

Aatuu'hari

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*Out of the darkness came the hands that reached thru'
nature, molding men...*

Alfred Lord Tennyson

...There is also a philosophical and political movement supporting this that has found a voice within the government despite the outrage voiced by the traditionalist segment of Andorian society, calling blasphemy this monstrous altering of what is considered the very essence of Andorian life and culture...

Federation News Network

Chapter One

*SECOND THIRTEENTH MOON, LOR'VELN YEAR
622 — DECEMBER 17, 2300*

He blinked.

It didn't help.

He blinked again.

It didn't usually take him this long to wake up.

Or...wait. How long had he been *trying* to wake up?

He woke up.

He blinked.

It didn't help.

Wait. Hadn't he just tried this? And surely, he had other senses?

It took him somewhere between a minute and four hours to remember exactly what other senses those might be.

He was lying down. He couldn't determine on which side, but of course, had he been awake enough to determine *that*, he'd have been awake enough to see. No; his brain was muzzy, and for an ambidexter with a muzzy brain, lying on one side felt the same as lying on the other. He thought he might have a fever. When had he gotten sick? He couldn't remember anything. He could just barely piece together his own identity.

The room was somewhere between cool and cold. He couldn't tell the temperature exactly — between about five-and forty-degrees Fahrenheit, he figured. Or maybe what

was cold was the floor. *There!* He was lying on the floor. Or else a really hard table. Or a smooth rock. It wasn't ice, he knew that much for certain. Things got much below five degrees, and that embarrassing shivering-reflex-thing kicked in — he couldn't endure significant cold.

Why that should embarrass him, he had no idea. Prolonged below-zero temperatures would kill the people whom he seemed to recall teasing him about his shivering-reflex just as efficiently as such temperatures would kill him. Although, if his childhood tormentors had begun to shiver, to convulse, it would have been a sign of impending circulatory collapse, or at least of severe frostbite, the incipient loss of...a foot? A hand? Why did the thought make his stomach clench? He sought to turn his mind to something, anything, else.

It smelled like...disinfectant? But there was a distinctly rotten odor underneath that. Rotten, or fecal. Maybe both. It could be that the disinfectant-like odor was actually something in his nose or mouth. Or possibly, the rotten odor was. They appeared to tango, and he couldn't exactly identify what portion of his brain — or his *face*, really — he was detecting them with.

The air in the room was...red. And pulsating. Or were those lights shining through something? He could detect the color just fine — the shape and structure eluded him. Well, of course it did; he couldn't open his eyes.

No. That assumption was incorrect. He couldn't quite remember why, however. In turning his attention to the

fact that some sense which wasn't quite sight was eluding him, he noted that there was no pressure in conjunction with anything. So, he wasn't under water or...Wait. There *was* pressure at his forehead. He had to use a combination of smell and color sense to determine that. Of course, he could see color with his eyes, too, but they didn't appear to be functional. Had he somehow gone blind? That made absolutely no sense. He should be able to see a great deal better than this, with or without his eyes.

And hear. He couldn't hear a thing, and it didn't seem to be merely an absence of sound, though that existed, too. It was a stuffiness, rather. A muffling. He must be very ill.

He closed off one mode of hearing and strained the other. Ah: He was *inside* of something. The odd flashing red light-and-shadowplay was coming *through* that something. And he wasn't actually lying on anything; he was leaning against a...wall? Yes, that was right.

Suddenly he was horribly dizzy — something to do with the mode of hearing he was straining to use, he supposed. It had happened to him before. Or anyway, he thought it had — unless it was the fever that was making him imagine that. He had an awful headache, too. He tried to ignore the aching dizziness and stiffen his legs under him, because what he was doing, he realized, was leaning against one wall of a tight...closet? Or...or...

I'm in a box?

It occurred to him that putting a person into a box might be interpreted as an impolite gesture. Then he

remembered that Starfleet stuck you in some kind of box after you'd died.

Am I dead?

He discarded that idea — primarily because he could now taste, and somehow he simply couldn't credit that the afterlife consisted of an eternity spent in a box with a poorly-cleaned, strobing red port-a-potty stuffed up your sinuses, and unknown decomposing items in your mouth. Of course, if there *was* such an afterlife, it'd figure that would be the afterlife he'd find himself in.

Now he was severely nauseated. He strove to turn his strangely cross-wired senses away from the roiling in his guts once more. In doing so, he spent another minute or four hours meditating on the thought: *Wait. What am I, again?*

Either it was a red-walled box that he was currently occupying, or the light of a rising sun — or some sort of red strobe — was shining through its walls. Thin walls, then. Not that it mattered; for the first time in his life, he understood the human aphorism *weak as a kitten*. He went on trying to get his legs to work for about fifteen minutes. Or maybe it was an hour.

His time-sense had gone the way of his optic vision, apparently.

And hadn't he been thinking about *pressure*?

The pressure at his ankles resolved itself, suddenly and intensely, into pain. He was trussed into this box by his forehead, his wrists, his ankles...suddenly, his entire body

was a strobing sheet of pain, as hot and merciless as the blue heart of flame. And he wasn't *leaning* against anything but the back of the box — he was neither on one side nor the other, but manacled onto his back.

He finally managed to yank open his heavily lashed and thickly encrusted eyelids.

The front of the box was a wire-mesh cage door, covered with some kind of muffling red cloth. The on-again, off-again lighting common to freighter-belly cargo holds was the only lighting in the space. He shouldn't hurt this badly, even manacled; he had a powerful innate and epigenetic resistance to pain and stress, even if he hadn't inherited the same short-term resistance to cold. He had the distinct impression that he'd *been* hurt, too, but his feverish mind wouldn't cough up the specifics.

Things swam into and out of focus. Blinking in an attempt to clear his optic vision caused fever-chimeras to appear — faces of people he loved, as flat and dimensionless as tissue paper, gryphons and cats leering from their eyes as they slid around the perimeter of the box just out of his direct line of sight, begging him for something he couldn't comprehend; fireworks that resolved themselves into thorns and bees that danced together in the meshwork of the cage in front of him, meaningless but somehow menacing; multicolored, swirling snow as agonizing as a storm of microscopic bullets, making him writhe, which increased the magnitude of the storm, while waves of boiling water surged toward him and away,

threatening to cook his flesh.

He finally managed to gain enough control over his mind to ignore both the hallucinogenic effects of high fever and the throbbing waves of pain, which kept wanting him to listen to awful tales of breakage and butchery whispered in voices that he couldn't quite hear. For the moment, it was enough for him to know that they hadn't taken his eyes.

They?

He clung to the word like flotsam. It kept changing its meanings. Say a word in a language that wasn't your primary language enough times, and it lost all context, became nothing more than an interesting sound. This one shifted and squirmed about like a sea slug as he fought with it, trying to wrestle away the memories that he knew it was holding onto tenaciously.

Aazhaa.

They; more than two, and acting with intent.

Aazh'dreelaa.

More than two, moving intently through something in an injuring manner.

Aazh'dreela'phaa.

More than two of them, they attacked, performing intentional injury.

His mind worked feverishly to connect an actual memory with the grammar. Where did they attack? When? How? *Why?* The effort required for these thoughts made him sweat, even in the cool of the cargo

hold, and he realized that the nasty odor underlying the scent of — medication? Disinfectant? Whichever it was, it was indeed lodged in the mucus membranes of his sinuses — was himself.

Why in hell couldn't he *remember*?

Feh! He attempted to make the sound of disgust and derision aloud, and realized that his mouth had been taped shut. He closed his eyes, furious and humiliated.

Iixa'mehtraiz'aa: Somebody's going to pay for this — maybe not right now, but someday.

Stick with simple words, his mind begged, as he fell into unconsciousness again. This time he dreamed. Really, though, it was a nightmare — it was what had happened, or so it seemed, just before he awoke and found himself sick and injured and manacled into a box.

"I wanted to do something really special for your birthday. I hope you don't mind."

Shrev blinked at T'Dani Corrigan in trepidation. He'd been raised on Andor, and they didn't celebrate birthdays. He'd been raised on Andor, and they very rarely did things for one another without expecting favors to be returned, sometime or other. He was, however, part-human, and so was simultaneously intrigued by the idea. Nevertheless, there was something in T'Dani's tone which insinuated that he *might* mind, so the intrigue and the trepidation both settled in to wait and see what this was all about.

He was part-human: His antennae gave off ambivalent,

conflicted signals that apparently made sense to nobody when he was feeling indecisive, or anytime he became engaged in the concurrent consideration of multiple emotions. Indecision was something Andorians assiduously avoided ever having to deal with, and when they did have to deal with it, they held their antennae unnaturally still — a sign of distress, distaste, or both.

The consideration of multiple emotions simultaneously was something non-hybrid Andorians simply couldn't *do*, any more than they could be resuscitated once they'd gone into cardiac failure or circulatory collapse — hence their never having evolved antennae signals for it.

Ye gods, Shrev's having a love-hate relationship with his antennae again was his *cha'chi's* usual succinct reading of such a situation, which would usually — but not always — prompt Shrev to laugh, thereby pulling himself out of the swamp of ambivalence his human nature had the habit of unceremoniously dumping him into the middle of. Nobody had ever been interested enough, or maybe just straightforward enough, to simply come right out and ask him what his own personal conflicted-antennae signals meant.

He was fairly certain that T'Dani had figured out that when his antennae started their incomprehensible routines, he was feeling ambivalent. He supposed he should ask her sometime. They'd been having a lot of spats lately, and his Shrevish antennae signals might have been one reason

why. That, and the fact that he kept trying to subtly restructure their relationship, and she kept unsubtly resisting.

It was enough to make anybody ambivalent.

"I've told you about my stepsister, right? Myral?"

He blinked at her again. "Is it just coincidence that your stepsister's name means *ghelnoi'd sensory organ*? Please don't tell me you're making me a gift of your stepsister."

T'Dani smiled. "Not even. Her full name's Jh'injaa'Doar'tsuur Myral'ni —"

"*Uniquely graceful dancing antennae*? You have a *zhen* stepsister?" his own antennae went straight up, and stayed there. Fascinating name, too: *Grace*, to an Andorian, was equivalent with *luck*, also making Myral she of the uniquely *lucky* dancing antennae.

"I guess I *didn't* tell you. She's half-Andorian, like you."

"And half-human?" he was incredibly excited by this revelation. Which seemed to bother T'Dani — better and better.

"No. Half-Vulcan — "

"You're kidding! So that *works*?"

Now it was her turn to blink at him. "Well, okay, but you'll have to get her entire bondgroup to take up that bizarre Thalassan religion where there's six people in a marriage or something, because they might get a little irritated at you, otherwise."

Purposely, he arched his smooth human eyebrows upward to mimic the expression he'd already made with his antennae, which he felt arch inward toward each other without his volition — a facial expression that blatantly announced that an Andorian was teasing their interlocutor. "She's *Thalassan*?"

"Quit already, *will* you? Of course, she's not Thalassan! That wouldn't be physiologically or..." the petite blonde half-Vulcan doctor scowled (T'Dani scowled by forming her mouth into a moue, which Shrev found adorable), shook her head, and started over: "I'm *trying* to tell you that she's currently the Andorian Art Institute's Head of Composition Arts, and she's been given the job of setting up an Extension College on Weytahn, and a gallery. So, I..." T'Dani drew a deep breath; "I told her about your art, and she wanted to see it, so I sent her copies, and now she'd like it for the gallery. I mean a *lot*. And she'd like you to be there for the first showing."

He shook his head, slowly and at length. "How...why...that's..." he gave up attempting to verbalize what he felt, then rubbed at his face and tried again: "T'Dani, are you...I mean, isn't this...don't you think you're becoming a little bit...mmm, involved in my life, here?"

He winced even as he said it. It had come out almost-thoroughly-other than he'd meant it to — a godawful personality trait that he couldn't appear to remediate, and one which had hurled him, headfirst, into exceptionally scalding water any number of times. If his uncle Jeshrie

was to be believed, Shrev had inherited the trait from his *shen* — easy enough to credit, really, since she'd been his uncle's sister, and his uncle possessed exactly the same attribute, which occasionally caused Shrev's aunts to throw things at Jeshrie, usually in earnest.

What Shrev had *wanted* to verbalize was as follows: He knew that T'Dani was afraid of close relationships. He, on the other hand, desperately wanted a closer relationship with the CMO of the *Enterprise*. And her announcement absolutely floored him — or, more accurately, it had pulled the floor out from under him, so that he had no clue where he stood, or even what, exactly, it was that he was standing on. He *wanted* her to tell him where he stood: He'd been raised, after all, in a culture where that was a female privilege. He hoped, desperately, that it was somewhere close to where he wanted to be.

Biologically, however, waiting for her to unknot enough to even consider such a thing was driving him absolutely nuts — a human term that had no equivalent in Andorian, but was wickedly descriptive of the situation.

The ambivalent antennae signals she was apparently reading as irritation didn't help the situation. T'Dani recoiled, a hurt look dancing across her face, followed shortly by its newly devoted dancing partner, anger.

"I... I meant it as a *gift*, but apparently..." she shook her head and drew away while he was still fumbling around for some way to take it all back. "You know, you're right? Like always, you're just *absolutely* right. I am entirely too

involved in your life, and you in mine. What was I thinking? Sorry, Yeoman, for demeaning you with my favor. It *won't* happen again." She turned decisively toward the door.

Uh-oh. This promised to earn him the silent treatment for an even longer period of time than *who am I to stand between you and your misery?* once had. "T'Dani, wait; that came out wrong. Please don't think I meant that I — "

Chapter Two

Everyone in the situation room had been badly shaken. To be pulled out of a deep sleep by an unexplained explosion that literally turned the ship over was not the best way to begin a day — or perhaps *end* a day would be more accurate, since the explosion had occurred shortly after midnight, ship's time.

The *Enterprise-B*, fortunately, came equipped with some of the best emergency force-field technology currently available in Starfleet, and the explosion had only taken out one-sixteenth of the upper section of the far starboard side of the saucer — the communal living quarters of all cadets, and the private quarters of most yeomen, currently residing on the *Enterprise*.

"What seems to have been the proximate cause of this?" Captain Ingram had demanded somberly. Her science officer, as ashy faced as the rest of them, had rubbed gently at her left elbow, which had begun to stiffen and to swell visibly, and replied in a dull monotone:

"Preliminary investigation supports the theory that we were caught in a collision of *branes*."

Everyone at the table had offered Seantie what amounted, considering the scope of the loss they'd just endured, to mildly dirty looks. The Betazoid had responded by shaking back her sleep-tangled, silver-streaked mahogany hair and sighing.

"B-r-a-n-e-s: *branes*," Voss had spelled out the abstruse term the second time she used it, and received blank stares rather than hostile ones: "Those are objects that exist in dimensions beyond what can be readily perceived or even mathematically calculated, really. When they collide, they cause unexplained explosions or combustions, sometimes both. Even *branes* the size of subatomic particles can cause this effect. Something of the size to cause what just happened to us would have been about the equivalent of...oh, I suppose a collision of asteroids about armor-stone size. Which is really pretty small; our deflectors should have just...well...*deflected* that."

"How many people?" Ingram had asked the table at large, softly. She'd entertained a moment's whimsical hope that, if she asked the horrible question softly enough, she might not have to hear the answer.

"Forty-seven, last count." Mel'Taya's voice had possessed a hollow ring that perfectly matched the hollow that formed in Captain Ingram's chest. The head of security couldn't meet her eyes, and sat in a slumped, defeated posture. "We're still counting heads," the *chae-na* had added listlessly. "Only thirty distinct quarters were blown out, including the main cadet quarters. There are people still unaccounted for, both those whose quarters were there, but who weren't present when the explosion occurred, and people whose quarters *aren't* there, but who appear to have been present in the damaged area. We're..."

Captain Ingram's head of security had paused, closing its eyes and sighing; "sweeping space for corpse debris, too."

Ingram had let her forehead fall onto the back of her hands, where her arms sat steepled on the table in front of her. It was then that she realized that her left hand might be broken. She ignored it. "Injuries?" she demanded next. Nothing. The captain of the *Enterprise* rubbed at her eyes with the grimy fingers of her right hand and looked up. "Doctor Corrigan?"

The half-Vulcan woman had to pull herself back from somewhere far away. The unshed tears in her almond-shaped eyes turned them into pools of molten ice-blue glass. "Oh. Sorry, I..." the CMO had rubbed at her own eyes, shaken her head, and visibly attempted to pull herself together. "Thirty-eight injuries — Josi, Marco, and Demora among those. And Colin, which of course you know. Some caused by the explosion, the rest when the graviton field went haywire for a while. They're all quite severe." She'd nodded around at the people sitting at the table with her: "And all of us here are cut and bruised up pretty well, which I think goes for everybody who wasn't directly beamed into sickbay. So, in that sense, at least, I'd have to say that we're *all*..." she'd paused and rubbed at her eyes again, ignoring both the gingery rug-burn and the green bruise that flared around one of them like a fleshy supernova, "more or less injured." The tears she'd been so valiantly trying to hold back finally escaped and found their way down her abraded cheeks.

"Seantie's right; this doesn't seem to have been any sort of an attack. There's no trace of warships in the area." EmJay had held what distinctly appeared to be a pair of shredded lace undergarments studded with opal-white rhinestones to his right cheek. Their outer surface was freshly stained with carmine spots from a series of shallow lacerations on his face.

Ingram had been and still was too shaken by having had to call emergency services to save her lover, whose head had been split open, to have the heart to conjecture the provenance of such suggestive attire to herself. "Are there traces of any other ships? Did anybody else get caught in this?"

Her tactical officer had shrugged. "Oh, a transport freighter went through here about half a day ago — Bolian, and they don't arm their transports. Usually, if they're carrying anything of value, they think might tempt somebody, they send fighter escorts along. No escorts, so nothing they thought was particularly valuable." Fletcher had pulled the less-than-satisfactory cloth away from his face and refolded it in attempt to stanch the bleeding. T'Dani had scowled, gotten up, pulled a dermasuture tool from her lower right medical coat pocket, and moved to fix EmJay's face.

"And the fluctuations of the ship's graviton field haven't caused any sort of temporal issues?" that was the hidden horror of graviton fields in general. Fletcher had shrugged again.

"Not that we can tell, Captain. I mean, how *could* you tell, if you're — ouch!" EmJay flinched under T'Dani's ministrations.

