

The two Newton shuttle crafts continued with their search. There was no indication that the planet's population had any idea they were there. They scanned rural and urban areas plus large open tracks of apparently wild land.

"G'Nex escape pod." Briscoe called on standard emergency channel and all Federation standard frequencies. "This is the shuttle Isaac Newton from U.S.S. Excelsior. Do you read?"

Wong scanned one of the larger cities as they flew over. "Most of the buildings are made from natural resources. Wood, stone. I'm reading some crude processed metals. Steel and something that reads very close to aluminum."

"I'd hate to see what they consider a hospital here." Dr. Caruso said. "Death traps, I'll bet."

Briscoe set the call to the pod on automatic. She turned to Wong. "Scan for something useful, Aaron. Like varidium six or kartellite."

"I am, Maggie." Wong said. "But I might as well get as much information as possible on the planet while we are here."

"Coming up on the shuttle point of entry. That's the first lap." Briscoe said. She opened the communication channel. "Newton Three this is Newton Six. Do you read?"

"This is Newton Three." Lt. Commander Smith answered. "Anything Briscoe?"

"No Sir." Briscoe said. "What about you?"

"Nothing." Smith said. "Expand search five degrees and go around again."

"Aye Sir."

"I've got it." Lt Wong reported. He switched the scan to the pilot's view screen. They were on their third pass over the southern hemisphere. It was a mountainous jungle region.

"They picked a great spot." Briscoe said sarcastically. "How are we suppose to land here?"

"How did they land?" Dr. Caruso asked.

"It must have been a rough ride. Look at that trail they left in the jungle." Briscoe said. She contacted the other shuttle. "Newton Six to Newton Three. We've located the escape pod."

"I'm on my way, Briscoe." Mr. Smith answered. "Did they answer the hail? Are all of the pod passenger's safe?"

"We have not had any answer to the hail." Briscoe reported.

"No humanoid life signs immediately around the pod, Mr. Smith." Lt. Wong added. "Within a five kilometer radius of the pod, I am reading multiple humanoid life signs. Several small groups."

"Locals." Smith said. "Wonderful! Hold position. I will rendezvous with you in three minutes/."

"Aye Sir. Holding position." Briscoe terminated the connection and turned to Lt. Wong. "Can you differentiate the G'Nex survivors from the local inhabitants by scan?"

"The people here read very close to humans." Wong studied his sensors. "As do Arkarians. But there were a Vulcan and an Orion among the students. I'm looking for them now. The difference in readings is small, but there."

On the Newton III, Lt. Commander Smith adjusted course to meet the Newton VI. "Have

you got it, Mirek?"

Lt. Mirek recalibrated her sensors to scan the coordinates of the other shuttle. It only took half a minute before she could answer. "Got it. They landed in some kind of jungle or rain forest. Laid quite a trail through the vegetation. The site appears abandoned."

"We're going to have to take a closer look." Smith said. He opened the channel to Briscoe. "Newton Six. I'm going to land. Stay in low orbit. We will stay in touch. If a half an hour goes by and you haven't heard from us, come looking."

"Understood." Briscoe said. "Good luck."

"Keep scanning, Mirek." Smith ordered. "I'm going to put her down right next to the escape pod. Let me know if anyone is in sight distance."

"Aye." Mirek said. "I wonder what sight distance is in a jungle."

"About the length of your arm, Lt. Mirek." Dr. Shimerman said.

"You have experience with jungles, Doctor?" Mirek asked while still staring at her scanners.

"Not me." Shimerman said. He was a small man with dark wavy hair. Only his vividly violet eyes and lack of any eyebrows suggested that his parantage was not entirely human. "I'm a city boy. Born and raised in New Paris."

"Well city boy." Smith said as they touched down gently next to the escape pod. "You are about to meet the jungle. Anybody bring a loincloth?"

"What?" Dr. Shimerman asked.

"Just pretend you have no idea what he's talking about." Lt. Mirek winked at the doctor. "He likes it that way."

"Ok." Smith turned serious. He handed Shimerman and Mirek each a phaser. "Keep your eyes open. Captain Sulu was very clear about not contacting the locals."

"What if they contact us?" Shimerman asked.

"Then we are just travelers looking for some friends." Mr. Smith said.

"This planet is very fragmented and primitive. They haven't even figured out how to use radio waves yet." Mirek said. "So they have no way of checking what we say."

