underway at impulse speed,” the Romulan sub-commander said.

“Order full impulse power and follow them,” Koba said, his voice a deadly whisper.

“Sir, when the emergency stabilizers activated the cloaking device we lost the ability for pursuit.”

“Then track them, Sub-commander. And pray to the Elements that you do not lose them.”

*A thick carpet of snow muffled the sounds of traffic in and around Elissa's Garden. In a few places, the dead stems of autumn's final flowers, which workers had neglected to pluck out of the ground, poked defiantly through the snow. As the wind chased the fluffy white flakes through the Garden, a scattering of scarlet Pod-Berries gave the only evidences of color to counter the stark white of the Snow Princess' blanket.*

*Before autumn's cool evenings faded into winter's chill, birds compete with each other for the tasty berries. When they received some secret, internal signal that the time of Harvest Woman was at an end, the birds begin to gather for their annual flight to the warmth of the south. First by ones and by twos, they perched on tree branches and on the tops of buildings. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, the flocks grow into thousands and tens of thousands. As they fly into the skies over Zenyuk they hide Adzeva's bright face from us. It is a warning that our star's face will be hidden often during the months ahead when winter seizes our world with fingers of ice.*

*Elissa's Garden was duplicated in every city on Resenka, but even the proud residents of Megin, our capital, were forced to admit that the one in Zenyuk was without equal anywhere on our planet. So old are the Gardens that no one knows, with any certainty, how they developed. They were probably a central area set aside as a common growing ground when people began to leave the wandering life of the woods*

*and gather into villages. Gradually they became parks where anyone could come for contemplation, discussion or simply for relaxation.*

*As villages grew into towns and cities the Garden area was preserved. By unwritten, universal consent Elissa's Garden was maintained as a monument to the Mother of us all, and by extension, to all of the mothers of Resenka. Perhaps it was because of the symbolism of motherhood that the Gardens became a refuge. Only foot traffic was allowed. No animal could be compelled to carry a burden through the Garden. Any individual, or any group, could speak to any person or crowd who would listen, about any subject, without fear of reprisal. No one was ever accosted, assaulted or arrested in the Garden – indeed, no policeman, or soldier could enter the Garden wearing his uniform. It was a place of sanctuary that, strangely, even the Bolskars respected.*

*If Elissa's Garden in Zenyuk was universally recognized as the most beautiful, Elissa's Garden in Ingal-Karbe was the most unusual. Every other Garden was an area, large or small, in the center of town, surrounded by buildings. In Ingal-Karbe, the Garden was a long, narrow strip which effectively separated the city into two sections. To allow for transport between the northern side and the southern side of the city, two large thoroughfares tunneled under the Garden (which began on the banks of the Wikfa River and spread east as often as the city grew). When builders sought more and more land, the Garden was also extended to the east. In this way Elissa's Garden was not only a place of growing things, but it was always a growing thing itself.*

*Even though it was winter, the Garden of Ingal-Karbe was filled with visitors as Anatorr and I stepped from the warmth of the Grand Theater into the cold of a growing darkness. We had managed one of our rare and special trips to the city to be alone and to hide ourselves. I had never seen a company of professional dancers before and Anatorr had surprised me with tickets for the first performance of the season.*

*Because he had been unable to secure seats close to the stage, we rented glazochkey glasses to bring the dancers closer to us. As a pledge that we would not steal the glasses, we had to leave our coats with an attendant. Although I would have welcomed the warmth of my coat in the old theater, those rented glasses entitled us to come to the head of the line when the performance was over. In that way we were able to be among the first to get our coats – because glasses or no glasses, everyone checked their coats – and leave the building.*

*We watched an old woman, dressed in black boots, layers of warm clothing, a scarf and a white apron, sweep the snow from the sidewalk. Her broom was a coarse hand-made thing constructed of twigs tied around a short branch. As she stooped to her work, I wondered if it was the length of the branch which caused her to bend over or if she had fashioned the handle to accommodate her stoop. Snow flew from the branches of her broom as if the flakes had been driven by the cold winter wind.*

*“There is a place near here,” Anatorr said, “where we can hire a horse and carriage. There is a reinsman named Tyree. He calls his horse ‘Ebony Enchantress.’*



*While we snuggle under a blanket, Tyree will take us through the old part of the city to a tavern which smells richly of wood smoke and warm kvasale."*

*"And how do you know this, my lover?" I asked. "Is it your habit to seduce young women and whisk them away to the city for carriage rides?"*

*Anatorr seemed almost embarrassed by my teasing remark, but when he saw me smile, he said, "Princess, you wound me deeply. I only discovered this possibility the last time Mitork and I came here to buy supplies for our store."*

*"What else did you discover?"*

*"Only that every moment I am away from you I dream constantly of the next time that we will be together."*

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The night wind began to blow once again through the *Always Trees* as the *Isaac Newton* lifted off. The timing of the two events coincided with such precision that it reminded Obolen of a great symphony conductor dropping his baton to begin a performance. The craft moved slowly but steadily away from its landing site.

“Do you think that this is an attack ship, Brother?” Obolen asked.

“Since its occupants are not Vargons, I doubt it. Our off-world benefactors have never given any of their technology to the Bolskars, so these may be new visitors to Resenka,” Gernet replied.

“If this vessel is not going to attack Zenyuk, then there is only one possible destination which makes sense,” Obolen said.

“Oracle Cave,” Gernet said, completing his brother’s thought.

“But if these beings are strangers, how do they know of its existence?” Obolen asked. “Half of the population of Zenyuk does not know the cave’s precise location.”

“We will simply have to ask them, Brother,” Gernet smiled, “if our speculation does not prevent us from pursuing them to their destination.”

Obolen nodded and the two men silently quickened their pursuit. The towering *Always Trees* and the smaller vegetation which grew between their trunks formed a natural snow fence causing a white mound to pile up at the windward side of the clearing. In the open space of the clearing, the snow was almost a meter deep, but

only a few feet behind the trees the men could walk easily through a thin layer of powder. By following that course, the brothers could stay hidden and also make good progress stalking the flying ship.

After a few minutes, Obolen spoke.

“Oracle Cave is only three kaalobars distance from here. I will cross the clearing and take a direct path to the cave. That way I can position myself to await their arrival. We will be able to approach our visitors from two directions. That will give us the benefit of surprise when we greet them.”

“Agreed,” Gernet replied, “and if they change course, I will follow them. Wait for me only long enough for my arrival at the cave. If the visitors and I do not appear, backtrack to this point and follow my trail. It will be easy to find me in the snow.”

“I will make a sign at the cave, so you will know where I am. Be careful, Brother.”

“You, too, Brother.”

When the brothers had moved inside the tree line, they had removed their snegs and strapped them on their backs. Out in the deep snow Obolen would need the webbed shoes to speed his progress, so he quickly laced them onto the bottom of his boots. Gernet watched as Obolen pushed over the snow bank and shuffled forward across the clearing. When Obolen reached the other side, he turned back and waved, then disappeared into the trees.

It had only been a few moments, but the silhouette of the small craft was now just a dim outline against the Always Trees ahead. Gernet turned and ran to catch up, then settled into a steady pace toward Oracle Cave.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Captain, sensor readings indicate that the cave which we are approaching may be the ideal hiding place while we prepare for our ascent into orbit,” Bakor K’Yle said. “The rocks generate a natural magnetic resonance which should make us invisible to long range scanners. Although the presence of the cavern can be seen on sensors, it is possible that even from a close planetary orbit, the Vargons will not be able to detect us.”

“That is good news, Ensign. A commodity which has been in short supply on this mission,” James Kirk answered.

“Agreed, sir. On both counts.”

Captain Kirk was flying the *Isaac Newton* only a few meters off of the ground and at a forward speed of two meters per second. The shuttlecraft was an excellent space vehicle, but it was not designed for acrobatic flying inside a planet’s atmosphere. The danger of swirling winter winds called for caution.

Kirk’s plan was for them to hide the *Newton*, eat and rest. They would need time to thoroughly check out their vessel before attempting to make planetary orbit. They also needed to fashion some type of long range signaling device to aid the Enterprise in its search for them. Perhaps, Kirk thought, “We can use the emergency recall signal which Scotty installed, if we can construct an antenna and boost the broadcast power beam.”

“Captain,” K’Yle said, breaking Kirk’s reverie, “we will reach the cave in thirty minutes if we maintain our present speed.”

“Very well, Ensign. Hold position here and let’s do a full sensor sweep.”

“Aye, aye, Sir.”

An overhead scan revealed only an empty sky. Kirk then set the scanner’s controls for a 360 degree lateral sweep. A fairly large life-form, human or humanoid was moving away from their position. If its present course was any indication, the being had not seen the shuttlecraft. The Captain watched as the receding figure vanished then reappeared on his screen. He was puzzled for a few seconds until he recalled the sensor disruptions associated with the cave they were now approaching.

“The same anomaly which can hide us, can also hide potential enemies,” Kirk said.

K’Yle nodded understanding.

When the *Isaac Newton* slowed and came to a standstill, Gernet had moved further into the woods and stopped, unknown to him, over a pile of rocks with the same magnetic signature as the cave. The rocks effectively hid him from detection. His brother was the only life-form the sensors could detect in the area.

“Mr. K’Yle, when we were in orbit, you said that atmospheric pollution content indicated a fairly advanced civilization and a large population center near our present position.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did you detect any possible power sources which we can adapt to our needs?”

“Captain, I must confess that I was not searching for that information, but I will do so now.”

“See if you can find something we can use, Mr. K’Yle. We are going to need more power than we have been able to drain from the phasers. I do not intend to make orbit, only to burn up a few hours later on re-entry. We have to give Mr. Spock a chance to find us.”

“There is an electrical generating plant on the opposite side of the city from us,” K’Yle said. “If we can locate some type of energy collectors we should be able to modify them for our needs. I have noted the plant’s position in our logs.”

“Well done, Mr. K’Yle. Now, let’s get inside, out of the cold.”

\* \* \* \* \*

From the woods, Gernet continued his pursuit. “These visitors are cautious,” he thought. “I will remember that.”

As he stepped over a fallen tree, Gernet’s foot encountered a patch of ice and he lost his balance. He instinctively threw out his arms to protect himself as he fell. The angle at which his left arm struck the ground and the weight of his falling body, put more pressure on the bones in his lower arm than they were created to withstand. The two bones broke, the larger, outside bone tore through the skin, blood pumping from the jagged wound. Gernet’s sleeve quickly turned red as blood gushed from the severed artery.

The pain caused him to cry out, but he instantly clenched his jaws shut, cutting off the sound. Fighting the pain, he used his good arm and pushed himself to a sitting position. He drew his legs up and sat on the log which had helped to trip him.