Ingram supposed that she should simply be grateful that the flagship of the fleet had also been equipped with the best inertial dampening systems Starfleet possessed; a blast capable of flipping the ship might otherwise have killed them all. "Never mind. Forget it for now. We have other things to worry about at the moment. Rafe, have the engine core or nacelles been effected by this?"

Ingram's head of engineering had limped hunch-backed into the conference room and had been squirming in discomfort in his chair ever since. He wasn't just ashen; he was nearly the color of a standard Starfleet flimsy sheet. Captain Ingram imagined that he probably had some very badly pulled back muscles. Rafael Buonarroti had shaken his head, wincing at the movement. "No, that's what's strange, Captain. No temporal twisting in the nacelles, no dimensional shifts in the core. Not even burn marks on the hull."

"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, Lieutenant. Now, go to sickbay." Ingram had motioned with her head toward T'Dani; "please accompany him, Doctor."

Both crewmen had nodded, T'Dani miserably and Rafe gratefully, and slowly left the room together. As Captain Ingram had suspected, T'Dani needed to support Rafe. Captain Ingram had taken advantage of the short lull that followed to flex her left hand tentatively, wincing.

Definitely more than a single metacarpal involved.

"Well, people, we'll at least be able to get to Starbase Seventeen under our own steam. The *Cairo* should be here shortly, and she'll take over scanning the area for..." she'd stopped herself. Captain Ingram wasn't going to start calling even pieces of people *debris*; "for signs of exactly what happened. But we're leaving here now; we'd be a sitting duck otherwise. The *Saratoga*'s promised to meet us en route and escort us in. Our shields are still functional?"

"Completely." EmJay, leaning back in his chair with his eyes closed, had replied. "Like Rafe said, the explosion didn't effect much of anything but the hull and the gravity fields, and not even the gravity fields were —"

"How about the scanners? Graviton issues can send scanners haywire." Ingram interrupted.

EmJay just shook what must still have been a badly-aching, though no longer bleeding, head. "They seem to be functioning well enough, Captain," Seantie had volunteered; "like Fletcher said, if there are temporal issues involved, we probably wouldn't be able to determine that, having been part of those issues ourselves."

Now the captain of the *Enterprise* was closeted in her ready room just off the bridge. She had been studying the profiles of the people who'd been killed in the blast. The final tally was in; sixty, fully a tenth of her crew. Nor were these names and faces all ciphers to her — she'd known

and liked most of them, a few quite fondly.

And here I'd imagined that this situation couldn't get worse.

Ingram had told herself before — more than once, and always for future reference — that she should *never* entertain that idea. Call it human superstition, but she'd noted that doing so almost guaranteed that situations would become worse. She sighed, set down the hazelnut latte she'd been nursing, and leaned forward toward her small tabletop viewscreen. Storn, the dark-skinned Vulcan man who captained the *Cairo*, had called her from his own private office, probably thinking — accurately, as usual — that the fewer people who were privy to this knowledge, the better. She'd requested that he be put in charge of the ongoing investigation at the site of the mishap, while the injured *Enterprise* made for Starbase Seventeen, where she would be met by the *Saratoga*, which would be carrying a team from the covert arm of Starfleet known as *Temporal Investigations*.

"Therefore, I stipulate that you detain all but the most dire functional repairs to your ship until Starfleet Temporal Investigations has had the opportunity to investigate the damage. The temporal shift traces left in the area which the *Cairo* is currently analyzing are, as far as we can estimate at this time, upwards of fourteen hours old —"

"What does that infer, Captain Storn?" Captain Ingram interrupted the soft-spoken Vulcan. He inclined his head to her.

"That would be my question, also, had my ship been caught in a collision of *branes*. However, there is no proximate evidence that points to any sort of collision. Furthermore, preliminary temporal resequencing puts the *Enterprise* in this territory at precisely the same time as a certain Bolian transport freighter. I must stress again that this information, as pieced together by the computers and crew of the *Cairo*, is hypothetical until confirmed by another source. Temporal Investigations has the tools to scrutinize the situation far more meticulously."

"Coincidence?" Ingram lifted her cup and took a sip. She didn't really want the milky coffee, but her stomach demanded that she either put something into it, or take herself to sickbay.

"Forgive me, Captain Ingram, but I am Vulcan. We do not credit coincidence. Moreover, and the truly imperative reason why you must not interfere with the vacuum-exposed quarters on the *Enterprise* until they can be studied..." he shook his head, looked down at a compadd on the table in front of him, and actually sighed:

"We've acquired genetic samples of forty of the people who were ostensibly blown out of the ship when *branes* collided near her hull. DNA shows a certain pattern of decay after being forcibly exposed to vacuum. All of these samples show the same pattern, except for one. This one shows vacuum exposure, of course, but without the accelerating decay effects of explosive force. What it *does* show is a Bolian transporter trace. Quite an unusual

coincidence, wouldn't you say, Captain?"

Renee Ingram sighed and set down her cup. She hated having only one contingency plan. Worse, of course, was possessing no contingency plan at all, which was where she found herself at the moment. It was time to start formulating some sort of strategy, however unlikely its implementation might ultimately be:

"Captain Storn, I might need some..." she paused and tried to think of the best way to ask for something she wasn't yet entirely certain how to request. She had a sneaky hunch that this was going to get weird, and that she'd need some sort of backup, but she hadn't a clue what level or sort of backup that might be, just yet. "I have a distinct feeling that this is leading toward issues that are going to take the safety of, at a minimum, my crew out of my own hands. As one Starfleet captain to another, I'd like to request your advice and your help with something. How long do I have before Temporal..." she tried valiantly to avoid making a face, and largely succeeded, "*takes over the Enterprise?*"

Storn blinked at her mildly, the way Vulcans did when they were mulling over life-death scenarios or advanced calculus equations. "That would depend upon how long it might reasonably take a damaged starship to reach Starbase Seventeen from the Bentahn Sector. Which itself would logically depend upon the level of damage sustained, what sort of help you request, and what amount of time the implementation of what you plan requires."

Captain Ingram smiled, and received the slightest curve of Storn's own lips in response. "All right. Let's start with the particulars concerning the body parts effected by that transporter trace, shall we?"

Lara'na sat on the bed in the center of the room. They rarely entered this room; it was Shrev's, it always had been. His desire for privacy was one of his odder human-derived quirks. She and Jeshrie, Shellis and Thon had taken him in as a baby after the Gorn killed his parents; there had been one single survivor of the massacre on Cestus Three, and their nephew was that survivor. None of them had wanted Rohm'aia and her bondgroup to leave home for some gods-forsaken terraforming project — Thon's ancestral home was enormous; they could have stayed here and had more children. But they'd been given so much grief by the most conservative faction on Andoria that...

She shook her head and scowled down at the little stuffed purple octopus she was holding. Shrev had never gotten rid of anything they ever gave him; he was obsessive about keeping his things. Dammit, they *all* should have just up and moved to the Northern Continent — surely Jeshrie's grandmother's people would have offered them asylum? Or even to Weytahn or one of the other established Andorian colony planets. They should never have let Rohm'aia, jh'Arell, Indrie, and Raukura go.

The *zhen* hugged the strange, soft toy to her chest. She wasn't being honest with herself. Shrev's parents had

primarily gone to Cestus Three because it was a prize chance for all of them to pursue the various scientific fields they loved without ever having to leave one another for extended periods. And their being safe wouldn't have made Shrev safe, not from these *things* that she'd finally made Jeshrie tell her about.

Lara'na imagined that a race of Shrevs wouldn't be such a bad thing. He'd always been an amazement and a delight to the family. So high-spirited, smiling for the sake of joy — like a human or an Aenar, or like her own *zhavey*'s people, the Bish'ee — rather than as an expression of aggression or placation, as was common among the Talish, the Theskians, and the ancient Thalassans. He would peal with laughter over the simplest, most unlikely things, a sound like sweet water falling into a still pool, his eyes brimming with love. But those weren't the parts of him they were after, at all. Lara'na shuddered. They wanted to use him to breed some sort of dual-gendered, inexorable super-race and eradicate everyone else. How could they take such a sweet child's genes to do something like that?

He'll fight them! she'd insisted — he could fight like the mythical Thirishar-zhach, nobody could best him, particularly not after he'd gotten his full growth. Then Jeshrie had told her then that they'd manacle Shrev with steel rods, and burn out his tongue.

And how would you know something like that? she'd snarled in response. She'd been so angry that she'd

attacked him with cutlery and crockery — and entirely destroyed dinner in the process. Being of Bish'ee heritage, she was no small *zhen*, and she'd demanded of Jeshrie, when she'd finally gotten him cowering in a corner:

You will bring my boy back!

She felt awful, now, about the level of her temper. Now she might never get Jeshrie back. Even though his admissions had been so awful, as she'd pelted dinner knives at him — *they told me they'd leave him alone, zh'yi, if I did what they demanded. I'd already given them some of his blood, I didn't imagine they'd want more!* — still, she didn't know what she'd do if she lost her *ch'te*. And her only child, too. Her astonishing, wonderful, occasionally incomprehensible hybrid *boy*. She rocked and keened softly to the little octopus.

"*Zh'yi?*" Thon's soft, carrying bass interrupted her grief. "What are you doing, honey? We..." the *thaan* bit his lower lip and sat down next to her, taking her into his arms, but not before she noted the tears that had begun to gather in his eyes; "we need to leave soon, for the funeral."

"He's not *dead, th'se!*" Lara'na whined. He rocked her gently. The captain of the ship on which Shrev had been conducting research had confided to them that she wasn't certain Shrev had been among the dead, and Lara'na had grabbed that shred of hope and run with it further than any of the rest of them might have done.

Shrev's imaginative way of thinking had long ago rubbed off on his *zhev'a*.

They had played along, Lara'na had thought at first, because it gave her comfort. Now Jeshrie had left Andoria for who-knew-where, and although Shellis privately told her that Jeshrie'd probably just meet them at Starbase Seventeen for the funeral, Lara'na was one of the few people in whom Jeshrie had ever confided certain highly confidential facts regarding his job and his ship. Lara'na knew for a fact that Jeshrie was performing the first of those, because the second was no longer docked near Andoria. She'd checked.

"I know," Thon soothed, "and he won't be. That boy could always get himself into and out of the strangest situations —"

"I agree," Shellis piped from the doorway; "remember that whole *flim'ta* we had to go through that time he injured those middle-school *thaan* so badly? Or that embarrassing...*thing* with those crazy Terran tourists? Or the horrible tantrum he threw over that ugly damned little milk-beast?" the *shen* had only that morning shared with the others a certain task that she'd taken on, and certain frightening and infuriating information that this task revealed. No, their boy was not dead. Unfortunately, however, he might in time become something worse than dead, if he couldn't be found and rescued.

"He'd take the cow to bed with him," Lara'na sniffled. Thon snorted.

"I really do hope he's found some better-smelling sleeping partners by this time. Maybe even some who

don't attempt to involve the authorities when he won't go home with them."

All three Andorians smiled, in a sad, nervous, longing kind of way. Even when they were about to leave for what they desperately hoped was his pseudo-funeral, Shrev could make them smile. He had taught them even before he could speak that a smile could have so very many meanings.

Chapter Three

He woke abruptly when they passed him, box and manacles and all, through the sonic sterilizer. It didn't take the tape off his mouth, but it removed the awful taste from it, and scrubbed out the port-a-potty in his sinuses, clearing his head as if by magic. A very large, extremely painful kettledrum took the port-a-potty's place, and the aches and pains in the rest of his body intensified. *Bad*, his mind announced. He moaned, and didn't bother opening his eyes.

The voices came as something of a shock, which in itself was something of a shock. Now he blinked his eyes open. What was either one *shen*, or a vanishingly unlikely set of identical triplets, peered into the box at him, a look of intense concern and more than a little fury blurring the triploid features that didn't want to come into focus. He let his eyes fall shut and moaned again.

"God *damn* it!" she didn't use the Andorian word for god — the conversation was entirely in Standard — which meant that Shrev, or whoever else she might have been talking to outside the box, didn't have to face ten minutes of scathing condemnation as descriptive objective conjunctions flew by.

There wasn't much Shrev could do about his situation currently, so he simply tried to endure the sudden appearance of a nearly intolerable thirst as the *shen*

continued to complain to whomever it was she was complaining to: "I *told* you I didn't want him harmed!" the female Andorian reached into the box and, with a vicious tug, tore the tape gag off of his mouth — along with, Shrev imagined, most of his lips. He gasped at the fresh wave of pain assaulting his face, then nearly choked on the trickle of water she dribbled over his mouth. It burned his tape-scorched lips. It was lukewarm, tasted of rancid blood and sick sweat, of adhesive and the cloth it trickled out of. It was the most wonderful thing he could recall ever having experienced, and he swallowed it avidly.

"But you did *want* him, yes? Because if we hadn't *harmed* him, you wouldn't have gotten him at all, you'd have gotten a Federation investigation up your — "

"What are you whining about now?" yes, Shrev thought, *I'm in really bad shape. I could've sworn her voice came from the other side of the box that time.*

"He killed Karvil, Thydar, and Rivie. He was naked and half asleep, and he killed them. I'd really like what's left of the bastard when you're finished with him." The second sentence came out in a soft, layered baritone purr that made Shrev shudder.

"In your dreams, Kryl. Old age is the only thing that's going to touch him here. What did you do with the antennae and," a tone of deep disgust touched her voice which, this time, seemed to come from the head of the box he lay in — some incomprehensible acoustical trick of wherever the hell it was they were holding him, he

supposed, "the hand and foot? *Why* the hand and foot?" the slight buzzing sound of an Andorian medscanner reached his ears. "And you cracked all of his ribs? You know, Kryl, we ought to just kill *you*!"

"You honestly think somebody's going to grow old before you're found out? And I didn't cut off the parts you people are interested in — don't think it didn't occur to me, either! The hand and foot are on ice; thought you'd want the DNA. The antennae we left behind, since he's supposed to be in spaceborne chunks, and there needed to be something to prove that with, eh? Cutting *those* off stopped him for about half a minute, *then* he killed Thydar."

No wonder it hurt to breathe. No wonder he couldn't stand up.

"So, you can see now why we'd want him? Can you imagine it, every *thaan* ever born —"

"Yeah, you know, I realize you might not appreciate the difference, honey, but he's not a *thaan*, and what you're trying to brew up aren't *thaan*, either. If you were *nice*, I could show you; I'm told it can be —"

"Get *out*! We should know better than to ever try to appeal to your higher nature — there isn't one. Your payment's waiting where we agreed. You should be thrilled, now you don't have to split it."

"No, you're right, no higher nature. Particularly when I consider that every *shen*, or should I say, every sad excuse for a *shen* you'd brew up, might be a bitch like you.

Nice doing business again, Theskhe."

That must be the *shen's* name. The *thaan* had given the 'th' a hard sound, and Shrev's mind translated the name without conscious volition: *this dreadful thing is cold*.

"Hey," Theskhe wheedled Shrev softly as Kryl's footsteps receded into some echoing distance. "I know you're awake. I want to take care of you, but you'll have to cooperate so I can do that. What do you say, gorgeous?"

Shrev didn't have to exert much effort in order to stop himself from laughing outright — which was good, because in general he was unable to exert much effort at all. He was, apparently, a swollen mass of purple-black bruises and cauterized stumps. If he *looked* one-quarter as bad as he felt, she must have thought he was a seven-day-old corpse when she first opened what, for all intents and purposes, could be his coffin.

He was in no mood to cooperate, most certainly not with his own kidnappers, and he never had been much of a sucker for flattery: In his experience, people who actually felt something showed it plainly, they didn't try to hang pretty bells and whistles off of it. He tried to speak, and failed. Gods, he was thirsty. Dizzy. And he *hurt* — never in his life had he hurt so badly. It was as though, suddenly, all of his nerve endings had remembered the human side of their heritage. He swallowed and tried to speak again; a groan emerged.

"Okay, okay," her voice was soft and gentle — not particularly the best possible state of affairs in an

Andorian, but it wasn't cold or brusque. He could almost convince himself that she somehow gave a damn, which only went to prove that he probably had a nifty concussion on top of everything else. Not that a concussion would have added much to the dull hammer of agony that came and went throughout his body with every heartbeat. "We'll get you out of there with a hoverstretcher. But I'll need to put you out again first — "

"What do you want from me?" Shrev managed. His voice grated and quavered in a subsonic pitch that, had the person in front of him not been Andorian, wouldn't have been audible to anyone else at all.

She laughed; the sound was horribly joyful, and Shrev wished he hadn't asked. "Oh, *everything!* You're the whole secret to pulling this off. We've known it for years. But your cells got to be too variable in mitosis, almost like plant growth nodes, just too *old*. Overused. Gleevah just wanted fresh ones, but we thought hell, why not just take the entire source? But let me get you fixed up, and then we can talk."

"You won't get away with it." Whatever *it* was. He didn't know what she — they? — wanted with him after her explanation any more than he had before she'd given it.

Shrev clones? His *shre'a* and *zhev'a* would be worried that Shrev clones would track ice in all over the carpet by forgetting to take off his shoes. His *cha'chi* and *tha'thi* wouldn't want to waste their time lecturing Shrev clones about picking one thing, and sticking to it. And T'Dani —

Who had ever wanted *more* Shrev?

Again, she laughed gaily. "And you're in *such* a position to make threats that I tremble! Here you go, big boy, see if this doesn't make you feel better."

The sting of a needle in his left bicep — aaah, *that* was the hand they'd cut off. A brief memory of an Am Tal sword, followed by an enormous gush of blood and bodily fluid that wasn't entirely his own, flashed through his mind convincingly enough to make him try to wince back against the unyielding manacles that held him, until mercifully soft, analgesic darkness enfolded him.

He dreamed.

The four Andorian assassins — damned inept ones, as Andorian assassins went — did Shrev the enormous favor of wearing electromagnetic-baffling units when they beamed from the cloaked freighter into his quarters on the *Enterprise*. Such units were able to keep a starship's computer system from detecting intruders at all. However, these particular intruders were strangely unaware that such units had exactly the opposite effect on Aenar people, even when they were part-human, part-Theskian, part-Talish Aenar people, like Shrev.

Large, predatory ice-lizards still existed on Andoria's Northern Continent that hunted using electromagnetic interference as a method of paralyzing prey. To the perceptive multi-sensory organs that Andoria's few ghelnoid wildlife had evolved, that electromagnetic

interference had more or less the same effect as Terran fireworks might have on Earth animals — exactly the same sort of effect that electromagnetic-baffling units had on Aenar or part-Aenar people.

