

# THE DIARY OF ELENA

*Translator's Note: I was the first person who did not actual live these events, who was allowed to see the original pages of Elena's Diary. Many of the words she used were unknown to me, and I have tried to judge their meaning from the context of the story, therefore, any mistakes are mine alone. Elena's story is an incredible tale of survival against the cruelest of enemies.*

*From imagination to the written page, telling such a story is an odyssey. Once the words start spilling out, the quest to tell a story is underway. Releasing them to paper finally completes the journey.*

*Blank sheets of paper cry out for words.  
Elena's story seemed to fill them as quickly as I could type.  
Nuances of character, location and history became the building blocks.  
In the lives of people who faced overwhelming cruelty is unimaginable courage.  
This, then, is Elena's story – lived, in part or in whole, by untold numbers.  
And they should take the center stage of heroism.*

*– David Sisler  
October 16, 1990*

# ONE

I was 19. He was 43. But for 19 months, 9 days and 14 hours the difference in our ages did not matter. Now that he is dead (and I will soon join him), I remember that it never did matter. And I remember, too, that he was the only man who ever loved me for myself. There were men before him and there were men after him, but they — including my father — only used me. The ones who came after him were much more fully rewarded because of what his love taught me — not about about the physical ways, but about myself. One of those men loved me, and I cared for him, but the memory of the first man to ever care about me, just for me, is the strongest, happiest memory of all.

For 19 months, 9 days and 14 hours he sacrificed his life, his world for me, to love me. I told him to go away and never return, and I still remember the hurt which filled his eyes.

But I know he never stopped loving me. He often said, “With my last breath, Elena, I will speak your name.” He kept his promise.

**Supposing that the Holy Ones admit me to Neyba, my heart will be at peace if I can hear him say once more, “Princess, I love you. I will always love you. There will never be a day when I will not love you.”**

# TWO

I met Anatorr two years before he knew who I was. I entered his place of business one wintery day and remarked that I had lived in the city of Zenyuk all of my life and had never seen his shop. He responded with laughter. It was not an unkind sound, just a warm knowing laugh that said he had heard my comments before.

“We hear that frequently,” he replied. “Actually, we have been here 11 years. Our white and scarlet tabersk gemstones are highly sought by young couples seeking the marriage rituals. The fact that we are hard to find only adds to their value.

“But a princess should have many suitors who will fight each other in combat to bring such trinkets to her.”

“A princess?” I said incredulously, punctuating it with, what Anatorr would later describe to me as an exasperated sigh, claiming that all women of Resenka are born with it.

“A princess,” he said. “Someone to be lifted to a pedestal or a throne. Someone a courageous suitor would try to win.”

I did not know that he was speaking of me, that he had already coined his special name for me, so I did not have the good sense to blush.

Anatorr continued, “Surely someone as young as you has not come seeking tabersk.”

It was a statement, not a question, and for reasons I did not understand, I was embarrassed by it.

“No, I’m not!” I answered sharply and immediately left his shop. As I pulled the door hard behind me, I heard his warm laughter again. That day it infuriated me. Later it would charm and soothe me.

During the last year of my studies at the University I found myself in need of employment. My father, Veresh, was a veteran of the War of Vengeance against the Chekart, and so I was entitled to a small scholarship. What remained after instructors were compensated left me precious little for living expenses. Since my mother, Meena, had only two weeks earlier packed all of my belongings into four small parcels and told me I was no longer welcome in her home, I needed to find support. And quickly. I looked at my father for a rebuttal, but he only looked at the floor.

I gathered up the bags and, with determination, stormed through the door. Behind me I heard my father weakly say, “Meena.” And then, even more plaintively, “Elena.” I hesitated for half a step, long enough to stumble and when I tried to catch my balance, I dropped my bags, spilling the contents of two of

them. Before anyone could help me, I dashed my things back into the sacks and ran for a tramway which had just stopped at the corner.

There was one empty seat in the front, and it faced toward the rear of the car. I scrambled into it, trying to make some order out of my small collection of personal belongings. The motion of the tramway and the construction of the bags fought against me and I soon had more of a mess than when I entered the car. In frustration, I dropped my clothes at my feet and cried silently. A nosey old crone poked her walking stick around in my things, stirring them while she looked for something to take. I knocked her stick away with a kick, shoved my clothes into a now very torn bag and pulled all of my parcels into my lap, hugging them fiercely to my chest. I glared at the old woman, daring her to try again.

I rode the tramway through two circuits of its route, passing my parents' flat twice, but no one was ever standing outside to see if I would return. Finally the driver circled the three yellow and red behemoths onto a siding and announced she was taking her lunch break. Everyone dutifully piled out of the cars, and walked back to the last stop to await another vehicle.

The old woman whom I had shied away from my things had moved to the rear of the tramway and made the two circuits with me, her dark eyes seldom leaving my face. Now she approached me and I backed up, prepared to run away.

“Stop!” she ordered, and with the instinct to which all Resenka is born, I immediately obeyed. Then in a kinder voice she scratched, “I apologize for violating your privacy. I offer no excuse.”

Before I could answer, she repeated, "I apologize for violating your privacy. I offer no excuse."

"You already said that," I said.

"I suffer from occasional bouts of forgetfulness," she said, "and the presumption that young people daydream more than they listen. Especially to eldermothers."

Before I could answer her, she rushed on. "You obviously need a place to stay and there is a flat open in my building."

With that, she pointed her cane at a five story, squat, gray tower across the street, and shuffled off in its direction. She reached the building's front door, stopped and fumbled for her keys. The lock must have been as old as the ancient woman who tried to coax its cylinders into their proper position so she could get inside. With a practiced persistence, she worked the lock and the door yielded to her. The door did not open flush with the walkway in front of it, rather, it was six inches above the pavement, to keep out the winter's snow and the spring's slush. As she stepped creakily over the thresh hold, she looked back at me and said, "They just moved out this morning. The flat hasn't been listed with the officials. No one even knows it is available, but that won't last long. You can have it if you hurry."

She paused and added, "And it's on the fourth floor."

"How do you know this, Old Mother?" I asked.

"I run this building," she answered.

Almost everything in Resenka is “defisit” — in short supply. There are shortages of everything, food, material goods, places to live. We accept it as a matter of course. It is one more of the non-fulfilments of the Streloxx promises. But here was an unexpected offer — a place to live. Without another moment’s hesitation, I followed her.

A fourth floor flat meant walking up four flights of stairs, but it meant the roof would not leak into your rooms, as it almost certainly would if you were on the top floor. The roofs always seemed to leak — stop up one, and another one appeared the next time the sky grew wet. Ground floor flats were noisy and dirty from the dust of the street, and they were easily invaded by crashers who found it more profitable to steal your belongings than to work for their own.

Mail slots adorned the wall immediately in front of the door. Many of the doors hung open, twisted on only one hinge. A few had no coverings at all. Maybe, I thought, it was the pervasive smell of kapusta which had slowly eaten away the metal. But that wasn’t fair. The cooking aroma of the hard green vegetable which formed one of the staples of our diet was probably no stronger here than in any flat in Zenyuk. Kapusta could be chopped and covered with a thin sauce and served for a salad or boiled into a soup or stuffed with meat or tubers. Without kapusta, and soeta, the starchy vegetable we mashed or fried, and khlep, the coarse loaf made from grain, there would have been many days when Zenyuk, indeed all of Resenka, would have gone hungry. We largely ignore the smell of kapusta, because it is the odor of life.

At least the human odors which could foul a building were not noticeable. That was not surprising since this building had a good door and a good lock. Nomies, the people who lived on the street, would enter any unlocked building and use it for a tyualet and a bed, often in close proximity to each other. To be poor was no violation, most of us were. To be dirty was no violation, life and work frequently caused that condition. To be grubby-grimy was a violation since water was still free. Barely.

Under the Streloxx, life was cut down to the very bone for most of us, but this gives our people an unsophisticated ambition. It gives us an intensity about life. What little we have is protected with the fierceness of a wounded Soracktor protecting her nestlings. Our world was suffering through desperate times. The victory over the Chekart had been almost as costly as defeat would have been because the victors ruled with cruelty. Anyone who spoke out quickly disappeared. Leaders who had opposed the Streloxx confessed the error of their ways and were promptly executed with a bullet in the back of the head. Leaders who had opposed the Streloxx and did not confess the error of their ways were promptly executed with a bullet in the back of the head. Rumors of the horrors of the imprisonment camps, the yachenka, persisted, although officials of the victorious Streloxx denied all rumors.

For the moment, no one at the University seemed to be threatened. Even though most faces were permanently sad, there was actually a feeling of hope, that perhaps the worst was over and the promised freedoms would soon begin.

When the old woman opened the door to my new home, I looked at its drabness, its dreariness, its sameness and saw only promise.

Several days later, I walked into Anatorr's shop — it was my second time — and without planning it, asked for a job.

“You may not remember,” I began. “I came into your shop two years ago and you said I looked too young to be a buyer of tabersk stones. I ran out, angry and embarrassed. Now I need work, and I remembered the warmth of your smile. I learn fast. Will you hire me?”

Anatorr laughed again.

“I will on one condition,” he said.

I pursed my lips tightly and folded my arms against my chest so he would not see my hands tremble.

“And what is that condition?”

“Only that you tell me your name.”

“Elena,” I answered so softly I wasn't sure at first he had heard me.

He held out his hands, palms up, motioning for mine, and said, “I am Anatorr. Welcome, Princess. Welcome.”

Three months later, when I lay in Anatorr's arms for the first time, he told me that he determined from those first moments of our relationship to win me to his heart.

# THREE

Anatorr patiently trained me in the details of the tabersk and other gemstones. Although I was sometimes slow in learning, he was never impatient, never made me feel stupid, unlike the way professors at the University often treated me. When I had a small success, he made me feel as if I had conquered the Chekart single-handedly. When I made a mistake, his correction was only with additional instruction as though it were his lack of details which had caused my error.

One evening, after the end of my third month in his employ, Anatorr asked me, as we were closing the shop, if I would like to join him for refreshment at a public house nearby. I accepted without hesitation.

When we were seated, I ordered a salad of setawbar roots and a glass of cold kvasale. He said he was hungrier than that and ordered a salad, a bowl of vegetables and a large leg of latt-beast. He drank only mountain water.

“Why did you accept my invitation?” he asked suddenly and without preamble.

Just as quickly, I answered, "I wanted to learn your motives for inviting me. I couldn't very well do that if I turned you down. Besides, I'm hungry, and I am not a good cook."

Anatorr smiled, a gesture which involved not only his mouth, but his eyes as well.

"My motives?" he asked. "Elena, I have a daughter older than you."

"And a wife, too," I said, with instant regret because the tone of my voice was sharp and disapproving.

Without a suggestion of reproof, he nodded his head slowly, "Yes. And a wife, too."

Anatorr picked up his fork, placing the flat end against the palm of his hand, holding the shaft with his thumb and index finger, began to twirl it aimlessly, using his other three fingers as the propulsion. His gaze was somewhere between his plate and infinity. For a long moment he did not speak. Finally he said, "And a son. He is crippled. An accident when he was a baby. My wife was running with him in her arms. She was being chased by thugs who wanted her, they could not have cared less that she had a small child. She stumbled, dropped the boy, and fell on him. When she tried to get up the men were on her. One of the hooligani kicked the baby out of the way, shattering his legs. Strangely, the screams of the two victims stopped their attackers and they slunk back into the darkness. The boy uses walk-sticks, it is the only way he can get around. We must care for him until he is 16, four more years, then he can be

accepted into a state home for invalids. If either parent abandons such a child before that time, the Streloxx decrees say he will never be accepted.”

I did not realize it at that moment, but Anatorr had just told me why we would love each other, steal precious moments together, but never, never be together.

We ate in silence, glancing only occasionally at each other and then looking away. Anatorr paid for our meal and we walked outside. He started to turn towards his flat when I reached out and touched his arm.

“I know it may be shameless, but I would accept another invitation to share your table,” I said.

“Shameless?” he said and looked at me quizzically, his mouth turned upward in the slightest hint of a grin.

“Shameless?” he said again, and then continued, “Elena, we each bring our past into this very moment. All that has gone before has combined to make us what we are today. There is no shame. There is only promise. All that you have experienced has made you the woman you are today. If you remove any of it, you remove part of yourself. And that subtraction would remove part of the woman I love.”

As he turned to walk away, I brushed my fingers against his arm a second time and said, “Love? What do you mean?”

“Whatever love is, whatever it can mean for us, I give as much to you as you will receive. I will give to you as much as I can. I pray it will be enough. If

the day ever comes when it is not, I hope I will have the grace to accept your word and quietly walk away.”

Thinking back now to that night, I know I did not understand it, but without hesitation I said, “Anatorr, I will never let you go.”

With that, he took my hand. It was completely engulfed in his. We walked without another word to a quiet place just beyond the edge of the city. My heart was racing with such fury that its beating sounded like thunder in my ears. Anatorr released my hands and turning to face me, leaned forward, bent to me and kissed me. Only our lips touched, nothing else. We kissed again, holding each other tightly, the second kiss validating the first one — it had not been a mistake. Without embarrassment, and as he had said, without shame, we undressed and lay beneath the twinkling stars. As if we had been created for each other, our bodies became one, our hearts became one.

I have already written that there were other men before Anatorr. They rushed through the coupling, satisfying only themselves — indeed, thinking only of satisfying themselves. With patience which excited me and with care which touched me as no one ever had, he brought me to fulfillment. My first. Only then did he give in to his own body’s urgings. And we were one.

# FOUR

I do not know how Anatorr and I found such happiness when our world was enveloped in such sorrow. The civil war which, for a time, threatened to destroy our civilization ended before I was born, but the repressions continued. Sometimes there was quiet, but there was never any real peace. If anyone could count the number of the dead, they did not say. Neither was there anyone who could speak for the missing, the displaced, the tortured or the terrified. Of course, that last category would be the total inhabitants of our world.

The Chekart were hereditary rulers who dominated Resenka for generations. It seems as soon as the first Resenka struggled for life there was a Chekart to rule over him. History tells us that until a century ago that rule was benign, even kind. I do not know if we can trust the record of history. So many other records have proven to be lies. The victors usually rewrite history to suit themselves; they become the gods, the vanquished become the demons.

But chains, even if they are made of the precious yellow metal, dzhhunk, are still chains. At least that is what we decided 100 years ago. The first revolutions against the Chekart were insignificant. They were little more than

protests. My ancestors asked for more liberties, the right to choose where their children could go to school, the right to select their own vocations.

Later the protests were directed at recognized institutions. The first violence was against the Chekart run agricultural system which forced all village farmers to work for the Chekart, leaving little land and even less time to provide for their families. Public transportation was often sabotaged, the railcars being an easy target.

Then an attempt was made to kidnap the Ryssart's son. The plot failed before it could truly begin. The boy, the heir to the Chekart throne, was not hurt, but the ruler was vicious in his reprisals and the rebellion took full and bloody birth.

Finally, about 20 years ago, the Ryssart and his family were captured and executed. Then followed The War of Vengeance which was calculated to destroy any of the Ryssart's distant kin and all supporters of House of Chekart. The victorious Streloxx set up their own government and set about subduing our world. I say "subduing" because they, too, had much opposition. Many people saw them as little better than the Chekart. Many said we were only trading chains of dzhhunk for chains of steelakite. Chains were still chains. For as bad as the Chekart may have been, the Streloxx were worse, doubling or tripling the previous atrocities. The forced emplacement of the ways of the Streloxx caused much suffering, much poverty and much death.

It began with the night time arrests. Everyone lived in fear for no one knew when a knock would come at their door and the Security Force would demand entrance. At first the only crime was opposition to the Revolution. I learned later that citizens had been arrested simply to fill quotas. Railcars, filled with prisoners, rolled through the countryside to the always expanding yachenka. Usually the wagons were loaded outside of the cities so the population would not guess their cargos. But we knew. Always we knew.

Many of my generation asked, “Why did you not resist?” The response most often given was, “In the middle of the night, with sleep still in your brain and your trousers still on the floor, what resistance could you give? Besides, we hoped that if we went with them quietly, they would leave our families unharmed.”

Survival on Resenka frequently depended on how many secrets you knew and who you could call on to assist you. At least that is the way it was at the beginning of the time of Streloxx. Drop the name of an important pol here, the name of a popular general there, and you might, just might, live. Later, the mention of those names only got your supposed protectors a place in line to the yachenka.

Anatorr had spent ten years in one of the yachenka — it was the longest sentence which was given at the time. He had been a decorated officer of the Streloxx, winning many campaigns, but in one battle, ill-planned and sloppily executed by his superiors, he was captured. At the end of the civil war he was

released from a prisoner of war camp and promptly arrested by the Streloxx. His crime: failing to fight to the death against the Chekart. Obviously, only a traitor would live when he could easily die for the Victory. The verdict was pronounced on the spot and the sentence was immediately carried out. He was not even allowed to tell his wife good-bye.

For as long as I knew Anatorr, he was reluctant to speak about his imprisonment. He did tell me about the terror of the journey to the yachenka. He said that he thought he would die before the railcar was unsealed at their destination.

Kryup, the large animals whose flesh could feed us and whose milk could nourish us — if the Streloxx allowed any to reach the open market — were transported in better conditions than were the men and women who were shipped to the yachenkas. The cars were completely sealed except for a three inch opening that ran around the top of the car's walls. Taller prisoners could strain up to get fresh air. Everyone else rode in misery, gasping for air. The cars only stopped to load on more prisoners. At those stops, the unfortunate — or perhaps they were the fortunate — who had suffocated were thrown beside the tracks, their bodies left as food for the carrion eaters or perhaps buried by the kindly from the villages.

