

"Dadush," I pleaded, "all of this frightens me. Make them stop!"

The old Keeper had fiercely gripped my hand when Anatorr bolted from the table. I had pulled from his grasp to go to Anatorr. Now I was seated in front of him, gripping his sleeves in my fists, pulling at him as if that action would cause him to notice me.

For a long time, he did not speak. When he did, it was not with words I wished to hear.

"I cannot," was all he said, but those two words frightened me more than all of the words which had been said so far. There was a finality to them which I did not understand.

"But you are the Keeper," I protested. "They will listen to you. Make them stop this talk of tenners and yachenkas. Especially about the Others. Make them stop!"

"Yes, Elena, I am the Keeper," Dadush said, his calm voice the direct opposite of my rising hysteria, "but some of the most atrocious acts the Bolskars have committed, and their monstrosities are multiplied countless times, have been against the serkor and against the integrals who follow the Holy Ones."

"Dadush, it may seem to be the greatest contradiction, but since becoming one with Anatorr, I have started to read The Words. And I have gone to the serkor more times in these months than in all of my life. But," I said, my voice now calm, almost cold, "I will follow no one who would try to tear this man away from me."

"No one is trying to separate you and Anatorr," Lared interjected. "But I know that his past, his years in the yachenka, his survival, will give hope to many people."

"I did not know that your hearing was deficient, Lared," I said sharply. "Anatorr has told you and your Others that he will not join your cause."

"He joined it, Elena, when he was led onto the first railway wagon and deported to the yachenka. He had no choice," Lared replied.

"But now he does," I protested.

"Yes, Princess, I do have a choice," Anatorr spoke for the first time in several minutes. "I know that I cannot remain the man you love if I hide from my obligations."

"Anatorr, what are you saying?" I asked. "You are confusing me. You are speaking two different things."

Before Anatorr could answer, Dadush interjected, "Elena, let me tell you about what the Bolskars cruelly call 'The Night of Renewal.'"

He stood up from the table, walked to the hearth and motioned for me to join him.

"Lared," he said, "would you hand me my makings? I would like to fix a smoking pipe."

Lared handed him a gnarled, hollowed-out tree knot into which a stem had been inserted and a soft, dark brown pouch. With great ceremony, Dadush untied a knot at the top of the pouch and loosened the draw string. He dipped his pipe into the pouch and I could smell the pungent tobak. With alternating motions of his thumb and forefin-

ger, he packed the tobak, then put the stem of the pipe between his teeth and sucked experimentally. Satisfied, he took a sliver of kindling wood and ignited it on the glowing coals. He placed that small flame against the tobak and puffed until it glowed, burning with a pleasant aroma. Dadush then leaned back against the fireplace and began.

“I was still a boy when the Bolskars began their worst move against the serkor. Early in their stinking history they had ridiculed the devotion of the integrals. It did not take them long to attack the serkor itself. You know that many places were closed. The buildings were used for many things – no sacrilege was too great. One of the most beautiful in Megin was made a stable for horses. The animals were tied to the altar, their excrements soiled the kneeling places. And the arrests began.

“My own parents were arrested. My father renounced his faith to avoid being sent to the yachenka. ‘Someone must watch out for the children,’ he said. My mother remained true to the Holy Ones and she was sentenced to five years. We never saw her again. That scene in our home was repeated in families all over Resenka.

“At first, the Bolskars concentrated their attacks on the leaders, but even those arrests did not satisfy their obscene quotas.”

“Quotas?” I interrupted.

“Princess,” Anatorr answered, “they determined that 100 people must be arrested in each city, each day. When they could not find enough obvious criminals, the Bolskars arrested anyone who was unlucky enough to cross their paths. Keepers and Shepherdesses with their distinctive costumes, were easy prey.”

“Every day the papers were filled with stories of the arrests,” Dadush continued. “No one was ever charged with the crime of following his faith. Instead, they were arrested for sedition – teaching their faith to their children.

“When the arrests of the Keepers did not fulfill their lusts for punishment, the Bolskars began to arrest the integrals. Anyone seen leaving the serkor was marked for the yachenka.”

“You mentioned ‘The Night of Renewal.’ What was that?” I asked.

“There is a small village, not fifty kaalobars west of Ingal-Karbe. It is called Samarett. The Keeper there, an old man, was savagely beaten and almost killed by a gang of Bolskar thugs. When the villagers universally protested, they were universally arrested. Everyone in Samarett was put onto the prison wagons and deported. The entire population of the village was removed. The Bolskars gave the houses and business and lands in Samarett to their henchmen as rewards for loyalty to the movement, for the renewal of Bolskar principles.”

“Even the women and children?” I asked disbelieving.

“Elena, within two days the only sounds that were heard in Samarett were the howling of the wind and the barking of the dogs. They were all gone,” Dadush whispered, his face streaked with tears. “They were all gone.”

“But the children,” I sobbed, “they were innocent. They had done nothing against the Bolskars.”

“But their parents had,” Dadush replied. “And that was enough for the Bolskars.”

“For every ten children who boarded the wagons,” Lared said, “two walked off alive at the yachenka. The bodies were left beside of the tracks for animals to devour. Elena, the Bolskars are the animals that the Others oppose.”

“But the children,” I repeated. And then addressing no one in particular, I said, “There is something wrong inside of my body. I am told I cannot bear children. And those monsters murdered children. They took from Resenka what I may never give.”

My own face was now tear-stained. It seemed as if my eyes were fountains that knew no limit. I looked at the faces of the men in the room – Dadush, Lared, Obolen and Gernet. Last of all I looked at Anatorr. I was not surprised that he was crying. He was easily moved to tears, both by sorrow and by joy.

When Anatorr’s eyes met mine, my expression was both a question and an answer. He smiled and nodded.

“Lared,” I said with great confidence, “Anatorr and I will join you. We will join the Others.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“It’s called latt-beast,” Gernet said, scooping crisp slices of meat onto his guests’ plates. “In the days of Aldan and Elissa the latt-beast was only conquered by the most skilled of our hunters. Today they are all raised in processing farms, more efficient, but less sporting. The only animals still living in the wild are those that escape from the farms. And they soon perish, either from starvation because they, too, have forgotten how to hunt, or because they are crushed beneath the wheels of a lumbering tramway.”

“Who are Aldan and Elissa?” James Kirk asked his host.

“Aldan and Elissa were the first two people created by the Holy Ones,” Gernet answered.

“On my world, their names were Adam and Eve,” Kirk said.

“It would seem, Captain,” Bakor K’Yle interjected, “that this is a parallel creation myth. It is similar to the one told on Berengaria VII. Their names were Artorvaal and Ellieanne.”

“Myth, Mr. K’Yle?” Gernet said, his voice clipped.

“A traditional or legendary story, usually concerning some superhuman being or some alleged person or event, whether without or with a determinable basis of fact or a natural explanation,” K’Yle answered.

The Captain rolled his eyes, thinking to himself, “Spock has ruined this boy.”

“I understand the term, Mr. K’Yle,” Gernet said, “I am merely trying to determine if it is the standard practice of your United Federation of Planets, to discount the cherished beliefs of all the worlds you visit.”

“I was making no value judgements at all, sir,” K’Yle countered, “I was merely reporting an observation. If you would allow me to finish, I was about to say that the similarities in these occurrences may support their emergence as actual facts rather than as mere cultural myths. I believe that these repeated similarities may indicate support for the theory of a common planetary origin for the humanoid races found throughout the galaxy. The similarities of race and language over such a widely scattered range calls for an explanation we have so far been unable to give.”

Gernet shook his head and smiled at Kirk, “What did he say?”

“I think he is suggesting that we may be related, Gernet.”

“Why didn’t he say so in the first place?”

“It is a failing of serious-minded types, like science officers and their understudies.”

“Captain,” K’Yle said, “I see no reason to insult me. I was merely stating the obvious conclusion that...”

“Mr. K’Yle, I was right,” Kirk interrupted, “Spock has corrupted you! Now, shut up and eat your breakfast.”

“Sir, how can I...”

“Eat, Ensign. That’s an order.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” K’Yle said, carved off a small piece of latt-beast and, with obvious satisfaction, began to eat.

* * * * *

Before returning home, Obolen decided to survey the area around the electricity processing planet. Darkness would be gathering when he, Gernet, Kirk and K’Yle finally reached the hill overlooking the plant, and he wanted to get as close now, in broad daylight, as he could. Security, he knew, would be tight.

Shortly after it became obvious that the Bolskar domination of Resenka was going to be oppression of a kind never before experienced on their planet, a group of the Others had attempted to sabotage the plant. Neither Obolen nor Gernet had been members of that group, but they were both aware of the outcome of the raid. The invaders easily penetrated the outer perimeter, since no attack had been anticipated. Early protests against the Bolskars were always verbal. No formal opposition had, as of that point, produced violence.

Six men and two women, armed with only hand weapons, and a home-made detonating device, walked through the front gates, and stormed into the plant manager’s office. They took the director and his two women staff members hostage and settled in for a long siege.

Using the director’s wire-comm, they demanded the right to negotiate for terms. When a representative from the Bolskars met with them, the Others presented a short list, asking only city-wide safety inspections of the manufacturing plants, the lifting of official censorship of the gazettas and better medical care for the elderly members of

the community. Their naivete was obvious in their requests and the Bolskars took advantage of their trusting nature.

The next team of negotiators took in food and supplies for the Others and their hostages. Inside the false bottom of one of the containers was an explosive device which could be set off by a remote radio signal. The explosion tore through the director's office, leveling that corner of the building, and killing the hostages and their captors. The Others never again resorted to negotiations, instead they began a campaign of hit-and-run strikes. As a result, the Bolskars increased security around possible target locations and increased tyranny against the population of Resenka.

Immediately after the funerals, Obolen and Gernet joined the Others, although they were not yet considered men. The leader of the strike had been their father. He had never recovered from the death of his wife in an accident at the electricity processing plant. Her job had been inspecting connections between transmission lines and the generators. All of the junctions were exposed and one worker had already died when he had fallen into the wiring. Workers' protests had brought no changes. When his wife became the second victim of the plant's ineffectual safety features, he had jumped at the opportunity to lead the mission. It was his only foray into the shadowy world of the underground freedom fighters. His only success was in inspiring his sons to take up the cause of the Others.

The memory of those long ago days haunted Obolen as he boarded a westbound tramway and rode toward the electricity processing plant. Out of habit, more than from suspicion, he switched trams three times, until he was confident no one was

following him. His last connection led him past the plant and behind the hill that dominated the rear of the facility. From the top of the hill the land dropped away quickly, forming cliffs which ended at the Wikfa River.

Obolen left the tram two stops past the plant and rode back one stop. Then he walked to the frozen river and set out along the shore line. Even from the bank of the Wikfa, the large, triple smoke stacks of the generating plant could be seen. Using them as a landmark, Obolen left the ice-bound river and scouted for a passage up the cliff face. When he reached the top, he was well back from the security fence and well hidden among the thick stand of Always Trees. Not wishing to leave tracks that a security patrol could see, he pulled a small, collapsible glaz-ochkey from his pocket and studied the plant through its magnifying lenses.

After 45 minutes, he climbed back down the cliff, walked to the tramway stop and caught a direct tram for home. A tall man, dressed in a well-worn, dark brown suit and heavy winter coat was the only other passenger to board the tram with Obolen. The man rode one stop and got off. As the tram pulled away, the man consulted a small notebook and stepped into a public wire-comm booth. He dropped two coins into a slot at the top of the wire-comm and dialed a number from his notebook. It was answered by the perimeter guard at the electricity processing plant.

* * * * *

Bakor K'Yle was experimenting with a smoking pipe which Gernet had offered him after they had consumed their breakfast. Captain Kirk had declined the pipe,

retiring instead to the quiet of their sleeping quarters to record a log entry in his tricorder.

“Mr. K’Yle, it is a delicate puffing. You don’t inhale like the icy breath of the Snow Princess howling outside our house,” Gernet said, obviously enjoying the Antosian’s attempt to master the device.

“Perhaps I still have the tobak packed in too tightly,” K’Yle observed.

“No, it’s fine. Just puff. Draw slowly.”

Almost as if by magic, the flame of the match bent towards the bowl of the smoking pipe and ignited the tobak on the surface.

“Puff again, K’Yle,” Gernet encouraged, “and don’t swallow the smoke.”

The warning came a millisecond too late. Bakor K’Yle’s face turned a coppery red and his eyes began to water. Smoke exploded from his nose and mouth as he coughed, gagging for breath.

When he could finally speak, K’Yle said, “Are you sure it is worth this considerable agony just to taste the smoke? I may die before I learn how to do this properly.”

“Absolutely! It is perhaps the second greatest pleasure known to man.”

“And what is the first?” K’Yle asked ingenuously.

“Mr. K’Yle, if I need to tell you that, your Captain has been very remiss in his training of you,” Gernet laughed.

K’Yle puffed thoughtfully on the pipe, this time avoiding swallowing the smoke and the resultant coughing seizures. Then his face once again changed colors and he said, “Oh! You mean the ways of a man with a maid! No, the Captain has not included

this course in my training curricula. But it is not necessary. I believe it is a natural product of reproductive biology.”

“Who taught you to talk like that, K’Yle?” Gernet prodded. “We’re talking about love, not biology.”

K’Yle had the wisdom not to answer. Instead, he concentrated on his pipe. He was soon hidden behind a pale gray haze of aromatic smoke.

Captain Kirk chose that moment to return to the room. In mock horror, he said, “Mr. K’Yle, your head is on fire!”

“Captain, it is only the smoking pipe. My head is quite well,” K’Yle answered innocently.

Kirk smiled and said, “The smoke it encircled his head like a wreath.”

When he noticed Gernet’s puzzled expression, Kirk said, “Another earth writer, Gernet. Clement Clarke Moore.”

“A Visit from St. Nicholas,” K’Yle said. “Captain, are you casting me in the role of St. Nicholas? I believe the poem indicates the gentleman was of rather significant stature – ‘he had a little round belly that shook when he laughed, like a bowl full of jelly.’ I hardly think I qualify, although I do have the ability...”

Before he could complete the sentence, Kirk interrupted, believing, correctly, that K’Yle was about to reveal his shape-shifting ability, a fact Kirk wished to keep secret.

“The ability to question your Captain’s appraisal at every possible opportunity,” Kirk finished.

K’Yle nodded understanding.

“But is it not the duty of a science officer, even an Ensign, to offer alternative avenues of thinking to his commanding officer,” he said.

Before Kirk could reply, the outside door swung open and Obolen stepped inside, kicking snow from his boots.

“Well, Ob. Were you successful?” Gernet asked.

“I spoke to Mitork. He was using the wire-comm as I left,” Obolen answered, his cheeks and nose reddened by the wind.

Gernet took a kettle from the top of the pot-bellied stove and poured his brother a steaming mug of chai. Obolen wrapped his hands around the mug, enjoying the heat the hot liquid generated on his cold hands. He put his face over the steam and inhaled the fragrant aroma. Only then did he notice the thick cloud of smoke around Bakor K’Yle.

“Are you on fire, Mr. K’Yle?” he asked.

“Your brother was attempting to teach me to learn the proper use of the smoking pipe. I am not sure he has been successful,” K’Yle replied.

“What took you so long, Brother?” Gernet asked Obolen.

“I went to the electricity producing plant to get a look at security emplacements while it was light. I don’t wish to be surprised tonight.”

“A good plan, Obolen,” Kirk said. “What did you learn?”

“I learned that if Mitork is not successful in acquiring assistance for us, we will not gain entrance into the plant. Security procedures are most exacting.”

“Who is Mitork?”

“Mitork runs a small shop which sells dzhhunk and tabersk stones. He took it over when Anatorr,” Obolen hesitated, “when Anatorr was executed.”

“And who is, was, Anatorr?”

“Perhaps, Brother, you may wish for James to read Elena’s diary,” Gernet said gently.

“Yes, Brother. I think it would explain much.”

Obolen silently finished removing his boots and heavy coat and walked to the shelf where he had placed the diary that morning. He opened the volume to the first page and stared at the words without reading them. Then he placed the diary in Kirk’s hands and without a word, walked into his bed room and closed the door.