“I must stop the bleeding,” he whispered to himself.

Awkwardly, he reached across his body and into his left jacket pocket. He pulled out a folding knife, and using his teeth, opened a sharp blade. Next he slit his jacket sleeve from the elbow to just above the wrist, exposing the wound to the cold night air. The rapid temperature change was instantly painful, but soon the cold air brought numbing relief.

Gernet reversed the blade and enlarged the cut in the sleeve upward towards his shoulder. He closed the knife against his leg and dropped it into his pocket. Then he took off his belt and wrapped it around his injured arm, slipping the free end through the buckle and drawing it tight. The improvised tourniquet stopped the bleeding.

He cradled his broken left arm in his right, using his good arm as a sling. With his right hand, he pulled his jacket sleeve together at the elbow. Gernet took a deep breath and stood up to continue following the alien ship, but by now it was out of sight. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he set to rendezvous with his brother.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was called Oracle Cave because here was where the great Resenka historian, Denikin, had made his home centuries before. Denikin had been called “an oracle of the people,” since he was an oral historian, speaking the history of the planet in traditional gatherings. He was not the first man on Resenka to memorize and rehearse the

planet's history. But because of his enormous mnemonic skills, he had learned and recovered far more than any who had preceded him, including his father, who had been his first teacher. Denikin's students eventually transferred his teachings to writing, but the oracle tradition continued until the time of the Bolskars. Those were times which no one wished to mention, but all were forced to remember.

Obolen arrived at his destination shortly before the *Isaac Newton*. At first he considered moving into the cave in order to take up a position behind the strangers, but rejected that plan because his tracks would most certainly show in the snow. The depth of the snow here would make them visible, even in the wintery darkness. Working through the trees he took up a position close to the cave's entrance. Seeing the approaching vessel would be no problem, but Obolen wanted to be situated so he could see and signal his brother.

Obolen wrapped his arms across his chest and rubbed his hands up and down his sleeves in a gesture calculated to ward off some of the chill creeping into his bones. He had been warm while moving, but now he began to feel the cold. He breathed softly through his nose so that the condensed air would not give his position away.

Moments after he had settled himself, the ship appeared. Obolen immediately looked past it, but did not see his brother. "He will be along soon," Obolen thought.

\* \* \* \* \*

James Kirk brought the *Isaac Newton* to a hovering stop at the mouth of the cave. He lightly touched the port-side aft lateral thrusters and rotated his ship in a



counterclockwise motion. When he had turned the ship 180 degrees, he toggled the bow thrusters and moved the *Isaac Newton* backwards into the cave. He carefully kept his rate of movement to a minimum in order not to dislodge the snow. He wanted the undisturbed snow to help further hide their position.

“Sensors show a deep cavern, Captain,” Ensign K’Yle reported. “You will be able to fly at least 150 meters straight back. I cannot get a reading beyond that, and I had to use the maximum setting to make that determination. The ceiling rises considerably, so there is no danger of damaging ourselves.”

“Any life signs in here, Mr. K’Yle?” Kirk asked.

“Not within range of our scanners, sir, but that is limited by the magnetic properties of the rock,” K’Yle replied. “However, in these arctic conditions, any native, warm-blooded creatures will be hibernating.”

“Any warm-blooded creatures with which we are familiar, that is,” Kirk said wondering if some new adversary lay concealed in the depths of their hiding place.

“Sir, the possibility of mammals existing which do not hibernate in such conditions are extremely rare. Any which do not – like humans – will certainly, in time, freeze to death,” K’Yle said.

Kirk shook his head, and light-heartedly said, “Save me from Antosians and Vulcans.”

Before K’Yle could reply, Kirk continued, changing the subject, “Mr. K’Yle, lower the view port covers so that we can turn up the lights and begin our inspection of the inside of the *Newton*.”

\* \* \* \* \*

From his position just outside the mouth of the cave, Obolen watched as the dim light coming from inside the ship narrowed and winked out. He watched the darkened ship for several moments, and then, satisfied that no one was going to immediately exit from the craft, stood up and stretched his stiffened limbs. He turned back towards the direction from which Gernet would emerge and squinted into the darkness.

Gernet was much further behind the strangers than he should have been. For the first time that evening, Obolen began to worry. He quickly decided to leave his position and look for his brother.

There were two paths he could take, although in the deep snow, the term “path” was more for direction than for following an actual outline. He could take the shorter course a few paces backwards into the woods and then go up over the top of the cave, or he could backtrack away from the cave’s opening and cross half a kaalobar from the opening. Either route should hide him from detection, but the danger of slipping while climbing up the frozen hillside made the choice for him.

Obolen retreated the way he had come, stopping periodically to check behind him. When he had moved a safe distance from the mouth of Oracle Cave he hurriedly crossed the opening and disappeared into the opposite woods.

Adzeva was beginning to rise in the eastern sky and a cold dawn was breaking over Resenka. Obolen was grateful for the coming light. If something had happened to Gernet, and it was obvious to him now that something had, the rising star would aid his

search. In the darkness, under the canopy of the Always Trees, it would be possible to walk past a fallen man and not see him.

About two kaalobars from Oracle Cave, Obolen found Gernet sitting with his back against a tree. The combination of the cold and the pain of the compound fracture to his arm had caused him to pass out.

“When the Snow Princess rules Resenka, many people died out-of-doors. That will not be my brother’s fate,” Obolen thought.

Quickly Obolen removed his gloves and put his warm hands on his brother’s face, rubbing his hands on Gernet’s cheeks to try to revive him.

“I thought you were going to be careful,” Obolen said with obvious relief when Gernet stirred and opened his eyes.

“So did I, Brother,” Gernet replied, his voice weak.

“I need to get you to a warm place and find someone to tend your arm,” Obolen said.

“It is almost 20 kaalobars back to our village. I do not think that I can walk that far,” Gernet moaned. “You will have to fashion a stretcher-rig and drag me back.”

“Both the construction and the trip will take too long,” Obolen said.

“Brother, I will die in this cold. What other choice do we have?”

“We will go to Oracle Cave. I am going to take you to the visitors. With the care they have taken not to be detected, they may be willing to help us, especially if I threaten them with exposure.”

“Obolen, with all that we have suffered at the hands of the Bolskars, you would not do such a thing,” Gernet said, shocked that his brother would even offer the suggestion.

“They do not know that, Brother.”

*Mitork and Anatorr were bond-brothers from their boyhood days. The bonding is a ritual that began with Aldan, the first man ever to walk on Resenka. Aldan, it is said, was very old, well over 300 years, when he made the first bonding.*

*Aldan and Elissa had given our world many sons and daughters and they, in turn, bore children of their own. Some think that the Holy Ones created other men and women after Aldan and Elissa and that these others also produced children. The Words do not say this, but some have imagined it to be so. At any rate the population of Resenka grew and prospered.*

*One day, so the legend tells, Aldan was traveling north from the Divinitar, an area which is now a popular site for respite-taking, located on the northern shore of the Great Sea. His destination was the important serkor located near the peak of the Ryumin Mountains. Five hundred kaalobars north of the Divinitar, where the land begins its gentle rise to form the Anveyet Plateau, Aldan met a traveler named Toley.*

*Toley was dressed in the traditional accouterments of a merchant, except for the battle-dagger he wore dangling from his belt. It was not unusual for a man to carry a spear or a sword, but the fierce battle-dagger marked its owner as a fighter or a braggart. He was usually tested to determine which was true.*

*Night was falling as Aldan reached the Plateau. Understanding the difficulty of the journey which awaited him once he began to cross the flatland and climb into the*

*mountains, Aldan gratefully accepted the younger man's invitation to share a fire and a meal.*

*During the night, seven konrobindroy – thieves, smugglers and murderers who infested the lower plains – attacked their camp. In the fierce fighting which followed, Aldan's and Toley's fighting skills complimented each other as though they had trained years for just that one battle. Toley's battle-dagger responded as if it had been a part of his arm and not a separate combat implement. Aldan fought with his traveler's stick, using it as a deadly club. Toley killed three konrobindroy and severely wounded a fourth. Aldan killed two of their attackers. The single survivor fled, leaving his comrade to his fate.*

*The victors set no guard and, in the early hours just before Adzeva rose, the wounded man escaped.*

*When Adzeva was poised just over the horizon, Aldan blew the embers of their fire to life and added wood to build up a bed of coals. He placed a preserved shoulder of latt-beast onto a spit to roast. The meat had been brought along to feed him on his two week journey into the mountains. Finding food along the mountain trail was an uncertain business and wise travelers went prepared. For Aldan to use his entire provision for one meal was to put himself at the risk of grave hunger, even starvation. When Toley protested, Aldan said that he was giving the meal to his friend as a thanksgiving to the Holy Ones.*

*After they had eaten, Aldan took off his elegant traveling cloak and exchanged it for Toley's serviceable, but plain garment. Then he asked Toley for his belt and his sword, which Aldan strapped around his own waist. Next he pulled the battle-dagger from the belt and drew it across the wrist of his fighting arm. He extended his bleeding arm to Toley. Toley took back the sword and drew it across his own wrist. The bond-brotherhood was sealed when the two man bound the wounds together, mixing their blood.*

*Aldan picked some of the white ash from the dying fire and rubbed some into his wound and then into Toley's.*

*During the entire time of the ritual, one like nothing he had ever seen before, Toley had not spoken. As Aldan bandaged their wrists, Toley asked, "Tell me the meaning of what you have done."*

*"The meal was an act of friendship and thanksgiving. When I gave you my cloak I was saying that all of my property, all that I own, is now at your disposal. When I strapped on your sword I said that your battles are now my own and I will defend you with my life. The mingling of our blood says louder than any words that we are now brothers. I rubbed ashes into the wound so that it will scar. Whenever any one sees it, they will know that Toley has a friend who will always come to his side. They will hesitate to attack you because they will be attacking two men, not one.*

*"This bonding is for life. Only when I am dead will I be free from the obligation that I have placed upon myself."*

*For a long moment Toley was silent. Then he said, "You have worn my coat and I have held your staff. All that you said, I now proclaim to you. The scar that will form on your arm declares that Toley will fight and die for Aldan."*

*Whether the story I have just written is true, I do not know, but centuries ago the men of Resenka began to form bond-brotherhoods. Because of the obligation under which it placed a man, a bond-brother was chosen with extreme care. The bonding could join families together, enable commerce, and start wars or stop them. Many times a bonding changed the course of history.*

*The bonding is not done so much now, but when it is, it is still witnessed as it was in the past, as a man's most serious pledge. A wife can be divorced. A child can be disinherited. But only death can sever the bonding. To those who still value the old ways, becoming a traitor to a bond-brother remains the most serious crime on Resenka.*



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

From standard orbital approach to Vargon, the Battle Dock looked like a series of disjointly related pieces of metal fit together with no logical purpose. As a ship neared the planet, the space station's haphazard appearance took on definite, if incomprehensible structure. As Vargon technology had grown and the size and function of its space fleet had changed, new components were added to the station – a construction bay, a weapons development pod, an environmental research section, the refit dock, and central command.