"That sounds primitive." Shimerman nodded and hoped the shiver that went down his back was not obvious to the others as he followed Smith and Mirek out of the shuttle craft. They searched the escape pod and immediate area around it. There were no bodies or any evidence of injuries.

"All right, Mirek." Mr. Smith surveyed the wreckage around him. "Any idea which way they went?"

"Well, I am reading a small group about ten kilometers due east. They are moving quickly in this direction." Mirek said as she continued to scan with her tricorder. "But it's not the survivors. Only six individuals. And to the south is a group of about fifteen individuals, also moving. However there appears to be a village or campsite or something stationary about four kilometers to the north east. About fifty individuals. Small buildings. Animals."

"Any indication the survivors are there?"

"Yes!" Mirek looked up from her tricorder and smiled. "I have one Vulcan and one Orion. In the village."

Smith opened his communicator. "Smith to Newton."

"Briscoe here."

"We've located the survivors at a site four kilometers north east." Smith said. "We will try to approach covertly to assess the situation. I'll report as soon as we know what's going on."

"Be careful Mr. Smith."

"Of course, Briscoe." Smith terminated the connection. "Lead the way, Lt. Mirek."

"Aye Sir." Mirek nodded.

Using her tricorder, she found a trail that led through the thick vegetation. It was only wide enough to walk single file. Lt. Commander Smith followed Lt. Mirek and Dr. Shimerman followed him. The broad leaves of the blue green foliage reached into the trail brushing against them. The trail twisted and turned as the Starfleet officers slowly made their way up the side of the mountain.

Mirek stopped. Smith and Shimerman came up behind her. She whispered. "Just ahead, Sir."

The vegetation thinned considerably in front of them. They peered through to see three small buildings constructed from local raw materials. Nothing processed or manufactured. Between the buildings they could glimpse the rest of the village.

People were moving about. They were dressed in natural fabrics dyed in the colors of the jungle. Blues, greens, browns, reds woven together in intricate designs. They were humanoid. All of one race, possibly one extended family. Their skin tone was bronze; their hair color various shades of brown. Everyone they saw was moving away from them.

"Now what?" Dr. Shimerman whispered.

"We've got to get closer to the survivors." Smith said. "Where are they, Mirek?"

She studied her readings for a full minute. "It seems they entire village is converging on a single area. The G'Nex survivors are there. My guess is it would be the center of the village. A meeting place. Dead ahead."

"You had to say dead." Shimerman complained.

"Relax, Doctor." Smith said. "We have no evidence of hostility. Unfortunately, I don't see any way of doing this without talking to the locals."

"Captain Sulu was clear about the prime directive." Mirek reminded him.

"Well they already have fourteen unexplained people on their hands." Smith noted. "And you can't tell me these people did not notice that escape pod coming down."

"And there is no telling what our survivors have said." Shimerman added. "That's assuming they have a universal translator."

"Only one way to find out." Smith said. "Come on."

He walked out of his hiding place into the clearing around the edge of the village. No one was around to challenge him. Mirek and Shimerman followed. They passed the three building into the inner circle of the village. A large colorful bird sitting on a perch spread its wings and clicked its beak making a loud threatening noise at them.

Four men with long slender poles in their hands came from the center of the village to see who the intruders were. They stopped suddenly when they saw the three Starfleet officers. Smith, Mirek, and Shimerman also froze. Almost in one movement the four men shifted the poles to defensive positions and started edging towards the intruders.

"Hello." Smith said. "We come as friends."

The tallest of the four men stopped and rested the end of his pole on the ground. The other three cautiously surrounded the officers. The tall man said. "We seem to have many friends today. Who are you?"

"My name is Smith." Tomas addressed the lead man and tried to ignore the other three. "This is Mirek and Shimerman. We are looking for a some friends who were lost."

"I am Praag." The tall man said then turned and walked back from the direction he had come. The other three men held their poles horizontally and herded the Starfleet officers after him.

As they neared the center of the village, they could hear voices. Children ran around the edge of a crowd who were all turned toward a center raised pedestal. An thin woman dressed in a red and brown shift stood on the pedestal speaking to the crowd. Her raised arms demanded the crowd's attention. Her advanced age was betrayed only by the wrinkling of her skin and the rasping of her voice.

"Quaall drumt." She said. "Is not pleased. Outsiders tread on her sacred land. Spirits take Lhunrun's form. Bodies twisted into..."