Sometime later, as he turned the last page and closed the diary, Jim said, to no one in particular, “It is almost as if she knew that a stranger to Resenka would read this.”

Obolen had returned to the room earlier and was standing, looking out the window.

“The Bolskars tortured her to death, James,” Obolen said at last. “I went back to her and buried her. She sleeps not far from here.”

Kirk carefully placed the diary back on the shelf and crossed the room to stand beside Obolen.

Obolen continued, “The ExComm searched all over Zenyuk for her diary. I do not know why they wish to possess it. I do not know how they learned of its existence – only a handful of trustworthy people have ever seen it. It contains no military or political

confidences, although it does reveal some of the Bolskar ruthlessness. That, however, is no secret. It is as if they are afraid that we will remember her. If they can destroy her diary, perhaps they think they will forever remove her spirit from Resenka. That, James, will not happen. Not as long as I still draw breath.”

“Obolen, I am not allowed, no Star Fleet Officer is allowed, to interfere in the development of another world,” Kirk said. “I vowed an oath that I would die rather than interfere. As much as I would like to do so on Resenka, I cannot.

“But I can see to it that her diary survives. Using my tricorder, I can make a copy of it that will endure. Her account will become an official part of Star Fleet records. The story of her courage will circulate throughout the Federation.”

“Do it James. Do it for Elena. Do it for all of us.”

Kirk adjusted the tricorder and began to scan the diary. When he had flipped the last page, he said, “I have one question. The child. What happened to her?”

“James Kirk, I am learning to trust you. But not that much. I cannot take the risk that you might fall back into the hands of the Vargons, or worse, into the hands of the Bolskars.”

“Worse?”

“Much worse. For all of us. Now quickly, we must leave for the rendezvous.”

It is astonishing what you hear when you start listening. Voices of the anguished, the cries of the tortured, the whimpers of those left behind – they had been there all along, but once they passed before you, you could no longer ignore them. On my way to work each morning at Anatorr’s shop, I passed a gazetta board. Before dawn each day a copy of that day’s gazetta was pasted up for public reading. I had stopped occasionally at the little shelter to get out of a quick rain shower, or to buy flowers from one of the old women who were always there, but I never read the words on the paper. After I joined the Others, I read for names I might recognize. If the names were not acquaintances, the pattern of arrests were tragically familiar.

“Subversives Arrested” the headlines screamed. It was the leading story on the morning after Anatorr and I returned from Ingal-Karbe.

Twenty young people, all of them around my age, had decided to hold an impromptu party. They took up a collection to buy sweet cakes and other refreshments. They listened to music and talked for hours. They made one mistake – they forgot the rule about registering any meeting of ten or more citizens with the Pol’s office for Public Meetings/Extraordinary and Otherwise.

To the ExComm it was obvious – to the Bolskars, many things are obvious that no one else can see – that they were a subversive group, planning sabotage, rebellion, or other anti-Bolskar activity. The music and the genial talk was a front, a cover-up, for

their real intentions. The money they had collected, was obviously intended to be used, not to purchase refreshments, but to ferment rebellion. Those who confessed were sent to the yachenka for three years. Those who did not confess were executed.

And I had never heard of such things before.

My immediate reaction was to become a zealot. Anatorr wisely tempered my fervor.

“Princess,” he said, “you are a known associate of a citizen of the yachenka. Even though you have never shown any tendencies toward agitation, they still watch you because you know me. If you draw attention to yourself, someone will see it and report it and one night you will just disappear. There is a better way. That is why we joined with the Others.”

My circle of contacts was limited at first. It is unusual, but not unheard of, for the Bolskars to infiltrate the Others. The reasons for becoming an infiltrator are as varied as for joining the resistance. Because my convictions were unknown, except to Anatorr, Obolen and Gernet, my initial contacts were limited. At first, I was perturbed by this, but I accepted it as a vital precaution – denouncers were plentiful.

One young boy was heralded as “an example,” for all citizens of Resenka. He had overheard his parents, in casual conversation with their friends, question some of the actions of the Bolskars. In school, he had been taught absolute obedience to the leaders of our world, and so he told his teacher. The teacher told her supervisor, who

told someone in the proper office and one night there was a knock at the family's apartment. The parents were arrested and the boy became a hero.

In spite of the atmosphere of suspicion and fear which the Bolskars cultivated to their own ends, there were safe ways to contact the Others. Most of our living quarters are small and overcrowded – I had a small place of my own, but only because it was in the old section of Zenyuk where few people sought dwellings. It was not uncommon for five or six families to be crowded into a six-room communal flat. Each family had one room for their “private” use, but they shared a kitchen, bath and tualyet with perhaps twenty or 25 other people. I heard of one communal flat where fifty-four people lived. So, regardless of the weather, regardless of the time of day, citizens of Resenka walk the streets – it is the only way they can have “privacy.”

If you wish to make contact with someone, just go outside. Wait by a tramway stop, or simply start walking. Sooner or later you will either see that person, or someone of whom you can ask, “Have you seen my friend?”

“I think I saw him walking on the next street over.”

And so you cross at the next block, and if you don't see him soon, you ask again. Word will spread and even if the Bolskars or their informants suspect something, it is almost impossible to detect “subversive” activity in a moving crowd of people. Especially, if the walkers speak softly and discretely.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

First Officer's Log: Stardate 5913.2

The efforts of Mr. Scott and his engineering team have been concluded. We have performed twenty-one separate computer simulations, each time correcting a problem which, if the engines had actually been on line, would have destroyed the *Enterprise*. The last seven tests have revealed no additional problems, beyond the obvious need to closely monitor the dilithium crystal chamber for possible changes in the crystals' integrity. I am therefore ready to order immediate implementation of the augmented systems. If we are correct, Warp Factor 11 will be available to us within 4.902 minutes.

If we are incorrect, this will be my last log entry. Although I have not calculated the odds, the possibility of our destruction exists. Therefore, I am jettisoning a recorder marker containing all ships logs to this point.

* * * * *

"Mr. Scott, are all engineering systems ready?" Spock asked.

"You can count on my bairns, sir," Scotty replied.

"I take that as an affirmative, Mr. Scott. Mr. Sulu, is the approach vector to the Pleiades we discussed laid in?" Spock continued.

"Plotted and on the board, sir," the navigator answered.

"Mr. Chekov, ahead Warp Factor One."

“Initiating warp, Mr. Spock,” the helmsman responded, and punched the controls, dissolving the *Enterprise* into the warp bow effect.

Seconds later the Russian reported, “We are cruising at Warp One. My board shows all systems normal.”

“Mr. Scott, do you concur?” Spock asked.

“Aye, that I do. Engineering shows all systems green.”

“Very well. Mr. Chekov, go to Warp Two. We will do this in one warp increments. At Warp Eight, I want a full systems diagnostic check.”

Three minutes later, the *Enterprise* was racing towards the Pleiades Cluster at over five hundred times the speed of light. Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott sat at his bridge station, going over read-outs. His left hand tapped several controls and he scanned the panels, checking the results of his tests. His right hand was extended, resting on the edge of the panel so Scotty could “feel the pulse of the ship.” Satisfied, he turned to the center seat and said, “Warp Nine at your discretion, Mr. Spock.”

“Thank you, Engineer. Helm, Warp Nine.”

The sound of the engines slightly changing pitch was the only noticeable difference to the bridge crew.

“It gets tricky from here,” Scotty said. “All computer simulations showed the first abnormalities after we passed warp factor nine.”

Once again, Mr. Spock ordered a full diagnostic scan and once again the engines showed one hundred percent of normal.

“Mr. Chekov, go directly to warp factor eleven. Mr. Scott, stand by emergency dappers.”

This time the familiar engine noise was replaced by the accumulated sounds of a system functioning at levels which its designers had never considered. A shrill whistle increased for several seconds and then settled into the familiar pattern, one that the crew would not even notice after a time. Outside in the void of space, the Constitution class starship, the pride of the United Federation of Planets, raced silently toward the Pleiades Cluster and the rescue of its captain and shipmates.

From his customary position at the left side of the captain’s chair, Leonard McCoy said, “Is it safe to breathe again? I don’t think I’ve taken a breath for the last four minutes.”

“Doctor,” Spock said, “that is impossible.”

“For a Vulcan, perhaps, but not for a simple country doctor who does not know from one minute to the next whether his atoms are going to stay in their accustomed configuration or whether he is going to be scattered to kingdom come.”

“Doctor, if any member of this crew suspects that you are merely a ‘simple country doctor,’ it is certainly not I.”

“No sense getting mushy at this stage of the game, Spock,” McCoy said, obviously pleased to break the tension.

“Mushy, Doctor?”

“Mushy, Mr. Spock. As in effusive, emotive, sentimental, gushing, gooey. All of those words could apply to a certain well-known Vulcan Science Officer.”

“To follow your slightly contrived, and somewhat unexpectedly logical, trail of synonyms, there are some which apply to a certain ship’s doctor – pleonastic, redundant, verbose, and long-winded. And do I need to remind you, Doctor, that as a Vulcan, I am incapable of those emotions?”

“Do I need to remind you, Mr. Spock, that as the Chief Medical Officer of this ship, I do not believe you?”

Doctor Leonard McCoy folded his arms across his chest, raised his eyebrow in a perfect imitation of his Vulcan friend’s expression and turned from the command chair to the view screen with a decidedly self-satisfied expression.

“I have often felt that you could be convinced more easily by a crystal ball and enchanter’s beads, than by hard, scientific proof, Doctor McCoy,” Spock countered.

McCoy’s next rejoinder was cut short as a red alert siren filled the bridge. Instead of thrusting a verbal jab at Commander Spock, the doctor snapped, “What the blazes?”

“Sorry, Doctor,” Scotty said, “it is only a pre-programmed alarm, signaling the need to decrease speed to Warp Nine so we can do a full analysis of our alterations. Sulu, DeSalle and I have two more such alarms programmed in over the next four hours.”

“Scotty,” McCoy said, “I don’t know who is going to kill me first – you or Spock.”

From her communications console, Lieutenant Uhura spoke, “Doctor, you are very likely to outlive all of us.”

“Gallop around the cosmos is a game for the young, Nyota. Besides, I’m not sure I’d want to.”

Hikaru Sulu spoke in a stage whisper, “Now who’s being mushy?”

* * * * *

Unaccustomed as they were to the icy temperatures of Resenka’s winter, James Kirk and Bakor K’Yle needed extra protection against the cold. Obolen and Gernet had provided them with garments which would not immediately shout, “stranger,” and they put them on over the make-shift insulating clothes Kirk had fashioned back on the Isaac Newton.

“Ready?” Gernet asked as he opened the front door.

Listening to the sound of the wind and watching snow swirl in the fast-approaching darkness, Kirk said, “No, but that does not matter. We need to get to the rendezvous. The longer we stay here the greater danger you and Obolen will be in.”

“We appreciate your concern, James,” Obolen said, “but we have chosen the danger.”

“Then, let’s go,” Kirk ordered.

K’Yle draped a pouch over his shoulder and across his chest. In it were the five modified phasers they hoped to charge with sufficient energy to regenerate the Newton’s engines. The phaser which still held enough power for three controlled discharges was in the Captain’s right front coat pocket, close at hand.

It was definitely easier, Kirk thought, to walk using the snegs than it had been tromping through knee-deep snow. The webbed snowshoes took some getting used to, and Kirk had to concentrate on the swinging motion it required to move successfully.

Gernet looked at K'Yle and smiled, "Don't fight it, Mr. K'Yle. Swing your legs naturally."

"Sir, there is nothing natural about the motion required to traverse in these snegs," K'Yle said. "It would be decidedly easier if I could grow several inches taller."

"Mr. K'Yle," Obolen said, "the Holy Ones asked, 'Who by taking thought can add to his stature?'"

"I am sure they were cautioning all of us, that there are occasions when we need to 'stay within ourselves,'" Jim Kirk said, surreptitiously reminding K'Yle not to give away his shape-shifting ability.

"That is a novel interpretation, James," Obolen said, "but they meant that, if we would trust them, they were more able to care for us than we are able to care for ourselves."

"Of course, Obolen," Kirk said, "I understand. It is a good lesson, but one I have been slow to learn."

"In the short time my brother and I have known you," Gernet said, "I would say it is a lesson which you have not studied."

"Call it a failing of Starship captains," Kirk replied.

The quartet trudged silently for several minutes. Their plan was to take a route, through the Always Trees, away from their intended destination. They would leave their

snegs in a secret place and board a tramway that would circle around, reaching the electricity producing station from the opposite direction which Obolen had explored that morning. Obolen took the lead with Kirk and K'Yle in single file behind him. Gernet trailed far enough back so that to a casual observer, he appeared to be walking by himself and not part of the group ahead.

Kirk had given each of the brothers a communicator before they moved out from their house. His instructions on its use were quickly mastered and he cautioned them to use the devices only in an emergency. Kirk disliked introducing more off-world technology to Resenka, but the planet had been contaminated by alien technology long before the *Isaac Newton* entered its stormy atmosphere. The brothers had, however, promised to return the communicators, once Kirk and K'Yle were safely back onboard their shuttlecraft.

When they had been walking for thirty minutes, Kirk stopped and looked behind him to judge Gernet's progress and to visually scout the terrain. He noticed their tracks in the snow and said, "Obolen, we would make better progress if we walked in a straight line, like your brother seems to be doing."

"James, that is something my elderfather said to me, many years ago," Obolen said, smiling at the memory. "He had taken us for a walk one afternoon, across a freshly covered field of snow and I meandered all over it. He chided me on my haphazard wandering. I had walked to the trees, climbed to the top of a neighbor's fence, chased a Keelork out of his brush pile nest, and watched Scarlet Flyers darting through the Always Trees.

“Obolen,’ he had scolded, ‘look where you have been. You have wandered aimlessly all over the field. Observe my steps. My path is direct. I have wasted little effort and have quickly reached my goal. You should never forget this lesson.”

“It seems that you have forgotten it,” K’Yle said.

“On the contrary,” Obolen said, “I have always remembered it. I promised myself that day that I would not miss the best things in life, as my elderfather had done.

“Now we hide our snegs and wait for Gernet.”

* * * * *

They waited in silence for Gernet to catch up. Moments after the quartet walked from the trees to a small tramway shelter, a tram pulled up. The driver, an old woman, bundled under layers of tattered clothing, her legs and feet wrapped in a blanket, was also the ticket agent and the conductor. Obolen and Gernet showed their passes and Obolen purchased tickets for Kirk and K’Yle. Without a word, she engaged the forward gear lever and the tram pulled off.

The tram was almost empty and Gernet, Kirk and K’Yle took seats in the middle, away from the door. Seats in the forward half of the car faced the rear and those in the trailing half of the car faced the front. The men chose the two pair of seats that faced each other and waited for Obolen to join them. Obolen placed the tickets in the wall punch and canceled them for the ride.

“If an inspector with a red badge asks to see your ticket, you must show this,” Obolen said. “The pattern of the holes indicate it was punched on this tram.”

Anticipating the question, Gernet said, "The pattern on every tram is different. The Bolskars are fond of saying there are no free rides. But I'd guess half of the people in this car have neither pass, nor ticket. If they are caught they are fined twice the amount of a monthly pass. If they can't pay, they are simply put off at the next stop where they wait for the tramway which will be following this one and they get right back on. At one time or another almost everyone does it. A few people live on the side all the time, but most people are so afraid of the Bolskars and the ExComm that they blindly follow the rules."

"Live on the side?" K'Yle asked.

"I think it means to beat the system," Kirk said helpfully.

"Your interpretation is correct," Gernet said, "but on Resenka, the system inevitably beats all of us."

"You don't strike me as being a cynic, Gernet," Kirk replied.

"As far back as anyone can remember, Resenka has lived under tyrants. For centuries it was the Ryssart, now it is the Bolskars. Tomorrow, next week, next year it will be someone else, probably the Vargons. It is difficult not to become cynical, James," Gernet answered.

"But you are attempting to make a difference, are you not?" K'Yle answered.

"On Terra there is an expression: 'it is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.'"