The yaks, the prisoners, were escorted under armed guard from the railcar northward to a small village. They wondered why they were guarded because with the sturdy bands around their legs and the chains that bound them together,

there was no chance for escape. Where could lines of a dozen men each, walking single file, always single file, hide? Who would not notice such a pitiful sight? The yaks laughed among themselves when they thought of it.

The reason for the armed guards became clear when they reached the village. The leggings were removed, the chains taken away. Forced back in line, they were marched north again. Three men made a break for freedom, Anatorr said, as soon as the column cleared the last building. The guards, expert marksmen, dropped each of the three runners with only a single bullet. Then the captain of the soldiers told the survivors that for every man who escaped, or tried to escape, from that moment, until they reached the yachenka, three villagers would be executed — three from this village, or three from the next village, it did not matter to him. Three would die for each attempt at escape. Three who had done no harm to the yaks would die because of the yaks. Whether the villagers lived or died, the captain sneered, would be up to them.

So the lines of prisoners trudged on, sharing the burden of pulling a crude cart on which had been piled what few belongings they had. Most of the guard detachment returned to the railcars and home.

Once the reality of the commander's threat set in, there was really no need for an escort. The commander's strategy was the perfect chain. Besides, in the terrain through which they passed, there was nowhere to hide and the villagers could smell a stranger from a dozen kaalobars away.

The rare attempts at escape — what the prisoners called “bolting” — occurred only from the yachenkas themselves. Those happened when the yaks bolted without thought of what lay in store. One day something happened inside and they just fled. Yaks bolted in the spring when the world became new and the longing for home became overpowering. They bolted when the seasons began to grow cold and Resenka braced itself to be frozen by the Snow Queen’s icy breath. Regardless of the season, some bolted just weeks before the end of their sentence, terrified that when they went to collect their release papers, they would be given another term instead.

If any of the bolts were successful, the yaks never learned of them, Anatorr said. The winter killed most. Those who bolted at other times were hunted down by skilled trackers from the villages who were paid a bounty 100 elbur per head. And a head was all they brought back to claim their reward.

# FIVE

Anatorr returned to Zenyuk by a twist of Streloxx logic. Convicted felons were forbidden to return to former cities — they might find sympathizers who could assist them in further rebellion. Repatriated prisoners of war were “sentenced” to return to their homes. It was part of their “shame.” He opened the door to his apartment and found Lubeme, his wife, sitting in the living room, staring out into the growing dusk of evening. The red from the setting sun gave her pale cheeks their only color. The faded green wallpaper had not changed. The brown blanket, thrown over the sofa was a little more worn than he remembered, and there was a growing tear in the arm of the room’s only chair.

Lubeme wife scrambled to her feet and embraced him.

“I never gave up hope you would return,” she said. “Even when they told me you were dead. Even when they tortured me for refusing to denounce you. I never gave up hope that you would come back to me.”

Anatorr held her at arms length and looked into her blue-gray eyes which were now a sea of tears. His hands tightened fiercely around her thin arms, crushing the thin material of her dress. Tears spilled uncontrollably down his

own face and he stammered, "I am a traitor. I am a citizen of the yachenka. I can no longer be your husband."

"Anatorr," Lubeme whispered, "there were good times, so many. I remember each one. I remember them all. Please!"

"You remember too much," he said.

He turned away from her and until I sent him away, he never touched her. She pled with him, crying that whatever lies they had accused him of did not matter, shouting only that she loved him and nothing could ever change that.

But his heart was cold and he would not let her words penetrate the frozen wastes. He would not let her caresses thaw his hardened feelings.

"I have waited faithfully all of these years, Anatorr," she said. "Can you not even give me a smile?"

"The fault was not hers," he later told me. "It was never hers. I steeled myself against her. She quietly bore her pain. And waited."

# SIX

Less than one kaalobar from the edge of our city, the Wikfa River flows by, forming the northern boundary of Zenyuk. At the westernmost edge of the city, the Wikfa is intersected by the River Zenyuk, and then turns almost immediately to the south. It was here that Zenyuk was founded more than 1,000 years ago.

At first Zenyuk was a fort, an outpost on the midpoint of the Wikfa River's 3,000 kaalobar journey to the Great Sea. It seemed a logical stopping place in the trek which took months, beginning at the capital, Megin, and ending at the pleasurable warm sands of the Divinitar Region.

The first two businesses to be established at the confluence of the Wikfa and the Zenyuk Rivers were a tavorn and a serkor. They were started by the same man (Anatorr joked that they were relatives of his — I never knew if he was serious or not). He advertised “rest for the body and rest for the soul.” Today his tavorn has many cousins in Zenyuk, and in all of Resenka, too many. His serkor has only a few — many of the buildings still stand, but they no longer have any resemblance to anything spiritual.

Those serkor buildings which were not destroyed in The War of Vengeance, were seized by the Streloxx (along with almost everything else) and turned into business places, offices, libraries, museums and even stables — and it was certain that the animals were tied so that their waste fell on the altars.

Population centers of less than 500,000 were allowed to keep one serkor, but only if the citizens paid for its maintenance and the salary of the Keeper — and an amount equal to the sum of both of those figures was levied as a tax on nonessentials. Because of the taxation, most serkor in the smaller villages were closed. Cities like Zenyuk were permitted two. Only in Megin are there more than two and they have seven, one building for each one million souls in the capital.

There is a story from the Dark Times, a story about a Keeper and his family, a story that everyone knows, that everyone whispers, that everyone believes.

It was late, time for the Keeper and his family to go to bed, but not just yet. Every night since word had trickled out of Megin that the ExComm were arresting the leaders of the serkor, they had played the key game.

“It probably will not work,” the Keeper thought. “I cannot move quickly enough and my body will not do what my brain tells it to do. But we must try. If they take me, they will certainly return for my family.”

His wife made a soft sound, imitating the doorbell. Then swiftly, imitating the impatience of someone standing outside of their flat, she rapped her knuckles on the table beside of her chair, pretending for their son that strangers were just

outside. Strangers who were probably dangerous. Strangers who had come to arrest the little boy's father. Strangers who must be delayed if the Keeper was to have any chance.

The little boy had nodded off to sleep. It was late. But the ExComm never came at a convenient season, always it was late, always it was too early. If they came, when they came, it would probably be at a time like this. For weeks now, the Keeper had not gone outside of their small rooms. There had been no services at the serkor. Everyone was told he had gone. Few believed it. No one was told the truth. The faithful did not care what the truth was, they knew the reason for the lie. The little boy did not hear the sound of chimes which his mother made, but at the sound of her rapping, the boy jumped up and ran to the front door. His father was already on his way out of the room. This was practice, this was a rehearsal for the day when he and his father would be alone in their flat and the knock was no longer make-believe.

“Who's there?” he asked, then quickly added, “Just a minute. Mother always locks the door when she leaves so I will be safe. I'm just looking for the inside keys.”

Then came the part of the game the little boy enjoyed most. With so many neighbors, so many people living in the same building, he always had to be quiet. He could never play loudly. He always had to walk softly. Now he ran away from the door, making a great deal of noise as he ran. He scraped a chair across the

floor. He opened a drawer and slammed it shut. He opened a cupboard and slammed it shut.

“Just a minute, I can’t find them. They are not where Mother always leaves them,” he yelled. Then he dragged a chair to the far corner of the room, scrambled up to the highest shelf of the clothes cabinet and snatched the keys from where he always knew they were.

“I found them!” he shouted, his success a genuine celebration. Then he walked with normal measured steps to the door and opened it. He looked at his mother for her nod of approval and then closed and relocked the door.

The little boy stood silently in front of the door and stared towards the rear of the flat. His mother never turned around, never looked where the little boy’s eyes were searching. She always waited for the joy which crossed his face when his father would emerge from the small hiding place which they had constructed. She knew his clothes would be dusty. She knew what he would say before his lips began to move.

“You did fine, son,” the Keeper said. “I am just too stiff and too slow to move as quickly as I should. But we will do our best. It will be enough.”

He did not believe it would be enough. His wife knew he believed it would not be enough, but she never said it. If she did not say it, then she hoped it would never be true. But hope was foolish she knew. Since the rise of the Streloxx there was no such thing in all of Resenka as hope.

And still they practiced the key game. Practiced for the day when his mother would be at work, practiced for the day when his little play would be all that would stand between his father and the ExComm, practiced for the day when, if the key game failed, his father would be killed. Practice and practice and practice.

And still they practiced.

“What will you say to the men who come to the door?” his mother asked.

“I will say nothing until they ask me,” he said.

“And when they ask you where your mother is, what will you say?” she asked.

“I will say she is at work,” he said.

“And where is your father?” she asked.

And as he always did, the boy was silent. And as he always did, his lips quivered. And as he always did, his eyes filled with tears.

“Where is your father?” she demanded, her voice as harsh as she could make it.

“My father is dead,” the little boy said. And they all knew that if the key game did not work, the little boy would be telling the truth.

“He’s dead,” the little boy said and threw himself into his father’s arms. The Keeper hugged his son fiercely, but as he always did, he was looking at the door, staring beyond it, seeing beyond it, seeing the men to whom he was already dead, seeing the men who would really ring the bell, seeing the men who would

arrest him and torture him and execute him if the key game failed, seeing the men who would come back for his family for their complicity in the key game, seeing the men who would take them and crush the life from them as if they were insects.

I write of that part of our history because Anatorr and I were strangely drawn to the serkor. We were not integrals of either of the two practicing serkor in Zenyuk, few people are. It was something intangible, almost a physical refuge more than anything else. The first time we actually entered a serkor was two days after “our night of discovery” (that was what Anatorr called our first coupling, he had a thorough dislike for popular vulgarities; I simply thought it was romantic).

After he had walked me home that night, or rather that morning — because the first gray-pink fingers of dawn were just appearing far to the east of where the Wikfa River turned and swept west on its lazy descent to the Great Sea — I had not seen him for almost two days. The store was closed and I could not call his home on a resting day. I was beginning to fear that he was just one more user when I heard an unusually loud rustling in the tall flowering plants that surrounded the front of my flat. The sound was punctuated by what was evidently someone crashing to the ground, followed by a loud curse.

From my fourth story rooms I could see Anatorr through the weather-glass. He picked himself up with as much dignity as he could, a hard task with dirt smeared on his face and the leaves of a plant tangled in his hair. He brushed his

hair, dislodging the green adornment, wiped his face with his hand and then he stooped and picked several bright blossoms. The tiny blooms seemed so small in his hands, just like my own hands did as we walked two nights ago.

I ran down the stairs and entered the lobby just as he stepped through the front door.

With as disapproving a look and tone of voice as I could generate — it was impossible to totally mask my joy at seeing him — I said, “Sir, you are on private property, and you have stolen living plants which belong to another Resenka.”

“I apologize, Princess. I did not mean it so,” he said, light twinkling in his eyes. “These are meant as a gift to a beautiful woman in Zenyuk and only such a gift could be given to one such as she. I am afraid, however, that even these exquisite blossoms will pale next to her grace and charm.”

“If you mean those words, sir, you are a poet. If you are less than sincere, you are a rouge,” I said.

“So I have a choice of being a light-headed writer of verse or a reprehensible person utterly lacking in principle?” he asked.

“Sir,” I said, as formally as I could, “you do have other choices. You can be my lover. You can become my husband.”

He crossed the lobby to where I was standing, took me in his arms and before I could protest that it was broad daylight and my neighbors might come along, he kissed me. When he finally stepped back he said, “I accept.”

“Which?” I asked, catching my breath. “Poet, rouge, lover or husband?”

**“All of them,” he answered. “All of them.”**

**It seemed then that a cloud passed in front of his eyes as he added, “But each in its own special time. Will you wait?”**

**Without hesitation I answered, “What I said our first night, I say again: Anatorr, I will never let you go!”**

**He took me in his arms again and held me. For a long time we just stood there, clutching each other as if there would never be another moment like this.**

**Finally Anatorr said, “I called a kafe which makes great btopoi, they even pack it in a woven basket complete with a checkered cloth for spreading on the ground. There is a wooded place near the Confluence, just past the historic settlement that would be perfect. Hungry?”**

**“For more than food,” I answered, maybe too quickly. Then I added, “I can’t tell you the last time I went on a btopoi. I don’t know if I ever did. Let’s go!”**

**As we walked toward the old part of Zenyuk, a quick summer rain came up. First it was just a light shower and we enjoyed the warm mist. Then the skies opened up in torrents.**

**“Hurry,” Anatorr said, “the abandoned serkor!”**

**What had once been a beautiful gathering place for the faithful, was now a trembling shack, staggering against the summer rain. The door had fallen off or had been removed and most of the windows were broken out. The holy relics had long since been carried off into private sanctuary, or destroyed, if the Streloxx had found them first. In the back of the building, behind where the altar**

had once been, we spread our cloth and ate our btopoi. Then as the late afternoon sun cast disjointed shadows behind us through the only remaining intact window, we fell asleep.

Later, I imagined the Holy Ones watched with approval when we awoke and renewed our joining.

# SEVEN

Suddenly selling tabersk stones and shiny yellow dzhhunk bracelets became more exciting than I could ever have imagined. It was no longer just a job, it was a chance to be with him. Anatorr and I were constrained to be discrete — sometimes we were successful, sometimes we were suspected (we did not embrace and kiss in the lobby of my flat again, that is for certain). Anatorr once told me that he if he were an outsider, he would never suspect me, but he would immediately be suspicious of himself. When a man has steeled himself against affection and later falls in love, he said, it is difficult for that man to conceal his feelings.

Anatorr's shop was basically a long, narrow room, divided into two sections. The front was the showing room — there were two clear glasstrite cases, one for the stones, the other for dzhhunk. The back was his office and a reserve room. We tried never to be alone in the back when any of the other workers were present. It was possible we might become careless and give someone an opportunity to speak against us.

There is a constant atmosphere of distrust and suspicion in every sector of Resenka. The great historian, Denikin, once wrote: “The only Resenka who ever lived in freedom was Aldan, the first man whom the Holy Ones created. When the second man appeared, one of the two became a vassal, the other became an overlord. The overlord became suspicious and the vassal lived in fear.”

I do not know if Denikin was cynic or not, but in that brief statement he explained the temperament of our entire world. When the Streloxx murdered the Ryssart and his family and overthrew the Chekart, the situation worsened by a factor incomprehensible.

If an activity forbidden would advance the Streloxx, then it would be forbidden and those who indulged could be denounced, imprisoned, exiled or executed. If an activity allowed would advance the Streloxx, then it would be allowed and those who abstained could be denounced, imprisoned, exiled or executed. That is why our entire world lives in constant fear. That is why Anatorr and I attempted discretion — we knew of no law against our love, we simply tried to be circumspect. Anatorr said if we were revealed before we were ready it would shame his wife, but it would shame me more.

I remember our first major careless moment.

The business day had finally been concluded. The day had been hectic, but profitable. We had entertained a city official and had satisfied his wishes with an unusual dzhhunk bracelet. The shiny yellow metal delicately supported five

small, round tabersk stones. He chose it as a gift for his wife. Such purchases were infrequent, the piece was expensive.

There were four of us working that day — Kerrioff, Anatorr’s longest serving worker and a great busy-body, Mitork, Anatorr’s bond-brother from their boyhood days, and Anatorr and me. Kerrioff had asked for and received Anatorr’s permission to leave early — she often asked, he always granted.

When we were ready to leave, Anatorr said, “Mitork, you may go. Elena, would you set the secure-system as soon as I close the vault?”

Mitork waved a cheerful farewell and went out, locking the door behind him. I stood by the inner door, while Anatorr went to the vault. When Mitork went out, I followed Anatorr and jumped into his arms. We did not hear Mitork reenter the store. As Anatorr held me and kissed me, Mitork discovered us.

“I’m sorry,” Mitork said, his embarrassment obvious, “I forgot my hat.”

I immediately stood between the two men, as though my small body could protect Anatorr.

After a few awkward moments, Mitork smiled and said, “I was right. I had hoped I was.”

Before either one of us could say a word, he continued, “It shows old man, it shows. I have known you so long and I did not think I would ever see that look in your eyes. I congratulate you both!”

And with that, he hugged Anatorr and then me, turned and left the store. Mitork became our first confidant.

# EIGHT

I remember the first present I ever gave to Anatorr. We had conspired to spend a few precious hours alone walking through the streets of a nearby city. Ingal-Karbe was two hours north of Zenyuk by railcar, six hours by bus.

The railcar was for people in a hurry, or people with a great deal of elbur to spend, or lovers anxious to be alone. The crowded buses were for everyone else.

An average working person, like me, might earn 25 elbur each month, a shop owner like Anatorr could earn 80, a pol, sitting in his office, controlling the affairs of an entire city, 250, and a member of the ExComm — short for Extraordinary Commission for the Maintenance of Social Order, the death squad police who enforced the Streloxx terror, as much as he could steal from his hapless victims.

When Anatorr would take a commission from a sale of dzhhunk or tabersk stones he would keep that separate from his regular salary. The first time I saw him drop those elbur into small box in his desk, he explained, “That is our money.” When I could, I would add to our small collection — we called it our

bank. Then when we planned a special day, we would “go to the bank and ask for a withdrawal.”

That particular day Anatorr withdrew ten elbur from the bank for the train, for food, and for what he called “souvenirs.” Every time we took such a trip, he bought me a little remembrance of the day.

“Since I cannot be with you always,” he said, “you can look at those souvenirs and remember each special day.”

“My darling,” I said, “I press each day into my thoughts, my book of memories, where they are always safe and where I can always reach them. The souvenirs will be illustrations for my memory.”