"Ualla." Praag called from the edge of the crowd, interrupting the older woman. She stopped and looked at him. The crowd between them parted. Praag bowed deeply then walked up to the pedestal. It was large enough for two or three to share. Praag jumped up next to Ualla and turned back to the Starfleet officers. "There are more. The leader is Smith."

"Qualla drumt is not pleased." Ualla said to the crowd. While she spoke, Smith looked around for the G'Nex survivors but did not see them. "She who keeps the snow on the top of our mountain and the water cool in the heat will not tolerate outsiders."

"Ualla." Smith called as Praag had. Ualla stopped and stared at him. "May I speak?"

"Smith?" She asked. He nodded. She gestured with both arms for him to come forward and said. "Jenau o tapa."

Smith slowly walked forward. At the foot of the pedestal he stopped and looked up at Ualla and Praag. "The friends I look for are lost. We mean no harm to your people or your sacred land. If you allow us to leave now, we will never return."

"The harm is done." Ualla said.

"May I see my friends?" Smith asked.

"You call them friends." Ualla said. "Are you also of the Mangaaruu?"

"I'm sorry." Smith said. "I don't know what that means."

"You speak our language." Praag said. "But you do not know our stories?"

"We wish to learn." Mirek quickly joined Smith. Shimerman was not about to be left behind. The crowd closed behind them. "Why would you think our friends are Mangaaruu?"

Ualla stooped down to study Mirek. She reached her hand out and touched her forehead lightly. "Your skin is cool to the touch. Your hair yellow. Your face pale. This is not Mangaaruu."

"What is Mangaaruu?" Shimerman asked.

Still stooping, she turned to the doctor. "Fire in the eyes and the body. A curse on the face. A change of skin color."

"Sounds like a disease or infection." The Doctor said to Smith. "Like a fever with a rash."

"Or like the elevated body temperature of a Vulcan." Mirek countered. "The mask effect caused by the pigment variations on the faces of Arkarians. And the vividly green skin of Orions."

"The devil embodied? Maybe?" Smith suggested to Mirek and Shimerman. He addressed Ualla again. "May we see them?"

"Praag." Ualla reached her hand to him. He took it and steadied her as she straightened up. "Take them to see the Mangaaruu."

"As you wish." Praag jumped down next to Smith. Without a word he walked past him through the crowd. Smith followed. Mirek and Shimerman were only a step behind him. The crowd watched them intently. On the other side of the pedestal was a building of sorts. It was more a hole in the ground covered by a thatched roof supported by short poles with plenty of open spaces for air to flow through.

Praag nodded to two guards who lowered a ladder through one of the open spaces. Praag went down first. Smith followed, then Mirek and Shimerman. The G'Nex survivors were sitting on the dirt floor in the dark shadows of the hole.

"Starfleet!" A female Arkarian student alerted the others. The rest of the survivors stood up and started talking excitedly.

"Who's in charge here?" Smith asked.

"Myja Karim." An Arkarian man came forward. He was shorter and heavier than Smith and much closer to retirement. His face was typically two toned. The darker brown covered his eyes, nose, and most of his upper cheeks. His lower cheeks, jaw, and chin were tan as was his forehead. "Pilot of the G'Nex."

"Captain Karim." Smith nodded to him. "Are there any casualties?"

"A few bumps and bruises from our crash landing." Karim reported. "Nothing serious. No deaths. But we've been in this stinking hole for most of the day with little water and no food."

"Perhaps Mangaaruu don't need water." Mirek said.

"What are you suggesting?" The young Orion man asked.

"We're not sure yet." Smith stopped Mirek from explaining further. He turned to Praag. "May they have water, Praag?"

"Will the cool water return the Mangaaruu to themselves?" Praag asked.

"They need water to live." Shimerman said. Praag studied the doctor then nodded and went back up the ladder. The survivors began talking all at once again.

"Quiet." Smith said and took out his communicator. The students fell silent. "Smith to Briscoe."

"Briscoe here."

"We don't have much time." Smith said. "So just listen and get to work. We are isolated. All the survivors and rescue party are together in this three meter diameter room. Start transporting us out of here. Survivors first. Take as many as you can onto Newton Six. When you are at capacity, transport the rest to Newton Three. As fast as possible, Briscoe."

Four of the students disappeared in a transporter beam, before Briscoe answered. "Aye, Mr. Smith."

"You came in shuttles?" Karim asked.