"It is a good expression," Obolen acknowledged, "but it is sometimes difficult to find candles on Resenka."

“Then, I suspect you’ll have to make your own,” Kirk replied. “I don’t think the two of you would give up easily.”

“Enough! We should not be talking like this here. The risk of discovery is too great,” Gernet said, his voice was quiet, but the force of it was undeniable.

“And don’t smile. You will draw attention to yourselves if you do,” Obolen warned. “No one on Resenka smiles in public. Not any more.”

They rode in silence the rest of the way. They repeated Obolen’s caution of riding past their intended destination and catching the next tram back. An old man stood at the shelter, holding a smoking pipe. When the four men stepped down from the tram, he clinched it, unlit, between his teeth. After a moment, he took the smoking pipe out of his mouth, stuffed it into his jacket pocket and walked toward the path behind the shelter. He stopped beside a rough wooden lean-to, withdrew his pipe and lit it. Then he moved around the corner and out of sight.

“Come on,” Obolen said, “our equipment is in that shed.”

“The man’s movements were a signal,” Gernet explained. “If he had lit his pipe when we stepped down from the tram, it would have meant that our mission was in jeopardy.”

“How long will it take to fill your collectors?” Obolen asked.

“Approximately thirty minutes for each one,” K’Yle answered.

“That means that we will have to be inside, exposed, for almost three hours,” Gernet said. “That is too long. The risk of exposure is too great.”

“Can we charge more than one phaser at a time?” Kirk asked.

“If we can tap into a large power conduit with our smaller lines, each of us could charge a separate phaser. But my modified connections require that the wires physically be held to the energy contact point in the phaser. We will still need an additional thirty minutes for the fifth phaser,” Ensign K’Yle replied.

“Mr. K’Yle, recalculate our power needs using four phasers,” Kirk ordered.

The Antosian was quiet for a few seconds. Then he said, “Captain, it will reduce our safety margin to a dangerous level.”

“We’ve been short of first one thing and then another almost from the moment we left the Enterprise. Let’s make do with four.”

K’Yle looked around in the dark shed until he found flexible cable. Working quickly, he constructed a four-branch conduit, the individual leads long enough to be comfortably held by a different man. He looked up at his companions and nodded completion.

Satisfied that they were not being observed, the men slipped inside the shed. The brothers quickly gathered several hand tools and put each one in a different pocket. In that way they could keep metal from banging against metal and giving their presence away, once they reached the inside of the factory.

One at a time, the quartet moved back outside and Obolen led the way along the frozen Wikfa River and up to the top of the cliff. He wordlessly motioned for the three men to wait while he explored ahead. When he reached the edge of the forest, just beside of the electricity producing plant, he took a long time to survey the plant’s perimeter fence. Finally, he motioned them to join him. Handing his glaz-ochkey to

Kirk he said, "A small seam has been broken in the fence. Down near the end. We will enter the plant from there."

"Are there no electronic detectors?" K'Yle asked.

"We'll meet that obstacle after we are safely through the fence," Obolen answered. "Now, let's move back into the trees and wait for darkness before an alert patrol guard sees our frozen breath."

I know that scientists can give complicated and unintelligible reasons why our winter climate is so harsh and so prolonged – the tilt of the planetary axis, the relationship of the oceans to the landmass, our distance from Adzeva, and on and on. They may be correct, but I think the people of Resenka will always hold to the stories of the four great magical beings which control the seasons – Snow Princess, Flower Girl, Sower, and Harvest Woman.

As a child, I think I enjoyed Snow Princess' time best of all. I was born during a particularly harsh winter. My father had gone to Ingal-Karbe on business and could not get back. An old woman who lived in the same building helped my mother deliver me – the storms were too severe to venture outside. The doctor finally arrived at my parents' flat two days after I was born.

"When contractions announced the nearness of Elena's birth, I thought she would take a long time to arrive, but my daughter was in a hurry to inhale the Snow Princess' breath," my mother had told the doctor.

"She seems to take to the cold," the doctor had said. "She will be strong, this one."

But as I approached the beginning of my twentieth year, it seemed as if Snow Princess would rule Resenka forever. The snows would almost disappear and then a new winter storm would cover us. Finally, the tiny blossoms of the Crystal Plants began

to push themselves up through the snow. Defiantly, the tips of the Crystals turned dark green, and then, almost over night, burst into bright red blooms. It was the first sign that Flower Girl had returned. Flower Girl had pierced Snow Princess' heart and spilled her blood. Soon blossoms would be everywhere.

During the winter, almost everyone wears black. It is not the sparkling, shiny black of celebration clothes, but a dead and dreary color. Pretty colors show dirt more than black, so practicality demands black. I was tired of being practical. Following the lead of the Crystal Plants, I searched through my clothes for something bright and cheerful, something that would match my mood. Anatorr had called. He was on his way! I had been planning a surprise for my lover and now was the time!

Every window in every building on Resenka is actually two windows. The outside window is divided into two sections, one approximately one-third of the width, the other section, the remaining two-thirds. The two parts open into the room, once the corresponding parts of the inside window are opened. The smaller section of the inside window is also divided into two parts – a tiny window can be opened on top, to allow the slightest touch of fresh air. Long ago, we learned to put food which would spoil between the two panes of weather-glass. In the winter time, it was the perfect place to keep food fresh. The cold air from the outside would preserve things, like meat, but the warm air from inside the flat would not allow the foods to freeze. It was a practice left over from the old days, but one that stubbornly held on.

I took a thick winter sausage down from between the windows. I sliced thin pieces of the sweet meat, and arranged them on a plate with slices of cheese and brown bread. I added a bowl of vinogpad to complete the refreshment.

Fresh fruit was extremely expensive at this time of year, if, in fact, it could be found at all. Vinogpad was one of Anatorr's favorites. The small, round, purple fruit was often crushed and fermented into vinya, a most pleasing drink. A few days earlier, I had found the vinogpad, bought several bunches, and a bottle of vinya, and planned the surprise.

I put the refreshment on a small table in my bedroom, along with two glasses and the vinya. Next, I arranged candles on the tops of all the furniture. Their tiny lights filled the room with a soft glow.

I bathed quickly, arranged my hair with tiny curls – just to please Anatorr, and dashed on perfume made from Jassica blooms (also his favorite).

The day I purchased the fruit, I also stopped at a shop which specializes in pretty underthings for women. The first piece the shop lady showed me was perfect! Tiny straps held it onto my shoulders and the silky material did not quite reach my waist. The bottom covers (a garment that daring should have a more feminine name), were tantalizingly small.

The shoplady said she had just received the garment from a very exclusive store in Megin. "That is where all of the best things come from you know," she said proudly.

In the back of my mind, I wondered who on Resenka could have designed such a thing, but I was glad someone had. I knew Anatorr would appreciate it. I could already see the look on his face. And I knew the two words he would say.

When Anatorr knocked at the door, I covered myself with an old robe, and let him in. He immediately noticed my hair, and twisted his finger lightly around one curl. A smile began in his eyes which quickly captured his entire face. That look, as much as anything he ever said to me, communicated such affection, such love, that it almost took my breath away.

Without a word, I took him by the hand and led him into the bedroom.

As we stepped inside, I said, "Close the door and stand right there."

I walked across the room, knowing his eyes were following me. I plucked one of the vinogpads off of the cluster and rolled it between my fingers and then popped it into my mouth.

"Vinogpad," Anatorr said, "this is a special night."

"There is more," I said, and untied my robe. I held it by the collar and slid it to the edges of my shoulders and then let it fall to the floor. If I could have placed a wager about what my lover would have said, I would have won a Ryssart's ransom.

"Oh, my!"

It was surely a transgression to spend so many elbur on such a small garment and wear it for such a short time, but it was worth it. The look on Anatorr's face was

instantly pressed into my book of memories. When I close my eyes, I can still see him, shaking his head with appreciation and repeating, "Oh, my!"

Later, I said, "Anatorr, when you called, you said you had a surprise for me. Can you tell me now?"

Anatorr said, "I entirely forgot."

"I'm glad," I replied, laughing softly. "I would hate to think you could have experienced all of this and kept thoughts of anything but me in your mind."

"Princess, thoughts of you fill my mind completely."

It was sometime later when we again got around to the subject of his surprise.

"Elena, the Others have entrusted me with the details of your first assignment."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Zenyuk was completely shrouded in wintry darkness when Obolen, Gernet, Kirk and K'Yle moved out of the cover of the Always Trees. Once Adzeva dipped beneath the western horizon, night fell quickly. Thick clouds hid the stars and Resenka's two small moons, so there was no light to betray their passage.

At the perimeter fence, strong illuminators shined into the electricity producing plant's compound. The light cast shadows on the area outside the fence. Then all was black.

Satisfied with the conditions, Obolen pointed to Gernet and said, "Go!"

Gernet crouched and moved silently to the edge of the fence. He paused for a moment, pried the metal open and slipped inside. For several moments he stood motionless in the shadow under the light, then, satisfied that he had not been seen, ran quickly to an alley between two buildings.

When Gernet disappeared into the alley, Obolen pointed to K'Yle, hooked his finger toward the compound and the Antosian followed Gernet's tracks to the fence. Next, Kirk repeated the maneuver and lastly, Obolen joined them inside.

The quartet moved silently down the alley. When they reached the edges of the buildings which formed their corridor, they stopped again. When the brothers were satisfied, the four men moved, one-at-a-time, across a small courtyard and into another alley. They moved left and in single file hurried toward the generating plant. Still taking the natural paths between the buildings, well-trodden paths, so their progress could not

be discovered by anyone observing new tracks in the snow, they worked their way to the generator building.

Gernet opened the door into the plant just wide enough to look down the corridor to his left. Motioning the others to stay in the shadows, he opened the door a little more and peered out to the right. Satisfied, he signaled for the others to join him and stepped into the hall.

They had worked only a few dozen meters along the wall when a door creaked in front of them. Gernet quickly pointed to the cross-hallway in front of them, and in pairs they disappeared down it – Gernet and Kirk to the left, Obolen and K'Yle to the right. The man who stepped out of the room laughed at something which had been said inside, turned and walked towards the four men.

From the corner, Kirk watched as the man stopped at a ladder. The worker checked his tool belt, then climbed to the top of the ladder and stepped onto a catwalk. The catwalk was suspended from the ceiling above and followed the hall Kirk and the others had just traversed. The man did not stop, but continued on for several more meters, then climbed another ladder and disappeared through a skylight and clamored onto the roof. When the workman had secured the skylight, Gernet motioned his companions to continue.

It took two more turns and one more hallway, but they finally reached a door labeled "Generating Room." Gernet tried the door, but it would not open. He looked at Obolen and muttered, "This was supposed to be unlocked."

“Patience, Brother,” Obolen whispered, “I have my tools,” and he dropped to his knees and peered into the lock. Taking a small package from his pocket, Obolen selected two, one a long thin piece with a curved hook on the end, the other a stouter piece, bent at a right angle. He positioned the stout piece at the bottom of the lock and slid the hook-end of the thin piece into the lock and began to slide it over the tumblers inside. As he got each piece to click into place, he twisted the stout piece downward, securing the tumblers in place. When he pulled the thin tool out and gave the stout piece one final turn, the door popped open.

“You opened that like a real pro,” Kirk whispered, remembering when Edith Keeler had said those same words to Spock.

“A necessary skill,” Obolen replied. “Now, quickly, everyone inside.”

The next part of the plan required an exposed connection where Mr. K’Yle could attach his recharging conduit. Gernet located a junction box and they sat to work there. K’Yle quickly established all of the links and cautioned the men to keep their hands clear of the exposed connections.

“We had already reached that conclusion, Mr. K’Yle,” Gernet said, a slight tension in his voice.

“Of course, sir. I am sorry,” K’Yle offered.

“It’s all right. Let’s just get this over with. I don’t like staying in here any longer than we have to,” Gernet said.

K’Yle positioned himself so that only Captain Kirk could see his hands.

“Captain,” the Antosian said, “if I am careful, I think I can hold two phasers and their connectors.”

Kirk nodded, “Be very careful, Ensign.”

“Understood, Captain.”

A few moments later, Bakor K’Yle had four hands, securely holding two phasers.

* * * * *

Single-mindedly, Ensign K’Yle concentrated on the duty of recharging his phasers. If the planet had dissolved around him, he would have noticed it only when the cataclysm affected the readouts on the phasers’ power indicators.

Obolen sat with his back propped against a control panel. He glanced frequently at his phaser, but an observer would never have been sure if the man was really looking at the display. He was completely relaxed.

Gernet was closer to the door than his comrades, and where the others were seated, he was standing, ready to fight or flee at a moment’s notice.

Although James Kirk was seated, the tension in his muscles spoke of a man who was never comfortable unless he was in action. He looked from one man to the next, silently assaying each.

If the compulsory scan directive program in the Enterprise’s main computers had been given a personality, it would have been Bakor K’Yle. When the computer had been directed to compute the value of pi to the last digit, it had turned bank after bank of circuits and relays to that single assignment. Ensign K’Yle could focus on one job

better than any person Kirk knew, except, of course, for Mr. Spock. And Spock had the uncanny ability of doing several things at once and doing each as if that were his solitary task.

The one man in the room who did not seem at all to be deep inside of a high security energy producing plant was Obolen. Kirk had seen devotion in the man, and also resignation. He had tried several times to get Obolen to speak about Elena, but with very little success. To have said that the wood carver was fatalistic would have been a mistake, but something vital died inside of him the night that Elena had died. Kirk understood that feeling. He also understood the pain of fighting to move beyond great loss. He wondered if Obolen knew that healing was possible.

The Captain thought of Gernet as basic, almost elemental. It was not the single-mindedness of Ensign K'Yle, or the detachment of Obolen. No, there was a driving purpose which tormented Gernet. He had seen his brother deeply hurt, and although he had never directly spoken of it, Kirk knew that Gernet would sacrifice almost anything to protect Obolen. It showed when he wordlessly stepped closer to his brother, when he positioned himself closest to the door – in the position of greatest danger. Kirk remembered the ancient quote about a friend who bonds closer than a brother. Gernet was the friend, and the brother.

Kirk saw Gernet move before the Captain heard the sound in the corridor. Gernet ripped the power coupling from the phaser and with the same motion, threw his hand up in a warning.

“They know we’re here,” Gernet whispered. He tossed the phaser to Ensign K’Yle and drew a weapon from the waist-band of his trousers. The configuration was like nothing Kirk had ever seen, but it was easily recognizable as a hand pistol, capable of firing metallic projectiles. Much more crude than a phaser, it was no less deadly in the hands of someone who knew the proper use of the firearm.

The sudden motion took Bakor K’Yle completely by surprise. He, therefore, caught the phaser, not with two hands, but with four.

Gernet’s concentration wavered for only a moment as he spoke to Captain Kirk.

“And do you have other secrets as well, Captain?”

“I hope we have the opportunity to explain,” Kirk said, handing his phaser to K’Yle. The Antosian had resumed his normal appearance, but he was obviously embarrassed.

“Sir, I regret my lapse,” he said.

“Later,” Kirk said dismissively. He continued, “Gernet, get us out of here.”

“If I can, James.”

Obolen moved to the far corner of the room where he picked up a long wooden beam. He moved quickly back to the door and jammed the beam against the knob.

“It won’t hold long,” he said. “There is a ladder back there which seems to go to the roof. It may be our only chance.”

“If our presence is known,” Kirk said, “there will probably be people out there, too.”

“At least we will be outside,” Gernet said. “It will give us a better chance than to be trapped in here like Spotted Rator Beasts. Now, move!”

Muffled shouts came from outside the room and the door vibrated as their pursuers began to pound on it, attempting to dislodge the beam.

When they reached the base of the ladder, Obolen began his ascent. Gernet stopped him and started his own upward climb.

“You might hesitate to shoot, Brother,” Gernet said. “I will not. Besides, your weapon is still in your pocket.”

“Don’t take chances, Brother,” Obolen replied.

“It’s a little late for that advice, Brother. But I will be careful. This battle is not yet over!”

James Kirk drew the small Type One phaser from his pocket. K’Yle recognized it as the one weapon which remained from the stores of the Isaac Newton.