We went that day to Ingal-Karbe, the first of many trips we took to that city — we called it a magical city because it hid our identities from everyone and allowed us to behave like husband and wife. The railcar glided silently into the station. If the windows of the wagon were down you could hear the hiss of the extenders as they reached up and glided along the elektrik wires. The wagons swayed slightly and the rails clicked a rhythmic tune.

Set up along the reception area were a few people selling their wares. At every railstation, large or small, and regardless of whether it was summer or winter, someone would be selling maroezh, a sweet food made of whipped, frozen cream. It is the national sweet of our people. And as common place as the maroezh, there was always an old woman selling black Adzeva-flower seeds. The old women collect the seeds from giant plants whose yellow faces follow

Adzeva across the sky, roast them and then sell them to travelers. They wrap the tasty seeds in sections of torn gazetta, the news printed on the paper was rarely digestible — the seeds always were.

It was late when we arrived and the lights of the city's streets were already on, casting their pink glow against the darkness. I told Anatorr I had never seen lights of such color. He said, "Princess, they used to be yellow like those in Zenyuk, but when they saw how beautiful you are, they blushed because of their own inadequacy."

"You do have a way with words," I smiled.

"Being with you makes it easy," he said.

We went to eat our afternoon meal in a tavern which had a few tables placed outside. Customers could watch the Wikfa River flow past. Anatorr was quietly sipping a mug of kvasale, watching me eat. The intensity of his gaze caused me to blush.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Taking photographs for my book of memories," he said.

I pushed my plate back and withdrew from my carry-bag a small package, wrapped in ordinary store paper and handed it to him.

"What is this?" Anatorr asked.

"My first present to you," I said.

"Princess, the first present you gave me was your love on our night of discovery," he answered.

**“You know what I mean,” I said, trying to sound fierce. “Open it!”**

**“What is it?”**

**“You’ll know when you open it, won’t you?”**

**Anatorr held the package for a moment, turning it slowly in his hands, as though what was inside would reveal itself to him.**

**“Anatorr, open it,” I said with great deliberation.**

**Smiling, he lifted first one corner of the paper and then the other, rolled the paper back and took out a small box I had taken from his store. He opened the lid and took out a shiny brass key.**

**“To your heart?” he asked.**

**“Close,” I replied. “To my flat.”**

**I hesitated for a moment and then added, “To our flat.”**

**For more heart beats than I could count, Anatorr sat without speaking, rolling the key between his fingers, running his thumb across its rough grooves. I could not read his face. And then he cried, not with sobs, but with tears that washed the dust of the streets off his cheeks.**

**“I have wanted to ask for this, but could not raise enough courage. It is a precious gift,” he said.**

**Then he smiled and said, “The second best I’ve ever received.”**

**“If you will ask the master of this place to rent us a room, I will give that first present to you again,” I said.**

# NINE

Terrors dominated my earliest memories, from the time I was just a little girl. I do not remember when they began, but I remember the horror of my tenth birthday.

I also remember the day the terrors stopped.

Anatorr and I had met in the forest just south of Zenyuk. I had prepared a small btopoi which we ate and then walked through the woods.

The tops of giant Folta trees seemed to reach toward the sky like a yawning man stretching stiff muscles. Under their heavy branches tiny Crystal Plants made a blanket of white, pink and red blooms. The air was heavy with their scent. Frequently we could hear the songs of birds, although we almost never saw them as they darted high up in the Foltas.

We stopped frequently to lie next to each other, to embrace and to kiss. During one such “intermission” I said, “You said you wanted to go for a walk. We haven’t done much walking.”

“I lied,” Anatorr said, holding me closer.

I laughed, my heart full of joy, “Sir, you can lure me into the woods anytime.”

Looking back to that moment, I still do not know what triggered the reaction, but I suddenly stiffened in his arms and started crying.

“What is it?” he asked alarmed. “What’s wrong?”

“There is something I have not told you, and I am afraid that if I say it, you will stop loving me. What I have done is so horrible.”

“Whatever it is,” he said, “it is part of what has made you the woman I love. I will always love you. There will never be a day when I will not love you. Tell me. Whatever it is.”

He held me close and I sobbed for a long time.

Finally I said, “The day I became ten years old, we had a festivity. After my friends had gone, my father followed me into my bedroom. I had started to change my clothes. My dress was lying on the bed, I was wearing only my slip and my bottom covers — that is what my mother always called them.

“My body was beginning its changes which signaled I was becoming a woman. Body hair was growing. The front of my slip was pushed forward by two small bumps.

“I heard the door open behind me and turned around to see my father come in. He walked over to me and without a word, slid my slip off of my shoulders. It seemed as though my heart had stopped as he stood there looking at me.

**“My little girl is becoming a woman,” he said. “I want to watch you grow up.”**

**He ran his hands down my arms, squeezed my hands and then left the room.**

**A few minutes later he came back. I was still standing there naked, trembling, frightened from the experience. I did not understand it, but instinctively I knew I had done something wrong.**

**My father stood there staring at me and then said, “Your mother would not understand it if you told her. She might even leave me.” And he walked out.**

**“Anatorr,” I said, “this went on almost every day for nine years. That is why, when my mother put all of my belongings into four paper sacks and told me to leave, I went without protesting.**

**“The last occurrence was the day before I asked you for a job. Mother had invited me to come home for the evening meal. When she was in the kitchen, Daddy said, ‘Elena, give me a kiss. I so seldom see you any more.’ When I leaned over to kiss his cheek he held my shoulders and stared down the front of my dress. ‘My little girl is growing up,’ he said.**

**“Anatorr, I am so ashamed. How can you love anyone who has done such terrible things?” I said, beginning to cry again.**

**When I looked at Anatorr his face was filled with such rage that I was frightened. Then he pulled me close and almost crushed me in his arms.**

**“Princess, I am so sorry,” he said. “Such filthy treatment! Never again feel ashamed. There is blame to be fixed, but it will not attach itself to you!”**

**“Do you mean you still love me?” I asked.**

**“Always,” he answered.**

**And I cried myself to sleep in his arms, free of the terror for the first time.**

# TEN

Because of “The Articles” everyone on Resenka lives in fear. Drawn up by the victorious Streloxx after the War of Vengeance, “The Articles” were designed to strengthen their advantage over the population of our world. Every thought, action or lack of action could be punished by one of “The Articles.”

As I have already written, whatever activity advanced the Streloxx position by being permitted was permitted; whatever advanced their position by being forbidden was forbidden. And those requirements could be changed tomorrow, or even this very afternoon. The great terror of “The Articles” was their uncertainty.

One thing was certain: the yachenka on Resenka multiplied like the Scarlet Flowering Langweer, one of our most prolific plants. Just as a few of their seeds could quickly cover the ground with blossoms, so the Streloxx prisons spread, not like flowers, but like choking, deadly weeds.

In the years immediately after the Streloxx victory, the yachenkas were filled with the vanquished. When their terms expired, the survivors were released and they slowly made their way back to their former homes. When they crossed

the formal boundaries into those cities, members of the ExComm arrested them and processed them for re-sentencing. A few asked what crime they had committed, most simply accepted their fate. Those who asked were told “The Articles” made it illegal for convicted felons to live in the same cities where they had perpetrated their crimes. Since they had entered those cities, they obviously intended to live there (the ExComm were masters at determining what was obvious, frequently seeing what no one else could see, often what no one else knew existed). Therefore they had violated “The Articles.” Returning home was proof of their crimes. They were returned to the yachenka, their new sentence was simply their original sentence — doubled.

There is an old Resenka saying, “To live a life is not so simple as crossing a field.” At least I am told that is an “old Resenka saying.” It may well be, we appear to have many of them. One thing about our lives is simple: our apprehension is constant.

Some things were in obvious violation of “The Articles” — sabotage of Streloxx property (and what was not Streloxx property?), murder, theft and all activities deliberately calculated to thwart their Victory. But what was deliberate? The fact that the Streloxx controlled the entire legal system and that only the Streloxx could therefore determine premeditation was a most effective means of control.

If you said to a Streloxx, “Drop dead!” it was obvious you were planning some heinous crime against him and you were sentenced to the yachenka. If two

citizens complained against a new tax, they were guilty of forming an organized gang and were sentenced to the yachenka. If you had lived in one of the Chekart controlled states during the War of Vengeance you were obviously a collaborator and could be sentenced to the yachenka.

The Streloxx are fond of saying that censorship of the written word does not exist. Anyone is free to write anything at all and submit it for publication. If the article does not appear, it means that the good citizens of Resenka would not have been interested in reading it. It was, of course, not censored.

Being only 19, I knew about the Dark Times solely through the whispers of those of my parents' generation. The Cleansings were now a part of the past, except for those who still lived in the yachenka or who still waited for a family member to return from them. And those two groups comprised fully half of our total population.

By now a sullen atmosphere had settled over Resenka. Few people acted with kindness, there was no example from the Streloxx to exhibit such behavior. Fewer still even smiled in public — expressions of joy could be reported to the ExComm.

The historian, Denikin, wrote, “The further back into the decades one goes, the fewer the eyewitnesses who are left. The light of common knowledge has gone out and darkness has set in. The written chronicles either do not exist or are kept under lock and key.”

Anatorr was an eyewitness.

# ELEVEN

Anatorr was an eyewitness to the darkness of the Streloxx.

At one stop on the long trip to the yachenka, Anatorr said that the wagons were emptied of the prisoners and flushed then out, the ever-rising filth would otherwise surely have killed them all. Because of this arrangement, the railcars were actually stopped in the town and the locals came and stood silently, their presence giving support to the yaks. A few tried to pass cool drinks of voda and small pieces of boiled tubers to the yaks, but they were quickly pushed back by the guards. Thwarted, they waited, making bold eye contact with the condemned, hoping that such a simple gesture would be comforting. Anatorr said that it drove away a small measure of despair.

As the assembly of yaks and citizens watched, more prisoners were marched towards the railcars, condemned to exile and the yachenka. Anatorr noticed that a few marchers back from the front of the line seemed to be a family, a man, a woman, and a girl of about five years. The man was carrying his daughter, the wife was a step behind. When the marchers neared the wall of locals, the man whispered something to his little girl. She looked at him, her

eyes wide open in terror, and then quickly nodded her head. The man set her down so she could walk, but he kept himself between her and the guards.

Closer to the railcars now, he let go of the little girl's hand and she wandered, seemingly aimlessly towards the locals. One eldermother dropped to her knees and motioned the little girl to come to her. Before the child could move more than four or five steps away from her father, a shot rang out and the little girl toppled over like a bundle of rags carelessly dropped to the ground.

The father stopped moving, his mouth flailing, but no sounds coming out. The rest of the line of new yaks, including his wife, kept moving. A guard stormed up to the father, pointed to the dead child and asked, "Is that yours?"

Anatorr heard him say, "Yes, she is my daughter." And without another word from either the soldier or the father, the man walked over to the little body, picked his child up in his arms and got back in line to board the wagon.

"Don't be afraid," the father said. "Papa said he would take care of you."

He stumbled on and as he started to climb into the wagon, a guard yanked his dead child from his arms. Before the guards clubbed the man into silence he wailed, "Dacha, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

The small body was dropped beside the steps and lay there as the prisoners piled into the wagons to be delivered, they fervently believed, to similar fates. As the railcars pulled away, the eldermother who had beckoned the child only moments earlier, scooped up the small bundle and carried her away.

Even after his release from the yachenka, Anatorr said the darkness did not lift.

Only a few months after he returned from the yachenka for the “heinous” crime of being captured by Chekart soldiers and not fighting to the death during the War of Vengeance, he attended a celebration in honor of the day the Leader of the Streloxx was born. Attendance was not compulsory, but if Anatorr, a citizen of the yachenka, had not freely elected to appear, he would have been executed. Indeed, that fate awaited any invitee who dared to be absent from a celebration in honor of the Leader. As it was, more than half of the audience voluntarily chose to enter the hall. The remainder just wanted to stay alive.

The very captive audience was made up of select citizens of Zenyuk, obviously not everyone could receive such an honor — the honor of honoring the Leader. Only shop owners, managers of large factories, the Pol and all of his underlings, members of the local Security Force, and, of course, the ever present ExComm could attend. And former yaks, proving that they had been “rehabilitated.”

The Security Force saw to it that “invitations” were delivered. The ExComm recorded everyone’s presence — or absence; they also took diligent note of everyone’s behavior, particularly their enthusiasm towards the Leader.

One of the ironies of this celebration was that our Beloved Leader was not in attendance. Zenyuk was too small a city for him to notice, except when it came

to delivering money to support his campaigns and projects, and soldiers and workers to fulfill those enterprises.

Speeches noting the glories of the Leader droned on and on. Self-congratulatory pronouncements fell from the lips of the Pol and his underlings. Finally, the Pol walked again to center stage and said, “Citizens of Zenyuk, let us bring this evening to a close by rising to an ovation for the Leader,” as if that was the first time that night when anyone had risen to an ovation.

With those words, he began to smile and applaud vigorously. Everyone in the hall immediately joined him, some accenting the hand claps with whistles and cheers. The tumultuous ovation continued for two minutes, three minutes, four minutes. Palms were becoming sore and arms were starting to ache. Many of the older citizens were actually short of breath. But still the ovation continued.

Even those who genuinely adored the Leader were feeling that they had given sufficient honor. But who would be the first to stop?

The Pol could have done it, after all it was he who had suggested this conclusion to the meeting. But he was afraid his position was not secure enough in the Streloxx pantheon, so he continued to applaud. And members of the ExComm were watching to see who would stop first.

Five minutes, six minutes, seven minutes, it continued. Eight minutes, nine minutes. Now everyone was clapping for fear. They could not stop unless their hearts stopped. At ten minutes into the ovation one elderly factory manager

did keel over, stricken with a heart attack. But when the ExComm called for a stretcher, everyone else continued to applaud the Leader.

Eleven minutes, twelve minutes. The celebrants began to look, very carefully at each other, pleading for relief, but not daring to stop. Thirteen minutes, fourteen minutes. Finally the Pol allowed his arms to fall to his sides — it was agony keeping them raised — and sat down. The hall was instantly silent.

That night the Pol was arrested. He was sentenced to ten years in the yachenka. The charge on his arrest papers was for allowing corruption in his city. But Anatorr heard that when the Pol was led to the prison wagon, a member of the ExComm whispered to him, “Never be the first to stop applauding!”

When the story was repeated all over Zenyuk, no one laughed.

# TWELVE

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

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

Well, maybe she did and maybe she did not.

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

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

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

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

**Her answer was no surprise to any woman of Resenka: “Because my mother did.”**

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

**She gave the proper reply, “Because my mother did.”**

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

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

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

**I distinctly remember the last time I asked her to teach me something in the kitchen. She slapped me across my face with her open hand and screamed,**

**“Learn that I do not want you in my kitchen! If there was a way I could do it, I would not even let you in my house!”**

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

**The day after I rented my flat, I went to the street peddlers to buy things I would need for my own kitchen. The despair I had felt when my mother put me out and my father did not stop her, had gone. I was excited about the new adventures, the new possibilities that were only just down the street. I threw my string-bag over my shoulder, locked my door and headed outside. At the corner I waited for the lights to be changed by the traffic officer. He had the big box open on the pole and when it suited him, he would stop one line of traffic by throwing a switch and let the other line go. When it suited him. Megin had automatic lights. A small place like Zenyuk had to make do.**

**One of the things with which we did not have to “make do” was the biblio, a store lined with row after row of shelves filled with books. Most of the books were Streloxx propaganda, dry as dust learning books, and teks, but we loved to read. As watchful as the restricters were, some old imagine-tales slipped through. So many people shopped at the biblio that there was always a wait at the door.**

**I passed to the outside of the walkalong, keeping out of the shoppers’ way as they wound in one shop, out its second door and into another shop. In Medical Shop 14, and back out. In Food Shop 57, and back out. In Shoe Shop 8**

and back out. Around the corner and into Food Shop 137, and back out. Who knew what treasures there would be? Since there was no way to know if a new shipment had arrived or if the shelves were empty, when we shopped, we looked in every store, and looked at every display even though they were far back and out of reach. Rare it was that a shop person would give you any attention. Normally you had to stop, stomp and stare until they helped you.

Out in the street it was different. There people lined up and held their wares. Some sellers purchased permits to be there, others just stood. The ones who bought the permits had many goods to sell, the standers, had only a few. When the milish came around, a signal would pass through the line of sellers. Those without a permit would fold up their few goods and scurry away. These merchants held up a pair of pants and a skirt that could be easily dropped into a string-bag. Or they would stand with their coats open, inside pockets bulging with forsales. If you saw something interesting, you asked the price, if the price sounded favorable you were obliged to make an offer of a lower price. A quick nod sealed the deal, a shake of the head sent you to the next person.

That day I spent less than two elbur, an enormous amount of money for someone who had not yet found a job (part of my extravagance went to buy a carbo-voda, a bubbling, sweet water sold by streeters). The majority of my purchase was spent for one cooking skillet (with a lid), one deep pan in which to make soup (with no lid) and a pot for boiling kafe. I bought enough plates and utensils so I could eat four days without needing to wash the dishes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Still holding me in his arms, he carried me to bed. It was several hours before he washed any more dishes that day.

# THIRTEEN

I have one good memory of my mother.

It was the day of my ninth festivity. Father was away, I do not remember where he had gone. Mother was going shopping. That meant I would be alone. At the door she stopped, turned back to me and snapped, “Well, put your things on if you want to go with me. We can stop at the Steamer on the way.”

I just stood there looking at her, my mouth hanging open like a hungry Rumpel Bird with its beak flapping back and forth.

“Now, girl! If you are coming. This day will not come again!”