The cavernous construction bay, the first part of the station to be developed, was the hub of the Battle Dock, all other parts radiated out from it. The rectangular shape was divided into command headquarters and the actual construction division. At first, central command, which occupied less than a third of the total area of the bay, was the only enclosed area of the station and the only area with life support and artificial gravity. The construction bay was a spider-work of beams and girders to which the skeleton of a ship under assembly could be anchored. Parts for a new ship were ferried into orbit from the planet and assembled in the weightless vacuum of the construction bay.

Succeeding sections of the Battle Dock radiated off of the construction bay like spokes of a giant wheel, but there was no symmetry to its growth. When additional areas were added, they were tied into central command by means of pressurized walkways. The walkways were fixed with an airlock at each end and a double airlock was positioned in the center. Explosive bolts ensured that a developing catastrophe in

one area would not threaten the entire station. Under emergency conditions, the explosives would be detonated and a powerful thruster engine, located on the underneath side of the section would ignite, propelling the danger upward and outward from the central core.

As the Battle Dock grew in size and in function, command central was moved to a new arm, away from the construction yards. The old command area was transformed into a transport bay. The small crafts which worked in planetary orbit, ferried passengers down to the surface or traveled to Resenka were all stationed in this shuttle bay. It was here that Security Chief Aireb stood, watching the outfitting of his personal scout vessel.

Aireb did not wait with grace. Waiting was something to be endured. While his scout craft was outfitted for its mission to Resenka, he looked out at the stars, and muttered ancient Vargon curses at the earth man called Kirk.

“When this is over, Earth Man, I will roast your heart over the ancestral fires of my family,” Aireb said to the blackness of space, “and then I will feed it to my groyskorth. If it sickens him, I will pray to the Spirit of the Great Pateetsa and ask for your resurrection, so that I may kill you again.”

A communications technician entered the transport bay and crossed to Aireb. Fear was evident in his eyes. Aireb saw the look and was instantly on guard. The Security Chief gripped the handle of his energy weapon and waited for the technician to close the distance between them.

“What has happened?” Aireb asked without preamble.

“We were tracking the Earth Man’s vessel down to the surface of Resenka. Initially, they were on a glide path for the southern part of the continent. Then they changed direction for the northern sector. We suspected the turbulent atmospheric conditions forced their craft off of its planned course. Its track flickered, then it just disappeared, sir. Repeated scans have revealed no trace of it.”

Aireb walked to a wall comm-panel and signaled tracking command.

“This is Security Chief Aireb. The data on the Earth vessel,” he barked, “transfer it to this station at once.”

Almost immediately the data transfer light winked on. Aireb played the data through at standard speed, then repeated the presentation at a slower speed, one designed for detailed analysis.

After a few moments, Aireb again called tracking command.

“This is Aireb. The data on the Federation ship. Run the last section through atmospheric filter compensators. Enhance to level three.”

“Sir, at level three the data may become unreadable.”

“Level three, technician,” Aireb said with deliberation, “unless you would like a transfer to the detention section, as their guest.”

“Level three is coming through now, sir,” the technical responded.

Again Aireb studied the data, but this time the frown which had dominated his brow ridge faded, to be replaced by a general appearance of satisfaction.

“Learn something, technician,” Aireb said to the comm-panel. “The planet Resenka is at this moment, as it is for over one-half of their year, in the winter season.”

The thick layer of snow which covers the ground reflects more solar radiation back into the atmosphere than even a desert region. The white blanket repels almost 95 percent of Adzeva's energy back at our scanners. That is why you were unable to track the vessel to the surface.

"When I viewed the data as played through level three atmospheric filters, I was able to detect their engine signature. It was faint, but readable enough to determine that they will land near their capital city, Megin, perhaps the city of Zenyuk. We will begin our search at Megin and expand out from there."

Aireb toggled the comm-panel off without waiting for the hapless technician to reply.

He turned to Bandera, his new second-in-command and said, "Outfit the ship and landing troops for duty under severe winter conditions. Prepare for extended surface exposure. Signal me in my quarters when we are ready to depart. The Earth Man has been too long absent from our accommodations."

\* \* \* \* \*

Commander Spock strode unannounced into the Engineering Section. Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott, his back to the science officer, was hovering over the dilithium crystal chamber, calling numbers to an assistant stationed at the main warp control panel.

When he heard the door into engineering open and close, Scotty spoke without turning around.

"Mr. Spock, is that you?"

"I did not know you were psychic, Mr. Scott," the Vulcan replied.

"I dinna have to be psychic to know you would be coming down here," Scotty said."

"Indeed, Mr. Scott," Spock said, "and how were you able to discern that?"

"You've been working with Captain Kirk too long, Mr. Spock. You have developed his instinctive care for this ship. With the *Enterprise* in trouble, it was only natural that you would come here."

"I will endeavor to be less predictable, Engineer. However, you are correct. I am justifiably curious. What is the state of your repair efforts?"

"I am afraid," Montgomery Scott admitted, "that I may have been a wee bit optimistic with my original estimate of repair time for the warp engines. We are going to have to maintain impulse speed for at least another six hours."

"Mr. Scott, every hour at impulse means an additional day arriving at the Captain's position."

"I am well aware of that, Mr. Spock. However, we have one cracked dilithium crystal which must be replaced. Six hours for replacement, setting, realignment and testing. We cannot change the laws of physics."

"Very well, Mr. Scott," Spock replied. "Continue your repairs."

"I'll have us at full warp as soon as possible, sir."

"Mr. Scott, of that, I am confident."

Spock turned to leave and then turned back to the Engineer.

"Mr. Scott. Do you remember the Nomad probe?"

“How could I forget, Mr. Spock? That changeling killed me!”

“Fortunately, it also ‘repaired’ you,” Spock replied. “And do you also remember the other repairs Nomad was able to do because of its integration with an alien probe?”

“Aye. It said that certain engine components were inefficient. It specifically mentioned the anti-matter input valve and the energy release controls. Whatever it did, Nomad claimed it increased engine efficiency by 57 percent. Before the Captain ordered the beastie to reverse its tinkering, we were traveling at better than Warp 11.”

“Do you think you could access the computer logs of those events and duplicate what Nomad did?”

“Mr. Spock,” Scott said in astonishment, “you’ll recall Captain Kirk told Nomad that the structure of the *Enterprise* could not stand that much power. There have been no structural refits which would reverse that conclusion.”

“That is, of course, true, but the power which Nomad generated was running out of control,” Spock replied. “Could you duplicate those changes, and by continual monitoring, keep the ship from suffering fatal design damage? Traveling at Warp 11, even Warp 10, would dramatically decrease our arrival time at the Pleiades Cluster.”

“I’ll make no promises, Mr. Spock. However, my team can handle standard warp repairs, and I will go to work on this wee problem. I will need a reference point for beginning my search of the logs,” Scotty said.

Spock immediately answered, “Stardate 3451 Point 9.”

Surprise showed on Scotty’s face.

“Ye came to Engineering with your plan in mind. Ye knew all along I’d do it, didn’t ye, Mr. Spock?”

“It would appear that I am not the only one whose actions can be accurately predicted, Engineer.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Harsh winter winds were now howling through the Always Trees as Obolen and Gernet struggled toward Oracle Cave. Snow squeaked beneath their feet, their webbed snegs leaving a cross-hatched design behind them. Light reflecting from Resenka’s moon caused the ground to glow as if thousands of tiny, perfect tabersk stones had been scattered by the wind. The light brought a softness to the landscape that the brothers would have appreciated on a different night.

As boys, they had frequently anticipated nights such as this one when the Always Trees looked like giant cones of ice standing still against the darkened sky. But as Gernet became less of a walking man and more of a staggering weight, Obolen noticed only his brother and knew he was dying.

Tufts of grass fought for a place above the snow line, marking the hiding places of keelork. If the brothers were careful, they could capture keelork as the animals slept in their nests. The long ears of the furry animals were often the only clue that there was something beneath the snow. Skinned and roasted, the keelork were important to winter survival – their flesh for food, and their hides for insulated clothing.

Gernet stumbled against a nest and a frightened animal ran away from the intruders and through the trees in a zig-zag pattern. The sudden movement startled Obolen, but Gernet seemed not to notice. Obolen grew more concerned.

“Gernet, we must hurry. The cave is just past those trees,” Obolen said. “We must get you in out of this cold.”

Gernet stopped, turned to look at his brother, and fainted, falling face first, into the snow.

Obolen dropped to his knees and rolled Gernet onto his back. His brother’s breath was ragged and shallow. Obolen pulled off his glove and reached inside of Gernet’s coat, checking for signs of life. He could feel Gernet’s heart beating, but the skin was dangerously cold.

The fingers on Gernet’s broken arm were blue. Whether it was because of the cold or the belt wrapped around his arm to control the bleeding, Obolen could not tell. He loosed the tourniquet slightly to allow blood to flow into the fingers. If the tissue was deprived of blood and oxygen for too long, the skin, he knew, would die. Blood began once again to pump through the torn artery and Obolen quickly wrapped his hand around the wound. He waited for almost a minute and then tightened the belt back snugly and the bleeding again stopped.

Obolen untied the laces of Gernet’s snags and dropped them beside his brother’s still form. Next, Obolen took off the long neck scarves they were each wearing and tied two ends together. He slipped it under Gernet’s back and tossed it across his own, tying the ends to fashion a sling which bound the two men together.



Protecting Gernet's damaged arm as best he could, Obolen stood to his feet. Bent over at his waist, he began to drag Gernet to the shelter of Oracle Cave.

"Howl, Snow Princess, all you wish," Obolen hissed through clenched teeth, "but keep your cold fingers away. You will not claim my brother this night!"

His gait was awkward and his path tacked sideways, but Obolen kept moving forward. With a deliberate pace, one not calculated for his personal comfort, but rather for his brother's safety, he plunged ahead. His progress seemed maddeningly slow, but at last the entrance to the cave appeared through the trees.

"Gernet," he said, "we are here. We've reached the cave," but Gernet did not respond.