The hybrid Andorian's dreams were always the same. Vividly colored, saturated with sound, touch, sensation, taste, even odor, but never the particular permutation of senses perceived by ghelnoid craniofacial sensory organs. Shrev woke up if antennae-sense ever showed up in his dreams. Like his anomalous, hyper-accurate sense of time, which made wake-up calls and ever being late for anything both unknown and unnecessary, this was an innate tendency over which he had no control.

The minute kidnappers had beamed into Vraeth'uutr'Shrev Th'raess'Aen's quarters, he came awake, adrenaline pouring into his system at the sudden presence of a dissonant, blaring noise that wasn't noise and a blinding, glaring light that wasn't light. Very close to him, too — close enough that he had been able to *smell* it.

Like any Andorian's, the hybrid man's eyes were functionally blind upon first awakening, optic vision not being the first sense generally called upon by people who'd come to sentience while using pitch-black hydrothermal vents to escape the killing cold of their planet's ecosystem. Had the more confrontational Southern Continent Andorians not learned to make and employ fire startlingly early in their evolution (hence the extinction of ice-lizards there), they too would have been forced continuously

underground, and would ultimately have evolved to be just as optically blind as their Northern Continent cousins. It had taken Shrev a few seconds to realize that there were unknown people in his quarters, equipped with Am Tal stealth devices. It had taken him no further time at all to come to the conclusion that introductions and handshakes were probably not what was called for in such a situation. Upon awakening, Shrev was usually just as sleep-blinded as any non-hybrid Andorian — but *they* didn't have had the enormous benefit of human adrenaline to scour away its torpor in a situation like this, which it did, and instantly.

The humanoid heel was largely impervious to immediate blunt-trauma pain, and so made an incredibly powerful — and always handy — weapon. Shrev was nearly certain that the first intruder he'd killed hadn't even realized that the hybrid man was in front of him. The second definitely had registered his presence, however; Shrev had needed to skip out of the way of a sword blow directed at his shin, which had told him that they wanted him incapacitated, not dead.

The next swipe of the weapon had been, predictably, aimed at his antennae. He'd ducked under it — not an easy thing for a big individual to do with a smaller opponent — then used his superior reach to crush his attacker's larynx. The heel of the humanoid hand also made a formidable weapon, and the Andorian dual larynx was both sensitive and horribly vulnerable.

Shrev had just pulled the *dosalnar* out of the

convulsing *chan's* fingers when what must have been a projectile weapon — flying stars, or punch-daggers on either end of a length of braided chain — sliced through his antennae. The horribly painful nerve-response had dropped him where he stood; he was fortunate he hadn't disemboweled himself on the sword. Nonetheless, he had known from experience that such an injury would be like hitting the bony projection of his humerus smartly on a metal surface, or being kicked in the ridiculously vulnerable groin he'd inherited from his human father: He'd be incapacitated, with the overwhelming desire to roll around and possibly vomit, for no more than a minute or so.

Then he'd get right back up again, courtesy of the human cochleae hidden in his otherwise Andorian-looking ears. This was always good for at least three minutes of utterly vulnerable perplexity in Andorian attackers. Plenty of time to kill the other two. Who had he ever pissed off *this* badly, since fourth grade? No answer had been forthcoming.

"Set the charges!" he'd heard one of them hiss. They were attacking the *ship*? Shrev had raised his head and shaken it; blood had pattered around and rolled down into his eyes and ears. He'd ignored the residual pain, stood up, grasped the antennae of the nearest *thaan*, and used them as levers to pull the *thaan* down backwards over his own bent thigh in order to break the smaller man's spine.

He hadn't been given the opportunity to complete the

violent act before the duranium-reinforced edge of a *dosalnar* had come whistling down. *Dosalni* were reinforced that way so that they could be whetted somewhat more than razor-sharp without any concern that they might turn, nick, blunt, or dull on tough tissue. The swords, though ostensibly ceremonial, could slice cleanly through bone, whether flexible or brittle, like it was composed of bread. The blade had travelled through Shrev's left arm just above his wrist, and continued on to disembowel the *thaan* stretched across his thigh. Its momentum had finally stalled halfway through the *thaan's* hipbones.

The latrine stench of opened bowels had melded into one with the incomprehensible agony that had shot through Shrev's body. The part-Andorian man had screamed. His attacker had laughed and kicked him onto his side as he freed the vicious edged weapon. Shrev lay face-to-face with the *thaan* shuddering in his death throes. The swordsman had then proceeded to kick Shrev viciously until he did, indeed, vomit, ending the violent but otherwise mostly silent tirade by cutting off the hybrid man's right foot above the ankle.

Shrev had blacked out then. He remembered that fact just as he woke up.

Chapter Four

"What a damn *mess*."

The captain of the *Enterprise* couldn't argue with the opinion of the Tellarite Manager of Operations for this particular Temporal Investigations team, much as he might have wanted her to.

TI personnel usually worked in two- or three -person teams. This one was composed of the aforementioned Tellarite, a male Algolian, and a distinctly harried human woman, with whom the Algolian appeared to be either enamored or enraged — it could be difficult to differentiate between those two emotions, with Algolians. Of course, considering the nature of galactic anthropomorphic interspecies interactions in general, it might very well have been both simultaneously.

"Nobody's been in the rooms nearest the blast since they were blown out, have they?" the Tellarite continued snappishly.

"No. I'm afraid I didn't catch your name?"

"I didn't throw it. I'm Gordle Brask. Sorry for not shaking hands, but I'd rather not contaminate my gloves." The Tellarite peered up at Captain Ingram the way Tellarites peered up at everybody —defiantly, or perhaps with the mild handicap of incurable far-sightedness. Or rather, as the captain of the *Enterprise* had learned from her Protocol Officer, usually both.

"That's too bad, because I'm told it's always best to shake hands with gloved Tellarites. In order to avoid contaminating one's hands. Do you have all the equipment you'll require, or is there anything we might provide?" Captain Ingram replied courteously.

"If we need anything, we'll let you know." Brask turned his far-sighted gaze from Captain Ingram to glare dourly at the sealed door. Ingram was fairly sure that he'd been chosen for this task for the simple reason that not a single person of Tellarite or part-Tellarite descent had been involved in the suspicious explosion aboard the *Enterprise*. He was taking no one with him: The chance of cross-contamination of data would increase exponentially with every individual allowed into areas of the ship effected by the blast.

The human woman on the team, Martha Aguilar, was closeted in the *Enterprise*'s briefing room, interfacing the data retrieved from the *Enterprise* with the data that was still being processed by the *Cairo* in that section of space where the explosion occurred. Neither Ingram nor any member of the Temporal Investigations team, which had commandeered her ship, labored under the delusion that this had been any sort of accident anymore, although Starfleet still officially considered it a *mishap*, largely for the sake of media control, Ingram imagined.

Certain departments of Starfleet possessed authority over Starfleet officers in general; Temporal Investigations was one of those. Great swathes of Captain Ingram's

remaining crew had been put on standby as aides to the people from Temporal, meaning that her crew wasn't strictly under her command any longer. It wasn't a situation that Renee Ingram relished; she'd made sure, hours before the *Enterprise* had docked at Starbase Seventeen, that the real nature of what had occurred existed in the minds, hearts, and data banks of various individuals who were *not* directly aligned with Starfleet itself.

The Algolian Temporal Investigations team member, Erig-nar, was going over the hull with a hand-tricorder, temporal nanoprobes, and most of the *Enterprise*'s Security team. The Algolian's first announcement, upon simple visual inspection of that part of the hull left curled and warped by the explosion, had been concise and unmistakable:

"Whatever concussion it was that caused this rupture originated inside the *Enterprise*, not outside of it."

Which didn't wholly negate the *brane* theory, though it did make it somewhat unwieldy, since the inside of any stellar vessel held an atmosphere conducive to the function of the respiratory systems of the vast majority of known humanoids. Brane collision in an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere was generally believed to cause spontaneous combustion, not concussive force, unless the collision was a large one, as had occurred in the Tunguska wilderness on Earth in the early twentieth century. Captain Ingram couldn't credit such a theory. According to all available

sources, a brane collision of the same magnitude as the one that had taken place in the Siberian outback three hundred years prior would have atomized the entire ship, not merely blown out a very particular part of its upper starboard hull.

"Pretty certain somebody aboard used this to try and cover something else up. How well do you trust your crew, Captain?" Gordle asked, before pulling the visor of his decontamination suit down and securing it.

"Implicitly, Mr. Brask. Nobody who calls the *Enterprise* home would have done something like this. If it was purposely done, I guarantee that it was an outside job."

"What of value did you have in this area of the ship?" the speaker inside the decontamination suit gave the edgy Tellarite's voice an oddly flat, almost bored tone.

Captain Ingram shrugged. She'd asked herself that question much of the way to Starbase Seventeen, and the answer she gave Brask now was the only one she had been able to conjecture: "People."

"And what did those people have of enough value that somebody was willing to try a very delicate temporal maneuver beneath the guns of a Federation Starship to procure?" Gordle turned to the computerized bulkhead retaining-lock and keyed in the code that would cause the inner bulkhead retaining doors in this hall to open into the furthest reaches of the area effected by the blast — and those were quite far from the main blast point, or points. People had been evacuated from the area on the other side of this bulkhead unscathed, both before and after the

bulkhead retaining doors had slammed down.

Again, the captain of the *Enterprise* had already considered this. The response was the same. "Their *lives*, Mr. Brask."

"Which would have been of great value to them, but of relatively little value to anyone else that I can see."

"But obviously, you're missing something," Captain Ingram retorted acidly. To her surprise, the Tellarite nodded.

"And I have no inkling what that *something* might be. Which is one reason why we're here." The emergency bulkhead door slid open, and he passed through it without further comment.

They thought they were being clever.

Thanks for letting me know that you have no compunction about messing with my mind, Shrev thought. Of course, he was their prisoner; they could do what they liked. Though, as their prisoner, it was his duty to attempt escape, which he would certainly try to do —once he figured out where he actually *was*.

He was lying, snug and painlessly, in his own comfortable bed aboard the *Enterprise*. They must have stuck him in a regeneration tank. He hated spending time in those; every minute spent in a regeneration tank took an equivalent amount of time off your life, unless you were Javhalian, in which case it took five times as much off your life. He supposed that they thought he'd wake up and think

it was all just a dream.

Not realizing that his sinuses ought to ache for two Standard weeks after his antennae had healed. His Andorian facial sinuses were the only place in his body where he had thin, brittle human bone, and for a period of time after they'd been injured or infected in any way, the truce between the two sides of his heritage became distinctly uneasy. But they didn't ache, which either meant that whatever they'd done to restore his hand, his foot, and his antennae had taken longer than two weeks, or that they'd had him in some kind of stasis for at least two weeks, while doing something else.

Your cells...were too old.

How had they *gotten* his cells in the first place? Shrev had just turned thirty-two, in Terran years. He measured everything in Terran years, as his uncle's family had learned to do with him as a child. If doctors hadn't encouraged his family to utilize that particular measurement system, they might have spent an inordinate amount of his infancy and early childhood believing that he was mentally disabled. He'd taken his first steps before a precocious Andorian infant would have been quite able to crawl but hadn't begun to formulate his first legible words until sometime after a normal Andorian toddler would have been speaking in full sentences.

Shrev hadn't begun to mesh, developmentally, with his peers until he was almost nine — at which time, unfortunately, his human ability to tolerate ambiguity and

an early capacity to comprehend abstract reasoning rocketed him ahead of them intellectually, turning a mild sense of dislike among some of them into deeply-entrenched loathing.

So, now: Assume that his kidnappers had somehow gotten ahold of his cells when he was an infant. Thirty-two-year-old, cryogenically treated humanoid cells were too old? For *what*? Correctly kept, they should be perfectly viable for ten times that long. The *shen* had said something about oddity in their mitosis, that they were behaving almost like the stem cells of plants. *Reproductive* cellular mitosis? Or...attempting to make non-reproductive cells behave like reproductive ones, perhaps? *Why*?

Of course, the Andorian race was declining. It seemed as though, about two hundred years ago, something that behaved a great deal like a chromosome-altering virus, but wasn't, had gotten into the varied and complex Andorian gene-pool party uninvited. It had snipped general fertility rates into neat quarters and eighths, and severed the length of the Andorian fertile period entirely in half. Where, five hundred years ago, his *shreya*, *charan*, and *zhavey*'s people had regularly produced twins and quads — sometimes as many of those as three or four over a ten-year period — they were now considered quite fertile if they produced two children within the five-year span of their fertile window. When four were required just to *replace* a four-person reproductive group.

None of this showed any indication of reversing itself in the future.

Some Andorians blamed sexually transmitted diseases brought to Andor by other races. That was a straw-man argument, as far as Shrev was concerned, which fed the more conservative faction's love of paranoia, Andorian self-aggrandizement, and bigotry all in one meaty, tasty package. Humans, it had been pointed out more than once, being the friendly creatures that they were, interbred like *preetha* with every vaguely intercourse-capable race that they had ever encountered for more than five minutes, and *they* most certainly weren't experiencing declining population rates.

Of course, humans didn't require quatrain reproduction. Denobulans and tyr-Rigellians did, but they weren't having...

Wait. Back up. *Humans didn't require quatrain reproduction.*

As far as Shrev knew, he didn't, either. He had children — two of them, whom he had been barred from ever seeing after a nasty breakup — with an Andorian bondgroup who'd lost their *thaan* and were desperate for any replacement. But Shrev was a man, like his father, not a *thaan*; sexual relations with Andorians had been, for him, a vaguely frustrating business, and there had been no love lost between them, for all that Shrev had honestly tried to kindle it. It hadn't been the first relationship from which he'd come to understand the Andorian aphorism *nobody*

starts a fire with wet wood.

Humans didn't require quatrain reproduction. The sentence kept repeating in his mind. No, they didn't, and as far as Shrev knew, he didn't. He had no human children that he knew of, but he'd had any number of fleeting romantic interludes with human women.

Andorians required quatrain reproduction. Yet, except for his reproductive system, his kidneys, his mouth, his large intestine, and his inner ear structure — also his body size, but that was fueled by the reproductive system — Shrev *was an Andorian.*

Okay, Shrev's scientific mind announced: *Let's look at this like a mathematical equation.*

Andorians were going extinct, possibly *because* they required quatrain reproduction. Isolate this concept. Now recombine the variables: Shrev was part Andorian. Humans didn't require quatrain reproduction. Shrev was part human. Shrev (probably) didn't require quatrain reproduction.

The answer to this horrible formula sequestered itself into a corner of his brain, and squealed.

Shrev could supply Andorians who didn't require quatrain reproduction.

That brought him bolt upright in the bed.

If true, something like what his kidnappers were considering doing with his genes would entirely change Andorian culture. No, it was worse than that: It wouldn't even *be* Andorian anymore, it would become something

else. Andorian culture would be effectively wiped out. As if the *current* reproductive situation wasn't doing that fast enough.

The ancient Thalassans, who were certainly the forebears of every Andorian race, were already very nearly extinct. The Federation was openly using medical interventions like egg twinning, artificial insemination, instrumental hatchery techniques, and large-scale cryogenic deposition of twinned embryos in attempt to stop that from happening to the Thalassans — or, at least, to preserve the race for the future, when they might be able to stop it from happening.

One almost never saw a Thalassan anymore. They were a fascinating people: Bright powder-blue, they possessed thick exoskeletal, nearly immobile parietal antennae. They were largely androgynous, and sexually equipped like a cross between a wasp, a seahorse, and a Terran platypus — or almost exactly like the half-insectile, half-marsupial Betazoid *grell*. Nevertheless, they were *Andorians*, usually considered by others to be the first Andorians, and deferred to as such. Six centuries ago, they outnumbered the other races. That long ago, the worst reproductive problem *Fesoan* and her colonies had faced was *overpopulation*, and overpopulation was what had spurred Andorians to take to space, originally.

Thalassan religion, culture, and mating habits were, of necessity, utterly different from those of the chatty Bish'ee, the dour Theskians, the retiring Talish, or the peace-loving

Aenar — who were also heading toward the sheer precipice of extinction as a race. Of all of Andoria's indigenous peoples, the Aenar's prime method of fighting that eventuality was the most similar to that espoused by the extremist political splinter group known as *Aatuu'hari*: They interbred now with non-Aenar, and preferentially with non-Andorians, as often as they could, maintaining themselves through sheer hybrid vigor.

What would happen to the Thalassans under such a scheme? For certainly, Shrev had none of their blood in himself. Would some faction like the *Aatuu'hari* (he was relatively certain that was who had kidnapped him, or anyway, that was what the movement in the Andorian government that advocated the scheme called itself) strive to preserve the Thalassans? Or would they simply wipe out the distinct cultures that made up the exquisitely complex clans, moieties, hives, cities, and colonies that the Federation called *Andorian*, and replace them with (Shrev shuddered) *him*?

Aatuu'hari. It was a derogatory term given to a certain progressive political party with embarrassing ties to the terrorist Ucalnathi clan, who harbored the outlawed — and, as far as most people Shrev knew were concerned, insane — Yan *Kava* religious sect. The name was taken partly from the way Andorians made bread, and it meant *strange brew* — or, using a slightly different translation, *perilous bread*.

Who knew they were up to something like *this*?

Should they gain a terrible ascendancy, the *Aatuu'hari* would certainly never consent to remain members of the Federation, which didn't look kindly upon either cloning or genocide.

Shrev let himself fall back against his pillows. *If I had known about this, I'd have done what I threatened when I was fifteen — had my antennae surgically removed, my melanin modified, and disappeared myself into some backwater human colony. Jeshrie would have helped me, if I'd begged. Does he know about this? Oh, gods, is he behind this? His cha'chi was a member of Am Tal.* Shrev had known that since he was four years old.

The hybrid man rolled his head on his pillow in negation. He couldn't let himself start thinking things like that, even if they might be true. To allow himself to believe that his *shreya*'s own brother had welcomed him into his family solely for the purpose of ultimately sacrificing him to some sort of *Aatuu'hari* people-making scheme... no, that way lay madness. Paranoia.

Next paranoid thought: *Aatuu'hari* desires had actually come into play about two hundred years ago, and it was this group, or its forebears, that had introduced whatever it was into the Andorian population that was currently decimating their racial and genetic variability, and obliterating the Thalassans and the Aenar.