As quickly as I could, I scurried into my cold weathers, struggled into my buckle-boots and put on my grubs which were lined with soft Keelork fur. My cold weathers had a hood lined with Keelork fur and I tossed it up on my head and pulled the string tight. My mother was actually inviting me to go with her and to go for a treat!

When the lift finally reached the bottom floor, I dashed outside and nearly bumped in to an old woman who was sweeping snow. Her short brush broom was working furiously, keeping the walkalong clean. Dressed in black boots,

cold weathers, a scarf and a white apron, she was the perfect twin of every other street sweeper. Mother did not see the near collision, but still I expected a scolding from the old woman (old women on Resenka, whether they are your own eldermother or not, are quick with a snappy word or correction). She flicked her broom at me and smiled as I skidded to a stop, spun in a circle and almost fell. She clucked her tongue, shook her head and went on with her work.

To reach the Steamer we squeezed into a crowded tramway. The red and yellow monster lumbered over steel tracks, which protested at the weight on top they had to move. Some days the tramways were empty, other days we tried to squeeze five or ten more people into a wagon that should have had fifteen or twenty fewer people inside. When the tramways were late, as they were today, they were always crowded.

Mother and I moved into the center of the wagon and went down the aisle away from the door since we had many stops to ride. Eventually there was an empty seat and I was glad to use it. It is hard enough for an adult to ride the crowded tramways, but for one who was only nine, it could be very tiring, if not actually frightening.

“Next stop,” Mother grunted, and I scrambled to my feet.

The wagon emptied like a tipped over voda glass. Many people were going to the Steamer today.

We walked down a short narrow street to the front door. Several old men sat outside, bundled against the cold, selling gelled vapors to be dropped on the

hot rocks. The hot rocks released the crisp aromas and when the scented steam was inhaled it gave a definite pleasurable sensation. The vapors were healthful as well. Mother selected two small gellies and we went inside.

The dressing room was full of women, some dressed, some partly so, mostly though, they were completely naked. Mother and I undressed, stored our clothes in a small basket and took towels from the attendant. The attendant worked a word puzzle in the gazetta and only gave us a fleeting glance as we left the dressing room and went inside for steam.

Young girls and old women, skinny, fat, and in between all, strolled on the hard tile floor, looking for sitting places. Small groups of friends stood around the walls sharing gossip or a glass of kvasale. We waited for a bench so Mother could lay on it while I rubbed her back.

Every once in a while she would say, "Massage right there, Elena. Work that spot." I was only too glad to do it, starved for her affection and appreciation. She eventually dozed off and I found a girl, about my age and we sat under the bench where Mother slept.

The companionable atmosphere was disturbed by a man who tried to stare in through a ventilation place. No one screamed out a warning. A whisper passed quickly through the crowd of steamers. One woman, young, beautiful and brazen, strode over to where the man was looking, pretending that she did not know he was there. She walked with an air that definitely gave the man something to look at. While she kept him distracted, two eldermothers

approached the ventilation place from opposite sides, each carrying a bucket of scalding water. Then the crowd of women began to shout, filling the hot air with hotter words. Instantly the old women hurled their buckets at the peep-hole. We could hear the man sputter and curse as the water drenched him. Then we all laughed and cheered. He would not soon forget his cheap thrill and his free bath!

After we had showered and dressed, Mother and I walked out into the cold, invigorating air. We turned back up the way we came and then turned down the street and shopped in and out of several stores. In the middle of the block we passed a store which had a door-guardian in front, the sure sign of an off-limits store, a store in which only a few of the most important Streloxx were allowed to shop.

The guardian was either new on the job or too long at his post because he missed a frail eldermother slip into the lobby of the store. Her cold weathers were so old and thin that they could hardly have been any comfort to her in the winter air. She had only one grub, the bare hand was shoved under her arm to keep it warm. As she peered into the shop she waited too long in front of the open door and attracted the attention of one of the shop girls who shouted a warning to the guardian.

The guardian spun around quickly and in a voice not loud, but very forceful, ordered the old woman to move along. Pretending she could not hear, the woman continued to look at shelves so full of food they were sagging. I was able to catch a glimpse past the guardian and saw foods I had never seen before.

When the eldermother showed no signs of hearing or any willingness to move on, the guardian picked her up, carried her to the street and shooed her away as though he were chasing a stray mongrel from his palace door.

People passing by hissed at his behavior, but he evidently had contracted the same hearing malady as the old woman.

Mother saw me and yanked me away with such force I fell, dropping the bag I was carrying, spilling its precious contents. As I tried to gather everything back into the string-bag Mother snapped, “Look at what you’ve done. You’ve wasted good food, wasted hard-earned elbur. I knew I should have left you at home.”

And just that quickly the wonderful day was over.

# FOURTEEN

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lubeme is well-mannered and well-bred. When written by her husband’s lover those words sound cold and calculating, but I do not mean them to be so. There is a gentleness and a sensitivity about her that I find warm and compelling. My uneasy feeling about sharing a meal alone with her quickly evaporated because of her poise and grace.

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

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

Although no one stays in favor with the Streloxx for very long, Lubeme’s grandfather had been able to keep the family from falling into total disfavor

through his shrewd business dealings. While there was little of the family's former status remaining today, Lubeme retained the nobility, but hid it beneath a surprising, almost girlish, charm.

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

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

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

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

But her pale blue eyes, I think, are her most compelling feature. They show the expressions which her face often seeks to hide. Sometimes they are softly lit with delight, other times they are fiery with emotion. Her eyes reveal much about Lubeme while the rest of her tries to be secretive and discrete. Tiny lines, lines

caused by age, by worry, by passion, by neglect — all of those I would think, and more — highlight her face when she smiles or when she frowns.

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

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

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

There was one point, near the end of the meal, when I looked up from my plate and saw Lubeme’s eyes filled with tears. She quickly wiped them with her fingers and then without preamble, said, “Anatorr does not love me. I love him more than I could ever love anyone else. He is kind to me, but there is a distance in him which hurts me so much. When he came home from the yachenka, the Ex-Comm had torn something out of him. They stole him away from me and he will

never be mine again. On rare occasions, he would come to me for his physical needs, but that stopped months ago.”

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

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

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

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

# FIFTEEN

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

We mark our new year at the time the Snow Queen begins to loose her power. Then she is transformed into an old hag and slinks back into the ground.

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

The rich, black soil of our world becomes a syrup of mud. Even places that will be trampled hard in the summer are places of thick, sucking mud. The old roads which have not been paved become impassable bogs. As the snow drains

into the Wikfa River, the River Zenyuk and every other river, lake and stream on Resenka, we watch for those Crystal blossoms as a sign that the Flower Girl has once again rescued our world.

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

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

But almost over night Resenka becomes a blanket of green to cradle the Lovers' embrace. The Maroezh trees burst open with white blooms that resemble great scoops of frozen cream. The blossoms open and fall to the ground like flakes of snow. The spring winds quickly blow them away and pale green leaves

appear. The music of birds and insects serenade the Lovers as their passion grows.

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

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

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

But even the Streloxx cannot stop Harvest Woman.

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

Harvest Woman cannot delay the Snow Queen for very long. Leaves magically turned from green to red, yellow and gold and then to brown, falling from the trees as Harvest Woman's tears. The bare branches creak in the wind like the old, dying creature Harvest Woman has become. And winter's icy breath blows the dead leaves through the streets of our cities and into the Wikfa.

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

# SIXTEEN

Because Resenka is covered six months by the Snow Queen's frosty breath, we have learned to grow things indoors. Probably the least practical, but the most prized of our unseasonable plants are flowers. Flowers are a sign that spring will overcome winter's icy grip. The flowers which we grow indoors are promises of that coming end. That is why when you enter a Resenka's home in the winter time, you will find at least one bowl filled with flowers. Some people even set up small gardens in their Adzeva-facing windows, grow flowers, harvest and sell the seeds.

When you attend a wedding or a banquet, the rooms will be decorated with flowers and always the women and girls will be carrying small bundles of the colorful blooms. If you are greeting someone at the railcar station, you take them flowers — always an odd number because that is the sign of good luck. If you are invited to a friend's home for dinner, you always take flowers to the hostess. On your first day of school you take flowers to your very first teacher.

No matter which home you enter on our world, whether it is the mansion of the Pol, the simple wooden construction of a peasant, or the towering gray

buildings the Streloxx have herded us into, you will step into a hallway. This is so that winter's snow, spring's mud, summer's dust, and autumn's leaves will not follow you into the rest of the dwelling.

Because of those uninvited visitors it has become tradition to remove your shoes upon entering and be handed a pair of slippers to wear during your visit. The slippers are kept in a cubicle just to the right of the door. The slippers keep your feet warm and keep the floors of the flat clean, but there is a greater implication to being handed a pair of them when entering someone's home. The slippers say that you have left the world of all-people and are now a citizen of a private sovereignty. The simple gesture speaks of openness and trust between old friends.

On top of the cubicle there is always a chasha-vaza in which to place the flowers. There are flower shops everywhere. In the winter when live blooms are so very expensive, merchants sell paper ones. Before Anatorr came into my life, I would buy flowers at the market or pick them from my yard in summertime and just drop them into the chasha-vaza. There was no artistic sense or fashion.

After Anatorr, my house was filled flowers, arranged as though Resenka's most gifted painter had prepared his most exceptional canvas. If they had been notes on a musical score, they would have composed a symphony. Perhaps love's memory causes me to describe those arrangements with words which are too fine. But I remember the first day I came home to find my house filled with

flowers and although those bouquets soon faded, nothing can cause that memory to pale.

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

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

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

I unlocked the front door, stepped inside and pushed the door closed behind me, hearing the lock automatically slide home. Without turning on the hall light I hung up my coat and shook my boots into the corner, one chasing the other into the darkness. Then I turned and walked across the cold floor to the cubicle where my slippers were waiting.

I had left the marcobox playing when I went to work and now the tunes which tried to fill my flat with good cheer only filled me with annoyance. Before I

could reach it, a droning voice came on, exhorting us to higher heights, goals to attain, and other political pablum. The marcoboxes can never be turned off — that is the way the Streloxx ordered them designed. We can turn the volume down so it is inaudible, but we can never turn the intrusive things off. I snapped the dial hard enough to break it and enjoyed the silence which flooded my ears.

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

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

I turned and walked on silent feet down the hall to the cooking and eating room. He had to be waiting there. He was not, but in the center of the table was a tall and narrow chasha-vaza which held three exquisite deep red Posys. All of the green leaves had been snipped off, except for two under each blossom which

cradled it like a mother holding her newborn. The prickly thorns were all cloaked inside the clear glass.

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

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

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

And then he knocked at front door.

# SEVENTEEN

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

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

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

A subdepartment of the ExComm was established just to deal with “the religion problem.” The “Committee for Counterrevolutionary Examination” spearheaded a wave of terror first against the Keepers and then against their flocks. In every village, town and city there were arrests, mock trials and imprisonments. At first the CCE executed Keepers, but eventually they learned that a dead Keeper was harder to fight than one who was simply locked away in a yachenka where he could be forgotten.

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

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

One story from the Dark Times is of two groups of women who were arrested, tried and sentenced — all on the same day. One group was composed entirely of prostituka, women who gave themselves to men for money. The rest were Shepherdesses, women who gave themselves to the Holy Ones for love.

Both groups were put on the same prison wagons and sent to the same yachenka.

At the yachenka, the tukies were allowed to continue the practice of their trade — in fact, whoring was their only duty, a duty for which they continued to receive pay! The hardest labor, the most degrading jobs, the most horrible disciplines were reserved for the Shepherdesses. After three years the tukies went back to their homes with bags full of elbur. After three additional years the Shepherdesses were released, but they were forbidden to return to their homes, their husbands or their children.

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

# EIGHTEEN

A thick carpet of snow muffled the sounds of traffic in and around Elissa's Garden. The trees were heavy with the snowfall of the day and the sky was heavy with the promise of a night of new snow. In a few places, the dead stems of autumn's final flowers, which workers had neglected to pluck out of the ground, poked defiantly through the snow. As the wind chased the fluffy white flakes through the Garden, a scattering of scarlet Pod-Berries gave the only evidences of color to counter the stark white of the Snow Queen's blanket.

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

**Elissa's Garden was duplicated in every city on Resenka, but even the proud residents of Megin, our capital, were forced to admit that the one in Zenyuk was without equal anywhere on our planet. So old are the Gardens that no one knows, with any certainty, how they developed. They were probably a central area set aside as a common growing ground when people began to leave the wandering life of the woods and gather into villages. Gradually they became parks where anyone could come for contemplation, discussion or simply for relaxation.**

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

**If Elissa's Garden in Zenyuk was universally recognized as the most beautiful, Elissa's Garden in Ingal-Karbe was the most unusual. Every other Garden was an area, large or small, in the center of town, surrounded by buildings. In Ingal-Karbe, the Garden was a long, narrow strip which effectively**

separated the city into two sections. To allow for transport between the northern side and the southern side of the city, two large thoroughfares tunneled under the Garden (which began on the banks of the Wikfa River and spread east as often as the city grew). When builders sought more and more land, the Garden was also extended to the east. In this way Elissa's Garden was not only a place of growing things, but it was always a growing thing itself.

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

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

We watched an old woman, dressed in the traditional black boots, layers of warm clothing, a scarf and a white apron, sweep the snow from the sidewalk. Her broom was a coarse hand-made thing constructed of twigs tied around a short

branch. As she stooped to her work, I wondered if it was the length of the branch which caused her to bend over or if she had fashioned the handle to accommodate her stoop. Snow flew from the branches of her broom as if the flakes had been driven by the cold winter wind.

“There is a place near here,” Anatorr said, “where we can hire a horse and carriage. There is a reinsman named Tyree. He calls his horse ‘Ebony Enchantress.’ While we snuggle under an blanket, Tyree will take us through the old part of the city to a tavern which smells richly of wood smoke and warm kvasale.”

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

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

“What else did you discover?”

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

His face was filled with a wonderful smile that covered him from his chin to his forehead. Then, without explanation, he started laughing.

“What?” I asked.

I furrowed my forehead, squinched my eyebrows down and stuck out my lips in a pout. It looked like a grimace of anger, and when I was a little girl I often pouted, using that exact look, but with Anatorr, I used it only to tease.

“You are laughing at me!” I said with a petulance that was hard to maintain.  
“Don’t laugh at me!”

He shook his head and held out his hands, trying to bring his mirth under control.

“Do you want to hear something funny?” he asked and started laughing again.

“Yes,” I said.

“If I tell you,” he said, “you must give your troth that you will not laugh.”

“You are going to tell me something funny and I must pledge my troth not to laugh?”

“Yes.”

“If that is the only way I can share your joke, thereto I plight thee my troth.”

“It is not a joke,” Anatorr said. “It is a true story. It happened when Mitork and I were here. I was talking about you. When Mitork and I are alone, I speak of little else. I was going on and on, praising your beauty.”

“And well you should,” I interrupted, smiling.

“Constantly,” he said. “But this time, Mitork surprised me. He seems to pay such little attention to the way people dress or act or talk, even beautiful

women. You know, I used to think it was only self-deprecation when he called himself a Middler, but I'm not sure anymore."

A Middler is a name given to someone who seems to have bad luck in all things and at all times. It describes one who seems to live in a storm, always under thunder and rain, never any Adzeva-shine. The name comes from the yaks. The bread which they were served was baked in loaves and then cut into sections each one weighing exactly the same, but everyone coveted an end piece of bread. The end was crisper and seemed to be heavier. Yaks claimed that it filled you up more than a middle piece. To get a middle piece was confirmation that you were abandoned by the Holy Ones and good for nothing at all. To receive a middle at the first meal of the day was a sign that nothing would go right until you pulled yourself into bed, and then the bed might collapse beneath you.

"Anatorr, your appraisal of your friend and your concern for him is admirable, but what did he say?"

Anatorr shook his head as if to erase some unseen picture and said, "I know that my mouth just dropped open, because without preamble, without connection to anything we had been saying, he said, 'Elena has a cute wiggle when she walks.'"

My eyebrow shot up and with shock, only about half of it pretended. I said, "Mitork said that? How did you answer him?"

"Remember your promise," Anatorr said.

I crossed my middle fingers of each hand over the first ones and drew them twice across my heart from opposite directions — a ritual symbol of truthfulness.

“I said, ‘She has a cute little wiggle when she is standing still.’”

I held out my arms to him and as he came into them, I whispered, “Is that the only time I have a cute wiggle?” With my face behind his, he could not see me break my promise.

He answered me over and over that night, when we were alone in our lodging-rooms.

# NINETEEN

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

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

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

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

Night was falling as Aldan reached the Plateau. Understanding the difficulty of the journey which awaited him once he began to cross the Flatland and climb into the mountains, Aldan gratefully accepted the younger man's invitation to share a fire and a meal.

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

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

When Adzeva was poised just over the horizon, Aldan blew the embers of their fire to life and added wood to build up a bed of coals. He placed a preserved shoulder of latt-beast onto a spit to roast. The meat had been brought along to feed him on his two week journey into the mountains. Finding food along the

mountain trail was an uncertain business and wise travelers went prepared. For Aldan to use his entire provision for one meal was to put himself at the risk of grave hunger. If he was seriously delayed, he risked starvation. When Toley protested, Aldan said that he was giving the meal to his friend as a thanksgiving to the Holy Ones.

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

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

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

"The meal was an act of friendship and thanksgiving. When I gave you my cloak I was saying that all of my property, all that I own, is now at your disposal. When I strapped on your sword I said that your battles are now my own and I will defend you with my life. The mingling of our blood says louder than any words that we are now brothers. I rubbed ashes into the wound so that it will scar.

Whenever any one sees it, they will know that Toley has a friend who will always come to his side. They will hesitate to attack you because they will be attacking two men, not one.