Stopping far enough inside the cave to get Gernet out of the wind, Obolen untied the make-shift sling and marched back into the cave approaching the strange ship sitting silently in the darkness. He stopped as a panel on the side of the vessel slid upward and a man stepped out. The stranger's garment was so strange, Obolen almost laughed. The man's hazel eyes looked first at Obolen and then to the front of the cave where Gernet sat propped against the cave wall.

"Help me," Obolen said with obvious desperation. "My brother is dying!"

*We know from The Words that after the Holy Ones created our world, after they created Aldan and Elissa, They created a community, the basic structure of our society. We were not meant to be isolated individuals, nor ambitious competitors. We were meant to live together as intimate partners.*

*The historian, Denikin, was, perhaps, our greatest non-believer. He accepted The Words as a historical document. He did not believe that it was a holy document. He agrees that the idea of a community government was an advance concept which appeared on Resenka fairly early in our development. But he says that people banded together for mutual aid and protection. As soon as there was a decision to be made which affected the entire group, and as soon as one man put forth his idea as being the correct idea, Resenka had its first government – according to Denikin.*

*Whichever view is correct, however our government began, it was surely not long until opposition grew. In every stage of our world's development, it seems that there has been a group who opposed the guiding authority. The Bolskars grew out of opposition to the Chekart and the "Others" grew out of opposition to the Bolskars.*

*Anatorr and I met the Others when the Flower Girl was chasing away the last vestiges of the Snow Princess' icy reign. It had been three months since I had been able to do the thing I loved most – wake up in Anatorr's arms. The winter had been hard and we had not been to Ingal-Karbe since shortly after the first snows fell. If we*

*watched with care, opportunities to be alone presented themselves. Still I wanted more. I was anxious for the day when we could openly declare our love. Until that day dawned, I would cherish the moments we were together as much as a thirsty woman would cherish water.*

*One afternoon while we were alone in the shop, Anatorr said, "Princess, I have heard of a new source for supplying tabersk stones. How would you like to go to Ingal-Karbe tonight?"*

*"I have been wondering if we would ever have another night together," I said. "Just try to leave me here!"*

*"If I left you here," he said laughingly, "there would be no reason for me to go. I could send Mitork."*

*As I have written before, Anatorr and I were not integrals at either of the two practicing serkor in Zenyuk. However, when we went to Ingal-Karbe, we always went to the gathering at the smaller of the two serkors in that city. It employed two Keepers, something that was unusual because of the heavy taxes the Bolskars imposed on places of worship. An amount equal to all expenses of the serkor, including salaries, had to be given to the Bolskars as a tax on "nonessentials."*

*Volukay was the image of everyone's elderparent. Only strangers to the gathering called him "Keeper Volukay." Everyone else addressed him as "Dadush," the diminutive for "elderfather." He had never been a tall man, but the years had bent him even closer to the ground. A stiffness in his neck did not allow him to raise his head.*

*This condition caused him to always peer over the tops of his spectacles, his eyebrows raised in a look of perpetual surprise.*

*One of the first things I noticed about Dadush was his incredible memory. The second time Anatorr and I ever attended the gathering, he greeted us by name, saying, "Elena and Anatorr of not from this city, the couple with secrets they think the Holy Ones and an old Keeper do not know."*

*When he met us the first time, asked our names and where we lived in Ingal-Karbe, I had replied, "Keeper, we are not from this city."*

*It seemed as though his eyebrows rose even higher than normal, but his only reply was, "Elena, at this serkor, we respect the secrets of all gatherers. There is one thing that I suspect you have difficulty hiding, however, no matter where you are from, and that is how very much you and this man love each other."*

*I remember blushing fiercely and saying, "For a man who must strain to look up, you miss nothing."*

*He answered, "Child, you are not the only one who looks with the heart."*

*Lared was Volukay's noveechok, one who learns. The two men could not have been more different. Volukay, bent with years was quiet, the balanced, sensible one. Lared, tall and erect was fiery, the one who rushed ahead. Volukay moved slowly, when he moved at all. Lared was never still, never at rest. Volukay spoke softly so you were forced to pay close attention to his words. Lared spoke with a volume that the deaf could understand.*

*As always, Anatorr and I took the train to Ingal-Karbe on our buying trip. It was late when we arrived and there were no transports available to take us to the hotel. So we did the only thing we could – we walked. The tall buildings which paralleled Elissa’s Garden made a natural tunnel for the wind and so we moved into a side street to get out of the cold. Without planning to, we soon passed the serkor and saw that lights were on upstairs in the Keeper’s room.*

*“Let’s go inside,” Anatorr said. “Perhaps we could prevail upon the Keepers for a warm drink.”*

*The front door of the serkor was locked, not to keep anyone out, but just to be sure that the wind would not pull the door open. A side door, used by Dadush and Lared to enter the building for quiet times of meditation, was open. As we walked to it, we could see shadows moving through the window in the Keeper’s room. One man, Lared, no doubt, gestured as if he was defending himself with a sword. The other paced back and forth, seemingly dodging the blows.*

*The well-oiled hinges allowed the door to open silently, and we stepped into the warmth of the building. We recognized Lared’s voice as he delivered a lecture or a sermon, but we could not understand his words. A man whose voice we did not recognize broke in and then there was silence. We stepped across the entry room towards the stairs when the door to the Keeper’s room opened above us.*

*Dadush, silhouetted by the light from inside, called out, “Who is there?”*

*Before we could reply, he answered his own question, obviously glad to see us, but with a hesitation in his voice we had never heard before.*

*“Elena. Anatorr. Welcome. Please come up. We have mugs of warm cinnotark.”*

*As we climbed the stairs Anatorr said, “I can already taste the cinnotark. Perfect. Absolutely perfect. That drink is one of my all-time favorites!”*

*The Keeper’s room smelled pleasantly of the spicy drink. A fire was smoldering in the hearth. Dadush hugged each of us as we stepped inside. Lared greeted us warmly, but his face showed the same hesitation we had heard in Dadush’s voice. Two men I did not know stood near the window. Lared introduced us.*

*“Elena and Anatorr are visitors from another city. This is Obolen and Gernet, skilled carpenters from Zenyuk,” Lared said.*

*Gernet nodded politely. Obolen spoke with formality, “Honored Keeper, we do not know the beautiful lady, but my brother and I know this man. He, too, is from Zenyuk.”*

*Then Obolen walked to Anatorr and clasping him firmly by the shoulders said, “So, it is true, Anatorr. A young woman has opened your heart.”*

## CHAPTER TWENTY

James Kirk was concerned by the read-outs on the *Isaac Newton's* status boards. Like the Captain and Ensign K'Yle, the shuttlecraft had experienced a great deal of stress since it launched from the Enterprise, carrying James Kirk and three command officer candidates. It had protected its two occupants during its fiery plunge through the planet's atmosphere. Its equipment lockers contained enough food to feed seven crewmen for fourteen days. Now powered by energy drained from a variety of phase-amplified weapons, it provided warmth and illumination for its occupants. But the battery levels were dropping steadily, slowly to be sure, but dropping.

"Mr. K'Yle, I agree with your earlier assessment," Captain Kirk said. "At our current rate of consumption, we only have enough energy in the shuttlecraft's batteries to keep the ship operational for another day. Based on the data the sensors automatically gathered during our descent to landing, I have switched off our environmental purifiers and opened the vents to the planet's atmosphere."

"Captain, an amount of energy equal to that saved by not using our onboard purifiers will also be lost in raising the outside air temperature to levels inside the Newton," K'Yle replied.

"I thought of that, Ensign. It will get a little nippy in here, but I have lowered the cabin temperature to 10 degrees C. Those two changes will extend the batteries for one additional day."

“Sir, I remind you of my species ability to hibernate. I can begin making preparations for a short winter sleep.”

“The offer is noted and appreciated, Mr. K’Yle, but that will not be necessary. Besides, I need you awake. We have to reach that generating plant you found if we are going to get off of this planet.”

“Understood, Captain,” K’Yle said, “and I have been giving some thought to a method of energy collection.”

“I thought you might,” Kirk said with a smile. “What have you come up with?”

“The bulky energy storage units used on Antos IV and on Earth during a time analogous to this world’s period of industrial development would be too heavy and too cumbersome to be of significant value to us. I have made a preliminary calculation and we would need a supply of those batteries greater in size and mass than the shuttlecraft. If we could find them in sufficient quantity, I doubt that we could transport them to our current location.”

“And your solution?” Kirk asked.

“We have five discharged Starfleet phasers and one empty Vargon weapon. I can think of no way to balance the energy to make them useful again as weapons, but I believe I can adapt them to store energy long enough to transfer it into the *Isaac Newton*,” Ensign K’Yle answered.

“Excellent!” Kirk said with obvious satisfaction. “Begin your modifications immediately. I’m going to go play in the snow.”



“Sir?”

“I’m going to go outside and have a look around.”

“Captain Kirk, it may be presumptuous of me to say so, but I do believe that you deliberately phrase your comments so as to be perplexing to me. And I further believe that you enjoy it. Sir.”

“Vulcans, Antosians, and children,” Kirk said with mock exasperation. “Vulcans, Antosians, and children.”

“Captain?”

“The batteries, Mr. K’Yle. Snap to it.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.”

\* \* \* \* \*

As his ensign worked, the Captain stripped off his regular duty uniform and dressed in the makeshift winter clothing he had fashioned. Satisfied that his creations would maintain his body temperature for several hours, he attached their one functioning phaser to his belt, selected a hand lamp from the equipment locker, toggled the shuttle’s door release and stepped outside.

The cold air in the cave hit James Kirk like a blow to the chest. He took a deep breath and it felt as if ice crystals were being pulled into his lungs. There was something curiously refreshing about the cold, dry air. After spending weeks inside the sterile cocoons of the *Enterprise*, the *Isaac Newton* and then the *Repelator*, real natural air was invigorating. One of the things Jim Kirk liked best about shore leave was being

able to breathe air that had not passed through circulating pumps. He often found the local odors preferable to the homogenized variety onboard ship.

Shining his light towards the rear of the cave, Kirk began to explore. When he turned back to face his shuttlecraft, he could see it silhouetted against the mouth of the cave. Dawn was breaking over the planet.

He worked several hundred meters back into the cave, finding only the cave formations that were natural in such strata on a thousand worlds. During one summer vacation, a young James Kirk had left the flatlands of central Iowa to explore the limestone caves of Kentucky and Virginia. Spelunking fit nicely with his interest in history, and although commanding a starship left little time for cave exploration, he recalled underground delights he had seen on several worlds.