“You may no longer have sufficient energy for three maximum bursts, Captain,” K’Yle cautioned.

“It will have to do, Ensign. Follow Gernet. Obolen, you go next. Hurry!”

Before Obolen could start his climb, the wooden beam skidded to the floor and the door burst open. The first man through the door unleashed a shot at the fleeing men. It struck the wall just above Obolen’s head. Kirk toggled the phaser down to stun and fired, dropping their attacker. Two men who had also started through the door, immediately withdrew. When the first man fell, he pitched forward, hurling his gun towards Kirk. The Captain picked it up and fired twice at the door and then emptied the

weapon into the generator's control panel. The machine erupted like an electric volcano, sending sparks showering into the room. The attack also extinguished the lights. Emergency lights flickered on, and then, they too, went out.

"I'm glad their maintenance procedures are sloppy," Kirk said as he climbed out of the room to the roof.

On the roof, Gernet and Obolen were crouched behind ventilators, firing at men who were hidden in the darkness. Between their position and the top of the open shaft, Bakor K'Yle lay on his side, dark red blood oozing from a bullet wound near the center of his chest. When Kirk saw his wounded friend, he swore silently. Off to the side, a man rose and fired. Gernet aimed at the flash point and returned fire. The attacker screamed and pitched off the roof.

Jim Kirk dropped to his knees beside of K'Yle and pressed his hand against the wound. The Antosian's face was pale. His breathing was already coming in ragged gasps.

Obolen moved quickly to K'Yle's side and put his hands under the man's shoulders.

"He pushed me aside, or it would be me lying there."

Kirk picked up K'Yle's legs and they pulled him to cover.

"I am sorry, Captain," K'Yle gasped. "I saw a man move. I did not see the projectile coming."

“Not even an Antosian could have seen that,” Kirk said, trying to smile in encouragement. “Just lay still. We’ll get you off of this roof and back to the shuttlecraft.”

“No, Captain. I will die here,” K’Yle said, his voice barely audible in the sudden stillness. “Be careful, sir. We were betrayed.”

Before James Kirk could reply, Ensign Bakor K’Yle was gone.

I don't think I had ever felt so alone.

I had fallen asleep that night in Anatorr's arms. I knew he would be gone when Adzeva's first rays of morning peeked through my window, and that knowledge only added to my loneliness. The smell of him still lingered in the room. I hugged his pillow tight and wept. "Oh, Anatorr," I thought, "I love you so much!"

After a time I remembered that he had given me an assignment, my first for the Others. I bathed quickly and then made breakfast from hard bread and chai. I dressed quickly, slipping on a old knit shirt that Anatorr kept in my flat. I knew that there was little danger in what I was doing that morning, but wearing his shirt made me feel safe, nonetheless. I pulled on a thick pair of pants and heavy boots. I wound an old scarf around my neck, buttoned on my coat, and slipped my hands into warm grubs. Tucking my hair up inside a stocking cap, I stepped outside with only my face exposed to the Snow Princess' frosty breath. One time when Anatorr had seen me dressed like that, he had said, "I did not recognize you. I did not know a beautiful woman could be so completely hidden." When I remembered his words, I was comforted by my "disguise."

Just past Elissa's Garden, on the way down to the place where the Wikfa River and the River Zenyuk meet, there is an open field. The bare earth was covered with snow. When the snow melted it would be covered with mud – so many people walked there that grass never had a chance to settle in and grow. This was the place where

people from Zenyuk gathered to buy and sell. If you had the patience to look, you could find most anything for yourself or for your flat.

My instructions were to go the farthest end of the field where people sold used motor-jalops. These private vehicles were especially valuable and only a fortunate few on Resenka could afford them. The wait for new motor-jalops from the factories was about three years, so the market in old jalops was very competitive. Often, a very old, very used jalop could be sold for more money than it had brought when new.

Anatorr told me that my contact was a man who would be trying to sell a red jalop with a dark blue door on the driver's side. I approached cautiously, watching the way people maneuvered as they tried to make a purchase or complete a sale. Usually there was a great deal of good natured haggling before the serious transaction began. Great care was taken when negotiating for something like a jalop because one of the Bolskar laws decreed that it was illegal to make a profit on the sale of private jalops. A certain amount of verbal circling was necessary to insure the safety of the seller and the trustworthiness of the buyer.

A man who appeared to be about Anatorr's age was sitting in a battered, old red jalop with a dark blue door. As I started to approach him, another man walked up and asked the price. I could not hear what the driver said, but the man threw up his hands in gesture of refusal and walked away.

The driver was sitting with the front windows rolled down, listening to music on the marcobox, and smoking a harsh-smelling pipe. He tapped his hand casually to the

rhythm of the song, not really keeping up with the music and not seeming to care. He wore nondescript clothes with a tattered worker's cap pulled down over his eyes. Except for the movement of his hand and an occasional puff of smoke, he appeared to be asleep.

"Where did you get this blue door?" I asked, using the approach-words Anatorr had given me.

"What do you care?" he grumbled. "It will keep you from falling into the road."

"My concern is that it might be stolen. I had heard of a ring of jalop thieves from Ingal-Karbe."

"I bought it from my father's brother. He lives in Megin."

And so it began.

"I don't really like this car," I said. "It is too small."

"Do you see anything larger?" he asked.

"That doesn't matter. I'm not buying a red jalop with one blue door," and with that I turned to look at another selection.

"You are a sassy one," the seller said. "Don't be too hasty. I haven't even given you the price. Look at the front tires – they are almost new."

I strolled casually around the vehicle and looked at the tires. The driver got out, pulled a rag from his back pocket, and began polishing mud off of the blue door.

"The marcobox picks up signals from Ingal-Karbe. Some nights you can even hear Megin."

"What is so important in Megin that you listen to it on the marcobox?"

"They play the newest music, long before it ever reaches Zenyuk."

"Maybe you should move to Megin," I said and started to walk away again.

"Did you come down here today just to insult me and my jalop, or do you really wish to make a purchase?" he asked, obviously irritated with the way I was treating him. It was a good performance, I thought.

"How much do you ask for your jalop?" I asked.

"Four thousand elbur," he answered.

"Four thousand! My, you are proud of it!"

"Ride with me," he said, and opened the passenger door. "I'll show you why it is worth every elbur I'm asking."

"My name is Elena," I said as I slid into the jalop.

He closed my door and said, "Rykov. My name is Rykov."

As we drove away Rykov said, "You must negotiate for jalops frequently. You are a hard customer."

"This is my first time. A friend told me what to expect."

"Did he now? And did he tell you what the Others wish for you to do?"

"I asked, but he said the telling was your job. If he knew, he would not say."

"Resisting you must be the most difficult thing a man could do," Rykov said. It was an obvious flirtation.

“Only one man knows, or will ever know the answer to that question,” I said, my tone harsher than I had wished.

“I am sorry, Elena. I meant no offense.”

“Then I will take none. Now tell me what I am to do.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Bakor K'Yle graduated from Star Fleet Academy one month before his posting to the *U.S.S. Enterprise*. Six months later, he had left the ship for a training mission aboard the shuttlecraft *Isaac Newton*. One month after that, he was dead, the victim of a primitive weapon, fired on a primitive planet. Captain Kirk felt the loss of any crewman under his command. Exploration of uncharted worlds was still a dangerous business, even onboard a ship like the *Enterprise*. Like the space pioneers of history who ventured out in vessels barely larger than their own bodies, the crew of a starship knew there was always risk, always the possibility of death. It was a basic understanding of life in space. The recognition of that fact did not lessen its impact on James T. Kirk. The death of his young ensign was particularly hard on the Captain. He was alive, he knew, because of Bakor K'Yle.

Kirk wiped his blood-stained hand across his trouser leg and stood up, his back now turned to his dead crewman. A heating chimney shielded him from the doorway where the shots had been fired. He looked out towards the grove of Always Trees where this mission had begun, less than one hour before. The wind was causing powdery snow to swirl around them. Where it struck their faces, it melted against the warm skin. Only Obolen brushed the moisture away, conscious that his face was wet, but not with snow.

“He was just a kid. He was too young to die,” Kirk said, his voice flat and hard.

“How old should you be to be murdered by the likes of the Bolskars?” Gernet asked.

“There is no good age,” Kirk declared, “not to die like this.”

“I live because of him,” Obolen whispered. “I will see that his sacrifice is not wasted. But now, escape is our priority.”

“I won’t leave him here,” Kirk said sharply. “You saw. You know he was different. I won’t leave him to be experimented on, to be dissected by their scientists.”

“James,” Gernet interrupted, “Ensign K’Yle saved my brother’s life. But his death will have been for nothing if we don’t get out of here now. I killed one of our pursuers and the other went back inside, no doubt to fetch reinforcements. This may be our only chance of escape.”

When Kirk turned back to K’Yle, he realized his fears about leaving the young ensign were groundless. In death, the Antosian’s body had disintegrated into its basic elements. The garments remained, empty in the blowing wind.

“A final transformation, Mr. K’Yle?” Kirk asked, surprised at the rapid dissolution of the body. He stooped, picked up the equipment bag and swung it over his shoulder. K’Yle’s communicator went into the Captain’s pocket.

“Sleep well, Ensign,” Gernet said. “My brother and I will honor your passing. Now, quickly. Before they return.”

“Which way?” Kirk asked.

Obolen looked questioningly at Gernet who nodded, and then back at Kirk.

“When all directions are equal, James, or equally uncertain, a straight line seems best.

Across this roof, to the fence, and back the way we came. There is a house near here where we can hide.”

* * * * *

The bridge of the *U.S.S. Enterprise* was manned by Gamma shift. Only here and in a few individual crew rooms, or perhaps one of the rec rooms, were the ship’s lights at normal intensity. The illumination throughout the rest of the ship simulated a normal Terran day. Centuries ago, it was learned that crews on deep space missions responded better to the rigors of their mission if a normal work/sleep/work cycle could be maintained. Twenty percent of the 400 crewmen onboard the *Enterprise* were not from earth, but earth’s 24 hour daylight and dark cycle was close enough to the pattern of most of their worlds, that it was chosen as the ship’s natural standard.

Commander Spock, satisfied that the changes to the warp engines were functioning satisfactorily, had returned the ship to a normal three-shift watch. Scotty had recommended that either himself, Lieutenant Sulu or Lieutenant DeSalle be on duty at all times. Since they had worked together to develop the procedures which were now allowing the ship to travel at speeds greater than its designers had intended, they would best be prepared to initiate emergency procedures, should they be required. That foresight was about to be rewarded.

DeSalle normally served on Gamma shift, so he automatically drew the midnight watch. Only someone trained in engineering, someone sensitive to the pulse of the warp drive would have noticed the anomaly before it actually appeared on the computer

readouts. DeSalle toggled the intercom switch on the command chair and directed his call to Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott.

“Scott, here,” the engineer answered.

“DeSalle, Mr. Scott,” the Lieutenant replied.

“Aye, lad, I felt it, too. The harmonics seem wrong. Drop us down to Warp eight point five and notify Mr. Spock. I’m on my way. Scott, out.”

DeSalle crossed to the engineering section and said, “All right people. Look tight. Mr. Singh, secure from warp eleven. Make our speed warp eight point five.”

“Eight point five, sir.”

“Lieutenant Alden,” DeSalle continued, addressing the communication’s officer, “ask Mr. Spock to join us. And you’d better wake Mr. Sulu, too.”

Montgomery Scott and Mr. Spock stepped out of the turbolift together.

“Report, Mr. DeSalle,” the Vulcan ordered.

Hikaru Sulu arrived before Lieutenant DeSalle could begin. Spock nodded with approval at the crew’s efficiency.

“Well, Mr. Spock,” DeSalle began, “the harmonics of the ship did not feel right. I don’t know if there is any scientific test to demonstrate the veracity of that statement, but when I signaled Mr. Scott, he agreed with my appraisal. A slight imbalance was developing and it peaked at less than five percent, but with the ship running at warp eleven, the problem seemed to be magnified beyond that amount.”

“Have ye had time to analyze the problem, lad?” Scotty asked.

“Barely, sir, but at this new speed, the Nomad probe was correct. The two design components which Nomad targeted were the anti-matter input valve and the energy release controls. Our adjustments to the valve are working perfectly. There is still an inefficiency in the energy release controls. I’ve set up a procedure that may correct it. The computer is still running the simulation.”

“Very well,” Spock said. “Mr. DeSalle, join me at the science station. Mr. Scott, assist Mr. Singh at engineering. And Mr. Sulu, please join Mr. Farrell at navigation.”

“My recommendation to the computer, is to increase the rate at which anti-matter is released into the containment pod,” DeSalle explained.

“That may require an axial shift in the dilithium crystal alignment, but it will still be within upper design tolerances,” Scotty said.

For several minutes the bridge of the *Enterprise* was silent except for the standard computer generated sounds. Finally, Scotty spoke.

“Mr. Spock, I believe we are ready to re-engage warp eleven.”

“Proceed, Mr. Scott.”

“DeSalle, monitor grid H3Y. Singh, if readings indicate the flow has deviated by as much as .00028 percent, blow your dappers. Warp eleven. Now!”

From the helm, Lieutenant Farrell began a verbal readout.

“Warp nine. Warp ten. Ten point three. Ten point seven. Ten point nine. Warp eleven, Mr. Scott.”

“H3Y is steady. No fluctuation,” DeSalle reported.

“Deviation is less than .00001, Mr. Scott,” Singh relayed.

Spock stood up from the science station and crossed to the helm. He studied the bridge readouts and compared them with notes on his data padd.

“I estimate we will reach the outer boundaries at the Pleiades Cluster only slightly behind our original projections. You may all return to your regular assignments.”

Spock walked to the turbolift doors and then stopped. He turned to the engineering station where Scott, DeSalle and Singh were still hunched over their boards.

“Mr. Scott, I have only recently discovered a curious ancient custom that seemed to be commonplace on sailing vessels on Earth as late as your twentieth century.”

“What is that, Mr. Spock?” Scotty said, looking up from his work.

“It required the ship’s commanding officer to make a curious statement.”

“Don’t keep us waiting, Mr. Spock,” Sulu chimed in.

“I believe the proper phrase is, ‘Mr. Scott, give the crew a well-done.’”

And with that the Vulcan left the bridge.

“The strain is beginning to show,” Sulu laughed.

“What do you mean?” Farrell asked.

“Mr. Spock saying, ‘Thank you.’ Most illogical. Highly emotional.” Sulu said, trying to match his commanding officer’s Vulcan stoicism and failing miserably.

“Mr. Spock was right, gentlemen,” Scotty said with obvious pleasure. “Well done!”

* * * * *

The *Vindicator* had been hanging in orbit over Resenka for hours and Security Chief Aireb was becoming impatient for action. Security teams had been dispatched to the planet's capital city, Megin, as well as to Ingal-Karbe and Zenyuk. Aireb preferred action to waiting for reports, but the stakes on this mission were too high. Prudence, indeed, continued existence, demanded that he remain on ship and direct the search. Efficiency would insure survival, Aireb knew.

The Vargons rarely interfered in the day-to-day workings of Resenka. For the most part, they were content to oversee the joint operations which had been set up years earlier. Their only interest in local politics was to insure the meeting of quotas and the safety of Vargon personnel. Beyond that, they allowed the Bolskars to implement policies of their own choosing. This mission, however, was different. If Aireb were to survive, the Earth Man must be located and brought back to Organ Moss-Kuib for execution. Whatever steps were necessary to achieve that goal would be immediately and ruthlessly taken.

Aireb was not surprised when the Pol at Megin had heard nothing about the Earth Man or his vessel. Events off-world did not concern the Pol, but with a certain amount of bowing and scraping, he assured Aireb of his full cooperation. Aireb let the leader know that anything less would be immediately fatal.

Winter storms around Ingal-Karbe and Zenyuk were lessening and Aireb's troops were already on the ground, the smaller detachment was in Zenyuk. It was from Zenyuk that Aireb received the first good news of the mission.