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

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

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

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

# TWENTY

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

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

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

Streloxx grew out of opposition to the Chekart and the “Others” grew out of opposition to the Streloxx.

Anatorr and I met the Others when the Flower Girl was chasing away the last vestiges of the Snow Queen’s icy reign. It had been three months since I had been able to do the thing I loved most — wake up in Anatorr’s arms. The winter had been hard and we had not been to Ingal-Karbe since shortly after the first snows fell. If we watched with care, opportunities to be alone presented themselves. Still I wanted more. I was anxious for the day when we could openly declare our love. Until that day dawned, I would cherish the moments we were together as much as a thirsty woman would cherish water.

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

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

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

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

the serkor, including salaries, had to be given to the Streloxx as a tax on “nonessentials.”

Volukay was the image of everyone’s elderparent. Only strangers to the gathering called him “Keeper Volukay.” Everyone else addressed him as “Dadush,” the diminutive for “elderfather.” He had never been a tall man, but the years had bent him even closer to the ground. A stiffness in his neck did not allow him to raise his head. This condition caused him to always peer over the tops of his spectacles, his eyebrows raised in a look of perpetual surprise.

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

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

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

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

He answered, “Child, you are not the only one who looks with the heart.”

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

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

"Let's go inside," Anatorr said. "Perhaps we could prevail upon the Keepers for a warm drink."

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

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

Dadush, silhouetted by the light from inside, called out, "Who is there?"

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

"Elena. Anatorr. Welcome. Please come up. We have mugs of warm cinnotark."

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

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

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

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

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

# TWENTY-ONE

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

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

As I gripped Anatorr's arm with my left hand I turned quickly to look at Keeper Volukay. Dadush's face was blank, unreadable. Then a smile crossed his eyes and soon could not be kept from his entire face. His eyes did not speak

sanction, but neither did they speak condemnation. Instead, it was a look of understanding, of comprehension.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**“How is Lubeme?” Gernet said.**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# TWENTY-TWO

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

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

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

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

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

But my beloved spoke prophetically.

# TWENTY-THREE

**“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 Streloxx**

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 railcar 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 Streloxx 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 forefinger, 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 Streloxx 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 Streloxx 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 Streloxx arrested anyone who was unlucky enough to cross their paths. Quotas were established for towns, farms, even flats — a certain number of people from here, a certain number from there. Sometimes the ExComm simply walked along the street and pointed to individuals. ‘You are arrested,’ they said. ‘You are arrested. You may go home.’ Thugs followed them and the arrested were carted away, most never to be seen again. 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 Streloxx began to arrest the integrals. Anyone seen leaving was 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 Streloxx 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. When the railcars stopped in the dread Sleeping Land, the snowy wasteland in the far north country, thousands had perished from the conditions of the trip. Those members of the village council who survived were taken from the train and shot. They were lined up in pairs. Their executioners saved bullets by killing two victims with each bullet.**

**“The Streloxx gave the houses and business and lands in Samarett to their henchmen as rewards for loyalty to the movement, for the renewal of Streloxx principles. They simply moved into the empty homes, reopened the empty stores and set up their lives where innocent people had once lived. All mention of the village was removed from books and atlases. Its name was changed and the old town simply ceased to exist.”**

**“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 Streloxx.”**

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

**“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 Streloxx 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 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.”**

# TWENTY-FOUR

For a long time no one spoke. Then Dadush broke the silence.

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

“Is there no organization, no hierarchy, no command structure?” I asked.

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

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

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

**“And now, I think we have revealed enough,” Lared said. “I was about to fix a meal.”**

# TWENTY-FIVE

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 that they were a subversive group, planning sabotage, rebellion, or other anti-Streloxx 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 may 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 Streloxx 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 Streloxx. 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 Streloxx 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 20 or 25 other people. I heard of one communal flat where 54 people lived. So, regardless of the weather, regardless of the time of day, citizens of Resenka walk the streets — it is the only way some of us can have “privacy.”

If you wish to make contact with someone, just go outside. Wait by a tramvay 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 Streloxx or their informants suspect something, it is almost impossible to detect "subversive" activity in a moving crowd of people.

## TWENTY-SIX

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 Queen, Flower Girl, Sower, and Harvest Woman.

As a child, I think I enjoyed Snow Queen's 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 Queen's 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 Queen 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 Queen's 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, with one section twice as wide as the other. When the inside sections of the window are opened, the outside pieces can be opened into the room for ventilation. 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, 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 vinograd to complete the refreshment.

Fresh fruit was extremely expensive at this time of year, if, in fact, it could be found at all. Vinograd 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 vinograd, 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 under things 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 shop lady 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."

# TWENTY-SEVEN

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 tightly 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 an 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 Queen's 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.”

Remembering his words that day, 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 a major 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 to 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 Streloxx 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."

# TWENTY-EIGHT

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 Elissa'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 railwagons 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-Streloxx 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 Strellox, 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 Streloxx 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 prove to be my ticket to the yachenka.

# TWENTY-NINE

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 Streloxx, 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, and we are frequently insane, 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 in Zenyuk who were interrogated 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 milish. 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."

# THIRTY

“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, trying to show more courage than I actually felt at that moment.

“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 Jassaca, 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 death actually becomes a comfort.”**

# THIRTY-ONE

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 Streloxx 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 Queen 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.

# THIRTY-TWO

The tramway we boarded was three wagons long. We stepped into the leader and took seats near the door. Someone else who knew us slipped quietly into the last car and huddled against the small heater. She, too, had stood many hours in the street, waiting for my release from the ExComm, and watching her husband. Anatorr and I were so intent on each other that we did not see Lubeme as she stepped from the tram at the same time we emerged, scampering up the front steps and disappearing into my flat. She took up a position across the street and waited alone throughout another frigid night.

When we stepped from my rooms and into the crisp morning air, Lubeme was standing near the door. I stiffened when I saw her and instinctively stepped behind Anatorr. She came up to him quickly and as if I was not standing there with her husband, as if we had not just emerged from spending the night together, she laid her hand on his arm. Her expression changed quickly from hurt to affection and then to bitter disappointment.

Lubeme looked at me and said very quietly, almost in a whisper, said, “Elena, I am glad the ExComm released you.”

**“Lubeme,” I started, but she held up her hand and shook her head.**

**She looked back at Anatorr and said, “When word spread that Elena had been held for questioning, I followed you. I knew you would go to her. I have known for quite some time. I waited all night at the Dom and all night here. I was afraid you would do something foolish, and you almost did. I do not know who that man was, but I saw you move toward him and I saw Elena stop you. I believe if you had advanced on him, he would have killed you. You also did not see Mitork. He arrived shortly after I did. He, too, is someone you should fear.”**

**“The man was ExComm, one of Elena’s interrogators,” Anatorr said, his tone of voice surprised me with its gentleness. After all he was standing in the street with his lover, confronted by his wife.**

**“You are wrong about Mitork,” I spoke up. “He has known about us almost from the beginning and has proven himself to be a faithful friend.”**

**Lubeme’s voice was harsh when she answered me.**

**“Think with your head, girl, and not your heart. Mitork’s face was full of jealousy as he watched the two of you. If that ExComm comes for you, you may be warned of his approach. Mitork will come offering the kiss of friendship, but he will be carrying the traitor’s bag.”**

**She turned to Anatorr, her voice now devoid of the compassion with which she had earlier addressed him.**

**“Anatorr, you take so many foolish chances. You think no one sees you. You think no one knows. Your heart is clouded by love for Elena. If I could have**

generated one small portion of the spark she has induced, you would never have left my side. I have tried not to blame her, because I know how convincing you can be, but she knew we were married. I tried to excuse you because she is so young and so very beautiful, but you are so deliberate in everything you do — this is something you wanted very much.”

Her body trembled and her eyes became moist, but she shook the emotion off and continued, “I want you back. My heart is as full of love for you as is hers. My bed is as open to you as it ever was. Come home to me, Anatorr. We can begin again.”

And then she started to cry. She made no sound, but her eyes brimmed with tears and then the moisture spilled down her face, like flood waters breaching an earthen dam.

Before Anatorr could respond, Lubeme spoke again, her voice now pleading.

“Elena, give him back to me. You can have any man on Resenka, but I have only Anatorr. Who would want a woman whose hair is streaked with white and whose body grows heavy with age and is lined with the marks of the years? Give my husband back to me.”

She turned back to stare at Anatorr. Moments passed and then she said, “Anatorr. Please come home.”

“No, Lubeme. I cannot. I am sorry, truly sorry. But I intend to stay with Elena.”

In that moment, Lubeme seemed to age a century. The spark went out of her eyes and her shoulders slumped. She turned and silently walked away. Deep inside of me, I knew the time would come when I would do as Lubeme had asked. Anatorr would not wish it, but at that moment I knew that someday I would have no other choice.

# THIRTY-THREE

About four weeks after our confrontation with Lubeme, Anatorr and I made our last trip to Ingal-Karbe. It did not, of course, start out to be our last trip.

There was nothing that either of us could have pointed to, no explicit happenings to mark the change in our relationship, but in the days after I had looked into Lubeme's face as she fought to regain her husband, a subtle distance grew between Anatorr and me. Our times together were as enjoyable as they had ever been and the times we were apart were just as empty, just as lonely. But something had changed.

The day following our discovery by Lubeme, Anatorr asked if he could move his things into my flat, making it finally and truly, our flat. I still cannot believe my answer. I told him, "No."

My exact words were, "Anatorr, I love you more today than I have ever loved you. Tomorrow I will love you more than that. But I cannot erase the pain in Lubeme's eyes from my memory. She knows that you are gone from her, but we cannot seal that separation just yet. More than anything else in this world, I want to wake up in your arms every morning, but something deep inside of me

says, not yet. Lubeme must release you. Until she does, you will never be completely mine.”

“And am I to tell her that? Am I to give her a hope that does not exist?”

Anatorr asked.

“I do not know what you will tell her. I only know what I feel. Anatorr, one of the things that loving you has done for me is to make me more aware of the Holy Ones. Maybe that is a violent contradiction, but you, yourself, have remarked about how much you enjoy reading The Words with me, how much you enjoy attending the serkor with me. My conclusion may be in opposition to his teachings, my heart speaks so loudly that I am not certain, but I believe that the Holy Ones brought us together. And I believe that in their time, they will seal us as one.”

That final trip to Ingal-Karbe started much like any other. Anatorr had withdrawn some money from our “bank,” that small container in his desk at the store where we kept the elbur we spent on ourselves. He purchased tickets for a premier berth on the train. When we entered our quarters I immediately saw a long, low table set against the far wall. On it were two chasha-vaza filled with the pale yellow blooms of Jassica. I walked into the sleeping compartment and saw a single perfect red Posy positioned in the center of the bed.

I do not know how he arranged to have the blossoms in our compartment. I do not know how much extra he had to spend to provide that added surprise. But if he had purchased the broach made of ninety-nine perfect tabersk stones

which had adorned the coronation dresses of the Ryssart's wife for seven centuries, it could not have been as beautiful as those blooms.

I held Anatorr tightly for a long time and then I peeled myself from his arms and slipped into the bathing compartment, taking my dressing-case with me. I emerged in a few minutes wearing a new gown I had bought just for the occasion.

Anatorr smiled that smile which covered his entire face and whispered, "Oh my! You've been shopping again!"

"I take that look as a sign of your approval," I purred.

"Elena, you are so beautiful," he said, moving the Posy from the bed and pulling back the covers. When Adzeva's early morning glow spilled through the sleeping-room window we were still entwined in each other's arms. The motion of the train slowing to enter the station awakened us. We were awakened once again, and several hours later, by the cleaning lady banging on our door. Her shrill voice pierced through the solid walls and locked doors and announced that she had work which could not be accomplished as long as we were inside. We bathed and dressed as quickly as we could and left our compartment, accompanied by the old woman's harrumphs. As we passed her, she smiled at me and winked. I was so surprised by the gesture that I walked back to her and gave her the long-stemmed Posy.

The old crone blushed and said, "Hang on to him, dearie. He will always make you happy."

Oh, how I wish I could have done as she advised!

# THIRTY-FOUR

We left the train, walked to the end of the platform and hailed a takzee. When we were seated in the rear of the vehicle, Anatorr said, “Driver, take us to the kafe which serves the finest breakfast in the city. My Princess and I have not eaten since early last evening and we are famished.”

The driver nodded, turned on the fare-meter and pulled away. He glanced at the mirror to look through the rear weather-glass as we merged into traffic. Several times in rapid succession he checked the mirror and then spoke over his shoulder to us.

“Do you have friends in the city?” he asked.

“Yes,” Anatorr said, “why do you ask?”

“Friends in uniform, who drive an official vehicle?” the driver continued.

Anatorr immediately turned around to see what the man was indicating. I followed his gaze and saw an ordinary black jalop signal and turn from the main roadway.

**“I guess it was nothing,” the driver said. Then he switched off the meter and said, “But if you don’t mind, I’ll take a longer route that normal to a special kafe.”**

**Anatorr slid across the seat and turned so that he, too, could watch behind us. I sat where I had been, but I huddled into myself, my arms wrapped around my chest, my heart racing as fast as the day Zalygin interrogated me about the papers missing from Levaki’s office. I reached over and gripped Anatorr’s arm fiercely and stared straight ahead.**

**Finally, the takzee stopped on a street busy with the morning’s commerce. Street vendors were already taking up positions on the pavement beside of us. Two small boys raced between pedestrians in an elaborate game of tag. Their innocent behavior caused me to relax, in spite of my earlier fear. The driver nodded to Anatorr and said, “Have you seen anything?”**

**“Nothing that causes me alarm,” Anatorr replied.**

**The driver turned to face me and said, “I am sorry if I caused you uneasiness. But my brother and his wife disappeared into the yachenka and now I am always afraid.”**

**“Do not apologize,” I answered. “I have met the ExComm. Every citizen of Resenka lives in fear.”**

**He smiled sadly and then tipped his cap as Anatorr paid the fare, which because of our driver’s kindness, was less than it should have been, adding something extra for our new friend. Anatorr opened the door and waited for me**

on the street. As I slid across to join him, the driver said, “You will find other friends in that kafe,” emphasizing the word “other.” We understood his meaning.

A long, tattered green canopy jutted out over the sidewalk, protecting the door of the kafe. That canopy, the building to which it was attached, indeed, all of the area surrounding us, had seen better days. In the early times of Ingal-Karbe, I thought, this must have been the most special place to come. At the far end of the street I could catch a glimpse of Elissa’s Garden. The lodgings where Anatorr and I always stayed were not far from this place, and yet, until a few moments ago, we had not know it existed.

The takzee pulled away and I grabbed Anatorr by the hand and pulled him across the street. We did not see the black jalop parked around the corner and away from the curb, until we were in the middle of the street.

I stumbled, but Anatorr smiled and said, “It is nothing. There are hundreds of jalops just like that one in this city. Besides, spending the night with you makes me very hungry.”

As we stepped out of the street, I pulled Anatorr to a stop under the green canopy and shamelessly asked, “What are you hungry for most, right at this moment?”

He threw back his head and laughed. It was a loud, satisfied sound that caused people to look at us.

**“I am twenty-four years older than you, Princess. An old man needs solid nourishment if he is expected to attempt to satisfy unquenchable lust,” he said, his voice stern, but his eyes full of laughter.**

**“Then I hope their kitchen is well stocked. You will need all your strength,” I said and pulled him into the kafe.**

**As we walked through the doors, a familiar voice said, “I wondered if you two were going to come in here, or just attack each other in the street. Have you no dignity?”**

**“Dadush,” I squealed with delight and rushed to the old Keeper. It was definitely not a proper greeting for a Keeper of the serkor, but I hugged him firmly and then kissed him on his cheek, causing him to blush and stammer, “Now I know you have lost your mind, Elena. But thank you for the kiss, just the same.”**

**Lared was seated opposite Dadush and for once he did not look at me with his usual expression of disapproval. Instead he smiled pleasantly, stood and pulled out a chair for me. I could not resist the tease and so I said, “Dadush, I believe your noveechok is learning manners. Perhaps he will soon attract a woman to his side.”**

**Again Lared surprised me. His smile changed only slightly as he said, “Elena, I once loved a woman who was as sassy as you. But she thought the life of a Keeper dull and unexciting. She went to Megin to seek her destiny. Are you sure you do not have a sister?”**

**“If I did, Keeper Lared,” I said, “I would introduce her to you.”**

None of us noticed the change in Dadush's expression. When he spoke, it caused our laughter to die.

"My friends, there is danger in the street."

We all looked immediately towards the kafe's wide front weather-glass as three men entered and took a table against the far inside wall. One, I did not know, but the other two I recognized at once — Zalygin and Genrikh. And it seemed as if my heart stopped beating.

# THIRTY-FIVE

“We need to go now,” I said to Anatorr, fighting the panic which was rising in my throat. “Those men are ExComm. Two of them are from Zenyuk, they are the ones who interrogated me about Levaki’s missing papers. Our presence here is endangering Dadush and Lared.”

Anatorr stood at once and put his hand on my shoulder, stepping between me and the ExComm. Before I could rise, Lared said, “Since they know you, it is too late for discrete movements.”

He looked at Dadush and an unspoken signal passed between them.

“Please stay and finish your chai,” Dadush urged and we took our seats once more.

Lared reached for his inside jacket pocket and withdrew a small white envelope. Opening it, he allowed the white powder it contained to drop into his chai. He quickly stirred the liquid until all of the powder dissolved. Then he turned the mug up and drained its contents. He crumpled the envelope and rolled it into a small ball which he mixed in with the remnants of his breakfast.