Near the back of the cave, in the area cavers call the twilight zone – an area of moderate environment, sheltered from direct sunlight, Kirk found two passageways branching into the shadows. Since it was likely that hibernating animals would be found here, if there were any in the cave, he progressed carefully. Picking the right side passage for exploration, he allowed the beam of his hand lamp to clear the darkness away. Instantly he could feel the 100 percent humidity of the cave's dark zone. Satisfying himself with a quick sweep of his lamp that there were no creatures within immediate striking distance, he backed out of the damp air, conscious of the need to keep his clothing dry. A quick sweep of the left hand tunnel also uncovered no danger.

The Captain returned to the shuttlecraft and found Ensign K'Yle already modifying the second phaser. Satisfied with their progress, Kirk opened the door and

stepped back into the cave. Movement off to his left flickered in the corner of his vision and he turned to face the cave entrance. A man, obviously better dressed for this world's severe climate than he was, was walking directly towards him. Another man was sitting against the rocks, just inside the mouth of the cave.

"Help me," the walking man said, his voice filled with concern. "My brother is dying!"

Kirk pulled his makeshift mitten off of his right hand and reached for his phaser. He pulled the weapon loose, but when the man made no threatening moves, Kirk dropped it into the pocket of his field jacket.

"My name is James Kirk. What is wrong with your brother?"

"I am called Obolen. My brother, Gernet, fell and broke his arm. The bone has ripped through the skin. He is suffering from loss of blood and from the icy breath of the Snow Princess. Can you help us?"

"Let's get him inside my ship, where it is warm."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ensign Bakor K'Yle had switched on the proximity sensors when Captain Kirk had made his first exploratory trip into the cave. He knew a wide sweep would be impossible because of the magnetic signatures of the rocks. At best, he had hoped for an intruder alert capability, an early warning sensor that would give them a few moments to react. Before they had flown into the cave, they could read 150 meters of the cavern's interior. Surrounded on all sides by the rocks, the distance decreased dramatically. When Captain Kirk had moved only ten meters away from the shuttlecraft

he had disappeared from the scanners. It had taken him less than ten seconds to cover that much ground.

“How would the Captain describe ten seconds warning?” K’Yle thought? One curious phrase he remembered was, “A little bit of something is better than a whole lot of nothing.”

“It will just have to be sufficient,” K’Yle said to the silence around him.

He watched the screen as Captain Kirk’s image flickered and dissolved into the magnetic interference. Less than a minute later, the auditory warning signaled someone’s approach – one object, mass much greater than the Captain.

K’Yle had served his shipmates well, he remembered, by changing form and disguising himself as part of the ship’s furniture. He stepped quickly into the storage compartment and disappeared.

The Newton’s door slid open and Ensign K’Yle heard Captain Kirk say, “Mr. K’Yle, I need your help. We have visitors.”

\* \* \* \* \*

If Ensign K’Yle was astonished at the presence of the two men with Captain Kirk, he did not show it. He immediately knelt down at the door in order to help pull the injured man inside. As he did so, the Captain said, “Mr. K’Yle, this is Gernet, and his brother, Obolen. Gernet has a compound fracture of his left arm. His condition seems aggravated by the cold. I told Obolen we would help.”

Kirk and Obolen had been supporting Gernet between them. They turned him away from the door and lowered him onto the steps. Obolen supported his brother’s

arm as K'Yle reached for Gernet's shoulders. Kirk took Gernet's feet and together they lifted him into the shuttlecraft.

When Gernet was finally laying on the floor of the shuttlecraft, Kirk spoke to K'Yle, "Set security protocol for egress and ingress, voice command authority. Adjust recognition parameters to allow for any Starfleet personnel."

"Right away, Captain," K'Yle said.

"Obolen," Kirk said, "let's get your brother's coat off and see what we can do for his injuries."

Obolen withdrew a long blade knife from somewhere near the small of his back and finished cutting Gernet's sleeve at the wrist while Kirk unbuttoned the bloodied garment.

As he pulled his brother's coat off, Obolen said, "Your friend called you, 'Captain.' Are you soldiers?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes," Kirk answered.

"You are obviously not Vargons. Are you Bolskars?" he asked.

"You know about the Vargons," Kirk said. It was a statement, not a question.

"No, we are not Vargons, although we spent some time as their captives. Who are the Bolskars?"

"The Bolskars are the ones who control Resenka and all of its citizens. Although their technology is not as advanced as the Vargons, their methods are no less ruthless. They overthrew the government of our world, announcing freedom for everyone. Their

brand of freedom is only another word for tyranny and slavery. We were better off under the Ryssart and his Chekart thugs.”

“Give me your knife,” Kirk said, and when Obolen deftly spun the handle, turning the blade toward himself, he handed it to the Captain.

“Thank you,” Kirk said, taking the offered handle. He cut away the tattered sleeve and completely exposed the wound.

“It looks bad, but I think we can help. Obolen, loosen that belt. It may start to bleed again, but the fingers are discolored and that is not a good sign. Mr. K’Yle, get me the emergency medical kit.”

“What about the Prime Directive?” K’Yle asked. “Surely, revealing more of our technology...”

“Would not be a violation,” Kirk finished. “If these people have met the Vargons, any semblance of normal development of their world vanished a long time ago.”

Ensign K’Yle nodded and retrieved the medical kit. He passed Jim Kirk the medical tricorder and the Captain opened it and switched its diagnostic scanners on. He passed it over the damaged arm and studied the readings.

“Obolen,” Kirk said, “I am not a doctor, but my Chief Surgeon has given me basic first-aid training. If I’m understanding these readings correctly, the only tissue damage is in the area of the puncture wound itself. I think he will be all right.”

“Thank the Holy Ones,” Obolen said.

Kirk activated the sterile field generator and began to cleanse the wound. Next he inserted a powerful antibiotic compound into the hypospray and gave Gernet a full dose.

“Now comes the hard part,” Kirk said. “We need to set the broken bones and repair the damaged skin. I’m glad Gernet is unconscious.”

Even unconscious, Gernet moaned as Kirk set about to close the wound. After a quick tricorder scan, the Captain placed a steri-pressure bandage over the wound and wrapped the arm in a liqui-cast. When the cast was in place, Kirk squeezed the lower end of the cast, breaking a small capsule inside. The chemical reaction of the capsule hardened the liquid in the cast.

Kirk nodded with satisfaction as he took another tricorder scan. Then he positioned the portable bone-regenerator and switched it on. Control lights flashed red, then green, and a soft hum emanated from the device.

“We’ll check this in about thirty minutes,” Kirk said. “In the meantime, I’m going to give him a mild sedative so he does not wake and disturb our repairs.”

Through all of the first-aid procedures, Obolen had watched silently, but with obvious appreciation of Captain Kirk’s instruments and techniques.

When he, Captain Kirk and Ensign K’Yle were seated in the command cabin of the *Isaac Newton*, Obolen asked, “Where are you from and what kind of men are you, James, that you have such devices and such compassion for strangers? And how did you come to be on Resenka?”

“Mr. K’Yle and I are from an interplanetary alliance called the ‘United Federation of Planets.’ As to how we came to be here, we left our mother ship several weeks ago on a routine training mission. The Vargons captured us and brought us here. We were able to escape from their ship and tried to land in the more temperate southern region of your world. Unforseen circumstances brought us here, instead.”

Kirk had a basic, instinctive trust of Obolen, but he saw no need to give more details than were absolutely necessary. While he was certain that he was not violating Starfleet’s General Order Number One concerning non-interference, he had learned that concealment of the entire truth could frequently be turned into a defensive asset.

“And you, Obolen,” Kirk went on, “you have mentioned several words with which I am not familiar. I gather that ‘Resenka’ is the name of your planet, but who, or what are the ‘Bolskars’ and the ‘Ryssart’ and his ‘Chekart thugs?’”

“We do call our world, Resenka,” Obolen began. “We are the fourth planet orbiting the star, Adzeva. The Ryssart was our hereditary ruler. The Ryssart’s family, the Chekart, governed Resenka for centuries. As I said, barely a generation ago we traded one form of oppression for another, although at the time we believed that the men who called themselves ‘Bolskars’ were fighting for universal freedom. In reality the only freedom for which they fought was the freedom to dominate Resenka according to their demands.

“Over the centuries the Chekart families had established an order to our society that was swept away in a bloody revolution. We did not know how good things were



until they no longer existed. Many of us long for something different, for the right to control our own destinies. The Others hope to make beneficial changes.”

“The Others?” Kirk asked.

“I speak too freely,” Obolen answered. “I notice, James, that you gave me only the barest details about yourself. There is wisdom in that strategy. I think I will be silent now and see to my brother.”

Kirk smiled. “I like this man,” he thought. “He may prove to be a vital ally. I do not think I would like to have him as an adversary.”

K’Yle glanced at the ship’s chronometer. “Gernet’s arm should be healed by now,” he said.

Obolen’s face showed a look of surprise and disbelief. “If his arm is healed even by the time the Flower Girl has chased the Snow Princess from our planet for another season, I will be amazed.”

“Let’s take a look,” Kirk said.

Without removing the bone-regenerator, Kirk passed the tricorder over Gernet’s arm. He removed the regen and once again squeezed the capsule in the end of the liqui-cast. The chemical reaction reversed itself and Kirk removed the device. He unwound the bandages and said to Obolen, “See for yourself.”

“If you had told me that Adzeva would not shine today, I would have believed that sooner than the miracle I see here,” Obolen whispered.

Without replying, Kirk changed the hypospray and gave Gernet a stimulant. Gernet opened his eyes and looked at his brother and the two strangers. He

instinctively dropped his arms to his side and pushed himself upright. Then he remembered his broken arm and looked where he had last seen his bones protruding.

“Obolen, my arm,” he said.

“I know, Brother. You can thank James Kirk and his friend, Mr. K’Yle. I think Resenka has found valuable allies.”