"Yes." Smith nodded. "The ion storm still rages above this planet. Our Starship had to retreat."

"Since when do Starfleet shuttles have transporter capability?" Karim asked.

"For awhile now." Mirek said.

"A military secret." A young Vulcan woman said. Four more students were transported out of the hole.

"Shut up and be grateful you are being rescued!" A male Arkarian student hissed at the Vulcan.

"Briscoe to Mr. Smith."

"Go ahead, Briscoe."

"Newton Six is at capacity." Briscoe reported.

"Send the rest of us to Newton Three." Smith repeated his order.

"Negative." Briscoe said. "Newton Three is not secure. I am scanning a group of six individuals in and around the shuttle."

"Who forgot to lock the door?" Shimerman asked.

"Damn." Smith thought for only a minute. "What about the area around the crash site?"

"Other than this one group, the area is clear of humanoid life." Briscoe answered. "I could transport you to an area within ten meters of the ship."

"Good." Smith nodded as if Briscoe could see him. "But transport Lt. Mirek along with three others. Get a report from her before transporting the rest of us."

"Aye Sir." Briscoe said. "Stand by."

"Doctor." Smith nodded towards the ladder. "See if they are coming with the water yet."

"Aye." Shimerman nodded and climbed up the ladder until he could just see over the edge of the hole. Behind him he could hear the transporter's characteristic hum as four more people dematerialized. There were now only five people left in the hole. Dr. Shimerman saw Praag coming his way followed by two young men carrying a large basin of unknown material between them. Still on the ladder, Shimerman turned and whispered. "They are coming."

"Briscoe." Smith called on the communicator.

"Lt. Mirek reports they are ok and the locals have not discerned their presence." Briscoe said. "There are five of you left. I can only send four at a time."

"I'll wait." Smith said. "Get the rest to safety. Doctor, get off the ladder. And Briscoe, remember the prime directive! Only transport me out if I am alone!"

"Aye."

Shimerman jumped down and stood next to the last of the survivors. Just after Briscoe transported them out, Praag came down the ladder. When he saw just Smith standing there, he stared with his mouth hanging open.

"Where are they?" he demanded.

"Gone." Smith shrugged.

Praag called up the ladder. "Trelmew ger o shamall!"

Smith could hear the running of many feet above him. It sounded like a distant thunderstorm. They searched the entire village, calling loudly to each other of any possible clue to the strangers disappearance.

"Praag, we mean no disrespect." Smith said. "But my people had to return to our own

sacred lands. I must go also."

"Ualla must be consulted." Praag said.

"She is your leader?" Smith asked. "Or is she a priest?"

"She is the keeper of all knowledge." Praag said. "And teacher of the young. She knows us all. Come."

Praag went up the ladder. Smith waited, hoping Briscoe would beam him out. When he did not come up the ladder, Praag sent down a young man with a shortened version of the pole weapon. The man jumped off the ladder and circled behind Smith to herd him towards the ladder. He balanced the weapon in an easy manner back and forth between his hands like a Klingon with a bat'telh preparing for single combat.

Lt. Commander Smith went up the ladder. Two more guards waited with Praag. Without another word, Praag turned and walked away. The guards touched their poles lightly on Smith's back to herd him after Praag. Smith followed. This time they took him to a clearing in front of a small low building that looked very much like the building covering the hole Smith had just left.

Ualla sat near the door. She was flanked in a semi circle by four other senior citizens of the village. Praag stopped in front of her and knelt then sat back on his heels. Although he found the position uncomfortable, Smith did the same.

"Smith." Ualla said. "Where are the Mangaaruu?"

"They have returned to my home land." Smith said. "I would like to return also."

"You did not go with them." A man in the semi circle stated.

"Not yet." Smith said. "I was ready to go when Praag returned."

"Praag." The same man said. "How is it they escaped?"

"I do not know, Luumrak." Praag said. "Guards were in place. No alarm was signaled by our friend Trula. And they can not be found in the jungle. It is as if they disappeared."

"Mangaaruu can do that." Smith said to no one in particular.

"You said they were not Mangaaruu, Smith." Ualla pointed out. Before Smith could come up with an answer, she turned to the others. "Quaall drumt will require cleansing of our spirits and our land."

"Jenau o tapa." The others all nodded.

"I don't think I like the sound of this." Smith said quietly.

"Preparations must be made." Ualla said.

"Jenau o tapa." The rest of the semi circle said in unison.