He stirred the lumpy mass of congealed grain pudding until the tiny ball was completely hidden.

Suddenly Lared's face darkened and his breath became short, ragged gasps. From somewhere deep inside of him, Lared uttered a tormented scream. He staggered to his feet, clutched at his throat and crashed to the floor, toppling the adjacent table as he fell.

Completely unnerved by Lared's sudden collapse, I screamed again and again. Anatorr and Dadush rushed to his side. As soon as I could control my voice, I ran to the kafe's proprietor and shouted, "The Keeper! Something is wrong! Send for healers!"

Anatorr was kneeling beside of Lared, running his fingers through the unconscious Keeper's mouth.

"What are you doing?" I asked, my voice still unsteady.

"Checking for something that may be choking him," Anatorr replied with a calm that seemed utterly foreign to the rising panic inside of me.

When Anatorr was satisfied, he placed his hand behind Lared's neck and tilted the Keeper's chin toward the ceiling. Clamping Lared's nose with the thumb and first finger of one hand, he opened the man's mouth with the other. Then he leaned over and sealing his own mouth over Lared's, began to blow his breath into the motionless body of our friend. He repeated the breathing every few seconds, stopping long enough for the forced air to be expelled, then he

began again. After approximately thirty seconds, Lared coughed twice and then lay still. But now he was breathing for himself.

I gripped Dadush's arm tightly and whispered, "What is happening?"

"Lared miscalculated the dosage," Dadush replied in an answering whisper, "but Anatorr has saved his life."

"I don't understand."

"The powder was meant to cause collapse, but Lared took too much and it affected his ability to take air for himself. He will be fine, but you and Anatorr need to get out of here quickly. Pretend you are going for a healer. When you are out of sight, circle back to the serkor and hide in my private rooms. I will join you there when I can. Go, now!"

I rushed over to Anatorr and in a voice that could be heard throughout the kafe said, "Let's go for a healer. The Keeper may be dying." The shaking in my voice was not a deception. I could hardly stand.

"Go!" Dadush ordered. "I will tend to Lared."

Then he looked across the kafe at the three ExComm and said, "You men. Do you know medicine?"

Before the surprised policemen could respond, Dadush continued, "Hurry! Help me get him off of the floor."

With that distraction, Anatorr and I hurried from the building. A crowd had gathered outside and we had to push our way through. A familiar takzee was waiting across the street and we ran to it.

For the benefit of anyone who might have been listening Anatorr said, “A healer. Help us find one. There is a man dying in there.”

“Get in,” the driver said, “I know the place to take you.”

As he drove, he gave us instructions: “I will take you to a place of escape. When I stop, you will find a door to an underground tunnel. Get inside quickly and walk in the direction that my takzee will be facing. There will be enough light from the street gratings so that you can see your way. Leave the main trunk at the first side tunnel. When it comes to an end you will be at a ladder. Climb it into the basement of the serkor. Hide in the Keeper’s room until we can come for you.”

Eventually he drove into a narrow alley that was dark because of the high buildings surrounding it. He stopped in the center of the alley where the darkness was like an evening’s gathering dusk. We jumped out and he drove to the end of the alley, turned left and disappeared. Anatorr found the door and forced its rusty hinges open. The smell which crawled out of the tunnel caused me to gag, but I took a deep breath and dropped into the darkness. Anatorr followed and held the trap-door, allowing it to close silently. We were standing in the sewage tunnels of Ingal-Karbe, alone and very much afraid. But for the moment, we were safe.

# THIRTY-SIX

Dadush came into the room, his body showing the weight of his years and the anxiety of the day's unexpected events. He unbuttoned his heavy coat and hung it on a rack just inside the door. He unwound the gray neck-scarf, draped it over a hook, and hung his hat on top of the scarf. With a sigh, he pushed his feet to carry him into the back room where Anatorr and I were waiting. He closed the door that separated his private quarters from the room where he received guests and slumped onto a hard, wooden chair.

“Lared will survive,” he said, answering our unspoken question. Then he continued, “The three ExComm were very upset when you did not return to the kafe, particularly the young one you identified as being from Zenyuk. I have seen many angry men, I have been in anger's grip myself, but this was an fury driven almost by insanity. Whatever it is you two have done, he carries a powerful hatred against you.”

“It is not us, Dadush,” I said. “It is me.”

And I quickly told him the story of my arrest and interrogation, of the way Genrikh's eyes clawed over my naked body, of my taunts and of Zalygin's warning.

Dadush shook his head sadly and began to weep.

"Child," he began, "we must get you to safety."

Before another word could be spoken, the door exploded inward, kicked from its hinges by the heavy booted foot of an ExComm special guard. He stood just outside the door, his arm hanging easily at his side, a personal projectile weapon gripped securely in his fist. Three other special guards ran quickly into the room, their PPWs drawn and leveled at us.

"What is the meaning of this?" Dadush roared, no longer looking or sounding like an old man.

The guard closest to him involuntarily took a step backwards. The Strelox may have turned many from The Words and from the serkor, but there was enough respect for an aged Keeper in that one guard to cause him to hesitate. The man who walked through the door, however, showed no respect for anything sacred or holy. Genrikh strode through the shattered door, marched straight up to Dadush and struck the old man across the cheek with the barrel of his weapon. How he remained standing, I do not know, but Dadush somehow held on.

Genrikh walked towards me, but Dadush grabbed his arm and stopped him. Dadush forced the ExComm inquisitor to face him and then said, "Elena tells me you are a beater of women. Now you violate a serkor and strike a

**Keeper. You bring shame to Resenka. You bring shame to your uniform. You bring shame to yourself.”**

**Dadush’s words were too much. Genrikh struck the him again, and this time Dadush slumped to the floor, bleeding from a second jagged wound.**

**Genrikh spun and stormed back to the open door. He turned to the three officers and said, “Bring those two. Kill the old man.”**

**I remember next only that I screamed, “NO!” and sprang towards Genrikh at the same time Anatorr moved towards the ExComm. The officer standing closest to me must have struck me from behind, because when I came to, I was lying on a dirty cot in a basement room. Anatorr was sitting in a chair beside me, his face swollen and bruised, his hands tied securely behind his back, his legs and back lashed to the chair.**

**I tried to move but pain and nausea seized me and I fell back down. I looked at Anatorr and asked, “Dadush?”**

**Anatorr said nothing, but sadly shook his head. When he spoke, it was with difficulty, his lips were split and swollen, “ExComm follow orders, Princess.”**

**I had no chance to grieve because the door to our cell opened and Zalygin entered, followed by Genrikh. I could tell from the expression on Genrikh’s face that his superior had taken some of the harsh pride out of him. Zalygin must surely object to the murder of a Keeper, I thought.**

**Without preamble, Zalygin said, “Elena, you have been arrested and charged with participation in the cause of the Others. You will be tried today and**

then sentenced immediately. Anatorr, you are similarly charged. You will suffer a similar fate.”

As he turned to leave, I struggled to my feet and rushed toward him. Genrikh anticipated my movement and struck me hard on the side of my face and I fell headlong onto the floor. I pushed myself to my hands and knees and spat out blood. My head seemed to be exploding with pain, but I forced myself to speak.

“Zalygin, I gave you more credit, but you are as dim-witted as your trained assassin.”

Zalygin turned back to look at me, his face white with rage.

Before I could be silenced, I went on, “With genuine ExComm incompetence, either yours or Genrikh’s, you have misread what you have seen. Yes, I am with the Others. I have been with the Others for almost five years. They believed that my youth would allow me to move unnoticed through our city, and they were obviously correct. But this man,” I paused and shook my head towards Anatorr, “this man is only someone who has paid my bills and bought me pretty presents for almost two years. In return for his generosity, I have been forced to submit to his inept advances. If it were not for his money, I would never have looked twice at him.”

The room was strangely silent and I began again, “The Others? That laughable old fool? He has trouble delivering in bed with a willing subject, let

alone deliver even the most simple information for the Others. At the first sign of trouble one like him would betray us all!”

Anatorr’s face was mixture of pain, betrayal and disbelief. “Princess,” he began.

“Shut up,” I hissed, “I never wish to hear you call me that again!”

I forced myself to my feet, walked to Anatorr and slapped him across the face as hard as I could. I reached into his shirt pocket and took out a clean cloth and wiped the blood from my mouth.

I turned back to the stunned officers and purred, “Take me out of here to a real bed. Show me what real men are like. I will give you pleasure such as you will never forget.”

Before anyone could answer, I threw the cloth at Anatorr and twisted around to leave the room. His eyes were focused on the floor and I did not think he saw me fighting back tears.

Genrikh followed me quickly. As Zalygin closed the door I heard Anatorr whisper, “Princess, I love you. I will always love you. There will never be a day when I will not love you. With my last breath I will speak your name.”

I saw my beloved only once more after that.

# THIRTY-SEVEN

I lived as one dead, long dead. At the moment of our interrogation by Genrikh and Zalygin, I knew I had done what was right. To protect Anatorr at all cost was my only thought. Now, the loneliness of my flat, the emptiness of my arms, the desolation of my life made me doubt the correctness of what I had done. Everywhere I looked, everywhere I went, there was Anatorr's memory. We had walked there. We had eaten geriachi there. We had stopped there for a glass of kvasale. Even in the places where we had never been together, he was there, because he was always in my mind, always in my thoughts.

I rode the tramvway passed his store, peering through the vehicle's greasy weather-glass hoping to see him. I stayed on the wagon as it circled endless through Zenyuk, always coming back to this street, never changing its route. That continuity was itself agony, because my life would never be what it had been.

I stood in the shadows of an alleyway across from where he and Lubeme lived. I watched the lights go on and off. I watched silhouettes move past the darkened curtains. Once while I was standing there, Anatorr came out, but I drew

deeper into the shadows and turned away as soon as I recognized my beloved. I could not bear being so close to him, knowing I could never hold him in my arms again. From that day, I never went back to his street.

One afternoon, I had gone out to buy carbo-voda from one of the little stands along the street. In exchange for a few coins, the attendant gives you a glass filled with the great tasting drink. You are expected to drink it down quickly, give it back to the attendant who rinses it in a spray of cold voda, wipes the lip, and hands the same glass to another patron.

Walking aimlessly away from the voda stand, I saw a line of shoppers stretching from inside a dingy shop, out into the street. Some prize was in stock, available only to the fortunate few, the few who were in the line. And those near the end of the line never knew if the supply would run out before they reached the front of the queue. I watched an old man, an invalid, shuffle past everyone to the front of the line, using his privilege a veteran of the War of Vengeance. As he squeezed through the open door, bumped and jostled by the milling crowd, an old woman shrieked at him.

“What kind of noses do they have to be able to smell a bargain? Then they take their red invalid cards and magically move to the front of the line, cheating all of us,” she wailed. “Don’t they get enough privileges without cheating us.”

Just at that moment a man came out of the shop, carrying a small bundle wrapped in crude, brown paper. It was Anatorr. He looked at the old crone and, his voice cracking like a PPW said, “If you care that little for one who served you,

take my package! I hope it chokes you as it goes down and then sets disagreeably in your stomach until you throw it back out!”

Everyone else looked at the wall, or the pavement, or the sky. No one wanted to hear or see anything of the confrontation.

Hypnotized by seeing him there, I froze, and before I could turn completely and move away, he saw me called out to me.

“Princess! Wait!”

I should not have stopped, but my feet obeyed my heart.

Heedless of the traffic, he quickly crossed the street to where I was standing. I willed my feet to remain still and not to run to him. I willed my arms to stay at my sides and not wrap themselves around him. I willed my face not to smile and fill with the love which was barely containable in my heart. Only my feet and my arms obeyed me.

Anatorr was wearing a marriage circle made of dzhhunk. I noticed it because he had never worn such a ring before. I touched his hand, running my fingers over the soft yellow metal.

“Lubeme and I renewed our vows,” he said.

I said nothing as I slowly withdrew my hand.

“How are you?” I asked. “How is everything with you?”

“Everything is as it was before I first met you,” he said, his voice husky. I knew he was fighting for his control. “Only now,” he continued, “I have met you and I do not have you.”

**“You have Lubeme,” I said without the sharpness with which I had once reminded Anatorr that he had a wife. I continued, “And your son.”**

**He shook his head slowly. This time the water spilled from his eyes and flooded down his face.**

**“You are only half correct,” he said. “There was a street accident, stupid, senseless. Our son is gone. The physician said he felt no pain. That was left for me to feel.”**

**Although the day was certainly not cold, I drew my arms around myself and shook with shivers. We were standing near the entrance to store where only important Streloxx may shop. The door guard moved toward us and barked, “You two! Move away from here!”**

**Everyone in the street noticed. No one in the street noticed. You are safer that way.**

**Anatorr touched my arm and we walked silently up the street and around the corner.**

**Only after we were out of sight of the door guard’s angry glare, did either of us speak.**

**“Princess,” he said, “there were good times, so many. I remember each one. I remember them all.”**

**“You remember too much,” I said, my voice harsher than I intended, but I was afraid that watchers would see us, that listeners would hear us and report that feelings existed between us and use that report against us.**

Anatorr smiled a bitter smile. His eyes seemed to be looking at days long past. It was a look I do not think I had ever seen on him. I raised my eyebrow in a question and he said, “I said those exact words to Lubeme when I returned from the yachenka. She said your exact words to me. I suppose this is a circle, now complete.”

I could not speak. I opened my mouth, but I could not speak. The words we would not utter rushed in and filled the silence. In the silence I prayed to the Holy Ones. I asked them if I would ever again know the delight of my lover’s touch, know the joy of his arms holding me close against him, know the sweetness of his kiss. The Holy Ones did not answer. It was a good tactic — if they did not answer, they could not be wrong.

Finally, I said, “Anatorr, take care of you.”

My beloved smiled and said, “Take care of you.”

Before we could speak further, before he could move, I turned and walked away. Behind me I heard for the last time the words I cherish most in all the world.

“Princess, I love you. I will always love you. There will never be a day when I will not love you.”

And then I was too far away to hear him, but as certainly as I know that Adzeva rose today in the eastern sky and will do so again tomorrow, I know that he said, “Elena, with my last breath, I will speak your name.”

# THIRTY-EIGHT

The day Anatorr died, I knew it before Obolen came to my flat and told me.

At the end, he had gone on a mission with the Others and was captured.

They took him into the forest and executed him with a single bullet to the back of the head.

When Obolen came with the terrible news, I said nothing, I could not speak.

I looked at Obolen with disbelief, but the expression in his eyes told me he had spoken the truth, and confirmed what I knew without reason, deep inside my heart.

I left Obolen standing where he was and walked into my sleeping-room. I stood looking out the weather-glass, the same one through which I had once watched Anatorr pick blossoms for me. I unconsciously reached down and lifted the chasha-vaza which he had often filled with Jassica. I rolled it between my hands and ran my finger across the rim. As I reached over to place it back on the shelf, it slipped from my hands and broke into a hundred pieces. I dropped to my knees, heedless of the shards of glass, and covered my face in my hands. When

I looked up again, Adzeva was disappearing behind the horizon. Obolen was sitting on the edge of my bed, silently watching me.

I rushed to him and began to cry again.

“Elena,” Obolen said, as gently as I had ever heard him speak, “this slip of paper was found in his pocket. I knew you would want it.”

The paper was dirty, stained with the perspiration of Anatorr’s hands, and creased almost to the point of tearing where he had opened the paper and refolded it time and time again.

One word at the top, larger than the rest, was evidently the title for the page. There were three paragraphs. Over the next months I read it so often that I committed it to memory and could recall it without prompting, but until the ExComm tore it to pieces, I read it and held it as my last link to Anatorr.

And now I will add it to my diary.

\* \* \* \* \*

### REMEMBER

I remember her tears that night in the cell in Ingal-Karbe. I am sure she thought I did not see, but they were a signal to me that her words were lies. She did what she did to protect me and save me. Love like ours could never have been a lie. The last day I saw her, in the street near the Streloxx store, her face said what her voice could not.

I remember the smell of her skin, the taste of her lips, the color of her eyes. I remember how it felt to hold her small hand in mine, how she felt when I clutched her close in my arms. I remember the sound of her laughter. I remember the way she wrinkled her brow, pouted out her lips and snapped off her words when I teased her. I remember her cries of pleasure when we made love. But the pain of separation keeps me from putting all of those pieces together and forming one complete picture of her in my mind.

Oh, Elena, I love you so much. I could happily watch the tormentors tear my heart from my body if I could hold you just one more time.

\* \* \* \* \*

I folded the paper and turned to Obolen.

“Did he say anything?”

Obolen nodded.

“I overheard the ExComm bragging about the execution to one of his friends. Anatorr said one word, only one. He called your name.”

At times like this, when my memory accuses me, I wish I could reach the pahodja which grows just outside the window of my cell, just out of reach. I do not know if the ExComm planted it there as a torment. I do not even know if they are aware of what it is and what it can do. I am not even certain that the stories are true, but if I could reach it, and try it, I would.

It was one of the stories I heard from old Reetaricka. The deeply lined, weathered skin on her face seemed to grow dark when she talked about the pahodja plant. “If remembering ever becomes too heavy and you think you might be crushed by the memories, make a beverage from its leaves and drink it. The drought will erase the memories and give you peace.”

Most people only laughed at the stories Reetaricka told. They called her a crazy old woman. I was only a school girl, but I believed her. Those old eyes, which had seen so much, seemed to open up to me. I really believe I could see some of the things she had seen. With the innocent wonder only a child can express, I asked, “Reetaricka, how will you know when it is time to drink pahodja?”