Zenyuk's Pol was a Bolskar named Levaki. Aireb was not sure if Levaki was the man's name, or his calling-name, meant as an insult. The word "levaki" was curiously close to a Resenka word which meant "accomplice," or "confederate," or literally "he who operates on the left." It applied specifically to the Resenka tradition of buying or selling merchandise outside of accepted legal boundaries. Someone who was living "nalevo" was making a living "on the side" or "under the table." In certain contexts, the word also meant "traitor."

As Aireb studied the report from Levaki, he debated its reliability. If a man would willingly provide information which might harm his fellow citizens, how reliable a source could he be? But Aireb had learned that despite the Bolskars' well-publicized desire to create a world where none of its citizens stood above anyone else, where all were servants of the common good (such obviously self-serving pronouncements revolted Aireb), some people stood on ground that was more level than it was for others. Bolskar equality was not necessarily equal.

Finally, Aireb decided, his personal prejudices against Levaki notwithstanding, the report should be investigated. After all, he had no other lead. More importantly, Moss-Kuib would be expecting progress with the search. And Aireb, too, had been warned against failure.

"Bandera, we have a report from a contact in Zenyuk. I believe you discounted the possibility of receiving any reliable information from that city, did you not?" Aireb said, his tone immediately threatening.

“Sir, I did not entirely discount Zenyuk as a possible hiding place for the Earth Man. I merely said that ground source radiation was less likely to hide him there than at Ingal-Karbe,” Bandera replied, carefully modulating his voice so as not to be perceived as insolent or threatening.

Aireb punched a switch on the console in front of him.

“Computer, replay ship’s security log from index 7745-091.”

Bandera steadied himself against his commander’s desk as he heard himself say, “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.”

“Computer, off,” Aireb ordered and except for the soft whoosh of air circulators, the room was as silent as an undiscovered tomb.

“Well,” Aireb said threateningly.

“I have no explanation beyond my original analysis,” Bandera replied. He thought, but did not say, “If I am going to die, I will not do it sniveling like a coward.” Out loud he added, “The report only says that an informant has reported the presence of strangers. It does not give the slightest indication that whoever they are, they are off-worlders.”

“You would not be so insolent, Bandera, if you had seen this,” Aireb said and thrust a comm-sheet at his second-in-command.

The comm-sheet’s single sentence caused Bandera to stagger backwards, so great was his fear.

“Read it,” Aireb ordered, “out loud.”

“Informant confirms, two men, who arrived in a damaged space vehicle, are being aided by locals.”

Rykov drove me back to my flat and waited in the jalop while I changed clothes. I needed to be dressed for business, not for shopping or relaxation.

By the time Rykov stopped the car at my target, the weather had changed. The morning had started out cold, but as the day wore on, the temperature increased slightly. Then it started to rain. By nightfall, when the temperature dropped again, the streets of Zenyuk would be impassable, covered with a sheet of ice. At first the rain was just a slight mist, then almost at once, huge droplets began to splatter against the windshield of Rykov's jalop. Seconds later, it was almost impossible to see across the street, the rain was now blowing in sheets like dirty gray bed-linen, hung on a clothes line. The trees in Elena's Garden were leaning together like drunken men trying to help each other find the way home. I jumped out and ran into the Dom, headquarters for all of the government workers in Zenyuk.

I entered the small, barren lobby and crossed to the security desk. Admission beyond this point was by invitation only. If you did not come with a signed pass, the person you wished to see had to be contacted over the wire-comm to see if you would be granted an interview. If that failed, your name was added to a list, and if it was ever convenient, you would be invited back.

Rykov had given me a pass to visit the office of the Pol, a man named Levaki. Levaki had gained a reputation for incompetent innovation. All of Zenyuk knew of his

attempts to increase the capacity of the rail wagons between Zenyuk and Ingal-Karbe and between Zenyuk and Megin. A story my father loved to tell, when he and his friends met at our home to drink kvasale and swap lies, was legendary. Given the choice between adding more wagons or adding more cargo, Levaki chose the later, doubling, and occasionally tripling, the freight loads.

If Levaki had chosen to build more wagons, he would have been able to improve the local economy immediately by the additional new jobs the factory would have developed. Then, the ease of transport in and out of our city would have helped merchants and workers gain greater facility to other markets and products. Instead, his order had the effect of damaging the fragile rail economy. Wagons that were built to one capacity, were drastically overloaded, damaging both them and the rail beds. When wagon masters complained, they were dismissed, or worse yet, arrested and charged with anti-Bolskar agitation. A few were even executed. The end result of Levaki's program was that our rail wagon system was now years behind the rest of Resenka.

None of that was any of my concern that day. I was simply instructed to go to his office and apply for a position. One had been listed in the gazetta, a secretary, part-time. The job would be to correlate and file transport orders. I would not be exposed to any security documents, but it was hoped that from the information I could gain, certain patterns could be recognized. If the Others could learn, for example, when food shipments were coming into the city, they could arrange favorable positions at

distribution points. The elderly and the infirmed almost never made it to the front of the line, consequently they got the worst food and suffered from the poorest diet. This information would certainly not topple the Bolskars, but it would feed hungry people. I was determined to get the job.

As it turned out, there were, thanks to the man at the security desk, no other applicants for the job. The security officer was, I learned later, one of us. He diverted all other applicants to another building. By the time they figured out the mistake and returned, the position was filled – I had a new part-time job.

Over the next several months, I saw sheet after sheet of transport records, but nothing significant appeared. It was completely by accident that I uncovered a cargo of a different sort.

I had just arrived for work one afternoon when Levaki brought me two folders and told me to deliver them to another office in the building. I walked to the end of the hall and took the creaky lift down three floors. When I stepped out of the lift, two men hurried into the car, jostling me as they approached, and I dropped the folders. The folders had been sealed with security tape, so no papers were displaced, but a single sheet of paper slipped out from between the two folders. I had not even known it was there and after I read the paper, I was certain that Levaki did not know it was in the material he had given me.

The words had no immediate significance to me: “Expect delivery of closed container, Station 3, Siding 13-A,” and gave a date and time two days away. Even

though I did not understand the message, I was certain that I had not been meant to see it. I quickly folded the paper and slipped it into my skirt pocket. As soon as I delivered the folders, I entered the ladies tualyet, tore the paper into tiny pieces and flushed them into the sewer.

That night as I boarded the tramway, I purchased a book of tickets. I slipped a folded note underneath the elbur which I gave the driver. She deftly slipped the note into the palm of her hand and handed me the correct amount of tickets. The note would be passed along a series of such cut-outs until it reached someone who could make an informed decision.

The next morning, as I fixed breakfast, Obolen knocked on my door. I invited him to join me, but he declined, saying he had come with a message from the Others. The note I had passed contained a Bolskar code – the sealed transport wagon would contain prisoners who were being sent to the yachenka. Because of that information, a plan was developed to free the prisoners. I learned later that twenty men and seventeen women were rescued. But our success in that one episode would later be disastrous to the Others. Especially to me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Kirk, Obolen and Gernet moved quickly across the roof to the end of the compound. The brief fight near the control room had convinced the men inside the plant that recklessness was fatal. The defenders massed their greatest concentration of men at the point where the invaders had entered the compound. The plant's emergency lighting had been restored and crossing the last few meters to the fence and the woods beyond seemed problematical.

"Lay down some covering fire when I give you the signal," Kirk said. "I'm going to see if I can clear us a path out of here."

"What do you have in mind?" Gernet asked, taking up a position in front of his brother and Captain Kirk.

"My weapon can be set to overload. In fact, I'm not sure how Mr. K'Yle was able to keep it from overloading. Since we don't seem to have grenades or artillery, it seems to be our best chance. Are you ready?"

The brothers nodded and Kirk said, "Now!"

Several shots were released in the direction where their pursuers were concentrated and Captain James T. Kirk stepped into the open ground and threw his phaser toward the fence. It rolled to a stop just short of the wire grating. Seconds later, it exploded, and the concussion ripped open the ground, toppling the fence.

"Quickly," Kirk ordered, "before they recover," and the Captain dashed towards the opening with Gernet and Obolen close behind.

The surprised defenders recovered just as the trio reached the fence. They fired several times, but the men disappeared into the darkness beyond the perimeter. Inside the compound orders and counter orders followed in rapid succession, but before they could mount pursuit, Kirk, Gernet and Obolen were in the woods.

As they paused just inside the stand of Always Trees to catch their breath, Kirk asked, "Can you get me back to my shuttle? Once I am gone, where will you go? If Mr. K'Yle was right, the Bolskars know who you are."

"There is a house near here that only my brother and I and Mitork know about," Obolen answered. "It was set up for just such an occasion. We can obtain supplies there before we set out to Oracle Cave."

"It will no longer be safe for us in Zenyuk," Gernet continued. "Once you are safely away, we will make our way to Ingal-Karbe and from there to Megin. It will be harder for the Bolskars to find us there. Now, before they can catch up, let's get out of here!"

Gernet led the way back through the woods to the edge of the cliff. The trio scrambled down the rocks as fast as safety permitted. They worked back along the edge of the frozen river and emerged from cover just behind the tramway shelter.

"Do you think it will be safe to board the tram, Brother?" Obolen asked.

"I don't know, but we have too much ground to cover on foot. We will have to risk it," Gernet answered.

“James, when we get to the station and then onto the tramway, take up a position near the far door. Pretend you do not know us. Talk to no one. And remember, do not smile. It is the only disguise you will have,” Obolen instructed.

“Watch us,” Gernet ordered. “When we get off, ride to the next stop and exit there. It is not far between those two stops and we know a short-cut to reach you. Wait for us at the shelter.”

Obolen gave Kirk a ride-ticket and reminded him to punch it as soon as he was inside the car.

They waited in silence until the tramway appeared out of the darkness, its single headlight struggling to penetrate the night’s shadows. The three men boarded the second car, Kirk standing near the rear door and the brothers taking seats several rows forward of the Captain. They could not see the driver switch the tram’s headlight off and then on again, twice in rapid succession.

Three stops later the brothers silently stood and left the tram. Kirk grimaced as two men wearing uniforms got into his car and sat near where he was standing.

“Well,” he thought, “they said it was not far to the next stop. And these two seem to be concentrating on the bottle they are passing back and forth.”

Just before the tram pulled out another man bolted through the rapidly closing doors and stood beside the Captain. Kirk watched out the rear of the car as the shelter disappeared behind them. Minutes later the tramway rounded a curve and Kirk could feel the vehicle slowing down.

The man who had jumped on at the last stop produced a large red badge from his pocket and showed it to Kirk. The Captain remembered the brothers' instruction that this was Resenka's version of a train conductor and he produced his ticket, properly punched.

The man examined it briefly and said, "This is the wrong ticket for this tram. The pattern of the holes are not correct. Do you have another ticket?"

Kirk shook his head wordlessly and motioned to an old woman sitting across from him.

"She was on this car when I boarded. I had to lean over her to punch my ticket," Kirk said, his voice flat and free from challenging tones.

"Is that right, old woman?" the man demanded.

The old woman shrugged, then shook her head.

"This is not good," Kirk thought, as the inspector motioned to the two uniforms.

"This fellow is trying to ride for free," the inspector said.

One of the uniforms lurched to his feet and approached Kirk and the Captain's tormentor.

"Is that right? Are you attempting to defraud the city of Zenyuk?" the man slurred, his voice thick with alcohol. He grasped Kirk's wrist in a steel grip and the Captain fought the instinct to jerk his hand away.

"Look," Kirk said, "there has been a misunderstanding. I'll punch another ticket and you'll see it is all a mistake."

He fished inside of his coat pocket, knowing he did not have another ticket. Just then the tram stopped and the doors opened. Kirk spun quickly to his left and punched the uniformed man in the face, dropping him as if he had struck him with a phaser. The inspector grabbed Kirk's shoulders as the second uniform lurched forward. Using the inspector's grasp to his advantage, Kirk lifted his feet into the air and kicked the uniform squarely in the chest, toppling him over a row of seats and into the floor. The force of the blow hurled Kirk and the inspector backwards through the door. The Captain landed on top of the inspector, jumped to his feet and kicked the inspector in the side of the head as the other man attempted to stand.

Two men in uniform emerged from the first car in time to see Kirk lash out at the inspector. These two were not sodden in kvasale and, pulling pistols, they rushed towards the melee. One man fired a warning shot in Kirk's direction and the Captain scrambled for the darkness at the rear of the shelter.

"Is every policeman on Resenka riding this train?" Kirk said to no one in particular.

A familiar voice answered, "No, James, it just seems that way at the moment."

Kirk dashed towards the voice.

"Obolen! I've temporarily dispatched three, but it won't be so easy with these two!"

A pistol barked off to Kirk's right and one of the uniforms screamed and crumpled to the ground, blood pouring from a bullet wound in his thigh. His partner hesitated, looking for cover and those few seconds allowed Kirk and Obolen to reach

the edge of the tram-shelter. Gernet stood quietly, still pointing his pistol in the direction of the pursuit.

“James,” he said, “I thought we told you to speak to no one.”

“They didn’t give me a choice,” the Captain said. “How did they know who I was?”

“The driver evidently gave a signal to someone,” Obolen answered. “Except for the presence of the two men in the first car, we could say it was coincidence. No. We were expected.”

“Let’s get out of here,” Gernet growled, “before all of Resenka’s policemen do show up!”

“I’m right behind you,” Kirk said. “Go! Go! Go!”

And the trio disappeared into the night.

* * * * *

When they finally reached the safe house, snow had been falling for several hours. Gernet motioned for Obolen and Kirk to stay hidden while he circled around to the back. Obolen and Kirk waited in silence, but Obolen never took his eyes from the place where his brother had disappeared into the trees at the rear of the house. Finally, Gernet emerged from the shadows and motioned them forward.

When they reached Gernet, Kirk whispered, “Where is this place?”

Gernet answered, “We are on the same side of the Wikfa River as the electricity producing plant. In fact, we are on top of the same cliff. If this were the warm season,

there would be a boat at the base of the cliff, stocked and ready for use. But since we are still under the grip of the Snow Princess, our provisions are kept inside.”

“We should have time to rest and eat before we set out,” Obolen said. “It could be a long time before we can do either again.”

Obolen dropped to his knees, withdrew his lock-picks and went to work. In a few moments the door opened to his touch and the three men scrambled inside.

Instantly Kirk stiffened.

“There’s someone already in here,” he snapped as Gernet nodded and drew his pistol.

“Don’t shoot me, Gernet. I had hoped you would come here,” said a voice that Kirk did not recognize.

“Mitork, I almost sent you to meet the Holy Ones,” Gernet said sharply. “That was a stupid thing to do.”

“I had to reach you, old friend,” Mitork said. “I am sorry. More sorry than I can say.”

With that Mitork flipped on the lights and the three fugitives slowly raised their hands. The open room of the little house held not four men, but seven, three of them brandishing very deadly looking weapons.

“K’Yle was right,” Kirk said. “We were betrayed.”

* * * * *

Everyone on the bridge of the *Black Inferno* was instantly at attention. The piercing sound of the alert klaxon would have been sufficient to guarantee a high state of readiness, even if Commander Koba had not been on the bridge at that moment.

As the red emergency lighting automatically switched on Koba demanded, “Sub-commander, why was the emergency warning activated?”

“An object of Federation origin, Commander, dead ahead.”

“Lock targeting computer, Sub-commander, but do not fire. Analysis! Quickly! Is it a threat to us?”

“It appears to be a recorder marker, Commander. I believe it is from the *Enterprise*.”

“Were they destroyed? Is there evidence of a battle? Any debris?”

“No, Commander. Just the marker.”

“Beam it onboard. Let’s see if we can discover what was so important that they jettisoned the device.”

“At once, sir.”

“And what of their engine signature? Are you still able to track them?”

“Their course is constant, sir. We are still tracking them toward the star cluster the Federation calls ‘The Pleiades.’”

“Continue tracking. I will see this recorder marker for myself,” Koba said as he stepped into the turbolift.

As the lift doors closed behind Commander Koba, the Sub-commander assumed a tone of arrogant command.

“Helmsman! Switch off that signal! Maintain tracking of the Federation vessel. If you lose them, your life-mate will be a widow!”

The helmsman silently complied, wondering what quirk of the Elements caused Them to create sub-commanders.