"Bring water." Ualla ordered. "Gather Kuulee. Prepare the fire."

"Jenau o tapa." They nodded.

"Go." Ualla ordered. The others from the semi circle rose and left. Praag rose in one fluid motion. Smith put his hands on the ground to push up, but before he could stand, Ualla said. "Stay Smith."

"Ualla." Praag took one of the poles from the guard who had stood behind Smith and stabbed it into the ground between Ualla and Smith. "I will not leave you alone with Smith. I have no desire to have you disappear also."

She looked up at him in his defensive stance and smiled. "Then stay, my first born. Yuraal can see to your family. I will speak with the outsider."

Praag removed the pole and handed it back to the guard. Smith shifted so he was sitting on the ground with his legs out in front of him. He was aware of the entire village moving behind him. Everyone was busy preparing for the cleansing ritual Ualla had ordered.

"I am sorry, Ualla." Smith said. "That my presence has caused problems for your people."

"What has been done can not be undone, Smith." Ualla said.

"True." Smith nodded.

"There are many things in our life that are held only by Quaall drumt." Ualla said.

Smith looked her in the eye, hoping he appeared something other than just stupid. "I'm sorry. But I do not understand. What is Quaall drumt?"

"Quaall drumt is the mother and father of all things." Ualla explained patiently. "Quaall drumt have revealed themselves and their true nature to only a few. The chosen."

"Oh." Smith nodded. "Both mother and father? Male and female?"

"Both and neither." Ualla said. "We are chosen, but our understanding is small. Many things remain a mystery."

"I see." Smith nodded. "My people are a mystery."

"Yes." Ualla nodded. "The valley people are crude and sinful. You are not loud and boisterous as they are. You dress strangely and speak rapidly. Unlike anyone I've ever seen including the strangers who came when I was a child."

"Your people are a mystery to me." Smith looked around to try and see what the other villagers were doing. "May I ask about this cleansing ritual?"

"Yes." Ualla nodded.

"What exactly happens?" Smith asked.

"Our cool waters are heated." Ualla explained. "And special plants are added to the water. The prayers are said and the children are cleansed. The prayers for the parents are said and they are cleansed. Last the prayers for the old are said. And we are cleansed."

"The water cleanses the body." Praag explained as if Smith was a child. "The prayers cleanse the spirit."

"I understand." Smith nodded. He turned to Ualla. "You are concerned that my people carry diseases that your people have not encountered."

"Diseases?" She said the foreign word slowly. It had not translated into her language. "Is this your word for the unclean?"

"Yes." Smith said. "I believe we are talking about the same thing."

"Ualla." An adolescent girl approached the three adults with a basket woven of local vines.

"Come, Soo Soo." The old woman called her with her hand. The girl sat down next to Ualla and placed the basket between them. "Smith, this is one of Praag's children. Soo Soo."

"Hello Soo Soo."

The girl smiled at Smith but addressed her grandmother. "Is this enough?"

Ualla picked a large yellow flower with a prominent seed pod out of the basket and inspected it. She broke the seed pod open and held it to her nose. Nodding, she returned the flower to the basket. "These are good. Another basket like this will be enough."

The girl leaned close to her grandmother and whispered in her ear. Ualla nodded and the

girl took her basket and left. Praag got up and followed after his daughter. He stopped the girl to speak to her softly but did not take his eyes off of Smith and Ualla.

Smith looked back and forth waiting for something else to happen. Except for the preparations for the ritual, the villagers seemed to be in no hurry. Ualla remained seated, watching him. Finally Tomas Smith asked, "Ualla, is there a problem?"

"No."

"Both Soo Soo and Praag seem concerned." Smith said. "Is it about me?"

"A girl her age is curious." Ualla smiled. "She has only seen men of our people. But she only asked if you were take part in the cleansing."

"Am I?"

"Of course." Ualla said calmly. "The village will not be clean unless everyone in it is clean."

"I see." Smith nodded. "Ualla. It is a spiritual ritual, correct?"

"Yes."

"May I prepare in my own manner?"

"What is this manner?" Ualla asked.

"I only require a few moments of private meditation and prayer." Smith said. Ualla hesitated. Smith could feel Praag behind him but did not turn. He kept his eyes on Ualla. "It is the custom of my people."

"I understand." Ualla said. "Praag will provide a place."

"Ualla." Praag protested.

"The decision has been made." Ualla pronounced.