With great effort, she stood up and slowly, very slowly, crossed the room and sat beside me. She held my face in her hard, calloused hands and said, “You will know, child. More than anyone I have ever met in the 87 years I have watched Adzeva rise and set, you will know. But your memories will be so strong, that I doubt even the pahodja will ease the pain that they bring you. The joy that you recall will release your spirit. The remembered sorrow will crush your heart. The men who finally come to make you their victim, will not allow you to forget.”

# THIRTY-NINE

Doctors had told me years ago that something was wrong inside of my body and I could never bear children. They were the ones who were wrong! Obolen went with me the last time I went to Ingal-Karbe. We spent only two nights away from Zenyuk, but on the second night, our daughter was conceived.

Genrikh and Zalygin called on me often, and I despised myself every time one of them touched me, but I knew if I refused them once, they would go after Anatorr. After he was dead, I stopped caring, but my submission to them kept me alive. They did not come around when it was the way of women with me, so I know that the baby I bore was Obolen's daughter.

After Anatorr died, Obolen showed great kindness towards me. Gradually, I came to know that Obolen's feelings progressed beyond simple kindness. As the days passed into months and then into a year, I longed for the touch of a man who would love me, not just use me. Obolen, I knew, would be such a man. The first time he spoke of his feelings to me I told him I could not yet accept his proposal. There was no logical reason for it, but then love is not logical. And

whoever said that the Resenka are logical. Another year passed before he spoke of his feelings again. That time I went to him gladly.

When Zalygin and Genrikh learned that I was with child, they took turns beating me. I guess they were trying to kill the baby. Maybe it was simple anger at me because I had let another man share my bed. Maybe it was just their inborn cruelty. At any rate, they eventually tired of their game. Mercifully, as my body began to swell with the new life inside, they lost all interest in me.

Early in my time, Obolen guessed that the baby was his. I started to deny it, trying to protect him, but I knew he deserved the truth. I have asked the Holy Ones to give her the friendship with her father that I never knew with mine.

After our baby drew in her first breath and saluted the world with a lusty cry, her father named her. Holding her for the first time he said to me, “Her skin is so soft.”

I laughed, “Obolen, babies are supposed to have soft skin. It is part of being a baby.”

He laughed back at me, “I don’t remember being a baby. I was too young at the time.”

Then he smiled at our daughter and said, “There is an old word that will be your new name. Myahkee. It means ‘Soft One.’”

Slightly over one year after the Soft One came to live with us, the ExComm made a concentrated effort against the Others and an elaborate trap was laid for

**us. It began one night during the Snow Queen's reign, while the fierce winter winds screamed a warning we did not hear.**

# FORTY

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

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

“Such a wind, he said. “The Snow Queen is angry with us tonight.”

Obolen drew the collar of his bulky winter sweater tight around his neck and shivered. It was not the wind which caused tremors to ripple through his

body. He was warm enough inside the wooden house his grandfather's grandfather had built. Several years ago, he had been able to convince the Pol to run the city's central heating system to the 192 homes in the old district east of Zenyuk.

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

No, it was not the cold which chilled his tall, muscular frame. It was his memory. It was a night not unlike this one when he had received the word that Anatorr was dead. Many of his friends had died on nights like this. Countless thousands and tens of thousands he had never known and whose names he would never know had died on nights like this — any night it seemed, was a good night to die at the hands of the Streloxx.

Obolen and Gernet had been born from the union of the same man and the same woman, but they could not have been more different. Strangers often expressed surprise when told that they were brothers. Gernet was half a head shorter than his older brother, but no less trim. Obolen's once thick brown hair was now mostly gray and thinning while Gernet's was still jet black and dense

with waves. Obolen had a face no one remembered, Gernet had the handsome appearance which caused everyone to be attracted to him, especially the beautiful women of Zenyuk. Obolen could quietly disappear in a crowd, Gernet was almost never alone.

Harsh winter winds were now howling through the Always Trees. Light reflecting from Resenka's moon caused the ground to glow as if thousands of tiny, perfect tabersk stones had been scattered by the wind. Fighting with the wind for supremacy of the night, the light brought a softness to the landscape.

Gernet broke the comfortable silence and said to me, "As boys, we frequently anticipated nights such as this one when the Always Trees looked like giant cones of ice standing still against the darkened sky. Tufts of grass fought for a place above the snow line, marking the hiding places of Keelork. If we were careful, we could capture Keelork as the animals slept in their nests. The long ears of the animals were often the only clue that there was something beneath the snow. Skinned and roasted, the Keelork were important to winter survival — their flesh for food, and their hides for insulated clothing."

"No one would be out on a night like this but a fool or an ExComm," Obolen said, continuing to look out through the window.

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

**“Soft and plump, Brother?”**

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

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

**Gernet turned to me and said, “For you, I make an exception.” I knew that because of the peace which grew in his brother, and the baby which nursed at my breast, he was telling the truth.**

# FORTY-ONE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**“We have a visitor.”**

**“A visitor?”**

**“Yes.”**

**“And this visitor needs to gain entrance into one of the most secured areas in Zenyuk?”**

**“Yes!”**

**“Where is this visitor from?”**

**“I do not know.”**

**“You have a visitor, but you do not know where he is from? Is that not strange?”**

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

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

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

**“Exactly so. Now, where is this visitor from?”**

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

**“Very well,” Mitork said reluctantly. “Two hours after Adzeva sets. I will make the arrangements.”**

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

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

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

**As Obolen left the shop, Mitork placed his call.**

# FORTY-TWO

Shortly after it became obvious that the Streloxx domination of Resenka was going to be oppression of a kind never before experienced on Resenka, a group of the Others had attempted to sabotage the elektrik 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 Streloxx were always verbal. No formal opposition had, as of that point, produced violence.

Six men and two women, armed with only PPWs, walked through the front gates, and forced their way 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 Streloxx 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 Streloxx 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 beginning a campaign of hit-and-run strikes. As a result, the Streloxx 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 elektrik 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 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 tramway 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 flipped through the pages of a small notebook, ignoring everyone in the wagon. He rode one stop and got off. As the tram pulled away, Obolen watched the man step into a public wire-comm booth. We would soon learn that we had been betrayed.

# FORTY-THREE

Obolen returned to the house, accompanied by a stranger, to me at least.

“Well, Ob. Were you successful?” Gernet asked, nodding at the new man.

“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. Gernet searched out another mug and handed it to the man who stood silently near the door.

Seeing the questioning look on my face, and knowing that Gernet would say nothing, Obolen said, “This man is from another city. A major Streloxx announcement will come tomorrow night and be broadcast from Megin to all of Resenka. Using the communications grid at Zenyuk’s power station to interrupt that announcement, we are going to send a message of our own. The message will be short because the Streloxx will succeed in jamming the signal, but times are very difficult, worse than they have been in years, and the Others want to

demonstrate practically that the stories of the Strelox's total control of Resenka are greatly exaggerated."

The details were precious few in what Obolen had said, but I knew that he would reveal nothing else, not even to me.

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

"I went to the elektrik 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," Gernet 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."

Adzeva was nearing the horizon when we left the house. My inclusion in the group was hotly contested. Finally the arguing ended when Lowetsn, the new man, said, "Elena, you do not understand. This mission will be dangerous, far more dangerous than anything you have ever done for the Others."

"Lowetsn," I said, struggling into my cold weathers, "I choose the danger."

"What of your daughter?" he asked.

"A woman I trust with my life, and hers, keeps Myakhee tonight. She will be safe until we return."

Lowetsn shrugged acceptance and we moved to the door.

"Aren't you going to extinguish the lights?" he asked.

"We always leave the lights on," Gernet answered. "That way the ExComm will not trip over anything in the dark."

# FORTY-FOUR

Our quartet trudged silently for several minutes. The plan was to take a route, through the Always Trees, away from our intended destination. We would board a tramvay that would circle around, reaching the elektrik producing station from the opposite direction which Obolen had explored this morning. Obolen took the lead with Lowetsn and I 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.

When we had been walking for thirty minutes, I stopped and looked behind us to judge Gernet's progress and to visually scout the terrain. I noticed our 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."

"Elena, 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,” I 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.”

We waited in silence for Gernet to catch up. Moments after we 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. We were the only people who got on at that stop and without another moment's hesitation, she engaged the forward gear lever and the tram pulled off.

We sat at the rear of the wagon so we could see anyone getting off or on. As the tramway jerked along a woman got up and walked back to us. She had a large black bag hung around her neck and she carried a red badge which she pushed into our faces. We dutifully showed her our passes and she moved on.

When she was out of hearing distance, Gernet said, “The Streloxx 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 Streloxx and the ExComm that they blindly follow the rules."

"Live on the side?" I asked. "Even though I went to University, I have so much to learn!"

"It means to beat the system," Obolen said helpfully.

"But on Resenka, the system inevitably beats all of us," Gernet said.

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

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

"But you are attempting to make a difference, are you not? Is that not why we are on this tramway?" I said. "The Words say, 'It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.'"

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

"Then, I suspect you'll have to make your own," I replied. "I do not think you will 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 said, giving me a warning, and an explanation, I did not need. “No one on Resenka smiles in public. Not any more.”**

# FORTY-FIVE

We rode in silence the rest of the way. We repeated Obolen's earlier caution of riding past our intended destination and catching the next tram back. An old man stood at the shelter, holding a smoking pipe. When we 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."

Satisfied that we were not being observed, we 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. Lowetsn carried a clumsy looking bag, inside of which, were the transmitter connectors

and an automatic repeater which would rebroadcast the message, if there was time.

One at a time, we 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 of us to wait while he explored ahead. When he reached the edge of the forest, just beside of the elektrik producing plant, he took a long time to survey the plant's perimeter fence. Finally, he motioned us to join him. Handing his glaz-ochkey to Lowetsn 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?" he 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."

Zenyuk was completely shrouded in wintry darkness when Obolen, Gernet, Lowetsn and I 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 moon, so there was no light to betray our passage.

At the perimeter fence, strong illuminators shined into the 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 silently mouthed, "Go!"

Gernet crouched and moved 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 me, hooked his finger toward the compound and I followed Gernet's tracks to the fence. Next, Lowetsn repeated the maneuver and lastly, Obolen joined us inside.

We moved silently down the alley. When we reached the edges of the buildings which formed their corridor, we stopped again. When the brothers were satisfied, the four of us moved, one-at-a-time, across a small courtyard and into another alley. We moved left and in single file hurried toward the generating plant. Still taking the natural paths between the buildings, well-trodden paths, so our progress could not be discovered by anyone observing new tracks in the snow, we worked our 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 three of us to stay in the shadows, he opened the door a little more and peered out to the right. Finally, he signaled for us to join him and stepped into the hall.

We had worked only a few dozen steps along the wall when a door creaked in front of us. Gernet quickly pointed to the cross-hallway in front of us, and in pairs we disappeared down it — Gernet and Lowetsn to the left, Obolen and I to

the right. The man who stepped out of the room laughed at something which had been said inside, turned and walked towards us.

From the corner, I 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 we 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 for us to continue.

It took two more turns and one more hallway, but we 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 implements, 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,” I whispered.

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

**The next part of the plan required an exposed connection where Lowetsn could attach his communicating equipment. Gernet located a junction box and they sat to work there. When all of the links were established, Lowetsn nodded his head in satisfaction.**

**The one person in the room who did not seem at all to be deep inside of a high security energy producing plant was Obolen. He sat with his back propped against a control panel. He seemed completely relaxed.**

**Gernet was closer to the door than the rest of us, and though we were seated, he was standing, ready to fight or flee at a moment’s notice. I thought of Gernet as basic, almost elemental. There was a driving purpose which tormented Gernet. I knew he had seen his brother deeply hurt in times past, and although he had never directly spoken of it, I 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. I remembered the ancient quote about a friend who bonds closer than a brother. Gernet was the friend, and the brother.**

**I saw Gernet move before I heard the sound in the corridor. Gernet threw his hand up in a warning.**

**“They know we’re here,” he whispered.**

**“Gernet, get us out of here,” Lowetsn ordered.**

**“If I can,” he answered.**

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,” I 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 we 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 PPW 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!”

Obolen positioned Lowetsn next, but before he 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 us. It struck the wall just above Obolen’s head. Obolen jerked his PPW up and fired, dropping our attacker. Two men who

had also started through the door, immediately withdrew. When the first man fell, he pitched forward, hurling his PPW towards me. I 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," Lowetsn said as he climbed out of the room to the roof.

On the roof, Gernet, Obolen and I were crouched behind ventilators, firing at men who were hidden in the darkness. Between our position and the top of the open shaft, Lowetsn lay on his side, dark red blood oozing from a projectile wound near the center of his chest. 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.

I dropped to my knees beside of Lowetsn and pressed my hand against the wound. His face was pale. His breathing was already coming in ragged gasps.

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

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

I picked up Lowetsn's legs and we pulled him to cover.

"I am sorry, Obolen," Lowetsn gasped. "I saw a man move. I did not see the projectile coming."

**“No one could have,” I said, trying to smile in encouragement. “Just lay still. We’ll get you off of this roof and back to safety.”**

**“No, I will die here,” Lowetsn said, his voice barely audible in the sudden stillness. “Be careful, my friends. We were betrayed.”**

**Before we could reply, he was gone.**

# FORTY-SIX

When Gernet killed one of our attackers, the others seemed to withdraw temporarily.

“Off the roof!” Obolen said. “Quickly, before they return!”

“Which way?” I asked.

“When all directions are equal, Elena, or equally uncertain,” Obolen said, “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.”

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

“Brother!” Gernet ordered. “You and Elena lay down some covering fire.”

“What do you have in mind?” Obolen asked.

Gernet reached into a pouch he wore over his shoulder and said, "I'm going to see if I can clear us a path out of here with this hand-bomb."

There was a brief lull in the shots coming at us from a cluster of buildings and Gernet shouted, "Now!"

Obolen and I opened fire in the direction where our pursuers were concentrated. Gernet stepped into the open ground, pulled the firing pin and threw the hand-bomb toward the fence. It rolled to a stop just short of the wire grating. We ducked back and seconds later, it exploded, the concussion ripping open the ground, toppling the fence.

Before our attackers could react, we dashed for freedom. The plant's defenders recovered just as we reached the fence. They fired several times, but we disappeared into the darkness beyond the perimeter. We could hear orders and counter orders being shouted behind us, but before they could mount any pursuit, we were well into the woods.

There is no way to account for our escape from the trap that was laid for us, except to give credit to the Holy Ones. Unfortunately, their favor, and our luck, did not continue for long.

Obolen and Gernet took me to the one place they felt would be safe, a house several kaalobars outside of Zenyuk which their father had built as a summer place. Only they and Mitork knew of its use by the Others. We stopped long enough to arrange a place of meeting with friends so that Myahkee could be reunited with us. We could no longer remain in Zenyuk, we all agreed. Once

provisioned, we would make our way to Ingal-Karbe and from there to Megin. It would be harder for the Strellox to find us there.

When we finally reached the safe house, snow had been falling for several hours. Gernet motioned for Obolen and I to stay hidden while he circled around to the back. We 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 us forward.

We were on the same side of the Wikfa River as the elektrik producing plant. In fact, we were on top of the same cliff. If this had the warm season, Gernet explained, there would have been a boat at the base of the cliff, stocked and ready for use. But since we were still under the grip of the Snow Queen, the brothers kept provisions 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.”

When we reached the rear entrance of the house, 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 of us scrambled inside.

Instantly Obolen stiffened.

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

“Don’t shoot me, Gernet. I had hoped you would come here,” said a voice that I instantly recognized.

**“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 we slowly raised our hands. The open room of the little house held not four people, but seven, three of them brandishing very deadly looking weapons.**

**“Lowetsn was right,” I said. “We were betrayed.”**

# FORTY-SEVEN

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 arresters 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, I shouted, “No! No! You’re not going to take me.” With each succeeding word my voice filled with greater anxiety, finally fear. An instant later I turned and bolted for the door.**

**The guard who had stepped between Obolen and Mitork shouted, “Stop her!”**

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

**The rest of the struggle was over just as quickly. When Obolen’s opponent tried to stand, Obolen slashed his attacker across the throat with the side of his hand, crushing the man’s windpipe. The remaining arrester drew his weapon and in the same instant, Gernet sprung at him. The man’s hand was twisted backwards towards his own stomach. He tried to release his grip on the PPW,**

but Gernet gripped the man's hand tighter and the weapon discharged. The projectile tore through the arrester's body, killing him instantly.

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

I felt for a pulse in each man's throat and then nodded.

Motioning towards Mitork, I 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 mother of his child 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?" I 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?” I 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 give me a PPW and I will watch from the window. We’ve had enough surprises for this day,” I said.

As I picked up one of the dead men’s weapons and positioned myself 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 elektrik generator, Obolen? They attached wires to sensitive parts of your body and then

send elektrik 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! 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 moved quickly and pulled Mitork back 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.”**

**Forgetting that I was in the room, or not caring simply for truth’s sake, he went on. “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 have always known. I saw no reason to burden you. Do you remember when you and Elena were caught, suspected of 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.”

“One of your guards later became a double-agent for the Others,” Gernet said. “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 one time she asked them to stop. She begged for a few minutes rest. 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, looking at me for the first time since Mitork began his confession. Then he began to sob. We held each other, not sure who was comforting whom.

After a time Obolen spoke again, and I turned back to the window to watch the front of the house. He turned to Mitork and said, “You said you ultimately betrayed Anatorr to the ExComm. Why?”