Shrev preferred to regard his paranoid thoughts as *creative ideas*. Andorians, literally unable to endure ambivalence, and psychologically incapable of entertaining

conflicting emotions simultaneously, were prone to paranoia and depression, which was what tended to occur when they were forced into situations that caused contradictory feelings. It was their greatest weakness, and it was a tendency that caused them to appear humorless or — depending upon who was doing the assessment — insufferably haughty to other races. Upon learning of it, enemies throughout all of Andor's spacefaring history had used it against them, sometimes to devastating effect. When, occasionally, an Andorian was born who *could* tolerate contradiction, they often rose to become great leaders.

Shrev's part-human brain had no trouble entertaining conflicting theories simultaneously, and ambivalence, though annoying, was just another emotion. While refusing to host the thought that the only family he'd ever had as a child might have somehow betrayed him — because that would weaken him and play into the *Aatuu'hari*'s hands, even if it was true — he wrapped the second paranoid thought, the betrayal of all Andorian races by the *Aatuu'hari*'s misplaced desire to emulate the vast majority of other humanoid races in the Federation, into a tight bundle in his mind.

Even if it *wasn't* true, it might make a devastating cudgel, at some indeterminate point in time. *Iixa'mehtraizh'aa*. Of course, he'd need some sort of hilt — some good, hard evidence — to tie it onto, so that it would have enough impact when the time came to swing it

at the heads of the people in control of whatever faction this was that had put him into this situation.

Only old age will touch him here.

They had no intention of ever letting him go. Even if they got everything they wanted and needed from him — and he held no illusions about what that was — they couldn't let him go without first wiping his mind, so why let him go at all?

Also, if he remembered correctly, his kidnappers had set charges aboard the *Enterprise*.

Oh, all-overarching goddess, he prayed. Please, please don't let them have destroyed the Enterprise! Oh, please; I'll give my own life in return for that — I'll stay as their pawn forever, just please don't let them have...

Tears coursed down his face and into his ears unpleasantly as the pseudo-*Enterprise* quarters lightened around him, signifying the beginning of a new day, and what might very well be the rest of his life in captivity. He let his emotions run their course, then rose — he was dressed in some sort of white jumpsuit reminiscent of long underwear, and absolutely nothing else — to explore his surroundings.

Chapter Five

Starfleet had learned, in its hundred- fifty some -odd years of existence, that having to give multiple funerals could break an officer's mind. Nonetheless, Captain Ingram had spent most of the trip to Starbase Seventeen reviewing the records of the people killed by the explosion of the ship — while sleeping or in the throes of passion, she hoped, making their last memories either painless or sweet.

Five separate individuals currently working aboard the *Enterprise* had lost a spouse in what Starfleet still insisted on calling *the mishap*, though if what the *Cairo* and Temporal Investigations was methodically uncovering bore fruit, Captain Ingram was sure that *mishap* would ultimately be reworded into *incident*.

It was the purpose behind the incident that currently stymied the Renee Ingram.

Two other *Enterprise* crew had lost a betrothed, one had lost a cousin, and one had lost a half-brother. Everyone aboard had lost one or more friends. The blast had hit the entire — single *and* married — free yeoman portion of housing on deck seven, and most of the cadet portion on deck eight. Every single individual lost had been less than thirty-five years of age. Most had been younger than twenty-five — children, really.

If Colin hadn't shared her quarters, in which he had

nevertheless been badly injured, he would have been caught in the blowout, too. Ingram kept that horrid thought in mind as she looked over the records of the people killed. Because somewhere, sometime, someone had cared for each and every one of them just as much as she cared for Colin. Every one of them had once been someone's adored infant, someone's pride and joy, someone's future.

By the time they had reached Starbase Seventeen, Captain Ingram had contacted the governments and families of the dead. Sixteen of the individuals killed had been from Earth, and another fifteen had been from Terran colonies, including her own home planet of Nisus: No fewer than ten of the individuals killed had possessed hybrid heritage and multi-planetary citizenship, turning Ingram's red-tape pile into a thing of fear and awe.

Some races adored patterning their governments into Byzantine mazes of ritual bureaucracy: Vulcans and humans were glaring examples of this. Others — the government of Napea, for instance — detested bureaucracy's stultifying influence. By the time Ingram had finished the first four interplanetary death-in-the-line-of-duty reports, she'd managed to determine which of the governments she'd be dealing with preferred which structure and had begun to request the support of the detesters in order to help her deal more smoothly with the bureaucrats.

Of the others killed in the blast, four had been from Betazed, two from Denobula, one from Matari, two from

Acamar, two from Rigel, one from Algolia, eight from Vulcan or her colonies, one from Andoria, and one from Guelph. What Captain Ingram was convinced had been a slaughter engineered to cover up some variety of criminal activity had ultimately taken the lives of twenty-eight cadets, two Exobiologists, seven Stellar Cartographers, four Exoanthropologists, a Quantum Chemist, three Xenolinguists, an Astrobiologist, a Relativistic Mathematician, three Astrophysicists, two Exobotanists, two Ambassadors-in-Training, a Systems Engineer, two nurses, a Second Shift Communications Officer, an Engineering Ensign, a Fourth Shift Tactical Chief, a Third Shift Science Officer — who should have been on the Bridge, but wasn't — and Kylie Morrison, who had recently been promoted to transporter chief.

Sixty people. Roughly half that number had been blown apart in what must have been less than half a second; the other approximate half had died from concussive injury or space-vacuum exposure in what would have been less than two seconds. Some as-yet-indeterminate number of them were now molecular clouds in space, while the remainder had been ripped, torn, and smashed apart. According to Gordle, the remains of several people were still present in the off-limits areas of the *Enterprise*. The Tellarite Temporal Assessor had set about to patiently and methodically identify all remains aboard the *Enterprise* down to their molecular structures. Captain Ingram didn't envy Gordle Brask his job.

Nor did she, at the moment, particularly envy herself *her* job. She was holding the memorial service on Starbase Seventeen itself; they had the large audience hall necessary to hold the other five hundred and fifty-seven individuals from the ship, as well as the families of the deceased, whom Captain Ingram had contacted as soon as she possibly could so that they might have the ability to attend the service.

She'd had the lecture hall walls transformed into holographic projectors, so that both still and active images of the deceased would surround their loved ones in a shifting collage format. The captain of the *Enterprise* had also informed the *Cairo* that all macroscopic spaceborne remains not strictly necessary for use in defining the exact nature of *the mishap* be either cryogenically sealed and returned to the families in attendance, or otherwise handled as the families or planets of origin in question wished. She'd made the same desire plain to the Temporal Investigations team currently going over the *Enterprise* with their quantum lice-combs.

Ingram took the podium and fixed her gaze on Colin, one of the last individuals to enter the packed hall. He smiled encouragement at her. The soft brush of the powerful red-haired telepath's mind against hers was the sweetest thing she'd ever known. She must make time to be alone with him, and soon. Then she looked out over the audience hall and the multiple-thousand people who had gathered there. Every last portion of the space not required

for seating or walkways brimmed with complex altars holding the mourning-rite paraphernalia of a hundred or more different cultures: Flowers, food, ritual weaponry, jewelry, incense, spirit-dolls, carved stones, eternal flames, feather fans, ancestral masks, poetry scrolls, locks of shorn hair, offering bowls, and artworks composed of everything from sand to petals to intricately folded paper.

Ingram's officers sat in serried rows behind her. Outside the hall, security-heavy scanner baffles had been set up, through which anyone who wanted to attend the memorial had to pass. What had happened on the *Enterprise* would not also happen in this hall, if Renee Ingram had anything to say about it.

"It's fitting," the captain of the *Enterprise* began, once all sounds except breathing and the soft noises of grief had stilled, "that we honor those we've lost with beautiful things. For truly, they were beautiful people. Many of them had been awarded commendations in the service of Starfleet and the Federation, and all of them were loving, friendly, full of life and the joy of discovery. Many of the individuals gathered here today believe that they still are. We should cling to that comfort, and make this service a celebration of beautiful life, in the here and the hereafter."

Ingram entertained no illusions of soul or afterlife herself, but she fully understood the ultimate purpose of the religious urge, there to provide hope and comfort when every last physical visage of hope and comfort were torn away. The humanoid mind could all too easily lose itself in

madness, otherwise. She cleared her throat softly, and continued:

"When I was a little girl, my adoptive father would say to me: *Every life is like a different world, and every one of those filled with surprises and contradictions, love and light and laughter, treasures and tears and tragedies, inhabited by princes and princesses, kings and queens, rogues and jesters and dairymaids enough to fill you to overflowing forever with wonder.*

"I can't tell you exactly who the dairymaid might have been, but I *can* tell you with absolute certainty that your loved ones were all people of high moral and physical courage, unprecedented intelligence, tender compassion, and breathtaking grace. And I want to assure you that, if this accident was in fact *not* an accident at all, the individuals responsible will be held accountable to every Federation and Starfleet law that exists, or which I have the authority to devise."

The captain of the *Enterprise* waited until the low murmur of conversation spurred by that comment had quieted before going on. "They say that funerals are held to comfort those left behind. I wouldn't want to make light of the depth of your grief, your despair and loss, but I would have you be comforted in the memory of everything that your lost loves have given you. All of us carry some part of them still, in the things they shared with us, the things they taught us, the love and friendship they freely offered, and, for some of us, the genes they gave us or left

behind mingled with our own, to comfort us in bonds of blood."

Captain Ingram stopped and swallowed. Only if she dredged into the depths of her own loves and sorrows, triumphs and secrets and losses, did she deserve to stand in front of these people and attempt to offer them anything. She held neither a compadd nor a sheaf of flimsies in front of her in order to deliver this eulogy. She never used such things; in her — and Starfleet's — estimation, a more-than-adequate Starfleet officer didn't require props or prompts.

"All of us carry, too, the weight of what we've lost. Of memories never shared, words left unspoken, secrets never revealed, possibilities that now can't find root in fallow ground. Still, I say that all is not lost. What *has* been shared and given will grow if we allow it to; the memories of beauty and love left with us *can* lift us all, impel us gently to become greater than the sum of our currently grieving parts, and all in the names and memories of our lost loves.

"A wise man once said..." Renee paused once more. She had looked hard for this, had used the computer to pore over captain's logs and associated documents until she'd found the exact sentiment she was looking for. After ten nonstop hours listening to computer playback of a certain voice, she could now hear an underlying timbre and cadence in the audio-boosted sound of her own voice that the court jester in her mind kept trying to tell her wasn't really there at all:

"*I don't want my pain taken away: I need my pain!*"

He said this because he realized that from pain comes compassion for others, and for the self. He said it, too, because pain can spur personal growth that might not occur otherwise — the way that rosebushes must be trimmed to bring out their finest qualities."

Captain Ingram hadn't originally planned to state the sentiment in exactly that way, but her CMO had requested the right to sing a requiem, and had suggested the idea. Ingram hadn't a clue what song T'Dani had chosen as a requiem, but she was more than happy to allow her best friend to perform it. The half-Vulcan doctor had been seeing patients for the last week and, as far as Renee had been able to determine, very little else.

The captain of the *Enterprise* bowed to the mourners and vacated the podium to T'Dani Corrigan as the antiquated music her CMO had requested as an accompaniment filled the hall. Ingram took the chair that T'Dani had vacated, and bowed her head as Corrigan's incredible voice soared and swooped about the vaulted ceiling like a swallow. The *Enterprise's* chief medical officer was giving voice to her own pain: Every word of the song Corrigan had chosen was as precisely targeted to the doctor's own personal demons as a laser scalpel.

Ingram had managed to wheedle her best friend into eating one meal during the busy, bereaved trip to Starbase Seventeen — a mug of strong tea and a dried-cherry scone, much of which had ended up as a mound of crumbs on the

doctor's plate. Vulcans could go a frighteningly long time without either eating or sleeping, but T'Dani was half-human, and the wear showed. Renee had long suspected that her best friend's feelings for the mixed-heritage Exobiologist who'd died in the explosion ran far deeper than she was willing to admit to herself. And now, the captain of the *Enterprise* knew, T'Dani was being forced to dredge that depth.

"He shouldn't have been there. It was his birthday, and I was going to invite...I had just told him about the surprise..." the doctor's throat had stopped up, and she cleared it viciously, following that with a long swallow of steaming tea.

When she'd set the cup down, a tear had rolled from her left eye, followed in quick succession by three more, landing on the soft mass of crumbs she was shredding off of her pastry. "He was...he seemed upset by what I'd done. I should have *apologized*, not just stormed out. He shouldn't have *been there!*" the last two words had emerged as a wail, and the CMO had buried her head in her hands.

Now T'Dani's voice broke on the last line of the hymn: "*...when the night has been too lonely and the road has been too long, and you think that love is only for the lucky and the strong, just remember; in the winter, far beneath the bitter snows, lies a seed that, with the sun's love, in the spring becomes the rose.*"

Captain Ingram sighed and stood as the first of the individuals slated to give a eulogy after her emerged from

the audience and took the podium. This would be a four-hour-long memorial, and she'd cleared her usual itinerary in order to be here for all of it, but her otherwise-silenced communicator had just buzzed insistently and handed her a text-message.

Temporal had come to some sort of conclusion, and she was being summoned.

Chapter Six

This fake starship cabin had no entry or exit doorway. However, behind what, in his actual starship cabin, was a series of microscopically interwoven painted canvases leading into the kitchen, but which was a drape here, was a sliding-glass door. It was not locked.

Outside the ostensible starship cabin was no starship hallway.

Shrev found himself on the tiny balcony of what appeared to be the topmost floor of a five-story luxury hotel in the tropics — Risa, perhaps, or Hawaii. The entire scene was flooded with warmth and light, but the sky was an odd flat gray, with no actual sun in evidence. He could hear the muted purrs and coos and whistles of what might, or might not, be native animals in the flimsy tropical foliage that surrounded the building for miles around, but no actual animals were visible.

What, no pool? he thought snidely.

Shrev bent over the balcony, looking down and around. None of the balconies were in alignment with the others, no significant hardy foliage was nearby, the architecture of the balconies and the walls themselves was slick, flat, and rounded, and the pale-mauve outer wall sloped inward as it descended.

He was an excellent judge of distance; the nearest fourth-story balcony was roughly ten feet down, and ten

feet diagonally to his left. The angle of the wall and the diagonal distance made it appear significantly further away than it actually was, but twenty feet was twenty feet. Of course, he'd have to add roughly six more to that, since he'd have to balance on the furthest outer edge of this one and jump inward rather than hanging off the balcony's bottom edge and swinging directly down. Call it twenty-six and a half feet: A bit on the extreme side. It might cause greenstick fracturing in his bare feet, or even sprained ankles, which would probably end the foray right there, but conceivably doable.

The hybrid man was grateful that he hadn't been burdened with the inborn fear of heights humans possessed. It was one thing, aside from a lack of human male-pattern facial hair, that he was glad he hadn't inherited from his father. Andoria's outdoor environment had an innumerable number of extremely slick vertical and diagonal surfaces, which was one reason the Andorian people had evolved sense organs that gave a person an extremely fine sense of balance.

Most, though by no means all, of Shrev's congenital and learned proclivities were Andorian, and he used to do things not terribly unlike what he was considering doing now as a form of play as a child — though certainly not to such distances as he was now facing, or from such ultimate heights in such an extreme state of undress. Instinct-wise, Andorians were born afraid of nothing. Such a reaction in the people of Shrev's maternal and epigenetic lines could

only come through experience. His particular mixed heritage, however, had graced him with not just one, but two pair of discrete balancing organs. He'd never met anyone with physical equilibrium superior to his own, and there was no doubt in his mind that he would be able to jump from this balcony and land in the center of the lower one. His only real concern was that something unfriendly might reside within the room behind the balcony.

You've just been partially dismembered and kidnapped, and you're worried now that something might be unfriendly? he asked himself, acerbically.

Shrev's sense of humor, intuition, and proportion were entirely human. People had learned quickly not to tease him about this — or about much of anything else — upon learning that the end-product of these human traits was to make him both more bold and more dogged, as well as significantly less responsive to perceived authority, than a non-hybrid Andorian. Shrev was also bigger, stronger, and possessed significantly more stamina than a non-hybrid Andorian, meaning that the corollary to taunting him could be grave. Fortunately, he'd only had to prove that once. Or twice. Which was the great advantage of being a social animal.

Shrev smiled wryly and hopped up onto the railing of his balcony. It really *was* slick, too: He wouldn't have been able to do this with footwear on. Whoever had engineered these balconies had failed to include any sort of awning over them, perhaps assuming (incorrectly) that fewer

abutments would make the balconies less easy to access. Whoever had designed them probably *did* have a healthy fear of slick heights and subtly rounded, diagonally plummeting vertical surfaces. Which told him absolutely nothing: Aside from humans, he wasn't sure which races possessed a fear of heights, but he imagined that the number who did was probably fairly substantial.

He jumped.

The landing was painful to the naked soles of his feet, which was pretty much as he'd expected, but otherwise uneventful. Until he looked through the sliding glass doorway that separated the balcony from the room behind it.

It was a classroom.

There were eight children in it. They appeared to range in age from about six to about eleven. The room was octagonal in design, brightly decorated with information and maps and charts. Four adults and multiple interactive computer terminals completed the tally of what he could see from the balcony. Every head in the classroom had turned toward the significant noise that two hundred and fifty pounds of Shrev had made upon landing on the balcony.

The next thing he noticed was what he'd most wanted to find; a door leading (he hoped) out of the opposite side of the complex. He really didn't care to perform the gymnastic feat he'd just accomplished five more times if he didn't absolutely have to, not without some sort of solid

protective footwear. He reached out and tugged on the handle set into the transparent sliding door, and it opened obligingly.

Everyone in the room regarded him with a combination of fascination and interest, this from the children, or with distrust and trepidation, this from the adults. It was the adults who next struck Shrev as a potentially extremely important item:

They were all Andorian *zhen*. The children, by contrast, all seemed to be *shen* and *thaan* although, upon closer inspection, their body conformation wasn't exactly what one might expect from juvenile *shen* and *thaan*. The ability to differentiate between the four sexes — and one non-sex — of Andorian people was largely inborn, and even then, it took considerable attention to subtle clues that Shrev couldn't have enunciated if someone had held a disruptor to his head. It would be like trying to describe the flavor of salt without using the word *salty* — or, as it apparently tasted to non-hybrid Andorians, *spicy*, which Shrev couldn't even begin to comprehend.