* * * * *

Commander Koba nodded with satisfaction. Three crew men were already at work on the Federation device.

A guard snapped to attention as the Commander entered the transporter room. The technicians saluted as well, but the Commander waved them back to their work. A fourth Romulan, his hair white with age, his piercing blue eyes making a lie of the age the rest of his body revealed, stiffened in recognition of the Commander, but did not salute. Instead, he kept his instruments focused on the recorder marker.

“Commander Koba,” the older Romulan said, his voice the sound of dry pebbles tumbling over each other, “we will soon learn the secrets of this device.”

“Centurion,” Koba said with a warmth few on the *Black Inferno* ever heard, “if anyone can coax the secrets from this Federation contraption, it is you.”

“If I cannot, our agent at Starbase 17, may be put to good use.”

“I need to learn the *Enterprise’s* precise destination, and why they are out this far. If we are to achieve honor for our Praetor, I need that information.”

“Understood, Commander. We will get it for you.”

“Soon, Centurion, soon. The *Enterprise* is traveling at speeds greater than our agents told us he could attain. We have a few secrets of our own, but I do not wish to reveal them unless it is vital for the success of our mission.”

The secrets of the sealed container, I learned later, had been made available to only a traceable few. When the Others stopped the train and rescued the people packed into the wagon bound for the yachenka, so few people had known of its existence, let alone its precise time schedule, that it was possible for the ExComm to find and interrogate everyone involved. Those who were questioned were all innocent, but the Bolskars, of course, did not know that. They immediately presumed guilt and six people simply disappeared. Two others were arrested and detained at the central facility.

The central headquarters of the ExComm in Zenyuk held the most feared yachenka on our world. We learned over the years that there was no appeal from Yachenka One, and there was no escape. The simple knowledge that Yak-One was a prisoner's destination could break the most hardened criminal, let alone an innocent citizen. People sometimes confessed to crimes of which they were totally innocent, if they received the promise that they would not be sent to Yak-One.

At Yak-One there is one window where the ExComm dispense information about the prisoners held inside. During times of great national insanity, it can take as long as five days just to reach the front of the line to make an inquiry. After waiting for almost a week, a prisoner's relatives can easily be told, "There is no one here by that name." At that point the relatives have two choices: get back in line and hope for a better answer

the second time, or give up and return home. I have heard of instances where the fate of an individual was unknown for longer than a year – that is assuming, of course, that word ever reached the outside.

There were times when a prisoner's family reached the front of the line only to be told, "He has been deprived of the right to correspond." The simple translation of that phrase was, "He has been taken to the wall. He has had his sentence passed by a firing squad. He is dead. No appeal!"

One of the two people arrested by the ExComm over the affair of the sealed yachenka wagon was Levaki. The notice of transport and the time table had been delivered to him only two days before I found and destroyed it. When Levaki could not produce the document, he was detained. His last memory of the time-table was of placing it on his desk, next to a stack of folders which he later delivered to his new part-time secretary – me. The secretary, he reported, had taken those folders to another office. It was possible, Levaki admitted, that the document had been accidentally placed with the folders.

Had the secretary picked up the folders or were they delivered to her?

They had been delivered.

So, she was never in the room with the transport documents?

She was not.

But just to be sure, the ExComm decided, we will talk to this secretary.

My interrogation took place in the ExComm office. I knew of Levaki's arrest, of course, but to maintain the appearance that I was ignorant of any possible reasons for his arrest, I went to work that evening for my regular schedule. When I entered the office, I was greeted by a man I did not know. He was ExComm.

Two other people were in the room, another man, and a woman.

Without explanation, the man behind the desk motioned to the woman and said, "Take her for examination."

The woman stood and left the room.

"Follow her!" the man demanded.

"What is this about?" I asked.

"We will ask the questions. Follow her!"

I followed her to the basement and into an empty office where she said, "I am with the police. You will undress. There may be secret documents hidden in your clothing."

"What?" I asked, with total disbelief.

"You understood my words," she snapped. "Take your clothes off or I will have someone remove them for you."

Tears welled up in my eyes as I began to undress. "This is madness," I thought. "This is a nightmare."

I was right on both counts.

When I was naked, the woman took my clothes and left me alone in the office for almost an hour. When she returned, she was accompanied by the two men. My clothes were dropped into a heap on the floor and the woman stepped to the back of the room.

“What is this about!” I said, trying to show only outrage. I fought back tears and a growing fear for my life.

“This is about espionage,” the younger of the two men said, speaking for the first time, as his eyes ran hungrily over my naked body.

His leering gaze completely unnerved me and I began to cry.

“Shut up!” he shouted.

His words struck me as though he had physically hit me and I staggered backwards. I took a deep breath, my body shuddering, but I controlled my tears. Regaining as much dignity as I could, I placed my hands over my breasts, since they were the objects of his closest scrutiny. Looking at the older man who was, oddly, showing signs of embarrassment, I asked, “Do you mind if I put my clothes back on? Your friend has seen enough.”

The younger man moved as if to strike me, but his superior raised his hand as a signal to stop. The man froze in place.

Here is someone with real power and authority, I realized. The young one frightened me with his physical strength. He represented every woman’s worst nightmare. But this man with the pale gray eyes and wisps of snow white hair

frightened me on a deeper, more instinctive level. I understood that he could do far worse than harm me physically. I saw from his expression that he had seen my understanding grow. Moments before, his expression had been one of sympathy, now his face was hard, harder than any I had ever seen. I began to cry.

“You may dress, young woman,” he said quietly. “Then we will continue this.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The sound of the silence grew louder and louder. James Kirk's words still hung in the air – "We were betrayed."

Finally, Obolen took one step toward Mitork and with all of his strength, crashed his fist into the man's face. Mitork was thrown backwards by the blow. His movement halted when he staggered against the wall. He tried unsuccessfully to control his balance, but he slid to the floor. Instantly, one of the guards trained his weapon on Obolen and ordered, "Move back, or die where you stand!"

Gernet reached out and touched his brother's arm. The simple gesture saved Obolen's life. Obolen shrugged the tension out of his shoulders as though he were peeling off a garment. He raised his hands in submission and stepped back.

Still in his crumpled position, Mitork rubbed his hand across his face, gently touching his quickly swelling lips, his mouth already filled with blood. Mitork reached into his back trouser pocket and withdrew a handkerchief and wiped his face. Finally, he stood shakily to his feet.

"I don't begrudge you that, Obolen," he said evenly, "although I am sure you will later have the opportunity to regret your rash actions."

"I only regret that my blow did not kill you," Obolen hissed. "The next time I will not fail."

"You will have no 'next time,' Obolen. Your activity with the Others, indeed, your freedom, ends here," Mitork said.

Without warning, James Kirk shouted, "No! No! You're not going to take me." With each succeeding word his voice filled greater anxiety, finally fear. An instant later he turned and bolted for the door.

The guard who had stepped between Obolen and Mitork shouted, "Stop him!"

The other two policemen hesitated for an instant. It was enough. Kirk whirled and pummeled the man closest to him, knocking him into his cohort. Gernet spun to his right, joining Kirk in the ensuing free-for-all. Obolen kicked the first guard in the knee, the force of the blow shattering the man's knee cap. The guard screamed and dropped his weapon. Obolen quickly picked it up, just as Mitork scrambled to retrieve the pistol. Obolen slashed out and struck Mitork on the side of the head with the butt of the gun. The traitor crumpled to the floor.

The rest of the struggle was over just as quickly. Kirk slashed his attacker across the throat with the side of his hand, crushing the man's windpipe. Gernet's opponent drew his pistol and in the same instant, Gernet sprung at him. The guard's hand was twisted backwards towards his own stomach. He tried to release his grip on the pistol, but Gernet gripped the man's hand tighter and the gun discharged. The bullet tore through the policeman's body, killing him instantly.

Obolen waved his captured pistol at the two policemen and asked, "Are they both dead?"

Kirk felt for a pulse in his attacker's throat and then nodded.

Obolen raised his gun and crashed the barrel into the third policeman's head, knocking him unconscious. He gestured towards the fallen man and said, "He will live. Although he may never walk again."

"And he is sure to have a headache," Gernet said with satisfaction. "But I wish it had not been necessary to kill these other two."

"As do I," Kirk said, "but they would surely have killed us."

"I have the greatest sensation that these will not be the last who will try," Gernet replied.

Motioning towards Mitork, Kirk asked, "What about him?"

"He is going to answer a few questions," Obolen said, the tone of his voice indicating that neither his brother, nor the Captain of a Federation Starship would be permitted to interfere.

As if on cue, Mitork groaned, and pushed himself to a sitting position.

Gernet dropped to his knees in front of Mitork and shook him roughly. Mitork inhaled, his breath coming in ragged gasps, and then he coughed, spewing blood on himself and Gernet. Gernet slapped him hard across the face and roared, "Stand up, traitor. We have many questions and you do not have much time."

"Nor do you, Gernet," Mitork wheezed. "I gave the location of this house to the ExComm. If we are not back at their headquarters soon, more troops will be sent out. You will not overpower them so easily."

"How long will it take these reinforcements to arrive?" Kirk asked.

“Assuming they wait the length of time it would be reasonably expected that we would be overpowered and escorted back to headquarters,” Gernet replied, “we could have as long as one hour. Maybe two. They will give their men enough time to bring us in, then they will wait, thinking the weather may be the cause for the delay. When they are sufficiently concerned, they will start out.”

“One hour will be enough to learn all Mitork can tell us, and still make our getaway,” Obolen said.

“Is there any way the ExComm could approach this house, except from the front?” Kirk asked.

“The cliff behind is too steep and the footing too unsure in this weather,” Gernet answered. “No, they will come from the front.”

“Then I will watch from the window. We’ve had enough surprises for this day,” Kirk said.

As Jim collected the dead policemen’s weapons and positioned himself at the front window, Obolen and Gernet dragged Mitork to a chair and tied him securely. Gernet went to the kitchen to find provisions and fix emergency rations.

Obolen drew a chair up to Mitork and sat in front of him, their knees almost touching. Leaning forward and studying Mitork’s face intently, Obolen asked, “Mitork, why?”

Mitork did not hesitate. “Profit. Survival. What other motives are there?”

“Honor, for one,” Obolen replied.

“It is easy to talk about honor, except when the ExComm have you hooked to one of their torture devices. Have you heard about the hand-cranked electrical generator, Obolen? They attached wires to sensitive parts of your body and then send electrical shocks into your skin. They can control the amount of punishment, so that you will suffer greatly, but never die.”

“Many have been tortured, Mitork. Few have turned traitor.”

“There are more than you suspect, Obolen. You have always been an optimistic oaf.”

“At least I can sleep when I lay down at night and know that my conscious is clear.”

“Yes, there is that, I suppose,” Mitork said, “but I made my choices long ago. You can learn to sleep with anything. I noticed it was not difficult for you to sleep with Elena after Anatorr died.”

Obolen drew back his fist and then stopped. “She came to me. If Anatorr had been alive she would not have come, nor would I have taken her.”

“Of course,” Mitork spat, “there is your high-born honor. Well, since I am sure to be the first person to die when the ExComm rush this place, it is time you learned some things. It was I who betrayed Anatorr! I betrayed Elena! And there were others before Elena came to you! She really was a tuki, you stupid fool.”

This time Obolen did not hesitate. The blow knocked Mitork and the chair to which he was tied backward onto the floor. Obolen jumped up and pulled Mitork upright. Then he began to pace around the room, desperately trying to calm himself.

Finally, he returned to face the traitor. Gernet had returned to the room, clutching a large sack, filled with emergency supplies.

“Mitork, I will not allow you to plant your bitter seeds in my brother’s mind,” Gernet said harshly.

Then turning to Obolen, he said, “Brother, this betrayer does speak some truth. Elena was with three other men before she came to you. They were ExComm.”

Obolen stiffened. “How long have you known this?” he asked.

“I learned about it after Elena died. I saw no reason to burden you with the truth.”

“What truth?” Obolen asked, his voice beginning to quiver.

“You remember when you and Elena were caught delivering a message for the Others? Anatorr had been dead for more than a year. You had told her about your feelings towards her. She said that you were a poor secret keeper, that your feelings were known to her, but she could not accept your proposal.”

“How could I forget? I had spoken of my love for her only the day before. She gave me hope that one day she might come to me. Her exact words were, ‘I cannot yet accept your proposal.’

“Then we were arrested. They separated us and worked us over separately. Elena never spoke of her ‘interrogation,’ but they deprived me of sleep for three straight days. They used their special devices to try to convince me to talk. When I refused, they put me in a box, barely bigger than my body. The box was filled with flesh-eating insects. I was kept there for hours while the creatures attacked me. At first I tried to

brush them away, but finally I gave up. I was resigned to death. Then the guards came and released me. They said nothing. They just released me. They let Elena go two days later.”

Gernet said, “One of your guards later became a double-agent for the Others. He told me that they made Elena watch what they did to you. And they described to her in detail what they would do to you when they pulled you out of the box. She pleaded for your life. She promised to do anything they asked.”

“No!” Obolen screamed. “Stop! I will hear no more.”

Gernet stepped in front of his brother and gently held him by his shoulders. For several seconds the two men just looked at each other, brothers communicating without words. Then Gernet began again.

“The minute you were released, they came for her. There were three of them and they took her. For three days they used her, one resting while the others tormented her. They told her that if she did not fully participate they would bring you back and dismember you in front of her. She did everything they asked. The man who told me said the only time she spoke, she called out your name. And for that, they beat her.”

“I saw no bruises.”

“They used bags filled with sand so her skin would not show the beatings.”

“By the Holy Ones, I did not know,” Obolen said quietly, beginning to sob.

After a time Obolen spoke again.

“It was almost a year later when she came to me. We were together only that once. She went away with me to Ingal-Karbe. It was the next year when...”

“When I was arrested and sent to the yachenka for five years,” Gernet interrupted.

Obolen nodded, “Yes, that is correct.”

Gernet turned to Mitork and said, “You said you ultimately betrayed Elena to the ExComm. Why?”

“She refused to come to my bed. Of course I knew about her time with the guards. And I knew about her time with your brother. And she refused me. So when I learned of a plot to assassinate several Bolskar officials, I helped the ExComm set a trap and she walked right into,” Mitork said, obviously relishing the memory of his triumph.

“What twisted logic,” Gernet said, spitting out the words with disgust. “I can almost understand the working of your sick mind. But Anatorr was your friend. Is nothing sacred to you?”

“Yes, Anatorr was my best friend. But you remember that he was a tenner, a citizen of the yachenka. Do you also remember that because I was his friend, the ExComm arrested me?”

“I remember.”

“You’ve read ‘The Articles.’ You know Article 58, Section 12: ‘failure to make a denunciation of anyone convicted of crimes against the Bolskars is punishable by imprisonment or death.’ I had not denounced Anatorr, therefore I was automatically

guilty. My father was dead, dead in the war. My mother was sick, she had no one else. The Bolskars gave me a choice. Join Anatorr in the yachenka – friends of traitors are traitors, too. Or work for them. After that, the rest was easy.”

“How could betraying your friends be easy?” Obolen objected.

“It is like the first kiss. Once the decision for a young couple to kiss has been reached, all other actions will automatically follow. Emotionally, everything else is anticlimactic. She submitted to him in that kiss. That first kiss announced her final surrender.”

“You believe that the conquest, the domination of Resenka by the Bolskars is inevitable then, simply because they have won the first battle?”

“I don’t see anyone stopping them, unless it would be the Vargons, and the Bolskars fulfill their obligations to the Vargons, so they are left alone. The Bolskars will always rule Resenka.”

Captain Kirk stepped back from the window and crossed to Mitork.

“On my world there was a city-state called Sparta. It was a society that had totally surrendered to a military dictatorship,” Jim said. “They had the best armies. They conquered everyone. But all that remains of Sparta today are the bleak plains where the battles were fought. Sparta was strangled by the dictatorship, just as Resenka is being strangled, just as Vargon has already been strangled. Free men can always vanquish a tyranny, Mitork, perhaps not by overthrowing it, but by outlasting it.”