*For a moment, I could not breathe. It seemed as if all of the air had been sucked out of the small Keeper's room. The fire in the hearth suddenly seemed to reach the temperature of a forge. Dzhhunk would have melted, then vaporized on the grate. I staggered and instinctively gripped Anatorr's hand with my right hand, supporting myself against him with my shoulder and my other hand. If he had moved, I would have fallen.*

*When Obolen spoke to Anatorr I was, for no accountable reason, looking directly at Keeper Lared. Surprise was the first emotion which showed in his face. That was quickly replaced with a hard look of coldness, the coldness of one who has forgotten that he has ever made a mistake. I was no longer a woman traveling with the man she loved. I was a very small child, hiding from her father's anger.*

*As I gripped Anatorr's arm with my left hand I turned quickly to look at Keeper Volukay. Dadush's face was blank, unreadable. Then a smile crossed his eyes and soon could not be kept from his entire face. His eyes did not speak sanction, but neither did they speak condemnation. Instead, it was a look of understanding, of comprehension.*

*Lared, too, saw Dadush's expression. When he spoke, it was not with the voice of a Keeper giving comfort to an integral. It was the voice of an Examiner condemning an offender.*

*“Volukay,” he said, his voice low and menacing, “what is unspoken here? Is this adultery? Does this man bring his prostituka to the serkor for the blessings of the Holy Ones? I will not hear of it!”*

*“Lared, unless my old ears have failed in the last few moments, no one has asked you to hear anything,” Dadush said.*

*If Dadush’s voice had been a weapon, Lared would have been slain. When he spoke again, it was with the confidence of a Keeper who knew more than one undisclosed passion. “There are many secrets in this room tonight. Do not you have your own, Lared?”*

*I could not read Lared’s thoughts, but there was no need.*

*“Elena, forgive me,” Lared whispered. “I walk where I have not been invited. I spoke with a purity I do not possess.”*

*Outside of the room, the wind whistled sharply. As it blew across the top of the chimney, the draft caused the fire in the grate to flare up. Dadush walked to the hearth, picked up a shovel and scooped lumps of black anthros onto the glowing coals.*

*“Anatorr,” Dadush spoke into the growing silence, “I think you mentioned your fondness for cinnotark?”*

*“It is one of my all-time favorites,” Anatorr said.*

*“And we see a woman who has captured his favor,” Obolen said.*

*“But she is so skinny,” Gernet replied. And then the brothers both shook with laughter.*

*Obolen and Gernet moved a heavy wooden table from its place beneath the window and positioned it closer to the fire. Dadush took my hand and asked me to sit beside him. The table was much like the one in my kitchen – sturdy, square and simple. Obolen would have taken the other seat beside of me, but Lared touched his arm, stopping him. Anatorr sat to my left and Obolen took the other chair across from me. As Lared served cinnotark, Gernet pulled a backless stool close to the table and motioned Lared to take it. Gernet stood at the side of the hearth.*

*“How is Lubeme?” Gernet said.*

*Anatorr sat down his mug of steaming cinnotark and said without hesitation, “My wife is well. She does not change.”*

*“But you have changed, Anatorr,” Obolen said. “The heaviness which gripped you since you returned from the yachenka is gone.”*

*“You were in the yachenka?” Lared asked.*

*“As were many, Keeper,” Anatorr replied.*

*“How long was your sentence?” Lared continued.*

*“I was one of the last of the tenners,” he said, his voice flat and emotionless, but I knew the pain was there. So did Dadush.*

*“I am sure Anatorr does not wish to speak of those days,” Dadush said. The tone of his voice indicated that a new topic of discussion would be very appropriate.*

*Lared heard, but he was not listening. Other thoughts had captured his attention.*

*“But a citizen of Zenyuk who was a tenner,” the young Keeper said, almost to himself. He looked first at Obolen and then at Gernet. He avoided eye contact with Dadush. “A tenner. Why have the Others not contacted this man?”*

*“I was approached, Keeper,” Anatorr answered the question which Lared had directed at the brothers. “I was contacted shortly after my,” he hesitated, “my rehabilitation. You do not know it, but I was sentenced to the yachenka because I failed to allow the Chekart to take my life at the battle of Yarnot.*

*“We fought for 47 days, the last four days using our rifles as clubs because we had run out of ammunition. The often-promised Bolskar supply train never arrived. When the war ended, we were released from the prisoner of war camps. The eight of us who lived, eight out of over three hundred, were automatically condemned, by the Bolskars, to the yachenka because we surrendered.”*

*“I never understood the mentality which said a soldier should die rather than surrender,” Dadush interjected.*

*“Nor I,” Anatorr continued, “but to the Bolskars a soldier who surrendered was a traitor – one who had obviously sold out. No, Lared, I was approached. But my politics ended in Yarnot.”*

*“But the Others,” Lared tried to go on.*

*“The Others be damned,” Anatorr said, his voice cracking like the sound of summer thunder.*

*“Who or what are the Others?” I asked.*

*Obolen looked quickly around the room. I saw no signal, but without further hesitation he said, "We, my brother, Lared and Dadush, we are of the Others."*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“James Kirk, with all of the advantages your United Federation of Planets obviously has over the technology of Resenka, and perhaps even over the Vargons, I would think you could design garments that would better protect you from the fury of the Snow Princess,” Obolen said as he, Gernet, Kirk and K’Yle were finally inside his house.

Snow had begun to fall again when the four men stepped out of Oracle Cave and moved toward the village. Kirk had moved the *Isaac Newton* into one of the side tunnels at the end of the main chamber. With the voice command authority activated, he was confident no intruder could gain entrance into his ship. By moving it deeper into the cave, he lessened the possibility of its being accidentally discovered.

With only the two pair of snegs Obolen and Gernet had worn on their trek to track the shuttlecraft, traveling back to the village was slow. They kept to the trees as much as possible to make walking easier for Kirk and K’Yle. Even though fresh snow would soon cover their tracks, Obolen followed at the rear of the procession, obscuring their trail.

Gernet had insisted on retracing his path back to the point where he had broken his arm. It was not out of morbid curiosity, he explained, but deep under the Always Trees the snow would not gather quickly and the site of his mishap could possibly be detected. Although it was doubtful that anyone could learn who had been injured, it was better not to take the chance of discovery.



When they finally reached the outskirts of the village, the quartet waited quietly on the edge of the trees until they were as certain as they could be that they were not being observed. Covering the 20 kaalobars of snow-covered ground should have taken two hours. Because of their circuitous route and their attempts at camouflage, it had taken over twice that long. Slightly deeper in the trees, Kirk and K'Yle shuffled their feet and rubbed their hands together in an attempt to combat the cold. Their efforts produced more of a psychological effect than the actual warming of their bodies.

Inside the house, and still deeply chilled, Kirk said with a wry laugh, "The next time Mr. K'Yle and I are shanghaied by Vargons, tortured and forced to escape, then crash land on your planet, we will arrange to do so in the summer time. Assuming it is ever summer here."

"It will be the warm season in another three months," Obolen said, "but it will not last long. Once the snows melt, we begin to make preparation for their certain return."

"Perhaps by then you will have grown stronger and better able to withstand a little cold," Gernet joined in. Obolen's face showed surprise at the hardness in his brother's voice.

"And perhaps you will have been able to show some gratitude to the men who saved your life," Kirk responded, not feeling particularly gracious as his numb feet and hands began to sting with returning warmth.

"And perhaps my brother and I will allow you to stumble around Zenyuk on your own. You can construct the 'batteries' about which you spoke during our journey through the trees, without our help," Gernet snapped.

K'Yle and Obolen watched the exchange in silence, moving their heads to observe first one speaker and then the other. Obolen frowned. K'Yle shrugged his shoulders in a gesture of confusion.

“And perhaps I will see to it that the next time you fall, you break more than your arm,” Kirk said, his voice raising in anger.

Gernet's voice was flat as he said, “Perhaps you will try, Captain. Perhaps you wish to try now.”

The two men stepped towards each other. Then Kirk stopped and raised his hands in a gesture of conciliation.

“The cold has made me forget myself, Gernet. I am a guest in your home. I apologize.”

“And I forget your kindness to a stranger, James Kirk. I also apologize.”

“I am not sure we can tolerate any more stimulation, but may I offer some warm kvasale?” Obolen put in. “Our national beverage is satisfying, and initially less harming to the body than the blows of feisty combatants.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The *Vindicator* scout ship was built more for function than for form. From a central circular engineering pod, stabilizer wings extended laterally outward. When the ship was moving through a planet's atmosphere, the wings angled aft for rapid flight. They could be adjusted forward to give added lift for a landing approach. Energy cannons protruded from the leading edges of the wings like talons of destruction reaching for another victim.

From beneath the craft, three retractable legs, equipped with independent balancing stabilizers allowed for a level landing on almost any terrain.

Two parallel shafts sprang forward from the central pod. These sections held the ship's command bridge, quarters for the ship's compliment of eight officers and fifty-two men, a weapons bay, a science lab, and of course, a detention chamber. Entrance to the *Vindicator* was reached through a security port located at the base of the pod. When the port cycled open, it resembled a maw opening to devour anyone who came close.

This was the type of ship Gernet had in mind when he said Vargon craft had the appearance of the flesh-rending Soracktor, perched to destroy its hapless prey.

Incorporating sensor scans of the *Isaac Newton's* engine signature, Bandera, Aireb's new second-in-command, had developed a preliminary flight track. Initially, the Earth Man had been descending toward the southern section of Resenka's landmass. Evidentially wind shear in the upper atmosphere had blown the craft off course and the Earth Man's incompetent piloting skills had not been good enough to maintain that route. In spite of his earlier boast that there was no place for Kirk to hide, Bandera could not locate a touchdown point.

"What do you mean, you cannot locate the Earth Man's ship?" Aireb asked with barely controlled fury.

Bandera began, "Security Chief, the winter storms on Resenka..."

“Should not be a deterrent with probing scanners set at maximum intensity. There is, after all, only one such vessel in the entire Var-Dohkad system. If you cannot find one small, highly-advanced, interplanetary vessel on this backward planet, I will cut out your liver and feed it to the Sovereign’s favorite groyskorth,” Aireb said, his voice growing quieter and more menacing with each word.

“But, Security Chief Aireb.”

“No excuses, Bandera. Just results.”

“I did not mean to offer an excuse, simply an explanation.”

“An explanation for your incompetence?”

“No, sir. Yes, sir.”

Aireb looked surprised at his subordinate’s honesty.

“Very well. Explain. And make me believe it, Bandera. You will not receive a second chance.”

Bandera turned to his computer station and activated the main display. It showed a schematic of Resenka which featured the cities of Megin, Ingal-Karbe and Zenyuk. Bright green traces approached Ingal-Karbe and then disappeared. Bandera toggled an overlay which showed the planet’s infrastructure relative to the three cities, and the two frozen waterways which bisected the area.

“Scanners gave us the general direction of the Earth Man’s descent. The same upper winds which blew him from his planned course have also completely dissipated any emission signatures his craft may have produced. Since his approach vector

brought him to Ingal-Karbe before he would have reached Zenyuk, we can concentrate our search backwards from Zenyuk. We can discount Zenyuk as a landing area.”

“And why are you discounting Zenyuk?” Aireb asked.

Bandera activated a secondary display which showed Zenyuk in detail.