No. These were not Andorian *shen* and *thaan* children. These were boys and girls. They were like *him*.

Shrev gaped at the children with roughly the same attitude of dismay with which the *zhen* were goggling at him. He didn't find it one whit comforting to discover that this aspect of the theory he'd cooked up the night before was accurate: He found it appalling.

Somebody please tell me they haven't kept me in stasis

for twelve damn years!

He didn't *feel* over forty years old, but what, exactly, would that feel like, anyway? The thought segued him, for roughly a tenth of a second, into a memory. He had just turned a very lonely twenty-one, and someone he was serving with on an Andorian Conjunction Ship had asked him, inanely and in all seriousness, what it *felt* like to be half human and half Andorian.

Shrev had patted himself in various not-too-personal areas, handed his Theskian interlocutor what he hoped would be perceived as a ridiculous and hence off-putting grin, and replied: *Not half bad.*

Now he wrenched his sharp gaze away from the children, who had begun to snigger and fidget uncomfortably beneath the concentrated attention of what was, obviously, a crazy person, and pinned the nearest *zhen* to the floor with it instead.

"What's going on here? What is this place?" he hissed. She shook her head, but didn't otherwise move. Neither did any of the other *zhen*. He scowled and repeated the questions in *graalen*.

This had the unexpected, and hence off-putting, effect of bringing tears to the *zhen's* eyes. She crooked a finger at him, summoning him closer. He moved with extreme care on feet that still smarted from his landing on the balcony outside. When she judged that he had approached closely enough to see what she wanted to show him, she opened her mouth.

She had no tongue. It had been brutally detached; stubs of flesh were attempting to grow around the vicious keloid remnant, which had almost certainly been caused by the partial cooking of the tissues at the bottom of her mouth. Whatever the people who had done this to her had used to seal the stump of her tongue, it was not allowing her natural Andorian regenerative factors to restore the organ.

Shrev recoiled in horror, and she closed her mouth. The tears that had gathered in her eyes at the sound of her native language now ran down her face. The children watched this spectacle in uncomprehending fascination.

Shrev turned and, ignoring his protesting plantar fascia, sprinted out the opposite door.

Chapter Seven

Martha Aguilar was one of those people who didn't waste time on *hello* when someone she had questions or information for walked into a room: "The area at the approximate center of this explosion was interesting. The temporal shifts center there, too, and I don't think that's coincidence," she announced animatedly, the minute Captain Ingram entered and took a seat at the otherwise-vacant situation-room table.

Ingram nodded thoughtfully. She followed Martha's lead and forwent pleasantries, but she did spend a moment examining the shadowed stranger who stood, still and intent, in one corner of the night-dimmed staffroom, his arms crossed across his chest, half-leaning against the bulkhead. Ingram had thought, upon first walking into the room, that he must be another operative sent from Temporal to help unravel the mystery that had killed ten percent of her crew. Neither he nor Martha had thus far said anything to disabuse her of that notion.

However, she was also struck by a peculiar impression which told her that this was the sort of man who spent a lot of time in dark corners. Trying not to be excessively intrigued, Ingram turned her attention back to Aguilar. "Captain Storn said he didn't think any of it was coincidence, either. Before you start, let me throw out the theory I've formulated from what he's told me: All of this

hinges on a certain dual-heritage *Enterprise* yeoman?"

Aguilar offered the captain of the *Enterprise* a grim smile. "Who knew there was such a thing? So, here we have the center of the blast, and strangely, the room the blast is centered in is less disturbed than the ones around it. Due to temporal shifting, it turns out.

"The ostensible Bolian freighter involved in the blast was off your starboard bow for a good three hours; there's no way you could have missed it, unless it was cloaked. In any case, both the room the blast was centered in and the tissue samples of the person these quarters belonged to all show Bolian transporter traces.

"So, we have a call out for Bolian freighters that have missed their scheduled docking agendas, so that we can determine what this particular freighter's warp signature probably is."

"Was the temporal shifting purposely done, or is it merely a relic of what the explosion did to the *Enterprise*'s gravimetrics? Because if could have been purposely done at the beginning of this escapade, rendering the transport invisible to sensors, it could just as well have been purposely done at the end of it, meaning that nobody's freighter necessarily missed anybody's docking schedule."

Aguilar's face crumpled into a look of extreme agitation. Apparently, the Temporal Mechanics group hadn't thought of that. Or of the fact that there were such things as hybrid people — something as evident and unexceptional to the captain of the *Enterprise* as the chair

she was sitting in. Captain Ingram made a wry face and shook her head, reminding herself that not everybody came from Nisus.

The quiet shadow in the corner shifted slightly, and Captain Ingram spared the fellow a half-second's glance. "Did you find anything *specific* in the room?" Ingram quizzed Aguilar.

"Did we! We found so much it's taken us this long to sort it all out. How much do you know about Andorian genetics, Captain?"

Captain Ingram shrugged. "Whatever it is you're about to tell me will be the sum total, I'm afraid, Ms. Aguilar."

"Martha, please. Okay, so Andorian genetics are quatrain — big surprise, right? A *zhen* is AAAA. A *shen* is AAAG. A *chan* is AAGG. A *thaan* is AGGG. That's the quick and dirty — don't even get me *started* on Andorian organelle DNA, that's just *way* too much like the War of the Roses for comfort —"

"You're saying you found Andorian DNA in a hybrid Andorian's quarters, and that this signifies something?"

"Sorry; obviously, I'm not explaining this very well. Let me back up. We found an incredible muddle of cobalt-based blood in..." she looked down at the compadd in front of her, wrinkling her nose. "Where do they come up with these names? I'm assuming you probably called this person *Shrev* on a day-to-day basis?"

Captain Ingram nodded and motioned for the woman

to continue.

"Okay, so Shrev's quarters are a bloody mess; a drop here, a drip there, a huge glistening mat over yonder, some sprayed on the walls that are still standing. Gordle took no less than a hundred samples of this blood, and we ran them for everything we could imagine.

"We find AAGG in two spots that flags as two distinct individuals. No way to tell if they're wounded or dead — it looks to us like wounded, because there's not a lot of it. So, we round up more of this blood, because there are chemical markers that can flag the stress of death versus that of injury."

Captain Ingram felt her eyebrows rise sharply, the disbelief she felt at that comment obvious on her face. "You're kidding?"

Martha shook her head. "As far as I know, only Section 31's got the instrumentation to do this, currently. I have to tell you not to let this information out; somebody thinks it could somehow compromise our investigative ability, you see."

Captain Ingram had to consciously restrain herself from staring back at the individual in the corner, who stood watching and listening with the attitude of a golden eagle over a deer carcass. So *that's* where this was heading. "Understood. A cottage industry in the brewing of stress hormones to cover trails with."

"Exactly! So, these two *chan* are quite dead. We get back more information on the gouts and clots on the walls

and nearer the center of the room, and there we have AGGG — a *thaan*, also extremely dead — and something we at first think is an equipment malfunction, right? GAXY. So, we rerun the stuff. GAXY again, on multiple instruments. So, next we put all of these samples, including what we still figure must be a post-contaminated sample, into our Federated and Wanted Personnel databases.

"Nothing on the Andorians. *In anyone's database*. Understand, Captain: When a child is born in the Federation — and, as often as practicably possible, outside the Federation, too — its DNA goes into a database. *These* guys? They don't exist. And we're already dealing with a temporal shift. People from the past? People from the future? We're mulling this over when up pops a picture. Is this your Yeoman?" she turned her compadd so that Captain Ingram could see the screen. An uncharacteristically somber likeness of Vraeth'uutr'Shrev Th'raess'Aen's visage peered back at her.

"It is, indeed, Martha. You're telling me he was slaughtered before the room was blown out?"

"Oh, no, Captain. I'm telling you he was taken *alive*. Apparently, he's what they came for. Temporal's going to finish with the *Enterprise*, but the rest of this is too big for our britches." She motioned at the quiet man who hadn't stirred from the corner. "I'd like to introduce Shawn Kell, Inspector General of Section 31."

Ingram's heart rate sped up at the word *alive*; it was

very much what she'd wanted to hear. It didn't slow down as she considered the rest of Aguilar's comment. Inspector general? *Those are some damned big guns*, she reflected: As far as she was aware, that was the highest rank possessed by Section 31 operatives. And that name...where had she heard that name before? It sent skitters of horror up her spine, but she couldn't quite place it.

She made a mental note to wonder, later, why the person who was probably the head of Section 31 had determined to take on this case himself, and why the thought of him should fill her with such disquiet. She stood in order to properly welcome the individual who glided out of the shadowed corner...

And was nearly overwhelmed with the desire to draw her phaser. Of course, she wasn't carrying one: Nevertheless, her right hand was rubbing against her right hip nervously before she remembered that. At the same time, she backed away. Only Colin's calming influence suddenly flooding her psyche kept her from backing right out the situation-room door:

This isn't the man who attacked you on Minara Prime in the Mirror Universe, Riana.

Wrapping her arms around herself to control the quivering aftereffects of large amounts of adrenaline pumping itself into her system, Renee Ingram forced herself, for perhaps the thousandth time in her life, to trust and believe the man she loved, no matter how unlikely a picture he painted for her. Scrutinizing the individual

before her as unemotionally as she could manage, she realized that her telepathic yeoman was right:

She was confronted by a fine-boned man perhaps ten years older than herself, possessed of a visage that might disappear into any background anywhere at any time without anyone being any the wiser: Weathered, wary features that sported more than one mark of probable past injury accompanied a graying and receding hairline. The fellow had none of the extreme tattoos that had marred the face of the violent madman who had bred and built Colin to be a weapon of mass destruction: The only similarity between this man and his horrible Doppelganger was a pair of dark eyes sharp enough to etch transparent aluminum.

Kell was clad in a simple black button-down shirt over black Starfleet pants and boots. Giving in to the overwhelming need for total reassurance (she would *not allow* a monster such as the one she'd once encountered in the grim Universe from which she'd rescued Colin aboard her ship), she strode up to him and, without hesitation, grasped one side of his shirt in each hand, and ripped with all her strength, ignoring Aguilar's sound of protest.

The man whom she confronted so rudely did not move. A pattern of nothing more than soft, dark hair curled up his muscular belly and chest. No vivid scarifications laced his body.

"Good day, Captain Ingram. What did you expect? That I'm someone else? Sorry to disappoint you." Kell's voice was a vibrant, amused, innuendo-laden smoky tenor,

of the sort usually associated with hypnotists and stage magicians: His voice was the same as his Doppelganger's, drenching her with dread and starting a variety of unsettling portents stirring. Ingram stuffed them aside as though they were a mismatched assortment of dirty socks. "Nice that you're conscious. You weren't last time," he added.

Ingram felt her face flame: Belatedly, she remembered that number of her crew had dealt with this man before. She, herself, had been suffering Husnock-imposed brain injury at the time, and had absolutely no recollection of him. And Colin had worked with him before, as well; Section 31 evinced a great deal of interest in Colin's unusual telekinetic abilities.

Again, the captain of the *Enterprise* had to master the desire to run away. *Section 31*? Not good. Very much not good. And the person standing in front of her gave off vibrations that were about as psychically comfortable as a front seat on a porcupine.

The inspector general of Section 31 and Captain Ingram considered one another silently for a long, motionless minute. The tension that rose in the air between them was odd, almost erotic. Martha Aguilar shifted in her chair and busied herself with her compadd. Kell broke the tension, turning to lift a long ecru-colored jacket from one of the room's chairs, put it on, and fasten it up.

Ingram took that opportunity to force her rubbery legs to deposit her back into her seat.

Making a command decision to overlook her own admittedly outrageous behavior, the captain of the *Enterprise* narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms, letting her head fall back so that she could consider this stranger from the ostensibly non-existent, covert subdivision of Starfleet down the bridge of her nose. Kell replied with a dissonant, throaty chuckle that not even the deaf might mistake for amusement.

"What does Section 31 know about the abduction of my crewman and the murder of ten percent of my crew?" Ingram snapped.

Kell blinked. Suddenly, Renee Ingram found herself scrutinizing an evocatively altered face, as though Shawn Kell had somehow suddenly shed a decade like an outgrown skin. "Hard to say, really."

Captain Ingram shook her head and grimaced wryly. "Until we find the thing you think you're looking for, you mean. So let me rephrase: *What* is it that you're looking for?"

The inspector general smiled mordantly. This expression caused his countenance to transform into something that neatly filled in the slender personality wedge that lay between *kindly schoolmaster* and *cynical contract killer*, yet hid behind its mask something that was both more complex and compelling than either of those. "Some very naughty Andorians."

Ingram briefly considered asking Kell if he was, perhaps, suffering from some sort of unfortunate mental

derangement that caused him to be incapable of enunciating sentences longer than four words. The captain of the *Enterprise* discarded the idea with a scowl: "If my crewman's still alive, I'd like very much to help you find him. It's going to be difficult for me to do that, however, if all you're willing to provide is statements of the glaringly obvious."

"You want to help?" when the hollow smile fled his face like some small, scared animal, Kell contrived to look both older and less imposing than he had when she'd first seen him in the corner. Captain Ingram imagined that differentiating between still photos and moving holograms of this man, without mistaking him for someone else entirely, would be exceptionally difficult. That was what must be behind the continuing feelings of familiarity and uneasiness that he instilled in her: The inspector general was a sort of human chameleon, a trait that Ingram imagined must come in handy for a covert operative. She'd have to be certain never to make the mistake of assuming that Shawn Kell was ever what he appeared to be.

He strode over to Martha — the man moved like a panther — to gently but firmly pluck the 'padd out of her hands. Aguilar seemed surprised when it happened, as though the instrument had vanished somehow into midair. Kell worked the face of the compadd for a moment, then turned it toward Captain Ingram again, exhibiting the same Starfleet photo of Shrev as Martha had shown her moments

before. "Tell me about *him*."

There must be something, Ingram mused, psychologically persuasive or commanding or...*some* damn thing of which she wasn't aware about terse, tetchy sentences. Frankly, she found it irritating. The captain of the *Enterprise* shrugged at the laconic inspector general of Section 31. "He's a part-human, part-Andorian Exobiologist." To her horror, she found herself nearly spitting out the sentence: *Actually, if you really want to know more about him, you need to ask our CMO.*

No. Absolutely not. She was not going to subject her grieving best friend to this little basket-trained pit-viper, with his compelling eyes and bewitching voice and exasperating verbiage. The memories of another man with his face were still too harrowing.

"What about his family?"

Them, either, if she could help it. Also, she needed their help too badly. Captain Ingram felt the time was ripe; she laughed.

Ingram could tell that Kell didn't mistake the sarcasm implicit in the sound she made for humor. Nonetheless, he barked: "You find this *funny*?"

"I find the stage-magician-hypnotism act funny. Seriously, sir, I'm not a suspect in some sort of—"'

"Oh, but you are," his voice softened, something Captain Ingram wouldn't have believed possible. "*Everyone is a suspect.*"

She considered this momentarily, swallowing against

the dryness that the sound of his voice bequeathed to her throat. "What you're saying is that you think someone aboard sold Shrev out to some renegade group that you're only marginally certain exists?"

Pure conjecture — what her adoptive mother used to call *summoning the fairies* when Renee would engage in it as a youngster. Something stirred behind the velveteen ice of Kell's eyes. Ingram thought it might have been respect, but that, too, might simply have been a call for invisible imaginary winged reinforcements. "And I'm assuming you want my help, Mr. Kell, or why make me privy to all of this? Unless, of course, *this* is the information you feel is least important. Or a false trail. Would you be willing, at least, to tell me which of those it is?"

The inspector general turned his head, looking away from Captain Ingram at the three-dimensional array of six *Enterprises*, from the aircraft carrier to the starship's most recent iteration, which adorned the situation-room. All of the models except the iteration *beta* were exhibited with full interior schematics laid open beneath representations of their outer hulls. The display took up space both above and below the expansive window-screens on the room's starboard side. Those currently looked out at the Starship *Saratoga*, which had brought the crew from Temporal Investigations on Terra to Starbase Seventeen.

Shawn Kell smiled at nothing in particular. At first Captain Ingram thought he was dismissing her, and she felt the fine hairs on the back of her neck rise as she bridled.

Then he refocused on her, and she realized that whatever he was smiling about, it wasn't in the room with them. Ingram's sense of umbrage abated somewhat, but the hairs along her spine refused to lie back down. Captain Ingram held both her body and her face taut and still: She did not appreciate the bitter swill of emotions this individual stirred up in her.

"Ms. Aguilar, please leave," the inspector general said. The data analyst from Starfleet's Temporal Investigations unit flushed visibly, but did as Shawn Kell ordered. As Ingram watched the other woman depart, she wondered if the inspector general imagined that the captain of the *Enterprise* would be equivalently acquiescent. If so, the man was in for a series of revelations that might, Captain Ingram mused, be nearly as unpleasant to him as the series of revelations she suspected she'd soon be in for, herself.

When the door shut behind Aguilar, Kell ordered the computer to lock it. To Captain Ingram's intense discomfiture, the *Enterprise*'s computer complied to the whims of this stranger. "I can't say which," he replied to her question finally, scowling: "I'm not currently certain. That's why I've come to *request* your help, Captain Ingram." He gestured with the compadd he held, then set it gently back on the desk. "The explosion that killed a tenth of your crew was centered in Shrev's quarters. It was a very specific sort of explosion, fueled by a molecular neutronic device equipped with temporal-phase detonators. I recognize the radiolytic isotopes this device left behind,

and my ship's equipped to track down those who attacked your vessel. Interested?"

As if I could say no, Captain Ingram reflected, both alarmed and intrigued by the sudden flurry of data the inspector general of Section 31 had handed her.

"Obviously I'm interested, Kell," she replied through clenched teeth. She'd have to be careful, some whimsical portion of her mind whispered, or she'd begin to adopt the speech patterns favored by this mysterious fellow. She stood up precipitously. "I'll need to inform my officers."

"No indeed, Captain Ingram. If you're to aid Section 31, you're under the aegis of Section 31. *We* define your pretexts: We'll inform your crew."

Captain Ingram scarcely heard what those pretexts would be. She was too busy making plans — with her telepathic yeoman, inside her head. Regardless of what powers, real or imagined, Shawn Kell might wield, he was not a telepath. Of this, Colin was certain.