Obolen stood up and looked at Captain Kirk. The change in his expression was total. Moments before he had been filled with rage at the revelation of Mitork’s

treachery and what it had meant to his friends. Now his face was deeply lined with sadness, almost regret.

“So many have already died, James,” he said. “How many more will have to die?”

“Freedom is expensive, Obolen. Never forget the price which Anatorr, Elena and the others have paid. A leader from my home world once referred to it as ‘the last full measure of devotion.’ That man, Abraham Lincoln, was murdered, shot from behind by a coward because Mr. Lincoln treasured the freedom of all men,” Kirk said and walked back to stand guard at the window.

“Maybe if your Mr. Lincoln had made a deal with the opposition he would have lived longer,” Mitork mocked.

“Your deal, and your life, Mitork, are both about to be ended,” Obolen said. “If it were me tied to that chair, I’d be thinking about something other than insolence.”

“You pompous, ignorant clod!” Mitork shouted. “Even now you do not understand. The Bolskars own you. I signed you over to them. It is only a matter of time until they collect on the obligation! Obolen, you haven’t forgotten how your precious Elena died, have you?”

“I heard her screams. I found her mutilated body. I buried her. I promise you, I promised her, I will never forget.”

“Take your revenge, Obolen. Enjoy it while you can,” Mitork said, this time without bravado. His face showed none of its earlier arrogance, only resignation.

“No, Mitork, I will not become like you. I will leave you for your friends. I am sure they have will have something to say about your failure.”

From the other side of the room, Kirk said, “Gentlemen, we’ve got company!”

The brothers rushed to join him and watched as a vehicle, especially equipped to cross the open, snow-covered fields pulled to a stop a short distance away from the house. An armed patrol of twenty men jumped from the rear of the truck and silently, following a prearranged plan, took up positions circling the house.

One soldier raised a microphone to his mouth and spoke, his voice broadcast through speakers mounted on the roof of the vehicle’s cab. His voice thundered, “You in the house. Come out now and you will live. This is your only warning.”

“I’m sure they think we will believe them,” Kirk said.

“If they take you alive, you will regret that you were ever born,” Mitork sneered, bravado returning at the sound of his would-be rescuers.

“Quickly,” Obolen said, “before they rush the house. There is a tunnel under the house. It comes out at the base of the cliff. Not even Mitork knows of its existence. We still have a chance.”

Gernet had already opened the door to a closet, set into the wall opposite the window and the front door. He pulled several boxes and other objects from the closet and then opened a door in the floor. Immediately he dropped into the chamber below the floor. Kirk followed next and Obolen drew the trap door down, stopping only long enough to look back at Mitork.

“Tell your friends not to bother following us,” Obolen said. “As soon as we are outside, we will detonate explosive charges and seal this tunnel forever.”

He hesitated for a moment, started to speak and then dropped through the floor and was gone.

Alone in the house, still tied to the chair, Mitork began to laugh. With rising hysteria, he shouted, “There is only one place where his spacecraft could be hidden, and I also told the ExComm about the cave!”

“Tell me everything you did the night Levaki gave you the two sealed folders to deliver to the keeper of the archives,” the older man said.

He had turned his back when I gathered my clothes and began to put them back on. The younger man watched my every move. The female officer left the room, dismissed by her superior. I was alone with two men who terrified me, each for a different reason.

“Sir, is it permitted to ask your names?” I said.

“I am Zalygin. My comrade is Genrikh,” he answered.

“And you are Elena, daughter of Veresh and Meena,” Genrikh interrupted. “You were, until a year ago, a student at the University. You terminated your studies about the same time that you went to work for a seller of tabersk stones. His name is Anatorr. He is also your lover. You travel frequently to Ingal-Karbe with your lover. When you are there, the two of you always attend the serkor of Volukay, although you never attend the serkor here in Zenyuk. You wear a fragrance called Jassica, because it is your lover’s favorite. You spend your elbur frivolously buying provocative feminine garments to excite the man who shares your bed. Three months ago you were hired by Levaki as a part-time secretary. This morning you bought a geriachi from an old woman at the tramway stop and consumed the greasy meat pie for your breakfast. There is much more that we know about you.”

“Please, Zalygin,” I countered, trying to ignore the threat implicit in Genrikh’s revelations, “why am I here? Why am I being treated like this?”

“I have already answered that question. We wish to know what you did when Levaki gave you the folders,” Zalygin said, the tone of his voice had changed from friendly to threatening.

“I went to the lift at the end of the hall and rode it down three levels to the archives. When I got off of the lift, some men pushed in, bumping me, and causing me to drop the folders. They laughed and did nothing to help me. The folders were sealed with security tape, so fortunately they did not open. I could see none of the papers inside, nor was I interested in their contents. I gathered the folders up and carried them to the archives. I stopped at the tualyet to freshen up and then I returned to my office. I stayed there working until Levaki dismissed me. Then I went home.”

“And did you sleep with your lover that night, Princess?” Genrikh asked. His tone of voice and his facial expression made me feel dirty. More than my body had been exposed to this man.

“Is it because your parents were never married, Genrikh, that you also treat me like a brachni-reebnok?” I snapped. “How dare you call me by the name that Anatorr alone may use?”

I saw the blow coming, but I did not flinch. I was determined to take back some of my own from my tormentor. When his hand raked my face, it snapped my head

back, but I managed to keep my eyes focused on him. I could taste the blood in my mouth, but I fought against the pain.

“Not only a brachni-reebnok, but a beater of women,” I said, my voice as flat as I could make it. “Do you also torture small animals and pull the wings off of letata?”

As Genrikh advanced on me again, Zalygin froze him by calling his name. The sound of that one word was like the report of a rifle. It startled both Genrikh and me.

Silence hung in the air until Zalygin said, “Genrikh, leave us. Return to your other duties.” And without another word, he was gone.

“Elena,” Zalygin said as the door closed, leaving the two of us alone in the room, “you have made an enemy today. You may come to regret taunting Genrikh. I have the power of life and death over you, but you may find him a greater threat.”

“What could be worse than death?” I asked.

“It is not the physical act of dying that can be so terrible, Elena. It is what takes place in the minutes or days before so that death actually becomes a comfort.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Gradually the narrow passage in which the trio was descending opened into a wide chamber. When they were inside it, Obolen signaled a stop. He reached above his head with his torch and inspected the contents of a small alcove. In its narrow recesses were a cache of explosives and a length of fusing. When he was satisfied that the preparations he and his brother had made years before were still properly in place, he signaled and the men continued their flight. At the end of the chamber, the passage narrowed into a sharp decline that quickly ended in a pile of rocks and small boulders.

“We placed these rocks here years ago to conceal the entrance to this tunnel,” Obolen explained to Kirk. “Now, if you and my brother will start moving those stones, I am going to bring this tunnel down around us.”

As Kirk and Gernet began clearing the pile of debris, Obolen set his torch to the end of the fusing. It sparked to life and the tiny flame raced back into the darkness.

“Hurry,” Obolen urged. “I used a fast-burning material. The explosives will detonate in less than two minutes.”

As they pushed away the last of the rocks, revealing a shoulder-wide hole, they heard a rumble far behind them. The men scrambled into the cold, gray dawn as smoke and dust belched through the opening they had just created.

“Anyone who was foolish enough to follow us has just greeted the Holy Ones,” Gernet said.

“We need to get away from here quickly, or we may find we, too, have a scheduled appointment,” Obolen declared.

“Which way?” Kirk asked.

“You saw the small boat in the last chamber. Obviously, with the river frozen, we would not need it. Our plan has always been to cross the Wikfa River and use the cover on the far bank to hide our escape,” Gernet answered, “but since we must get you to Oracle Cave, I think we should stay on this side of the river.”

“Tell me how to get back to your house from here. I can find my way back to the cave. You two have done enough for me. You need to complete your escape,” Kirk urged.

“No, James. We left you on your own onboard the tramway for only a few minutes and you caused great commotion,” Obolen said smiling. “There is a public wire-comm near here. I will reach a friend who has a jalop and ask him to place it where we can make use of it. We will get you safely back to your *Isaac Newton*.”

“Quickly, then!” Gernet ordered. “Adzeva is already rising in the sky. We need to use what darkness is left. The ExComm will surely have patrols out by this time.”

* * * * *

Aireb had never placed great faith in the religions of Vargon, or of any world he had helped Organ Moss-Kuib to conquer. He had never seen evidence of anyone coming to his aid, except by his own hand, and if the gods of the conquered worlds had not been able to help those who had worshiped them, they would certainly not help him. Now as he read the report which had come in from Zenyuk only moments before, he

involuntarily uttered an ancient Vargon prayer: "Spirit of the Great Pateetsa, if you are not going to aid me, please do not assist my enemy!"

Bandera had brought Aireb a single piece of paper. As soon as he presented it to his commander he tried to withdraw from the room. Aireb saw the motion and froze his assistant with a quick look, and then returned to the report. For all of its brevity, the eight words were like a sharp blow to Aireb's stomach: "Two dead. One injured. Asset exposed. Subjects escaped."

"Bandera, contact Levaki. Tell him to expect visitors. Then order my personal descent vehicle. Ready my personal guards for winter combat. The Earth Man has caused us enough trouble. His freedom ends today!"

Bandera stiffened to attention, then spun sharply and hurried from the room.

In the silence of his private quarters, Aireb paced back and forth. Then he stopped at a viewport and looked out at Resenka, much of the planet's single landmass covered under a frozen white blanket.

"You should have been born a Vargon, Earth Man. Your life would have been worthy of the Sovereign," Aireb said, directing his words to his unseen nemesis. The Security Chief surprised himself when he added, "Under different circumstances, I might have called you, 'friend.' But I will still feed your heart to my groyskorth."

* * * * *

Kirk instantly knew they were in trouble. Spock would have called it intuition or gifted insight. Jim recognized it as an ability inherited by his father, George Samuel Kirk, and developed by command school at Starfleet Academy, his years on the *U.S.S.*

Farragut, and by almost four years at the helm of the *U.S.S. Enterprise*. Perhaps it was the subtle way the man in the dark brown coat looked at the trio and then looked across the tramway shelter at someone outside of Kirk's line of vision. Perhaps it was the slight drop in the level of conversation as the three men entered the shelter.

Kirk tried not to broadcast his feelings. He casually reached inside his jacket pocket for his phaser and then remembered that he had used it as a grenade.

"Not good," he muttered.

"I see them," Gernet answered.

"Maff's jalop is across the street," Obolen added.

Gernet turned to face Obolen. Grasping his brother by the shoulders, he said, "I will create a diversion. Get James to safety and then come back for me."

Obolen held his brother's hands and nodded. As he did so, two women walked outside of the shelter, and out of harm's way.

Gernet said quietly, "When we get to Megin, I know two sisters who will be glad to give us shelter."

"Soft and plump, Brother?"

"They are definitely not the stick figures that you seem to be drawn to, Brother."

And with that, Gernet turned around, crossed quickly to the man with the dark brown coat, and kicked him squarely in the crotch. The man he had been sending eye signals to, immediately rushed to his aid. While Kirk darted across the street, Obolen walked over to the two departing women and calmly said, "Your friends are in trouble. Hurry! Go for help! Their attacker is insane." Confused by Obolen's remarks, they

ducked back inside the shelter. When they looked back outside, the battered tan jalop had disappeared down a side street.

* * * * *

Adzeva was well up in the sky by the time Obolen and Kirk neared the small cluster of houses where the brothers lived. They abandoned the jalop at a prearranged place and set out towards Oracle Cave. Maff had placed two pairs of snegs on the floor of his jalop. After he had parked the vehicle, he had walked two blocks to another tramway stop, boarded the tram, rode back to his flat and reported that his jalop had been stolen.

Kirk and Obolen tied on the snegs and set out. Obolen carried their bundle of emergency food rations and Kirk had the satchel with the recharged phasers. As they walked, Obolen tore off two large hunks of hard bread and gave a piece to Kirk, and began working on the other piece. Then he took a knife from his pocket and sliced two thick pieces of sweet sausage and added them to their fare. Finally he opened a can of preserved fruit. The men shared the pieces and washed their meal down with the sweet juice.

“What will happen to Gernet?” Kirk asked.

“I told the two women he was insane. Hopefully, they will take him to the hospital for psychological detention. Any place they will confine him will not be pleasant, but he has a greater possibility of surviving in there. We have been able to place two of the Others on the staff. If they are unable to help him escape, they will surely be able to

alter the medicines the ExComm are sure to give him. Their truth serums are most effective, but if we can make substitutes, Gernet will be able to hold out until I get back.”

“The communicators I gave you – does your brother still have his?” Kirk asked.

“I am certain of it.”

“Then I will use it to help you locate him. Even if he is captured and the ExComm take it from him, I will still be able to send a signal to it. That will at least put you in his vicinity.”

“If you can do that, it will be enough.”

* * * * *

Levaki’s office was on the top floor of the Dom, a building which faced onto Elissa’s Garden. The massive white structure was completely detached from all of the other buildings in the area. In the rear, guards patrolled a parking lot for jalops and checked credentials of anyone trying to gain admittance into the Dom. Every city on Resenka had such a building. Its upper floors were dominated by government offices. Its underground floors contained the interrogation rooms of the ExComm and the detention cells for political prisoners. Levaki rarely ventured into the depths of the Dom. Today, he made an exception. He had little choice in the matter – a fact which had not escaped his attention.

Levaki disliked Vargons. Even the lowest ranking Vargon he had ever met filled him with instinctive dread. Maybe it was their superior height. Maybe it was the way they always strutted in their body armor. Maybe it was the red eyes, set deep in their sockets, glowering from underneath the brow-ridge. Maybe it was all of those things

and more besides. Since Zenyuk was outside of the mining districts, there had been little requirement for him to have dealings with the off-worlders. He would have preferred maintaining that posture. If you displeased the ExComm, they would simply interrogate you and then kill you. Eventually death would release its victim to the void of non-existence. He had heard stories of Vargon interrogation which made the ExComm seem ineffectual.

The fact that Security Chief Aireb had summoned him into the lowest depths of the Dom was not lost on Pol Levaki. There was a hollow quiet about this part of the building. The ExComm, he knew, used this curious factor of the building's construction to their best psychological advantage. Today, he wished that massive stones which formed the perimeter walls would simply swallow him. He had heard rumors of secret tunnels down here. "I should have found a way of escape," he thought.

"Well, Levaki," Aireb said evenly as the Pol stepped from the lift and into the corridor, "I am pleased that you could join me so soon after our arrival."

"As if I had a choice," Levaki thought. Wisely he said, "If I could have anticipated your arrival, I would have prepared a better place to receive you."

"This place suits my purposes, Levaki," Aireb said, his meaning well received by the Pol. The Vargon noticed the man still standing inside the lift and continued, "Is this the man who alerted you to the presence of the Earth Man?"

Levaki motioned his subordinate to join them and said, "He is Mitork. His services have been invaluable to me for many years."

“If I can serve you, Security Chief, I would be happy to do so,” Mitork replied, bowing stiffly.

“You will serve me, Mitork. As to whether or not it brings you pleasure, will depend on how you define that word,” Aireb said. “Now, follow me. Both of you.”

Aireb walked past the two men and disappeared around a corner. Levaki prodded Mitork, causing him to stumble. Both scrambled to catch up to the Security Chief, each silently cursing the other for causing them to be in their current situation. Mitork walked with resignation. Once Aireb was out of sight, Levaki quickly regained his swagger.

Aireb stopped at the end of a long passageway. There was barely room for two men to walk side-by-side down its length. It opened into a small chamber. Set in the far wall was a single door, guarded by two Vargons. The soldiers stiffened to attention. One of them opened the door and stepped just inside. The other positioned himself where he could guard against approach from the outside.

Aireb paused and asked the guard, “Is the interrogation proceeding?”

“Sir, they are following your instructions. Their methods are crude, but they should be effective.”

“Very well. Do you have anything else to report?”

“We found an implement on the prisoner. It appears to be some sort of communications device. We believe that it belongs to the Earth Man.”

“Keep it. We will examine it later when the Earth Man is once again our prisoner.”