“On both displays, the flashing red indicators are the power generating plants outside of each city,” Bandera explained. “It is possible that the multiple number of generators in Megin or Ingal-Karbe could distort an orbital scan and hide his ship, if he could land close enough to them. Zenyuk, however, has the least amount of generated energy readings in the sector. A ship such as the Earth Man’s would show up there even under the most severe conditions and even on equipment vastly inferior to our own. He is not in Zenyuk.”

“And what if he set his engines in a total power-down mode?” Aireb asked.

“In order to achieve absolute invisibility from our scanners, he would have to shut down every system on his ship, including all computer activity and all life-support systems. That would be extremely foolish, and this human does not seem to be a fool,” Bandera replied.

“That is the first thing you have said since we departed the Battle Dock that I completely agree with,” Aireb said grudgingly. “The Earth Man is no fool.”

Aireb changed the display on the view screen, bringing Zenyuk to the foreground. He studied it for several minutes and then said, “We will concentrate our search in the area of Ingal-Karbe. Send a security team to Megin to pay our respects to the Pol. And just in case you are mistaken, send a detachment of soldiers to Zenyuk.”

\* \* \* \* \*

*Engineer's Log: Stardate 5911.9*

Mr. Spock has asked me to review engineering logs from our encounter with the Nomad probe in an attempt to boost engine efficiency. Before the Romulan attack we were only two standard weeks out from the Pleiades Cluster. Now we are more than three weeks away from rescuing Captain Kirk and his crew of trainees. The "repairs" which Nomad effected threatened the structure of the *Enterprise* and now I have been asked to duplicate that situation. I do not know another set of circumstances under which Mr. Spock would order such extreme measures.

\* \* \* \* \*

Commander Spock had ordered a meeting to discuss the possible ramification of Montgomery Scott's efforts. If successful, Scotty's efforts would lessen their arrival time at the Pleiades Cluster by almost two weeks. So Spock had arranged a meeting of the engineering section's top people: the First Officer and Lieutenant Commander Scott, plus Lieutenants Vincent DeSalle and Hikaru Sulu. Originally a relief navigator, Mr. DeSalle had been promoted to assistant chief engineer. He had, more than once, taken the helm in the absence of more senior officers.

Before becoming a member of the senior bridge crew, Mr. Sulu's first assignment onboard the *Enterprise* had been as chief of section in the astrophysics department. Along with his many other "hobbies," Sulu had kept up with developments from his first posting.

Dr. Leonard McCoy sat alone in the conference room of the Enterprise. The fact that he had not been included among those ordered to attend the conference did not matter to the doctor. The fact that his best friend, James T. Kirk, was missing was reason enough to include himself. Jim, Berek, Shelton Jackson and Bakor K'Yle had been gone too long, much too long. And McCoy was worried. Logically, he knew, worry would not help rescue the Captain.

"I'm glad Spock doesn't read minds uninvited," McCoy thought. "If he ever heard me talking like this, I'd never hear the end of it."

McCoy had no data padd in front of him, no stack of file tapes. His only paraphernalia was a cup of black coffee, a variation of "Southern Pecan," an old flavor from the doctor's home in Georgia. When he stopped by the mess to secure a cup from the synthesizer, he had considered ordering a mint julep. It probably would not help him make any significant contributions to the meeting, but at least it would numb his frazzled nerves.

Spock would never admit it, McCoy knew, but the Vulcan, too, was worried about the Captain. At least they had a starting point for a search, but they were still weeks away from obtaining even the most rudimentary sensor data.

The door to the conference room whooshed open and Mr. Spock walked in, followed by Scott and Sulu.

When he saw Leonard McCoy already seated at the table, Spock said, "Doctor, you were not ordered to attend this meeting."

“Mr. Spock, wild horses could not keep me away,” McCoy answered, “and don’t lecture me about my choice of imagery.”

“Very well, Doctor,” Spock said and without further comment, sat down. If his intention had been to pacify the doctor’s temperament, he failed.

“Dammit, Spock!” McCoy growled.

Spock’s face was a mask of pure, cherubic innocence.

“Gentlemen,” Scott said, “I think we can begin. Mr. DeSalle is running some tests for me. Significant data would be lost if he left his post just now, so he will join us as soon as he is finished. According to the Nomad log tapes, making the actual changes in the propulsion system will be possible. However, there are other factors that may put us in the same position as when Nomad made its changes – the physical stress on the design of the ship may be something we will not be able to overcome.”

“Mr. Spock, I’ve been studying the preliminary readouts Scotty supplied, and if he is successful in increasing our speed, it will take a delicate balance of the navi-computers to fly us smoothly to the Cluster,” Sulu said.

“I have been working a sub-routine program to assist you, Mr. Sulu,” Spock replied, “but navigation will be the least of our problems.”

“Aye,” Scotty began, “we must develop a new bracing system for the warp nacelles and new shielding for the anti-matter containment pods. All of that increased activity will put a strain on my bairns that they were never designed to handle.”



“Mr. Scott, I believe that if you reroute the spatial displacement array through the positive voltage micro-processors, you will increase containment strength on the pods by 34.973 percent,” Spock said.

“Good idea, Mr. Spock, but what about the stress on the warp nacelles. There is simply no way to physically shore them up,” Scotty answered.

“I was working on that problem earlier with DeSalle,” Sulu interjected, “and while we cannot add actual, physical bracing to the nacelles, it might be possible to do it with a deflector field. We have several portable, emergency deflectors onboard, the kind we use when we set up temporary base camps on unexplored worlds. Crews working in environmental suits could position them – one on each of the nacelles, along their outer edges. Then if we set the emitters to a close proximity amplitude modulation, the system should strengthen the molecular structure of the pylons. That way they will be able to withstand the additional thrust of warp drive above factor 10.”

Just then Vincent DeSalle burst into the conference room, his face covered with a wide smile.

“Report, Mr. DeSalle,” Spock said.

“It will be close, Mr. Spock,” he said, “but I’ll bet you credits to navy beans it will work!”

“Well, don’t just stand there man,” McCoy ordered, “get cracking.”

“You heard ‘Captain McCoy’,” Spock replied. “Gentlemen, begin your efforts at once.”

As the engineering team left the conference room, Doctor McCoy folded his arms in a gesture of absolute satisfaction. The Science Officer's only response was to come as close to a smile as McCoy had seen on the Vulcan's face since the conclusion of the ritual of koon-ut kal-if-fee.

Spock walked to the door, stopped and turned back to McCoy.

"Coming, Doctor?" he asked.

"Wild horses, Mr. Spock," McCoy answered. "Wild horses."

*Anatorr stood up abruptly, knocking his chair over, and walked away from the table. He stopped at the window and stared out into the darkness. I got up immediately and stood behind him, wrapping my arms around his waist, burying my face into his back.*

*“What are you looking at?” I asked. “What do you see out there?”*

*“Princess,” he said, “I can see only ten years of confinement, torture and loneliness – the ten years of the yachenka. The ten years that destroyed me. The ten years that you restored to me on our night of discovery. And I see the discussion of this night condemning me once again to the hopelessness of those years. This night will rip you from my arms.”*

*With a strength born of rage, rage at his words, I spun Anatorr around, pulled his face down to me and kissed him. Heedless of the others in the room, I kissed him as passionately as if this were our first kiss, as fiercely as if I would never kiss him again.*

*“I have told you before. I will repeat it now. I will never let you go!”*

*But my beloved spoke prophetically.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Before they had gone to bed, Obolen had opened the doors to the two bedrooms and stoked the fire so that the pot-bellied stove radiated heat throughout the small house. If the population of Antos IV had ever constructed such a device for heating their homes, it was so far in the planet's past that Bakor K'Yle had no knowledge of it. For Captain James T. Kirk, it was a pleasant reminder of his childhood in Iowa. His grandparents kept, and used, an antique coal-burning stove.

Obolen and Gernet laughed heartily when Kirk told of a time, he was about twelve years old, he remembered, when he was alone one winter evening in his grandparents' house. His grandfather always delayed switching on the solar heating system for the fall season, preferring to do things "the way the Iowa pioneers did them." Until the winter storms whistled down out of Canada with arctic ferocity, Grandfather heated the entire house with one stove, located in the living room. When Grandmother was baking, an old-style oven added warmth to the back of the house, but little of that heat filtered into the bathroom.

Young Jimmy Kirk had taken a bath late that evening, and as soon as he opened the door, the warmth of the small bathroom was replaced by the colder air from the hallway. He wrapped himself in a towel and scurried into the living room to stand in front of the old stove. As he luxuriated in the warmth of the old fossil fuel burner, the towel slipped from around his waist. When he bent over to pick up the towel, Jimmy

forgot how close he was to the stove. When his bare backside connected with the hot firebox, he remembered.

Ensign K'Yle tried his best not to laugh at the story – after all, this was his captain – but the effort was futile. Captain Kirk seemed not to mind. It was obviously a fond memory. The Captain did, however, rub the seat of his pants in a gesture mocking the old injury.

Kirk continued with his reminiscing, telling how he and his brother, Sam, spent many a winter night in his grandparents' upstairs bedroom, buried under layers of old-fashioned quilts. Their grandmother would “tuck the boys in,” adjusting the quilts, often as many as six, to make sure the boys would be warm during the night.

“Every night, Grandmother would finish adjusting the heavy blankets and say, ‘There now. Snug as bugs in a rug,’” Kirk smiled. “The homogenized heating system onboard my starship may be more efficient, but it lacks a certain character, a certain humanity.”

“It also lacks a grandmother,” Obolen noted.

“Yes, Obolen, but on the *Enterprise* we have a chief medical officer who learned his bedside manner from someone's grandmother,” the Captain said.

“Are we thinking of the same physician, Captain?” K'Yle asked. “I am not able to visualize Doctor McCoy as being similar to anyone's grandmother.”

“Ensign, you just haven't known Bones long enough to see through his disguise.”

Gradually, the evening wound down.

Finally, Gernet shook the grate to dislodge the ashes, and shoveled anthros onto the glowing coals. As he banked the fire for the night, he directed Kirk and K'Yle to sleep in his bedroom, since it was directly opposite the stove. When he joined his brother in Obolen's room, Gernet said, "We owe much to our visitors, but they may not be safe here."

"If the Bolskars or the Vargons find them, they will not be safe anywhere on Resenka," Obolen replied.

"We must help them finish their repairs so they can complete their escape," Gernet said.

"Agreed, Brother. In the morning, I will contact the Others."

\* \* \* \* \*

In the middle of winter, Adzeva rose late, fighting against the Snow Princess for a place in the sky. Or so folk lore said.