If, somehow, Kell did have psionic abilities, Ingram thought with a shiver she couldn't entirely repress, there would be no way for her to set the plan she had laid into action. She'd become, rather, this gruff man's virtual prisoner.

Starfleet, in thrall to Section 31.

Chapter Eight

No matter in which direction he went, his attempts at escape ended at the seashore.

Shrev sat down at the edge of a jagged cliff five hundred feet above sienna-brown rocks like the teeth of a targ, and regarded the violent gray waters of the ocean with an attitude of defeat. To his *cha-chi*'s people, the ocean was a metaphor for hell, regardless of the fact that Andor's berg-choked trans-continental oceans teemed with foods and medicines, while its boiling inland seas provided copious hot water, which fueled more than half of the geothermal demands made by the population of the otherwise ice-locked moon. To his father's people, Terra's seas were both symbolic and very real providers of life.

To Shrev at the moment, this particular body of water was a deep and abiding frustration. First going on the assumption that it wasn't really water, he'd tried walking into it as though it wasn't actually there. If it *wasn't* real seawater, then it certainly performed a convincingly metallic-tasting, unbreathable simulacrum of it.

Next assuming that, perhaps, it wasn't as wide as it appeared, he'd swum out into it. Shrev had learned to swim on Earth — it was that, or drown: In many ways, the young men who had challenged his right to be half-human on Terra had been far more focused on breaking him than the children who had challenged his right to be half-

Andorian on *Fesoan*.

He had won both of those challenges. This one, however, Shrev had given up on after about three miles, where both the wind and the waves had turned into a gale that he'd nearly not been able to swim back against. He simply couldn't figure it out. It was glaringly obvious that the sky wasn't really a *sky* — it was some sort of flat, colorless, sunless, monochrome-lit backdrop. Shrev had assumed that everything around him, or at least most of it, was a holographic projection, perhaps underground. No holographic projection that he'd ever encountered, however, could drown someone. Shrev was tired, sore, hungry, thirsty, and seriously pissed off.

The only way he'd be able to ease any of those irritations, with the rather glaring exception of the last one, entailed returning to his kidnappers' compound. He pulled his legs up and let his forehead fall against his knees.

Wouldn't death be better than this? It would, at least, limit how many more living cells they could harvest from him. He did not want to go back. He stood and peered far out over the cliff, trying to determine the most immediately lethal...

A laugh like finely blown glass wind chimes made him stagger backward, his heart in his throat. He whirled around; he hadn't sensed anyone at all nearby, but someone was there.

The child couldn't have been more than seven years old, a pretty pale blue *chan*, whose sex was clearly

discernable since the little fellow was buck-naked: The still-developing edges of the inguinal cavity that protected a *chan's* sexual organs ran horizontally, not vertically as they did in a *thaan*.

"Where did *you* come from?" he whispered. So, there were wholly Andorian children here. He knelt down and motioned the child toward him —the area was windswept and dangerous. With another sweet-voiced laugh, a sound that signified defiance rather than mirth in the vast majority of Andorian races, the child ran the other way.

Directly toward the edge of the cliff.

Shrev was an excellent judge of distance, and he was absolutely certain that he caught the child before the little *chan* went over that deadly drop. But his arms were empty. No scream echoed below him; no gracile body lay splattered azure and cyan over the sharp dark sandstone teeth, though the breakers were fierce and might have simply washed it away in their first pass after the child struck the rocks. Shrev lay peering over the abyss in dismay for what seemed like the better part of an hour, his confusion and horror about what might or might not have happened to a child who might or might not have actually been there at all, in this prison which might or might not even be real, threatening to unhinge his mind.

He felt it, this time, when another person came up behind him.

"Have you had a long enough exercise session yet?" Theskhe inquired acidly. She motioned him up with a hand

that held a disruptor —Romulan make, Shrev noted, and she was right-handed. Both of these facts might seem to serve no purpose in someone less potentially belligerent than Vraeth'uutr'Shrev Th'raess'Aen. "Get up from there and follow me back. Unless you'd rather be carried?"

Shrev didn't bother asking who'd help her carry him. She was easily as tall as he was himself, and as muscular as his *zhavay*. He stood, slowly, then darted forward —

Only to be smacked smartly across the bridge of his nose with the barrel of a disruptor. He hadn't even seen the move coming. Theskhe let out a hiss that was pure *shen*, composed partly of impatience and partly of undisguised pleasure, as Shrev crumpled back down onto the stony ledge above the uneasy sea.

"*I said* get up from there," Theskhe said, the same ardent tone she'd incorporated into her hiss making her soft voice ring. "I did *not* say perform stupid maneuvers. Come with me *now*, Th'raess'Aen!"

Like a compliant automaton, or an unpleasantly shocked Andorian, Shrev stood and did as he was told, trying to avoid touching what was almost certainly a broken nose.

It wasn't as if he had anywhere else to be anytime soon.

Theskhe pulled a pad of absorbent gray cloth out of a breast pocket, handed it to him, and then motioned at the pastel-blue stone talisman Shrev wore around his neck on a fine gold chain. His captors had decided to leave it with

him, he'd surmised, because it amused them to think that such a strong man relied on superstitious symbols. "What is that?"

Shrev reached up to touch the carefully sculpted piece of chalcedony, carved into a total of four helices, or one long double-helix bent over upon itself and braided like a loaf of challah made of semiprecious stone. It was a delicate thing, which he was surprised that the violent fight in his quarters hadn't smashed to bits. He didn't answer her question right away. He was still shaken by her unexpected presence, and anyway, it was none of her business.

The pendant had been his father's, one of the few things accidentally left behind when his parents had left Andoria for Cestus Three. They had also left a small booklet of ancient-style, two-dimensional photographs taken at some Terran Living History Exhibit, and a few pieces of clothing, worn or torn or discarded for some less fathomable reason. He kept the other items very carefully preserved on Andoria. The chalcedony symbol was a Maori love-knot, and that went with him everywhere.

He had seen, while spending his adolescence among his father's people in New Zealand, that like Andorians, the humans native to the vibrant, pantheistic Maori culture also followed the ritual of exchanging locks of intricately-braided hair —*shapla*, in *graalen* — between lovers. According to *Kaumatua* (the affectionate title that his human grandmother had insisted he use for her, the

alarmed, enraged, and astounded looks and comments offered by the rest of his father's tribe the first time she had proudly introduced her unlikely pale-periwinkle-skinned, antennaeed grandson notwithstanding) that coincidental cultural similarity, and the similarity in both sound and meaning between his *shen's* unusual name and his father's relatively common one, had been the initiating conversation among a group of friendly undergraduate students on Andoria that had, ultimately, culminated in Shrev.

He would have given much to have possessed even a tiny portion of just one of those *shapla*, but was profoundly grateful to have received this, a symbol of the affection that had united his Andorian and human parents. The destruction visited by the Gorn on Cestus Three had destroyed all else, with the sole exception of himself.

"It's something a kidnapper wouldn't understand," he hissed nasally, droplets of indigo blood accompanying his words. "You think I'll share anything with you willingly?"

"The Andorian people *need* what you have to offer them, Shrev; they're going to go extinct otherwise!"

"What the Andorian people do or don't need is beside the point. It *doesn't* give you the right to kidnap me and hold me against my will!" Shrev snarled, dabbing tentatively at the blood flowing out of his injured nose and the tears that coursed down his cheeks. The disruptor striking his face had brought numbness in its wake, but the pain that followed made his eyes brim, as the dense mass

of sensitive ghelnoid tissue in his sinuses inflamed and engorged. It hurt just to blink.

Theskhe backed away and motioned him to follow her—back to the compound, he imagined. "You think your rights are more important than the survival of a species?" Apparently, he wasn't following her with sufficient alacrity. She grabbed his upper arm and propelled him along; he could feel her nails cut into his skin.

"What *species*? I'm damn well not a species, I'm a *hybrid* of two distinct species. And not representative of all the races of those, either. What about the Thalassans?"

"What about them? They're a throwback, we've moved beyond them. Some would argue they're not even people —"

"To use a saying beloved of humans: *Bullshit*. I've met Thalassans, they're as much *people* as me or you."

"And I say that no *shen*, no *chan*, no *zhen*, no *thaan*, no *chae-na*, and certainly no male-incubated, egg-laying creature are as much *people* as we are! There's more to a people than damn *antennae*, Shrev." She shook his arm for good measure, and he pulled away from her by main force, blinking at her in confusion for a minute.

"You're saying you're not a *shen*?"

She laughed. The sound was brittle over the soft coos of little tropical birds or rodents or insects, which remained hidden in the foliage that abutted the trail Theskhe had dragged him onto. Shrev still couldn't see them, so he wasn't sure what sorts of creatures they might be.

"I'm a *woman*, Shrev. The same way you're a man."

The reaction of his body to her words horrified Shrev, and he hadn't one iota of control over it. He had never in his life wanted to be a *thaan* as much as he did in that moment. His mouth filled with saliva, as though he'd just been offered the most luscious treat the galaxy offered. He swallowed painfully and forced his attention back to his aching face, plying the bloodstained cloth with greater zeal and trying to arrange his thoughts into something that didn't howl.

"So, which of the prisoners here are your parents?" he hadn't seen any humans or other dual-gendered humanoids on this planet in the short span of time he'd been conscious here, but that didn't necessarily mean that there weren't any. He was a captive: There was no way to know whether what he perceived to be a planet was even real. The technology they had was too advanced; it might all just be something they made up, to play with his mind. It was flamboyantly obvious that they enjoyed doing that.

Her last statement, for instance.

"I'm looking at him," she replied softly.

Now his mouth went dry. He found himself unable to speak, and could only stare at her in petrified fascination, like a bird caught by the gaze of a snake.

Chapter Nine

"Doctor, I need to speak with you."

Colin wasn't at all certain that T'Dani would be willing to respond, and he couldn't contact her telepathically. He'd tried. That was what had told him she was in her dampered meditation room. The computer had merely confirmed it.

To his surprise, the door opened. The interior of the room was dim. Compared to the enthusiastic fluorescent brightness of the Starship hallway, which Rec Decks maintained constantly, it was dark. He stepped just far enough inside to allow the door to close behind him, then stood and blinked for a minute, letting his eyes adjust.

"What was it you needed, Yeoman?" the *Enterprise's* CMO inquired coldly. Renee was right — this was hitting T'Dani hard. Colin allowed himself a heartwarming moment of fantasy; Shrev would be thrilled to know just how deeply his absence effected his friends. Of course, if what the captain had divulged was accurate...

His eyes adjusted at last to the dim, flickering light of the Vulcan meditation altar, Colin moved to sit on one of the room's large, scattered pillows, its only other furniture. Before he replied to T'Dani, he had a conversation with the computer:

"Sweep this room for monitoring devices, per code alpha Ingram two-two-four-six. Institute full-field electromagnetic and psionic shielding if none are found."

Of course, Section 31 was aboard the *Enterprise*. From what little even he knew about the covert intelligence arm of the Federation, they probably had the capacity to turn a starship's computer *into* a monitoring device.

Ah, the fresh green scent of paranoia in the morning. Colin returned T'Dani's glance of alarm with a somber expression. "It wasn't what *I* needed, Doctor. It's what Captain Ingram needs."

She cocked an eyebrow at him, silently.

No monitoring devices have been detected anywhere on deck forty-seven, the computer announced blandly. Colin winced. Renee had taught him to regard a computer that offered more information than what it had been asked for with suspicion. He shook his head at nothing in particular. The information provided by the computer implied that the ones that *had* been planted were elsewhere than the Rec Deck. He'd have placed a high bet that they'd be here soon enough, as well. Of course, he'd probably have placed a bet like that with Shrev.

"Renee wants us off the *Enterprise* while we still have that opportunity," he continued. "Section 31 will have this entire Starbase locked down tighter than an emergency bulkhead in a few hours. We're to pose as husband and wife, and track Renee's movements from the Beta Argus Four asteroid belt." He ran his hands back through his hair, whose texture, growth-pattern, and color had been altered from full and auburn and wavy to sparse, receding and steel-gray. "Nifty, huh? They changed my eyes, too."

Now the half-Vulcan woman shook herself, seeming to notice for the first time that Colin's appearance had been altered; she squinted at him in bafflement. "Section 31? Not," she made a mow of distaste, "Shawn Kell again? What's all this about?" her voice was a hoarse, unmelodic croak. The big telepath swore that he could feel emotion seep through it, for all that the space was dampered.

This room obviously possessed heavy sound-dampers as well as telepathic ones. Colin wondered how long she'd been here, keening out her desolation. He sighed. "Yes, we're host to Shawn Kell again. He says this entire swath of murder was engineered to hide a kidnapping. Somebody wanted a human/Andorian hybrid for their collection very badly."

Colin watched this information sink in slowly. T'Dani's eyes went flat and glassy. She swayed where she sat, catching herself against the beautiful round of petrified wood that made up the face of her meditation altar. He half-rose to help her, and she motioned him away with one imperious, upraised palm. Her hand trembled.

"Shrev...you're telling me Shrev is *alive*?"

The big telepath nodded and resumed his seat, rubbing at the back of his neck uncomfortably. The level of psionic damping currently imposed on this little space was giving him a stress headache. As if in response to that knowledge, the half-Vulcan doctor reached up with trembling hands to massage her temples.

"All indications point that way. Unfortunately, Section

31's been put in charge of the investigation, and Renee's convinced that their prime motivation in the case doesn't necessarily entail keeping him so. They appear to be moving with very little speed or force. She'd like us to bolster Section 31 and herself in accomplishing the task of rescuing Shrev, if we can."

T'Dani jumped up. "What are we doing sitting here, then?"

Now it was Colin's turn to hold up a restraining hand. "I need to give you some specifics. You're going to go one way and I'm going," he smiled jokingly to himself; he could, when serious need demanded, telekinetically pass-through walls. Given a set of circumstances Captain Ingram had already set into motion, he should be able to do that where the ship's ruined hull currently formed an extensive airlocked abutment with the station's docking-bay port, "another. Meet me in the station chapel, and we'll take it from there.

"But before you do that, you'll need to go to sickbay: William has a couple of alterations to make on you, too. Then you'll need to go to Mel'Taya's quarters — also known as Shuttle Bay Two. I *always* suspected that there was a reason our head of security demanded such a thing, and now I know. The shuttle *Roosevelt* has been transported in there. It's programmed with the *Enterprise's* own engine coding, and the route the ship followed around the station to dock here. It will take you to the other side of the station, near the *Saratoga*, where its code will

change to the *Saratoga's* before it docks. The *Saratoga* itself has another shuttle waiting there for us.

"Renee's got a false trail set up that proclaims we're currently on leave. That should hold up for about as long as it takes Section 31 to figure out that the order came from the *Saratoga*, not Starfleet." Colin stood, and motioned toward the door. "Are you ready for this?"

The doctor nodded. She was still trembling, he noticed.

They'd cut her hair extremely short, turned it nut-brown and curly, darkened her skin by a shade, added melanin to her eyes, performed fascinating surgery on her ears and, to her great disgust, dressed her as a *Saturnius* harem girl. This was a title and form of dress not evocative of status, as it once was on Terra or — as the more naive might imagine — on *Saturnius*. Rather, the delicate adjective had evolved to describe a particular, very old chosen profession.

Which was probably for the best, considering that when Colin passed through the heavily shielded walls where the starship and the space station came together, their effect on his system was not dissimilar to blind, stupid drunkenness. Few people would blink twice at the idea of such a woman uniting herself to such a man — at least until he ran out of whatever capital she was interested in divesting him of, anyway.

T'Dani had decided that, before the AWOL courtesan

and her painfully drunk consort drew too much attention, she might as well fulfill the ruse they were using and dragged Colin into the Starbase chapel. The chaplain was decidedly bemused, but nevertheless married Ms. Cori Andan and Mr. Graham Corliss. It no longer mattered that the groom was altogether too wasted to sign his own name: Such niceties were performed by retinal scan now, and William had thoughtfully altered the vein-patterns in the retinas of both Colin and T'Dani when he'd altered the hue of their irises.

T'Dani had then dragged a very sick Colin off, to the protests of the station's med techs, looking for their 'honeymoon' shuttle. The *Saratoga*'s medical crew had complained just as vociferously when she dragged him from that shuttle onto one of *Saratoga*'s shuttles without allowing them to treat the telepath, but T'Dani, Chief Medical Officer of the Fleet's flagship, had no intention of wasting precious time, and refused their overtures.

The shuttle was pre-programmed, ostensibly to take the same path out of the system that the *Saratoga* had followed into it. T'Dani couldn't tell shuttle programming from ancient Linear A script — she was a doctor, after all, not a shuttle pilot — and simply had to trust that she and Colin wouldn't be betrayed the minute that she activated the autopilot program.

The *Enterprise*'s CMO was somewhat more concerned about Colin's mental state than about the programming of the shuttle, about which she knew nothing. He appeared to

be suffering from a combination of acute chemical intoxication, muscarine poisoning, and low-level radiation toxicity. T'Dani set the shuttle on autopilot and damned the consequences. By the time she'd treated Colin for what he was actually experiencing from his trip through the high-tech walls of a Federation Starship and adjoining Station, the shuttle was on its way out of the system, having been programmed to hide itself among the ring of glaciated meteor debris that surrounded nine out of every ten-star systems in the Milky Way galaxy.

Colin finally settled into an uneasy, sweating sleep. After exchanging the profoundly ironic costume that William had stuffed her into for a standard Starfleet medical uniform, T'Dani settled into an uneasy, unsweating but distinctly anxious wait to see whether they'd been followed. Colin didn't awaken, and T'Dani didn't relax, until the shuttle had docked itself none too gently into a crater of one of the larger asteroids orbiting half a parsec outside the system's last planetary moon.

"What?!" Colin cried blearily, as the rumbling landing of the shuttle jounced him out of what had become a progressively less and less sound sleep. T'Dani snorted.

"I'll answer that question as soon as you tell me whose bright idea it was to disguise me as a prostitute and saddle me with the moniker *Cori Corliss*."

Colin staggered up toward the front section of the shuttle, rubbing at his eyes as though they pained him — which, the doctor reflected, they probably did. "Ahm.

Dunno. Computer was supposed to just mangle...or, I mean, mingle the sounds of our names." He blinked blearily down at the woman in the pilot's seat. "Wow, William really changed you, didn't he?" he stared at her multi-lobed, multi-pierced ears in obvious fascination.