Aireb resumed his stride into the brightly lit room, its illumination a sharp contrast to the corridor outside. The guard admitted Mitork, but blocked Levaki's entrance, which definitely suited the Pol. Shelves and cabinets lined one wall. A single oversized table was the room's only furniture. Aireb stopped at the foot of the table and motioned for Mitork to join him.

A man was strapped securely to the table, his arms held out away from his body by straps, his legs spread and secured by bands above his knees and across his ankles. Stripped to the waist, the man's torso showed marks of a vicious beating. The fingertips of his left hand were covered with dried blood where each fingernail had been torn out. One eye was swollen shut. Blood trickled from the side of his mouth.

Aireb motioned to two men whom Mitork assumed to be ExComm. They moved to their victim and one of them held the man's hand while the other clamped a pair of pliers on the prisoner's thumb. He gave the instrument a vicious yank and a long, high-pitched scream tore from the prisoner's throat. The torturer opened the pliers and dropped a bloody finger nail.

The two men looked at Aireb who nodded and the ExComm fastened onto the prisoner's index finger. The Security Chief nodded again, but before the torture could be repeated, Mitork mumbled, "Stop." When the two men showed no signs of having heard him, he repeated the single word, his voice quavering. This time the ExComm hesitated.

Mitork walked between the bloody man and Aireb.

"I understand the point of this exercise. Can we leave this place now?"

“As long as I am assured of your full cooperation,” Aireb said evenly.

“You have it. I have no desire to join him. Now can we go?”

“As you wish,” Aireb replied. Then motioning to the ExComm, he said,
“Continue.”

“Your Excellency, you have not yet asked this man any questions,” one of the men said.

“When I am sure that his pain will convince him to be completely truthful with me, I will have many questions. Now continue, or you be the next one of whom I will ask questions.”

Mitork looked back at the prisoner and then turned to go. From behind him he heard Gernet hiss, “Traitor! I will tell your friends nothing!”

Zalygin insisted that I repeat my story. I knew that he was looking for an inconsistency, some little lie that would expose me. But the story I told was free of lies. There was, of course, one large omission – I had seen the paper which led to the attack on the yachenka train. Zalygin suspected me, of course. Levaki was the last person who could account for the secret document, but since I had not been inside of Levaki's office while the document was known to exist, all Zalygin could do was be suspicious.

I could, of course, have simply disappeared from the Dom. Countless citizens of Zenyuk had done just that, often with far less provocation than working for a man who had lost sensitive Bolskar papers. There was no logic for it, but after nearly two days of intense questioning, I was released.

I quickly gathered my coat and dashed out of the building. When I reached the street, Anatorr was waiting. He had rushed to the Dom when word trickled out that I had been detained. He had tried to gain admittance to the building, but was not permitted to go beyond the entrance lobby. Finally, he returned to the street and waited throughout the night and the next day. When Levaki was released and I was not, he began to fear for my life. But the Holy Ones were especially kind that day.

When I saw Anatorr pacing outside the Dom, my first instinct was to rush into his arms, but I knew that the ExComm would be watching me. My resolve dissolved when he saw me. All of my lingering terror vanished when he called out, "Princess!" I

weaved through the small group of people meandering outside and jumped into his arms. He pulled me close, and I snuggled deep into his embrace. I was safe!

“Take me home,” I whispered. “Stay with me tonight.”

“Those are my intentions,” Anatorr said, his eyes darting rapidly, trying to see all of me at once, his face an exhibition of relief and of love.

Our reunion was observed, of course. Genrikh was standing on the sidewalk, positioned where we would have to walk past him or go back inside the Dom. I tensed involuntarily when I saw him, and Anatorr felt my body tighten in his arms.

“What is it?” he asked.

“That man,” I said with loathing, looking directly at Genrikh, “was one of my interrogators. There is something innately cruel about him. It is as if there is a dead spot inside of his heart.”

“Princess, did he hurt you?” Anatorr said, his words leaping from his throat like a great predator.

Anatorr stepped toward Genrikh, but I dug my hand into his arm, halting his progress.

“No, my darling. He did not touch me. All he did was look at me, but that was enough. This man is more dangerous than anyone I have ever known. Please. Just take me home.”

I do not know what strength of will Anatorr summoned. I had seen him consume large quantities of kvasale and apparently be thoroughly inebriated. Then he would

expel all of the breath from his lungs and suck in fresh air in one giant gulp. As he swallowed the last of his breath he would seem to shake off the effects of the kvasale, smile and say, "See, stone cold sober." And it was as if he had never lifted his glass. The display there in front of the Dom that night was very different. It came from the very elements of his soul. He nodded once at Genrikh in acknowledgment, and then led me across the street where we boarded a tram for home.

As we climbed into the tramway, Mitork stepped from the shadows beside of the shelter. The winter winds had caressed his face and his cheeks were scarlet. He, too, had been standing outside for a long time. I smiled at him, but his face was lifeless. It was as if the Snow Princess had frozen a grimace of pain on his countenance. I looked again and realized it was not pain, but jealousy, and anger. And I did not understand, but once again, I was very much afraid. I tried to control my trembling hands so that Anatorr would not know.

CHAPTER THIRTY

“Kirk, James Tiberius. Disengage security locks. Open.”

Captain James T. Kirk and Obolen were standing beside the entry port of the shuttlecraft *Isaac Newton*, deep inside Oracle Cave. The doors of the shuttlecraft slid open noiselessly and as soon as the steps lowered themselves into position, Kirk bounded inside. Obolen followed, and Kirk toggled the door closed, once again activating the voice command authority.

“Lights,” Kirk said, “emergency one-third,” and the interior of the ship was bathed in a dim red glow.

“Obolen, I will need you to help me prepare my ship for orbit. Once I am ready, I will be able to fly it by myself, but recharging the batteries will require both of us.”

“Explain what I must do, James. I am ready.”

Kirk led Obolen to the command console and adjusted the panel to show engineering displays.

“While I am discharging the phasers into the energy system, you must monitor these readings. If it were a simple matter of draining standard issue hand phasers, I could do it with hand tools. But I do not know how the ship’s systems will react to the electrical charges we collected. So, if this reading deviates from the center position, call it out at once, and I will stop.”

“Understood.”

Kirk removed the grid covering the battery compartment and dropped to the floor. Equipment in hand, he set out on the tedious job of returning his ship to full power. The Captain worked in silence through the discharging of the first three phasers. After a few hesitant starts, he was able to feed the energy into the batteries without causing fluctuations on Obolen's board.

Jim rolled his shoulders and stretched, trying to remove the tension in his body. As he put the fourth phaser in place, Obolen asked, "Your Mr. K'Yle. What kind of a man was he?"

The Captain understood the question to be a reference to Bakor K'Yle's ability to grow an extra pair of hands, but his first thoughts were about the dead ensign's character. After a moment of silent reflection, he said, "Mr. K'Yle was a native of a planet called Antos IV. Many years ago his people learned the secret of cellular metamorphosis. How they reached that discovery has not been made a part of Federation records. And for good reason, because the one off-worlder to whom they taught the skill, nearly destroyed them. K'Yle was able to alter the shape of his body at a fundamental level. He used that ability to assume the form of a Vargon medic and rescue me. I can't explain it any better than that, Obolen."

"You have seen the deaths of many," Obolen said. It was not a question, but an understanding of a vital part of his new friend.

"As Captain of a starship, I have to choose men and women to go on missions that can be dangerous, even fatal. I remember every person who has died under my command. And each time I conduct a service to a crewman's memory, each time I

prepare a comm-tape for someone's family, I promise myself that no more will die under my command."

"But surely you know that to be a promise which is beyond your power to keep."

"That knowledge does not prevent me from making it, nonetheless."

"I understand, James. It is a promise I, too, have made more times than I care to remember."

"You? How?"

Before Obolen could reply, Kirk went on, "No, wait. Back in your house, that first morning, you said that the Others have a commander. And while Gernet prepared the morning meal, you went out to communicate with him. That was merely a security precaution, since you are the leader of the Others."

As with Obolen's observation that Kirk had lost many of his shipmates, it was not a question.

Obolen smiled and said, "Are all starship captains as intuitive as you, James?"

"It is one of the command requirements. Your secret is safe with me."

"I am confident of that, James."

"But who else knows? Not Mitork, I hope."

"No. My brother knows, of course. And," Obolen hesitated, balancing the desire to be honest with Captain Kirk and his natural reticence at revealing his most closely guarded secret. Kirk waited in silence, instinctively aware of the struggle.

"And my daughter. Our daughter. Elena's and mine."

* * * * *

The Romulan Centurion paused outside the door to Commander Koba's quarters. His shoulders were square and erect, his bearing and demeanor, proud. He raised his hands and smoothed his snow-white hair in an unconscious gesture first begun when he was a raw recruit only recently enlisted in the service of his Praetor. The Centurion was an intensely handsome man and fiercely proud of his appearance. Curiously, on a world where ability and character were a soldier's primary assets, his good looks had served him well.

There were, of course, the conquests of a handful of willing young females. As befitted someone of the warrior caste, they were only trophies, nothing more. Except for one. She had the jet black hair characteristic of her race, but her eyes were the color of Donatuvan gold, intensely yellow and full of mystery. The people of Donatu V had a special word for that color. In Romulan it translated as "Here I am, Yellow!" The man who had risen to the rank of centurion had shortened the Donatuvan word, "tebreydoterri," to its diminutive, "tebby," and made it his pet name for the only woman he would ever love.

When he was offered an off-world posting, he promptly accepted, even though it was a backwater base on an insignificant world at the fringes of the Romulan empire. He took the assignment because it was a chance to command. His efforts brought him notice with the Praetor's advisors and he was reassigned to a prestigious position on the leading edge of the frontier. It was a dangerous world, its location criss-crossed by legitimate traders as well as privateers and smugglers. His efforts there uncovered and eliminated a network controlled by S'Burgh, a slave trader and pirate from Orion.

S'Burgh escaped and vowed revenge. It took him ten years to complete his threat, but both Tebby and their two young sons were killed when their transport was hijacked and blown out of space.

After that, nothing brought any pleasure or satisfaction to the Centurion, not advancement to his current rank, not even the capture and execution of the pirate who had destroyed his family. Nothing, that is, until a young commander named Koba came to his attention. As Centurion, he was able to read privileged communications from military commanders throughout the Empire, and the exploits of Koba attracted him. In a move completely outside of all Romulan protocol, he contacted the young commander and offered his services. The Centurion's reputation preceded him, and Koba was only too glad to accept. Neither men had ever regretted the association.

Now standing outside of Koba's door, the Centurion wondered if the news he carried would finally bring his commander the recognition and promotion he deserved. If it did not, then the Elements had forsaken him.

The Centurion entered his security code into the door-comm and waited. Even though he had instant access to his commander, he did not wish to enter without invitation. He had once barged in and interrupted Koba's refreshment time with a female crew member. Both the Centurion and the young woman had been deeply embarrassed. Koba openly enjoyed the discomfort of his two friends, a fact the Centurion often remembered, particularly when the Commander was in his private quarters.

The door whooshed open and the Centurion stepped quickly inside. Koba was sitting alone at a small table, eating. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and stood up.

“Your eyes show concern, my old friend.”

“Commander, I may have exhausted every favor owed to me in the Empire to bring you this news. Handled properly, it could elevate you to the Senate, or beyond.”

“And if we mishandled it?”

“We will simply slice our throats and our stomachs in ritual suicide for wasting the most glorious opportunity ever given to a Commander in the Praetor’s service.”

“That good, eh? Let’s have it.”

The Centurion settled in at the Commander’s private communication console and dropped a data-disk into the proper slot. He keyed in his security access code and leaned back and averted his eyes to allow Commander Koba to enter his code. Then he pushed the button labeled “transmit” and waited.

Within a few seconds the viewscreen flashed with an incoming message indicator. The Centurion looked at Koba for approval and the Commander said, “Proceed.”

The pattern on the screen dissolved and was replaced by the view of a man in Starfleet uniform.

“Our spy at Starbase 17?” Koba asked before the Centurion could activate the audio portion of the signal.

The Centurion punched the audio control and said, "Commodore Alexander. It is kind of you to speak to me on such short notice."

The Commodore exploded, "You idiot! You may have compromised years of Romulan intelligence work, not to mention my life. If I had not been given guarantees that your signal was authorized by the Praetor, himself, I would not have acknowledged it."

The Centurion spoke softly, but with the weight of the Praetor of Romulan Empire at his uncton.

"Commodore Alexander, your tone indicates that you may believe your importance to be greater to the Empire than it actually is. That is a condition which, I assure you, I can change with my next transmission."

The Commodore winced and the golden color of his face changed to match the deep green of his eyes, a certain sign that he was both humiliated and frightened.

"I await your command, Centurion," Alexander said, his voice barely audible.

"Very well. I will forget your arrogance. For now.

"You have received certain communications from your starship *Enterprise*. I wish to know its destination and its orders. What is Captain Kirk doing so far from Federation space? And why did his current mission come so close to the Romulan frontier?"

"Captain Kirk is not onboard the *Enterprise*. He and three trainees were kidnaped and taken onboard an alien vessel of unknown origin. Commander Spock is

in temporary command and the log entries which he has transmitted show the aliens to possess power of an extreme magnitude. I have ordered Mr. Spock to pursue them. Their apparent destination is the Pleiades Cluster. I have designated James T. Kirk as expendable.”

As the Commodore finished his brief report, he noticed the look of surprise on the Centurion’s face at the use of the last word. “That should hold you, you arrogant bastard,” he thought, struggling to keep his face from showing any sign of triumph.

“Commodore, you may have earned the Praetor’s confidence in your ability,” the Centurion said with grudging appreciation.

Before the Commodore could reply, the door behind him burst open and three Starfleet security personnel charged into the room, their phasers drawn and leveled at the Commodore. A man wearing the uniform of a Starfleet admiral followed them in and looked first at the Commodore and then at the face of the Romulan on the viewscreen.

“Commodore, you are under arrest,” the man said. “The charge is espionage. The chief evidence against you will be the transmission from your Romulan friend which we have intercepted and recorded.”

The arresting officer turned to the viewscreen and said, “Centurion, you would do well to abandon your search for the *Enterprise*, and it would serve you equally well not to underestimate the abilities of Captain Kirk, whether or not he is onboard his ship.”

“Sir,” the Centurion said gravely, reaching for the disconnect switch, “underestimating James Kirk has proven fatal to several of my comrades. I do not intend to follow their example.”

He quickly broke the communication connection and turned to face Commander Koba who had been standing outside of the range of the video pickup.

Koba smiled, his face a message of appreciation.

“You have brought me precious information indeed.”

“It has been purchased at an equally precious price, Commander. Use it well.”

“I assure you, I will, old friend. I pledge it on my life, and witness it to the Elements.”

Koba reached out and grasped the Centurion on the right shoulder. The Centurion returned the gesture and said, “May the Elements honor your pledge.”

Koba nodded firmly and repeated solemnly, “To the Elements.”

* * * * *

“From reading her diary, I have discovered two things about Elena,” Kirk said. “First, there was more, much more than is contained in those pages. And secondly, the Bolskars feared her so much, and would fear the presence of her daughter equally, because of her spirit, more than her actual deeds.”

“Both inferences are correct, James,” Obolen replied. “She began the diary simply to recount her time with Anatorr – remembering made her feel closer to him. But once they made the commitment to join the Others, their relationship irrevocably changed. She had not yet gained her twenty-fifth year when the ExComm murdered

her. It was unusual for someone so young to become so dedicated to the opposition. Her heroism gave birth to a new generation of freedom fighters.”

“One thing I do not understand, Obolen. The first entry in the diary – she said she betrayed Anatorr. Unless there is a story her diary does not tell, her actions were really an attempt to save him.”

“There is no other story, James. She betrayed no one. I had always read that statement without understanding, since I knew how much she had loved Anatorr. Listening to Mitork’s confession of treachery, I now know that the idea was planted in her mind by the ExComm. They must have known the pain it would have caused her.”

As Obolen turned back to watch the readings on the control panel, he said, “Finish your work, James. I must quickly return to the battle. I will first find my brother and then we will take this fight directly into the heart of the Bolskar power.”