As the star rose in the morning sky, Jim Kirk stood by the window and looked eastward at the glowing horizon. Kirk had slept soundly, but as was his habit, awakened early, slipping quietly out of the bedroom. It was impossible to shake the stove grate quietly. Clinkers ground against the metal, and then dropped into soft ashes. Kirk opened the door on the front of the stove and using a long metal poker, stirred the embers to life. He dropped a handful of kindling sticks onto the glowing coals and watched them burst into flames. Then he scooped a few shovels of anthros into the stove and closed the lid. He opened the draft on the stove pipe so that air could feed the fire.

Satisfied, he found his mug from the night before, rinsed it in the sink, filled it with kvasale, and sat the mug on the stove's flat top surface. When the liquid was warm, he picked up the mug and walked to the window. For the moment, no snow was falling. He sipped the kvasale and wondered if Resenka had anything that passed for coffee.

Kirk turned from the window and crossed to a large wooden desk, tucked into the far corner of the room. Above the desk was a shelf that seemed to overflow with books. One end of the shelf was against the wall, but the opposite end was open. The books looked like a frozen waterfall, but one that was rapidly thawing, threatening to send the books crashing to the floor.

Kirk absently ran his fingers along the spines of the books, reading unfamiliar titles penned by unfamiliar authors. All of the volumes were professionally printed and bound except one. It was made of irregularly sized sheets of white and brown paper, sewn together in the middle, and covered with a much heavier, pale green paper cover. In neat, precise handwriting, the cover identified the book as "The Diary of Elena." Intrigued by promise of personal recollections, written by hand, Kirk opened the diary to the first page and began to read.

\* \* \* \* \*

*I was 19. He was 43. But for 19 months, 9 days and 14 hours the difference in our ages did not matter. Now that he is dead (and I will soon join him), I remember that it never did matter. And I remember, too, that he was the only man who ever loved me*

*for myself. There were men before him and there were men after him, but they – including my father – only used me. The ones who came after him were much more fully rewarded because of what his love taught me – not about technique, but about myself. One of those men loved me, and I cared for him, but the memory of the first man to ever care about me, just for me, is the strongest, happiest memory of all.*

*For 19 months, 10 days and 14 hours he sacrificed his life, his world for me, to love me. I told him to go away and never return, and I still remember the hurt which filled his eyes.*

*But I know he never stopped loving me. He often said, “I love you. I will always love you. There will never be a day when I will not love you. With my last breath, Elena, I will speak your name.” He kept his promise.*

*And I betrayed him. I betrayed us both. He would have said, “Princess, it does not matter. I love you.” Perhaps when I meet him in death I will be able to ask his forgiveness.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Kirk did not hear Obolen open his bedroom door, but he turned as his host walked to the desk, the old wooden floor signaling Obolen’s advance.

“Good morning, James.”

“Good morning, Obolen.”



Without preamble, Obolen reached out to the Captain and took the diary from his hands.

“Who is Elena?” Kirk asked.

“A most remarkable young woman,” Obolen answered, and gently closed the book. “From what I have learned about you in these few hours,” he continued, “I think you would have been drawn to her. We have an expression on Resenka. She would have been ‘your type.’”

“We have the same expression, Obolen,” Kirk replied, “but you said, ‘She would have been.’”

“Elena is dead.”

Before Kirk could respond, Gernet walked over and joined the conversation. “It’s a long story and one that my brother and I will be glad to tell you. But later.”

“Yes, later,” Obolen said as he closed the diary and placed it back on the shelf.

“If I have offended, I am sorry,” Jim Kirk said.

“There is no need to apologize,” Obolen said. “There was no way you could have known.”

“She obviously meant a great deal to you,” Kirk said, remembering another woman, also long dead. “I will respect your wishes.”

“Your face says you knew such a woman, yourself, James,” Obolen said quietly.

“Yes, Obolen. Her name was Edith Keeler. I knew her for only a few days, but I almost traded the universe for her love.”

“Elena was such a woman,” Obolen replied, “but we have much to do today and right now we do not have time to remember the past.”

Kirk walked away from the desk, stopping in front of the pot-bellied stove. He held his hands out, trying to catch the heat with his fingers. After a few moments, he turned back to Obolen and said, “In one of his dramas, a playwright from my planet has his leading character say, ‘I cannot but remember such things were / That were most precious to me.’”

From the bedroom door, Ensign K’Yle who had been observing the interplay interjected, “His name was William Shakespeare, the play is called Macbeth, and you quote from Act IV, Scene 3.”

“I would like to read your William Shakespeare,” Obolen said. “But now we have much to do. The Vargon commander you spoke of, the one you humiliated, Organ Moss-Kuib, will not take your escape lightly. I am sure he already has search parties looking for you. We need to charge your energy collectors, so that you and Ensign K’Yle can return to space and contact your Enterprise.”

“Agreed,” Kirk said, “but how do we begin?”

Gernet said, “I will fix the morning meal. While those preparations are under way, my brother will go to see some friends who may be able to help us.”

“Do you mean the Others?” Jim Kirk asked.

“How do you know of the Others?” Gernet asked, his voice harder than the previous night when he and Captain Kirk had nearly fought each other.

“How does this stranger know of the Others?” Gernet hurled the question at his brother. “Is their arrival a Bolskar trap? Have we brought spies into our home?”

“Easy, Brother,” Obolen said. “When you were unconscious, back in Oracle Cave, when James Kirk was saving your life, I told him of the existence of the Others. I told him nothing more.”

“Nor do you need to, now, Obolen,” Kirk said. “This seems to be my morning for sticking my nose where it does not belong.”

“No,” Gernet said, his voice now normal, “I will explain. A little. The Others oppose the Bolskars. Did my brother explain about the Bolskars?”

When Kirk nodded, Gernet went on, “The Others are divided into small groups. That way no one knows more than five or six members. If the Others are discovered by the Bolskars they are tortured for information and then executed. And, we have had betrayals. That is why we restrict the size of any one group. Knowledge of other groups is deliberately limited. There is a system of cut-outs which protects our linkage with each other. If members of the group learn of participants outside their company, they keep those names secret. It is for everyone’s protection.”

“That is wise,” K’Yle said, joining the conversation, “but it seems to be inefficient.”

“In what way?” Gernet asked defensively.

“Is there no organization, no hierarchy, no command structure?”

“We do have a commander, but he keeps his identity hidden,” Obolen said. “If he were discovered, the entire resistance movement could be exposed.”

“How do you communicate with him?” Kirk asked.

“It is a slow process,” Obolen said. “We send a signal. It passes through several cut-outs. When he receives it, he arranges for communication, never directly with him, but with someone he trusts.”

“And now, I think we have revealed enough,” Gernet said. “I was about to fix a meal. And you, Ob, were about to send a signal.”

“I will not be gone long,” Obolen said. He retrieved his coat from his room. Then he picked up a small, palm-sized loaf of bread from the table, stuffed it into his pocket, and walked outside.

\* \* \* \* \*

The only reason Obolen ever journeyed to Anatorr’s shop was to contact the Others. Mitork was his cut-out. When Anatorr was executed by the Bolskars, Mitork reluctantly became the director of the business. He hesitated at first, but Lubeme insisted, explaining that she had no knowledge of tabersk stones and dzhhunk bracelets. Mitork, she reminded him, had given Anatorr the first tabersk stones with which he had started his business. Those stones had belonged to Mitork’s mother. The two men had made their first sale from a street corner bench. Only later did they find the building where the store was currently located.

As he approached the building, Obolen watched the street. It was still early and only an old woman was out. She was sweeping the street with her twig-broom. Obolen stood at the corner, looking across into the store front. He could see only Mitork and Kerrioff, so he crossed the street and went inside.

“Well, wood carver, are you here to purchase a fine piece of our jewelry?” Mitork asked without preamble.

“Since you do not sell wood carving tools, that would be a safe assumption,” Obolen said smiling widely.

“In that case, I will buy chai,” he said. “Kerrioff, please take some elbur, go to Betru’s and get three hot, steaming mugs.”

When Kerrioff had left the store, Mitork said, “Give that woman a chance to leave here and she will trample you getting out the door. I used to wonder why Anatorr kept her and now I ask myself the same thing. But I know you didn’t come to discuss Kerrioff and I know you didn’t come to buy dzhhunk. On a cold day like this, you could have used the wire-comm.”

“Ever since Lossky and Panidze were arrested because of indiscretions over the wire-comm, I have ceased to use it for the business of the Others,” Obolen answered.

Mitork laughed, “Kerrioff was talking to her mother until just before you walked in. You would not have been able to reach me, regardless. Now, what do you need.”

“We need to get inside the electricity producing station. Do you know someone who can help us?”

“I surmise that you need a clandestine approach under the cover of darkness. Can you tell me more?”

“For all of our sakes, I would rather not.”

“I know someone who can help, but he is not likely to take the risk without knowing it is important.”

“You can tell him, ‘Obolen said it is important,’” Obolen said with growing irritation. Talking to Mitork was always like fighting a duel with ancient battle swords. Obolen silently wished it would not have been necessary.

“He will know that,” Mitork said, trying to pacify Obolen’s uneasiness. “He will need to know more.”

“We have visitors.”

“Visitors?”

“Yes.”

“And these visitors need to gain entrance into one of the most secured areas in Zenyuk?”

“Yes!”

“Where are these visitors from?”

“I do not know.”

“You have visitors, but you do not know where they are from? Is that not strange?”

“Mitork, you ask more questions than a gossipy eldermother! Even Kerrioff would stop sometime. I have told you all you need to know! Arrange it! We will be at the south end of the station, on the small hilltop, two hours after Adzeva goes below the horizon.”

“Obolen, you ask for a great deal, but offer little.”

“Mitork, this is not a bargaining session for tabersk stones. This is business for the Others!”

“Exactly so. Now, where are these visitors from.”

Obolen was silent for a long time. Finally he said, “They are not from our world.”

“Vargons!” Now it was Mitork’s turn to raise his voice.

“No, Mitork. Did your brain die in the night? They are like us, but from another world. Their vessel is damaged and they need our help repairing it.”

If Mitork was injured by Obolen’s outburst, he did not show it.

“So that is why you need entrance into the producing station,” Mitork said.

“Where is their craft?”

“That, my friend, I will not tell you. That information, your contact does not need.”

“Very well. Two hours after Adzeva sets. I will make the arrangements.”

“Until then, Mitork,” Obolen said, and turned to leave.

“Kerrioff will be back in a minute. You must wait for the chai.”

“First, verbal fencing with you, and next I will have to listen to Kerrioff complain about her mate. ‘Rickard is such an idiot,’ she will say, and then I will be forced to listen to a good man assassinated by the words of a frustrated wife. No, Mitork. You drink my chai.”

As Obolen left the shop, Mitork placed his call.