T'Dani smiled. "For the first time in my life, I actually look like a Vulcan, but now I've got even worse ears. So, we're on some asteroid on the outskirts of the system Station Seventeen's in. What now?"

He shrugged tiredly, rubbed at his eyes again, yawned, and dropped into the seat next to T'Dani. "We track the movements of the Section 31 ship."

She blinked at him, nonplussed. "Okay. How, exactly?"

He heaved a sigh that ended in a dry cough. "Unless the Section 31 ship's psionically shielded, I'll know where Renee will be. We don't want to follow them too closely. Until we tail this covert operations ship to wherever it is they're going, we'll get no further information regarding specific locations. What was it Renee called it? Oh — defensible deniability. I think the trip through the walls impaired my —"

T'Dani shook her head at him. "No, that's caused by the medications I gave you. You'll be a telepath again in just a few hours, though you'll probably be a telepath with an on-again off-again low-level migraine for a day or two.

So...we'll know we're actually at wherever it is Shrev's at how?"

"Didn't I just say that? Renee will contact us." He blinked at her for a minute. "No, wait, I don't think I did say that, did I? I *really* need to eat something." The big telepath watched the doctor squirm antsily in her chair for a moment.

"You love him, don't you?" Colin inquired baldly, heaving himself out of the seat to go in search of the shuttle's replicator. They tended to be more than a little bit limited in their offerings, and he called up the menu list on this one — much easier than standing and entering selections that got denied for five minutes straight.

"Who?" T'Dani came back innocently, watching Colin work the replicator.

Colin threw her a pawky look. "What are we out here for? I think I've forgotten." He analyzed and finally accepted the tray that the replicator produced, balancing the bowl of creamed vegetable soup and Monte Cristo sandwich carefully back into the shuttle cockpit. Politely requesting the computer to slide out the cockpit table, Colin set the tray down and made himself comfortable in the seat across from T'Dani again. He then picked up the soup bowl and set it in front of her. The *Enterprise's* CMO stared at it as though she didn't know what it was.

"You need to eat, doctor. Your brain's obviously failing for lack of nourishment." Colin took an enormous bite from his sandwich, sat back, and chewed blissfully.

T'Dani prodded the surface of the soup with a spoon, and finally took a tentative taste. As Colin knew was common among humanoids, anxiety absolutely destroyed her appetite. "I don't know...how can you *know* something like that, anyway? And quit eating so fast, you're going to choke."

Colin shook his head at her and set down what remained of his sandwich while he chewed.

Love was a subject that frightened T'Dani, and she realized that many people found that fact more than a little bemusing. Everyone she knew had read the passionate, bloody history of Vulcan and its people, and understood that they had determined to follow the teachings of Surak (philosophies of logic and peace) in order to avoid entirely exterminating themselves. Those who refused to adhere to the teachings of Surak, the Vulcans had ultimately exiled. The terror of self-genocide ran so deep in the Vulcan psyche that they still did that to segments of their people who would not conform to those teachings.

T'Dani had never wanted to conform to Surak's teachings of emotional suppression, though his teachings of logic and peace made perfect sense to her. High-spirited and hot-tempered, deeply compassionate and intense, if there was any emotion she should be able to comprehend — according to people who knew her at all — it was love. Something had happened to her that had caused her to deny the reality of that emotion to herself, some repressed occurrence that no one had ever been able to affect.

Until Shrev had come into her life, anyway. It was a simple truth that she was unable to deny to herself anymore. Colin watched T'Dani apply all her attention to her soup bowl and spoon. He knew that Shrev was her friend...

He also knew that wasn't all the hybrid man wanted to be to the doctor. He watched T'Dani eat her soup for a moment while he put his thoughts in order. What had he learned of love during his time in the Federation?

"From what I understand, there are different stages of love. A person fascinates you, delights you, attracts you. I'm told it doesn't have to be all of those, either; I have talked to people whose first intimation of love was actually a *repulsion* so intense that they said they found it fascinating.

"Over time — how *much* time being dependent upon yourself and whoever it is you're attracted to — the thought of them begins to haunt you, the desire to be with them grows almost unbearable, and being apart from them is almost like a physical pain. Then, if the relationship's allowed to grow, there's comfort, as though that person or people are the family you've always longed for, the place you want to call home. Eventually, it's as though they're a part of you, and you can't imagine life without them."

The doctor, having finished half of the soup and all of the crackers that had accompanied it, carefully cleaned and laid down her soup spoon with a typical Vulcan fastidiousness that was altogether atypical of her. "And is

there any way to..." she shook her head, scowling at the gleaming utensil; "I don't know...keep this from happening?"

Colin shook his head in return and picked up what remained of his sandwich. "Why would you *want* to avoid such a thing?" he inquired before taking a bite.

"Because it...because it feels like it's trying to rearrange my — "

"Oh!" he exclaimed around a mouthful of sandwich, "Yes, it will. If it's real, it'll rearrange all *kinds* of things. That's what it's *for*, ultimately." He swallowed, then winced and reached for one of the glasses of water the tray also held. T'Dani was right, of course; he ate too fast.

She blinked at him owlishly. "You're not serious!"

He shrugged, set the water down, and popped the last of the sandwich into his mouth, chewing it thoughtfully before replying. "The only time a relationship's a problem is when somebody refuses to give in to the changes it evokes, or if somebody in it tries to force changes that don't come naturally. *You're* not seriously suggesting that the pain of denying love would be less terrible than simply giving in to it, are you? Because, as one familiar with both of those things, I can *guarantee* that assessment's mistaken."

Chapter Ten

"Now you see why we wanted you?" Theskhe enthused. Shrev blinked himself forcibly back into the present moment.

He had, as the lovely but nonetheless dismal days passed, discovered where to eat, shower, and relieve himself in the housing area of the complex. He hadn't yet learned, however, exactly how to avoid Theskhe. She seemed to be everywhere, and it had become quickly obvious to him that he wasn't supposed to be left alone.

It was late evening. They sat in a courtyard beneath a broad swath of incomprehensible stars that never moved. He had determined to remain mute and unresponsive to her attempts to socialize. He'd tried walking away from her numerous times before, but that just seemed to irritate her, making her all the more persistent.

She was part-Andorian, after all.

New hidden creatures called from the soft, thick foliage surrounding the ornamental waterfalls and gardens in the courtyard and, from somewhere much farther away, some predacious-sounding beast yowled. Shrev wondered if any of it was actually real.

"It's called trans-cloning," Theskhe went on, as though blithely unaware of his attempt to pretend that she wasn't there at all. "It's tough to accomplish using non-hybrid cells, but what we learned is that hybrid cells maintain a

certain sub-microscopic level of Thalinase all the time —"

"*What?*" Theskhe seemed to be attempting to rouse his sympathy for the *Aatuu'hari* cause. She didn't appear to realize that the revelations she'd disclosed to him since the day she found him peering over a sea cliff were becoming more and more repugnant to him.

Thalinase was a drug that could be used by individuals of substantially different humanoid races when they wanted to reproduce, or as a carrier during medical treatment for severe congenital defects. Theskhe's revelation, apparently, was the answer to the long-standing question of exactly why, when a hybrid individual and a non-hybrid individual — of any species — mated, they were usually able to produce viable offspring without resorting to direct treatment using Thalinase, a drug synthesized by rock-dwelling amoeboid organisms.

The original, and still most important, use of the substance was to eliminate potentially deadly interactions between native and alien microfloras and microfaunas existing on different planets and within all species. An old Terran axiom went: *every dog has fleas, and those fleas all have fleas that bite 'em, and so it goes, ad infinitum*. That saying was truer than anyone on Terra had realized when it was first made up. Every leaf on any plant on any given planet housed up to twenty-seven different fungi, seventeen different bacteria, four viruses, plus nematodal, algal, slime mold, insectoid, and mammalian or avian microfauna.

And *that* was in regard to just one plant leaf. And every microscopic creature itself came with its own load of viroids and prions and sub-microscopic whatevers — each one ultimately vital to the life of any ecosystem. The host of microbiota that sentient organisms contained, and required for a long, healthy life, was even more numerous and complex.

Not all — in many cases, not *any* — of these vital microscopic and sub-microscopic lifeforms got along well with their equivalents from other planets. Indeed, biological warfare could be, and had been, fought to devastating effect by the simple introduction of what, on the attacker's planet, was nothing more than a harmless fermenting yeast. The most accurate science fiction story ever written, from the viewpoint of any Xenomicrobiologist, was the Terran drama *War of the Worlds*, though modern Federation Xenomicrobiologists knew that such hygienically slipshod aliens wouldn't have lived for more than an hour after burrowing into Terra's soil, without something like Thalinase on board: Their buried ships would have very quickly become their mausoleums.

To utterly demolish a microbiota through sterilization was worse yet. A sentient individual so sterilized wouldn't live much past the first handshake with whomever was initiating First Contact. The trick to forming alien microfauna that would either exist in harmony with native microfauna and that microfauna's hosts, or of forming new

microfaunas that would be capable of performing the same function regardless of planet or host, was the use of Thalinase.

The Federation coated every surface of every piece of First Contact or duck-blind equipment thickly with it and aerosolized it into the air breathed by its crews on any ship for any reason, anywhere. It allowed automatic and free exchange of genetic information between cells, while eliminating most forms of teratology or unrestrained growth, except for those that were forced through the introduction of other electro-chemical agents.

Which did happen occasionally — sometimes with dire results. Otherwise-mild illnesses had, more than once, been electrochemically programmed on a mutative course and forcibly introduced into groups of people who carried Thalinase in their genes, in attempt to turn those people into vectors of fast-mutating plague. Nevertheless, contact between species from different planets could never have taken place without some equivalent substance.

The Vulcans who had initiated First Contact with Earth had originally obtained the product from the Andorians, who themselves had gotten it from the Zyrellians. It was an affectionate joke between Vulcans and Andorians that everything of real value that either of them had, they had stolen from each other. Anyway, it was a joke in the twenty-third century verging on the twenty-fourth, Terran Standard Time. For much of the twenty-second century and the century prior to that, it *definitely*

hadn't been considered funny.

Shrev suddenly felt like some sort of hyper-exotic Augment and tried mightily to banish the thought. It was not the sort of idea beloved of most Andorians. More than one scientist had inferred that the people of *Fesoan* had, in fact, been biologically engineered, either by one another or by someone else, sometime in the outstandingly brutal, largely unremembered, and more or less unmourned past of their homeworld. Which, if it was true and could be proven, the *Aatuu'hari* would take hold of with a death grip to further their aims.

"Yes, it was a surprise to us, too, but it makes all cellular amino-acid strings remarkably — and automatically — plastic. Well, of course it does — I mean, that's what it *does*, but it apparently works *because* the cells carry it along with them and replicate it. Kind of like a prion, right? The process works using standard cells, but it requires a *lot* of them. You put their nuclear DNA and their organelle DNA into mitosis at once, and shift pieces around a still center of whatever traits you want to keep."

"And you make monsters," he managed in a ragged whisper. She shrugged.

"Oh, some teratology occurs, of course. But isn't that the way of evolution? When standard cells are fresh, they're okay for the process. But reproductive cells are *so* much better. Of course, I was born with a limited number of reproductive cells. *You*, on the other hand..." she made an expansive motion with both her hands and her antennae,

and let the thought wander off. "What's really exciting about this process is that the mitotic transintegration around the chosen trait-set is so indiscriminate that *your* DNA doesn't look a thing like mine. We might as well not be related at all! Human genes are particularly satisfying to work with using this process — they're so incredibly *plastic*!"

The creature reciting these nightmares to him under the motionless canopy of stars and plasticine fairytale forest couldn't have been more than five years younger than himself. "Yes, I can see that's what people in general represent to you. Plastic. Did you know that my parents — no, that *our* parents — loved one another? A Maori man loved a half-Aenar *shen*, a Talish *zhen*, and a Theskian —"

"And so that love has made something that will last for all time and save the Andorian species. You somehow think that's less beautiful?"

"I think the Andorian races are more than..." he paused for a moment, then threw her words back at her; "*just antennae*. What will all the different facets of Andorian culture possibly mean any more if you —"

"Cultures change!"

"Peaceful cultures that are *forced* to change through outside coercion *die*, and their people turn to anything they can find for solace — suicide, drugs, murder, cults. You really don't know much about humans or their history, do you? How nearly until the founding of the Federation

itself, their different races and clans and tribes treated one another as though they weren't all *people*, how they sought to impose what they valued on one another through force of arms, how entire cultures were destroyed because they were considered of no more worth than *plastic*?"

"Who's talking about force of arms, here, Shrev? I never —"

"How else will you break up hundreds of thousands of bondgroups? Disband an existing military backed by Federation force? And where will the *chans* and *thaans* and *zhens* and *shens*, not to mention the poor damn *chae-na* and Thalassans, end up? Concentration camps — those wonderful unseen day-spas where *the others* are always sent," he looked around himself wildly; "like this place, this lovely mythical land you've informed me that I'll never again be let out of?

"I'm the other now, but what will come in time, when your strong and beautiful pseudo-species that looks Andorian to anybody not looking closely enough decides it's time to take over from the *throwbacks*? What will happen to my *shreya* and *zhavey*'s people — the one who bore me, the other who nurtured and saved me? What will become of my *cha'chi* and his bondgroup, who raised a strange hybrid boy like he was their own *thei*? What will happen to the people and culture that I *love*, damn you?"

Her face went cold. No; her face had always been cold. Anything else she projected there was a mask. Obviously, even her creators realized that, hence her name.

Who are her creators? he wondered.

"There are more considerations in life than *love*, Shrev," his trans-clone snapped.

He shook his head. "No. The Universe is made of love. Everything else is an illusion." This was a deep belief of both Buddhists and Andorians. *Kiehrus'shola*. He touched his father's love-knot again, taking comfort in its familiar smooth curves. It meant that, too.

Theskhe sneered. "We can offer you more than fairytales here. Dammit, we're *offering* you immortality!"

"No. You're wrenching open my mouth and forcing your concept of immortality down my throat."

She shrugged. "Whichever you prefer, Shrev. You choose."

He shook his head wearily and rubbed at his temples. "You can't destroy a people and call it salvation, Theskhe. I can't stop you from doing to me whatever you obviously do when I'm unconscious — "

That brittle laugh again. Her largely immobile antennae handed him something that floated weirdly between nervousness, rage, and amusement. Is that what it looked like to others when he experienced ambivalent emotions — as though they were wired to his head wrong? The thought made him wince. "Where did you come up with *that* fantasy? Tell me; is it arousing?"

He'd been here what seemed to be maybe six days. Yet his newly grown antennae had stopped aching. Which meant that for each hour of those days, at least eight more

had passed — somewhere, somewhen — in unconsciousness. "No, Theskhe. Life as a sperm bank is demeaning and depressing. You really have no —"

"Be glad we don't just *keep* you in the transclone bed, Th'raess'Aen," she hissed. "It could be done. Watch your step, gorgeous. And your mouth. Tongues aren't so very hard to remove."

"Yes, the *zhen* you've got taking care of your little brood prove that, don't they? Are they all *yours*? What do you average, one set a year? Or do you need to produce more than ten or twelve eggs before you can trans-clone a set?"

Her eyes shone when she looked up at him. "Oh, you *are* clever! And *they're* as smart as we are, too," Theskhe breathed. Shrev snorted.

"Things are lost even in straight cloning, Theskhe. Cut out my tongue, if you like — it'll give you yet more DNA to work with, but it *won't* make you as smart as you seem to like to think you are." Now he did get up and walk away, not caring if she followed him, or somehow ran ahead of him to meet him at the juncture of the first corridor he turned. He needed free of her, if only for a space of seconds, before he went mad.

"You're going to want to muzzle him," the Augment announced from behind the Theskhe. Together, they watched Shrev stalk across the compound and disappear indoors. "And we shouldn't let him wander around like

this."

Not that steps hadn't been taken in order to keep tabs on the imposing hybrid. He'd been expensive to obtain, and so had been implanted with a subconscious biofeedback alarm: Should he wander either too far or too near to potentially dangerous equipment, his own mind would trigger the alarm to send out a signal. That signal would alert his keepers, and would cause Shrev's own subconscious to embroil him in some harmless phantasmagoric situation for a long enough time to allow his keepers to find him.

Theskhe snorted and rolled her eyes. "Why? It's *not* like he can get out of here. What's he going to do, buy off the holographic guards?"

"One of you should be with him at all times, then." The instruction held an admonitory note. The transclone turned to the voice's owner, her eyes narrowed.

"Why did you make so *many* of us?"

The ugly little troll-like creature who leaned, motionless and nearly invisible, against a miniature palm tree, hands in its pockets, smiled — or something like that. "You were a success. We wanted backups, to ensure that — "

"I'm not a damn *backup*!" Theskhe snarled through clenched teeth. Now her interlocutor chuckled.

"Jealous of yourself, are you? Letting him make you forget your place in the scheme of things? Keep it up, and I'll leash the animal myself. It's all he is, you said so

yourself — a useful animal. You should cut its tongue out before he seduces you further with it."

Now the Theskhe bared its teeth, a facial expression common to its most ancient hominid progenitors, both human and Andorian, when angry or attempting to placate. In humans, the response had attached itself to a broader emotional repertoire and evolved into the smile, something that most Andorians had to consciously teach themselves to attach to different cultural reactions if they wanted to use it in the human manner, but which occurred naturally in Shrev.

The human smile didn't occur naturally in the Theskhes: When they bared their teeth, it was usually a prelude to biting. "We *need* him — you hurt him, Gleevah, and we'll all — "

The creature didn't even need to remove its hands from its pockets in order to reduce the Theskhe to the sum of her constituent parts. Cloth proved no obstacle to the tiny cellular deconstruction unit it carried. Nor did sturdy ghelnoid skin, bone, or parietal tissue. Or plate-steel, as far as the Augment was aware: Gleevah was proud of the little palm-sized instrument. Not being the first to dabble in clones — indeed, Gleevah *was* a clone, or, more accurately, a product of Augment technology, a technology devised for humans, which carried in it the potential to have great and terrible effects on other races — Gleevah knew enough to build failsafes into them.