“For hate’s sake. For vengeance on Elena. She refused to come to my bed. Of course I knew about her time with the two ExComm. And all of those others. And she refused me! So when I learned of a plot to assassinate several Streloxx officials, I helped the ExComm set a trap and Anatorr walked right into it,” 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 Streloxx 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 Streloxx 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 Streloxx is inevitable then, simply because they have won the first battle?”**

**“I don’t see anyone stopping them. The Streloxx will always rule Resenka.”**

**I stepped back from the window and crossed to Mitork.**

**“The Words tell of a city-state in the before-time called Atraps. It was a society that had totally surrendered to a military dictatorship,” I said, surprised at how calm I was, surprised that I could think of The Words with Mitork’s revelation still echoing in my ears. “They had the best armies. They conquered everyone. But all that remains of Atraps today are the bleak plains where the battles were fought. Atraps was strangled by the dictatorship, just as Resenka is being strangled. Free men can always vanquish a tyranny, Mitork. Perhaps not by overthrowing it, but by outlasting it.”**

**“You stupid tuki!” Mitork shouted. “Even now you do not understand. The Streloxx own you. I signed you over to them. It is only a matter of time until they collect on the obligation! Elena, you think your beloved Anatorr died a hero’s death. He died begging for mercy, squealing like a pig.”**

Gernet hissed at Mitork, his voice full of more fury than I had ever heard from any man.

“I was there, traitor, hidden in the Always Trees. Anatorr spoke only once.”

He looked at me and said, “he spoke her name.”

I walked over to Mitork, raised the PPW which I held in my hand and pushed the barrel into his forehead. Before I could pull the trigger, Gernet grabbed my wrist and spoiled my aim. The weapon discharged, the projectile flew into the wall. Still holding my wrist, Gernet wrenched the weapon from my grip.

“Your blood will not be on her conscience, traitor,” he said to Mitork with slow deliberation, lowering the pistol which he held in his free hand. “She might not be strong enough to bear it.”

Then in the flash of an eye, he jerked the weapon back up and shot Mitork squarely in the face. The force of the shot toppled Mitork over and he was dead before his body hit the floor.

“But I can,” he said with cold finality.

The moment stretched into silence, until from the other side of the room, Obolen said, “We’ve got company!”

Gernet and I 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 voice-phone to his mouth and spoke, his speech broadcast through speakers mounted on the roof of the vehicle's cab. He 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," I said.

"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 knew 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. I followed next and Obolen drew the trap door down, stopping only long enough to look back at Mitork's body. He hesitated for a moment, and then dropped through the floor.

# FORTY-EIGHT

Gradually the narrow passage in which we descended opened into a wide chamber. When we were inside of it, Obolen signaled a stop. He reached above his head 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 we continued our 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. “Now, if you and my brother will start moving those stones, I am going to bring this tunnel down around us.”

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

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

We pushed away the last of the rocks, revealing a shoulder-wide hole, and at the same instant heard a rumble far behind us. We scrambled into the cold, gray dawn as smoke and dust belched through the opening we 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.”

“There is a public wire-comm near here,” Obolen said. “I will reach a friend who has a jalop and ask him to place it where we can make use of it. He will tell the woman who keeps Myahkee to meet us at the railstation.”

“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.”

# FORTY-NINE

Almost instantly we knew we were in trouble. Maybe it was intuition or maybe gifted insight. Perhaps it was the subtle way the man in the dark brown coat looked at us and then looked across the tramway shelter at someone outside of our line of vision. Perhaps it was the slight drop in the level of conversation as the three men entered the shelter.

“Not good,” I 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 Elena 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.” Then he reached over and touched my face. “One of the sisters will be disappointed,” he said.

And with that, Gernet turned around, crossed quickly to the man with the dark brown coat, and kicked him squarely in the crotch. The men he had been sending eye signals to, immediately rushed to his aid. While I 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 I had abandoned the jalop at a prearranged place and set out through the Always Trees. Maff had placed a small packet of elbur on the floor of his jalop — it was not much, but we would need it to buy tickets on the next railcar for Ingal-Karbe. After he parked the vehicle, Maff would, we knew, have walked two blocks to another tramway stop, boarded the tram, rode back to his flat and reported that his jalop had been stolen.

Obolen carried the bundle of emergency food rations and we set out. As we walked, he tore off two large hunks of hard bread and gave a piece to me, 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 our fare. Finally he

opened a can of preserved fruit. We shared the pieces in silence and washed our meal down with the sweet juice.

“What will happen to Gernet?” I asked.

“I told the two women he was insane. With luck, 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 certain 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.”

“Get back?” I asked, already knowing the answer and dreading it with all of my heart.

“He would come back for me,” Obolen said, his face an unreadable mask.

I touched his arm and said, “I would expect that he would. And I would expect that you would. In fact, I knew that you would. Myahkee and I will get to Megin and wait for you. I will go to the old serkor nearest the railstation every day just as Adzeva is setting and pray. I will go everyday until you are with me again. The Holy Ones may grow tired of seeing me, so do not make us wait too long.”

# FIFTY

The railstation was crowded. Early morning travelers swarmed everywhere. Vendors set up to sell their wares. Beggars held out their hands. Children played tag, dodging everyone else. We walked to the ticket window and Obolen bought both places in a first class compartment. Even though he would not be going with me, that would guarantee that Myahkee and I could ride without having to share our compartment with a stranger. We hoped that first class would not be subjected to as close a scrutiny as the rest of the wagon.

Across the crowded ticket hall I saw Myahkee in the arms of the woman who cared for her, and just behind them I saw uniformed arresters and dozens of ExComm soldiers. As several of the arresters pushed past the nurse-woman, she realized the danger, turned and quickly left the building. Obolen saw the approaching men and put his arm around my shoulder. I turned to him and he pulled me close. We stood there, waiting for the inevitable.

Several men pulled us apart. We offered no resistance. I stood quietly, looking only at Obolen, freezing his face into my book of memories. I knew there would be no escape. I knew equally well that I would never see him, or our

daughter, again. One of the arresters twisted me around, another pushed me towards the door. Stumbling, my hands secured behind my back, I turned to look at Obolen, but the ExComm had already dragged him away. The terror was just beginning.

# FIFTY-ONE

At first it was everyday, gradually the frequency lessened, but at least once a week I was taken to the “Nickelode.” That was not the name which the ExComm called the building where interrogation took place. I do not know if it had an official name. That is what the yaks called it. In the center of a large hall were two rows of plain wooden benches, placed back to back, but not touching. We would be led from our cells to the hall and seated, under guard, waiting for interrogation. The walls across from the benches were blank, but if you stared long enough, you could see pictures from your life, just like the shows at the Nickelode. Once you were taken inside your only thoughts were whether you would live or die. Seated in the Nickelode you could run scenes from your mind on the blank walls. Friends, lovers, enemies would all appear, starring in the story of your life. And you controlled the projection. You controlled the film. You controlled the progress of the story.

One of the first pieces I watched was a time with Anatorr, a time I had not thought of, probably since the day of its occurrence, but it was a good time, a good Nickelode.

Summer was hot, the air sticky. We had gone to Ingal-Karbe to enjoy a few private hours. There is a place where families go for btopoi, packed lunches and all, called “Seaside Beach.” There is no seaside, it is hundreds of kaalobars away, but there is a river and there is a small beach. You ride the tramvway to the place where the great red and yellow beasts are repaired, dismount and walk half a kaalobar through the woods to the Wikfa River.

There are two ramble-down huts where kvasale, carbo-voda and maroezh are sold. Sometimes an old woman will offer roasted Adzeva seeds or, before the weather warms up, hot geriachi.

Eldermothers cluck and coo over the little ones, watching them as they run naked to the water and back again. The old women will fold the pages of an old gazetta and make a covering for their heads, while they expose the rest of their bodies in swimming suits which would scarcely cover their young charges.

Sometimes there is an organized game, always there is someone with a marcobox noisily playing music. And always couples spread blankets on the sand and wrap themselves in each other’s arms. I know Anatorr and I did. I know, too, that we went back to Zenyuk with very red skin caused by over exposure to Adzeva’s rays. How we could both suffer Adzeva-burns on the same holiday time was a cause for much wonder.

We sat on the bench and watched people watch us as Anatorr and I held each other close. Then when Adzeva was high in the sky, we went into the cold water and played like little ones, splashing and squealing, and generally

cavorting in, what one eldermother called, “a shameful display.” But she clucked in laughter when she thought we could not hear.

As the Nickelode played in my mind I watched us eat our btopoi of hard khlep and hard cooked eggs. We washed it down with large amounts of kvasale ale. Many of the Nickelodes that we yaks watched were of food — eating and cooking and eating. We watched more food Nickelodes than anything else. We remembered the enormous parties we celebrated when the places where we worked reached their Streloxx-assigned quotas and we were rewarded with extra elbur as a bonus. With no thought of saving for the day when we would not make quota and may not make salary, let alone bonus, we would buy and cook and eat and eat some more. Outside of the Nickelode, the fare was not quite so good, nor quite so luxurious. Most days it was almost as bare as the wall of the Nickelode.

Early in my imprisonment we were taken to meal twice a day. Later it was just in the morning. During those times when we went out, we were herded into a line where we picked up a metal spoon and a metal dish, placed them on a tray which was slightly larger than the dish and pushed them along a small wooden track. There was a wall between us and the kitchen which was open only two hands high. That way the servers could not see upon whose dish they were placing the food. Friends could not be given more. Enemies could not be given less.

That method of serving was probably the only fair and just thing in the yachenka. On the outside, many of the yaks had possessed “blat” — influence,

connections. Many times “blat” was more important than elbur. You had a friend who had a friend. You had something you could trade. You had a service you could perform. It was a way of speeding slow things up or slowing fast things down. With “blat” you could get a little more. With “blat” you could get a little better. At least in the yak dining hall, everyone was the same — we were all hungry, all the time.

# FIFTY-TWO

You always knew when one of the yaks had broken under questioning. You always knew when the torture became too much. It was not their bodies which gave them away for we were used to seeing people go to the inquisitor strong, erect, and return that day, or the next, or the next bruised, limping, broken. No, there were too many things that the ExComm did to our bodies for that to ever give away the fact that someone's spirit had been broken. It was the eyes. Always the eyes.

When someone broke, when they confessed to their own crimes (real or imagined by the Streloxx), or when they implicated others in their confession (to crimes real or imagined by the Streloxx) they would not look at their fellow yaks. If they had suffered a moment of weakness in the questioning room, if in a moment of fear they wanted to save themselves, their eyes would give them away. It would be many days before they would ever make eye contact again. Some never looked up again, too great was the shame of saving their own life at the expense of the life of another.

# FIFTY-THREE

I am forced to sleep, when I am allowed to sleep, with a light always on in my cell. I am forced to sleep with my arms outside of the covers, for fear, they say, that I will try to strangle myself. I am fed one meal a day — if bread and thin potato broth can be called a meal. I am allowed to go to the tualyet only once a day and that is just after Adzeva rises in the morning. In the middle of winter, Adzeva rises late, fighting against the Snow Queen for a place in the sky. That trip to the tualyet is the only time I am allowed outside of my cell and so it is my only exercise period.

The ExComm has many methods to induce a prisoner to sign a confession, but knowing that I will never see my daughter again is worse than anything physical they could do to me. And I have little doubt that when they are finished with their psychological attacks, I will feel their methods of interrogation in my body. I now believe what Zalygin told me that day in Levaki's office — death, when it actually comes, will be a comfort.

# FIFTY-FOUR

One jailer, an old woman, has shown me consideration. By writing of her, even if I do not name her, I can show her my gratitude for her kindnesses. I pray that my thankfulness does not do her harm. She often gives me a smile. When I walk outside, she sometimes touches my shoulder in a gesture of comfort. Once or twice she has been able to hide a piece of meat in my potato soup. This morning she brought me a basin of water and a small piece of soap. She said she thought I would like to wash my hands and face because I have a visitor. I will write this one last time and give my diary to the one who comes.

The interrogators did not come last night. For the first night since I was put in this cell, they turned the light off and let me sleep curled up on my side. There is no way to describe the sheer joy of being allowed to put my hands under the cover!

I slept all night long, not once was I awakened, not even by a dream. The sound of the key twisting in the lock woke me and I went out into the prison yard and lined up for the tualyet. One of the humiliations of the yachenka is that all prisoners, male and female, must use the same facilities.

The jailer brought me breakfast — it is hard to call it the morning meal, because it is the only meal of the day, but even here, some habits remain. The bread was fresh, and not one piece but two. The broth was hot and steamy (not an easy task with the Snow Queen howling fiercely outside) and filled with pieces of meat and potatoes! It was a veritable feast. When I looked at the tray the old woman brought me, I laughed and asked her if this was my last meal. When she quickly sat down the tray and walked away, I stopped laughing.

At least, I thought to myself, I will die with a full stomach. I ate rapidly, not really taking time to savor the meal. I was afraid someone would come in and take it away before I could consume everything. As I finished, I smiled and asked my empty cell, “Is death on a full stomach to be preferred over death on an empty stomach?”

Moments later I heard footsteps in the hallway and a familiar voice said, “Elena, the jailer said I could visit you. I hope you will see me.” And Lubeme stepped into my cell.

I stumbled to my feet, knocked over the chair which I used for a table, and scattered my utensils onto the floor. We stood there for a long moment, just looking at each other, then Lubeme closed the distance between us and hugged me. When she started to step back, I clung to her with all of my strength and she returned the gesture. Both of our faces were wet with tears when we finally broke the embrace.

I could think of nothing meaningful to say. Stupidly, I said, “I am going to die today.”

“I heard,” Lubeme said, “that is why I begged them to let me see you.”

“Why did you wish to see me?” I asked, my voice showing genuine surprise. “I caused you such great pain.”

“That is all forgiven, Elena. I wanted to tell you that.”

She looked at me for the longest time and then spoke again, rushing her words as though she were afraid something would stop her before she had completed her speech.

“And I have a selfish reason for coming to see you. Anatorr and I had a daughter, but she denounced us to the Streloxx years ago. She moved to Megin, I do not even know if she still lives. Our son is dead. So you see, when you are gone, my last link to Anatorr will be gone.

“We had such a short time after you sent him home, but those days were the happiest I have ever known. They erased the memories of all the bad times. Thank you for those days, Elena. I know he would have said, ‘Princess.’”

“You even know his special name for me,” I said, “and still you extend forgiveness.”

“I knew he had a ‘Princess’ before I knew she had a name. He talked in his sleep.”

“Yes,” I said, “I remember,” and I started to cry.

**“Stop it, Elena,” Lubeme said, but her voice was gentle. “They will not let me stay much longer.”**

**“Myahkee,” I said. “And Obolen. What of them?”**

**“There is no word about Obolen and many have tried to learn his fate. Myahkee lives at my flat. She has been with me since you were arrested. She will always have a place there.”**

**I could not speak. Prison rumors said one day that Obolen was dead. Another day the rumors said that he lived. The torment of uncertainty in my mind equaled most of the things the ExComm did to my body. But there was never word about our Soft One. The news that our daughter was safe filled me with such joy. My precious darling!**

**After a few moments Lubeme said, “Tell me how I can comfort you. Ask me anything. If it is within my power, it will happen.”**

**“Give me time to write a few pages,” I said. “I’ve been keeping a diary and I want you to take it out with you. The jailer will never see it if you tuck it under your heavy coat. Read it if you wish and then give it to Keeper Lared in Ingal-Karbe.”**

**Lubeme nodded, then she asked, “How have you produced a diary in the yachenka? And how do you keep it from the ExComm?”**

**“The ExComm allow us to have a few sheets of paper each week,” I explained. “We may write letters to the outside, but the ExComm read every word. When I realized that they do not count the number of sheets you pass back**

to them, I began to save and hide extra paper — there is a loose seam at the foot of the mattress-pad, and it opens to reveal my secret place. Friends send small personal items like winter stockings, or a hair brush. Once someone sent me a piece of hard cheese. These gifts are wrapped in heavy brown paper which the ExComm fails to confiscate. It evidently does not occur to them that this paper which holds gifts, will also hold my words.”

“Is there anyone else I can speak to?” Lubeme asked.

“When she is old enough to understand, tell Myahkee that I loved her. And get word to Keeper Lared. Tell him when it is over. I would like for him to speak to the Holy Ones. I may need his assistance with them to get to Neyba. I don’t know if they let such people as me into their Eternal City.”

“I will do it all. And if the Holy Ones do not welcome you to Neyba, I do not wish to go there when I die.” Lubeme turned away and although she made no sound, I knew she was crying.

Obolen was good to me, and very kind. Something of me will live on because of the daughter he gave me. Obolen never asked from me what I could not give. I am grateful for our time, but only one man ever ruled my heart. There were days when I struggled against his memory — even as I was writing my confession, I could not relinquish my love for him. There were days when I would look into Obolen’s eyes and be ashamed that I could not love him like I loved Anatorr. Do not think harshly of me when my thoughts in my final moments turns

to Anatorr. Obolen told me that he knew, he told me that he understood. His eyes said he told the truth.

I will finish these pages where I began.

Anatorr, my beloved, I will see you soon. You said you would speak my name with your last breath. With all of my heart I want one more time to hear you say, "Princess, I love you. I will always love you. There will never be a day when I will not love you." If in Neyba I hear those words, I will be at peace.

-30-

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**“The Key Game” is not something I conceive. It was described in horrifying detail by Ida Fink in *A Scrap of Time*, a collection of stories — many of them autobiographical — about life in Poland during World War II.**

**Elena describes “the Nickelode,” a place of punishment while in the yachenka. Julius Fuchik wrote movingly about “the Cinema” in his book about Jewish suffering during World War II, *Notes from the Gallows*.**

**The conditions which I describe as existing inside of Resenka’s yachenkas are based on incidents recorded by Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn in *The Gulag Archipelago*. Also, the story of the ovation given to the Streloxx Leader was adapted from an incident which Solzhenitsyn recorded. His truths are much more frightening than any fiction I have imagined.**