"Now perhaps you *understand* why I made more of

you," Gleevah offered, *sotto voce*, to the dripping, gently steaming pool of protoplasm slowly being absorbed by the soft ground of the courtyard and the wicker of the lounge chair where she'd been sitting, neither of which were wholly real, but both of which flawlessly performed the virtual functions for which they were designed. The way the Theskhes had been meant to do.

Gleevah had invented numerous things. The Augment's hermaphroditic body was a study in teratology, though the worst of it had been ameliorated with prenatal surgeries before the brain had even begun to develop. The non-human Augment's brain, too, was abnormal in any number of ways, but those had been allowed to remain. They were mostly psychological glitches, which hadn't mattered to those who'd made Gleevah.

Using pre-existing human Augment technology would, of course, have been magnitudes easier than what was being attempted here. But that technology had profoundly unexpected effects when used on Andorians. Things like Gleevah would be worse than useless for what the *Aatuu'hari* ultimately had in mind. The Augment didn't find that discomfiting —much the contrary. Gleevah was unique of its kind, and took pride in that fact.

Or anyway, that was how Gleevah had perceived its life until it had met Shrev. *I possess qualities the hybrid never will!* Gleevah insisted fiercely to itself, scowling by turns at the doorway through which the hybrid had walked, and at the puddle the Theskhe had formed. And that was

enough —it would have to be. As twisted, stunted, warped, and disabled as the Andorian Augment's body was, its ruthless, psychopathic mind was nonetheless a creation of unparalleled genius. And its lifespan, with the aid of various bionic implants — the Augment couldn't walk unaided, and its brain had no working thermostat; it was naturally as cold-blooded as a fish — had already been abnormally long, and showed no sign of ceasing anytime soon.

With an expression not terribly unlike the one Theskhe had offered moments before, the Augment bared its sharp little teeth at the holographic stars.

Chapter Eleven

The *Enterprise*, with nearly an eighth of its upper starboard hull blown out, wasn't going to be travelling anywhere for awhile — *awhile* being entirely dependent upon what sort of situation its captain found herself in later. Ingram had joined Shawn Kell's crew on the runabout commanded by the inspector general of Section 31, leaving First Officer Josi Felingaili in command of the *Enterprise*. Josi had dealt with the inspector general before. The thought of having to do so again made the executive officer of the *Enterprise* distinctly cranky.

While the starship might easily have acquired first-berth rights in the Starbase's repair bay, Felingaili encouraged Temporal to remain and perform further in-depth scans of the ship instead, and put *Enterprise* on what amounted to Starbase 17's *we'll get around to it when we get around to it* list, since there was absolutely nothing amiss with the starship's engines, emergency bulkheads and forcefields, shielding, or weaponry.

There was nothing wrong with its computers, either, though its science officer was wont to balk at what the ship's captain was requesting, in absentia, that she do with those computers. Commander Felingaili encountered Lieutenant Voss' concerns when she took up the subject with the Betazoid science officer in the one place that the XO determined beforehand was least apt to be wired for

sound: The Jacuzzi in Female and Female-Analogous Changing Room Number Three just off of the group gymnasium.

Felingaili broached this conversation after inviting Lieutenant Voss to take part in an impromptu and mandatory late-night racquetball lesson. Josi usually played with Renee, but since it was known that the commander of the *Enterprise* gave such lessons to anyone aboard ship who was interested in them anytime they asked, it provided excellent pretext; also, at that time of day, the gym locker room was almost always deserted. These were the important factors.

The distinctly sleepy Betazoid woman shook her head at the XO of the *Enterprise* through billows of steam. "Let's see if I've got this straight: You want to keep track of the *Blacksnake* in seven dimensions and two separate spectra using phase-plane-constant vector determination? Mind if I ask *why*?"

Josi offered Seantie an innocent gaze. "Um, because we want to know where it's going? Here's the theory: The Section 31 ship's going to try really hard to remain concealed while looking for the people who did this damage to the *Enterprise*. Meaning that they'd be concealed to us, too."

"*Why*? As in: Why, exactly, do we want to track this ship? And why do *they* want to track the people —"

The first officer of the *Enterprise* shook her head and held up a restraining hand. "Honey, it's one of those things

we're gonna do because the captain says *please*. *Can you do it?"*

The *Enterprise's* senior science officer scowled and slouched lower in the water. Josi imagined that, judging by the particular way in which the Betazoid matron was fidgeting, that Seantie was probably seeking a forced-air vent capable of providing spot-massage.

"Like we could find a blind man in dark room looking for a black cat that isn't there," Voss retorted (incomprehensibly, Josi thought) before leaning back and closing her eyes. She shrugged, eyes still closed, when Josi's response never moved past bewilderment: A Betazoid didn't necessarily need to see another sentient being in order to know what that being was feeling. "Sorry; old mathematics joke. Seriously, though, I'd need *some* sort of data to input — point-of-progress, apparent magnitude, directional trend, *something*. If this ship can cloak itself, it can also cloak its warp signature and ion trails. And I *do* know this is Section 31 we're talking about here, so..." she let the comment finish itself, and sighed, apparently having found the air jet she'd been looking for.

"We sent Colin and T'Dani to shadow the *Blacksnake*. They should be able to give us all of that data."

Now the Betazoid opened her eyes and lifted a brow at the *Enterprise's* first officer. "You've sent T'Dani? You expect someone's going to get hurt?"

Josi grimaced and lifted herself out of the Jacuzzi to sit

on the side. With a normal body temperature of not quite ninety-two, she found a hundred and ten distinctly toasty after awhile. "I thought you *knew* this was Section 31 we're talking about? Or did you never get a chance to meet the reptile who commands the *Blacksnake*?"

Captain Ingram couldn't have begun to command the *Blacksnake*, even though, at first glance, it was nothing more complex than any standard, sixty-person runabout. The bridge consoles — not those of a runabout; they possessed schematics similar to those of a full-sized starship — were set up as though adapted for use by the blind, partially through an arcane pattern of chunky raised toggle-switches, a modification that Ingram found baffling.

Nobody offered to explain the setup to her, and she *did* ask. Kell merely smiled at her questions. She found his smile so unsettling that she refrained from asking too many. Ingram would have to work with this man —or seduce him, or blackmail him or, perhaps, put him out an airlock. The captain of the *Enterprise* found the inspector general of Section 31 so provoking that she didn't consider that last too unlikely an option, should this turn out to be a lengthy excursion.

If her eyes didn't deceive her, Ingram was also fairly certain that this ship was capable of a startlingly high warp potential, and came equipped with cloaking capacity. It also hosted a number of station consoles (and probably whole rooms, though she wasn't invited to tour the

runabout) that defied recognition. She wasn't offered an explanation for these, either. Nor was she allowed a tricorder, though there were 'padds available to her; perhaps, she thought, her hosts didn't realize that, between the communicator that they did allow her to bring, and the capacities of a few of these 'padds, she could rig together the equivalent of a tricorder, given time and a few simple tools.

Certainly, some of the instrumentation that she *thought* she recognized couldn't be used for what it appeared to be designed for: The damping of large-scale subspace projection, for instance, or the long-range manipulation of multi-dimensional waldos. There simply wasn't enough physical equipment, in large enough proportion, to make such activities tenable from such a tiny vessel. The bridge was also unusually large for a runabout, and the conformation of the craft, from the outside at least, was peculiar — not in any way Starfleet standard.

It was made implicit by the *Blacksnake* crew, though never directly stated, that Captain Ingram would be unwelcome to tour other areas of the ship. The crew of the *Blacksnake* appeared to be obsessively well-trained. And a quarter of the crew, including the people who showed her more-or-less through the ship, were Andorian. Captain Ingram somehow doubted that these two particulars were coincidental.

Ingram was given a very long time to mull all this over. She'd been politely shown her quarters, the path from

her quarters to the nearest lift, sickbay, the crew mess, and the bridge, then left largely alone for three weeks. Assuming that they were actually following the trail of something real, and doing so at a brisk warp, whoever had taken Shrev had taken him significantly far away.

Ingram was determined to question Kell about all of this, but she wasn't granted that opportunity until, seemingly out of nowhere, the man alarmed her by inviting her to dinner in his quarters, which was held in the presence of an extremely good bottle of Rhine wine. She'd gone into his quarters feeling bemused by the invitation in general. As far as she could deduce, Kell didn't care for her any more than she did for him, but her bemusement was interrupted by sheer surprise at the décor of the inspector general's personal quarters.

His sole couch was bright red and yellow velour, in distinct opposition to the various purples of his bedspread and the standard pale gray-blues and greens of the walls. His tableware, though perfectly matched in form and function, ranged from orange and white through pink and brown.

Captain Ingram chalked this psychedelic effect up to either some as-yet-undiscovered quirk innate to Kell himself, or to the fact that the personal quarters on Section 31 ships might have been saddled with the same interior decoration for the past forty years without changing tastes ever having been taken into account, or to yet another esoteric Section 31 psychological game, and subsequently

ignored the vividness of her surroundings. Nothing present appeared to pose any sort of threat, as far as she could tell. However, she hoped that Shawn Kell wouldn't just sit and smile at her when she asked him a question in the privacy of his quarters. If he did that, she decided while attempting to frame her comment into something less obvious than a direct interrogatory statement, she'd get up and run out of the room.

It hadn't taken Ingram long after boarding the *Blacksnake* to learn that Kell wasn't one for idle chitchat, so she determined not to waste time. She feared that they might not have all that much of it to spare: "It seems to me, Mr. Kell, that it's no coincidence that you and your unique crew were chosen to take over this investigation," she offered.

He did indeed smile at her, his gaze more inquisitive than friendly, but to her immense relief, he also deigned to reply to the comment. "Of course, it's not. I'm afraid I take this case more personally than is good for me. Have you ever heard of the *Aatuuhari*, Captain Ingram?"

Captain Ingram shrugged. "An Andorian progressive political party, aren't they?"

He drew a deep breath and poured himself more wine. "Well. That's the part most people know about. They have an underground. With no *actual* name. Plausible deniability, you understand."

"And you think this nameless underground..." Captain Ingram paused, searching for the least inflammatory term;

"extension of the Aatuu'hari's abducted Yeoman Th'raess'Aen? Why?"

"Aatuu'hari means 'strange brew'. Everyone thinks that's a moniker they were given by the more conservative factions. A mockery. It's not. Rather, it's the basis of their platform. They're the ones who pushed through the laws in the Andorian Parliament that enforce genetic detailing of all individuals, and modern *shelthreth* by genetic dictat."

"Because they're having population issues, I thought."

Kell took a long sip of wine, swallowed, then shook his head slowly. "Again, that's what they tell people."

"So, what *is* their actual goal? Population tracking? And what does any of it have to do with Shrev?" Captain Ingram took a sip of her own wine and considered the tray of canapés that sat between them.

"Population tracking? Oh, most definitely so. Looking for unique traits. The reason their underground *is* underground at all is because the vast majority of the Andorian people — not to mention the Federation — would be so aghast at what they've done in the past, and at what they ultimately propose for the future, that it's difficult to find words for it when preparing a report on the bastards." He paused and pursed his lips, frowning. "What they currently feel would be best for the future of Andoria would be to alter every Andorian henceforth residing there to be one of three things: Male, female, or dead."

Ingram, in the process of picking up a tidbit to put into her mouth, set it right back down again. "What? But..."

she shook her head, nonplussed. This was one of the most intricate conundrums facing the Federation, and always had been: It was necessary, in order to abide by the Charter's high overarching standards of freedom and dignity, to allow all members to determine their own destinies by freely determining the composition of their own planetary governments.

What was the Federation, then, supposed to do should one of those governments become an impedance to freedom and dignity — or, as in this case, potentially conducive to genocide?

Kell's inscrutable visage twisted into an expression that Captain Ingram chose not to try and classify, and he added: "But they wouldn't actually be *Andorian* anymore then, would they? And so, you see why the Aatuuhari needs to keep all this quiet. And can you understand *now* why they've abducted your crewman? I've seen his files. He's *exactly* the sort of thing they're trying to create."

Captain Ingram frowned. "With all due respect, Mr. Kell, Shrev's not a *thing* —"

"He is to them. I can guarantee it. And once they've attained what it is they're striving for, all of Andoria, her colonies and her people, will become *things* to them." He paused and took a long, thirsty drink of wine before continuing. "Somebody was so avid about getting their hands on your crewman, they got extremely messy this once. Usually, looking for the Aatuuhari underground faction..." he shook his head. "You know, Captain, the best

way to keep a secret? It's to pretend that there *isn't* one.

"This is the best chance we've had to get at them directly since I started on this case twenty-seven years ago. I don't fool myself into thinking that they're only doing this in one area. They have their fingers in a lot of pies, including Fesoan's Am Tal and the..." he drew another deep breath, again letting it subside slowly as he took another sip of wine from his nearly-empty glass. "Well, that's for the future to take care of, not pertinent to what we're doing right now."

Captain Ingram had never heard a non-Andorian individual, even her CMO, directly refer to Andoria as *Fesoan* before. Admittedly, Kell felt some kind of personal stake in this. Maybe, she mused, that was common among members of Section 31, but it struck an uncomfortable note with the captain of the *Enterprise*, though she'd have had a difficult time saying why, had she been asked to. "What sorts of criminal activity are they involved in?"

Kell shrugged. "That we *know* of? Different varieties of cloning. Temporal highjinks, as you've experienced personally, possibly culminating in large-scale kidnapping, though that's something we can't directly verify. Largely prohibited cutting-edge cryogenic and metabolic containment — hell, let's call it what it is, shall we? Economical humanoid internment methods. Cloning requires *subjects*, yes? Inter-dimensional transportation experiments, leaving a painfully long line of experimental subjects with twisted and mutilated genomes stretching

away in various directions around it. And, of course, the crime of raising what all this genetic and temporal manipulation produces as a super-race. Or whatever it is that they're calling it now. From all reports, they definitely don't have any intention of raising them as actual Andorians." He paused for breath.

It seemed that Captain Ingram's concerns about him not being forthcoming had been unfounded. "They're trying to breed a race of clones?" the thought of having a Eugenics War with some hyper-augmented super-breed of Andorians was chilling, particularly considering that they could destroy the Federation, effortlessly, from the inside. Kell shook his head.

"Not exactly. Like I said, they've got cutting-edge technologies. Some of which are ours. They separate out all the DNA in a cell and its sub-cells into trait-units, and recombine them around a core of whatever traits they find most compelling. Using Shrev? He's quite physically powerful. Has multiple sensory systems. He's the male gender, giving them an endless supply of reproductive cells capable of producing either male or female genomes. And he's markedly Andorian-looking. Quite the unusual fusion of traits for one of his ancestry." The inspector general of Section 31 made a grimace of pure disgust.

"You want to destroy this facility," Ingram announced flatly.

Kell nodded, refilled his glass, and raised it in a grim toast. "Irrevocably yes, Captain Ingram."

"I want to rescue my yeoman, Mr. Kell. And the murder of clones is still murder."

Kell smiled. It wasn't pretty. "Section 31 doesn't engage in murder, Renee. We set things right."

"Even if you have to do it by the wrong methods." This was the crux of what amounted to an endless argument between Starfleet and Section 31. Captain Ingram set down her wineglass with a ringing click and rose.

"That's for the future to worry about," Kell replied softly, in the general direction of Captain Ingram's glass. Ingram snorted.

"You're sure that's *your* slogan, and not the Aatuuhari's?" she snapped. He fixed her with his cutting gaze but didn't reply. The captain of the *Enterprise* went to find dinner elsewhere, one she doubted she'd have much appetite for.

Chapter Twelve

The first Theskhe stopped the second one in the hallway. They had long ago taken to wearing different colors and styles of clothing. This amused Gleevah, who considered it to be a pathetic affectation, and so allowed it. A lot of the things that they did amused Gleevah, who — the first Theskhe was convinced of this — considered most of their actions to be pathetic. The Augment certainly didn't consider them to be *people*: Gleevah had always seemed to treat them with much the same indifference as it gave to the sad, mutilated *zhens* and holoprojections that had reared the Theskhes all those years ago.

Gleevah's general lack of concern *did* present the Theskhes a great deal of latitude for creativity. "Shrev wanted to bathe in private, and so I was waiting out here," the first Theskhe told the second, in what she hoped was a flustered tone: "But he got away *again*. Can you come in here and help me figure out how, so that I can determine which way he might have gone?"

"Gleevah's going to kill us, and I *do* mean that literally. Why did you let him leave the —"

"*Let* him? And where the hell were you?" the second Theskhe hissed at the first, who held open the door to the steamy room for her doppelganger.

The second Theskhe shook her head and frowned before stepping into what amounted to a private spa.

"We'll never get him to help us willingly if he knows there's more than one of us. He's creeped out enough as it is. If it'd been me, I'd have offered him a massage or —"

The steam effectively concealed everything from casual sight, even to someone equipped with Andorian sensory organs, but the first Theskhe knew she had to act before her double could smell the results of her having already asked three of the other Theskhes in here.

The ancient weapon was a wonderful thing: A three-foot-long, medium-coarse duranium chain, each end of which consisted of a six-inch-long, sheathed dagger. The daggers, naturally, had to be sheathed in order for a person to effectively use the chain. Three feet of chain snapped tight between Andorian-strong female arms offered something just over a hundred and fifty pounds of torsion strength per linear inch — more than enough to slice through a windpipe or snap a humanoid cervical spinal column, even one composed of springy Andorian bone. Nor did the process cause too much bleeding; the room smelled far more like a rarely cleaned, well-used public toilet than it did the slaughterhouse which it had become.

The first Theskhe wanted Shrev to herself, and not in a state of perpetual unconsciousness. Not that they didn't all feel that way, hence their unwillingness to appear before him simultaneously. Gleevah never did seem to catch onto the fact that, for all their structural similarity, every Theskhe was a little bit different, both psychologically and physically.

This one was pretty sure that, at some point in time, either human women or Andorian *shens* killed one another, or at least competed strenuously, for mates. She had no idea which it might be: Nobody had bothered to school her in real Terran or *ghelnar* history or biology, and in any case, she didn't really care. She did, however, know that although Theskhes could be cloned by the hundred — though Gleevah, for obvious reasons of control, had only six to eight at any given headquarters — doing so was a time-consuming and economically burdensome task, because clones, like anyone else, had to be *raised*. She knew that the Augment was working on some variation of time-lapsed tank-raising or even transporter-fueled cloning, but she also knew that neither method had been perfected yet, and that Gleevah had already killed one of the other Theskhes several days ago for some minor infraction.

If she killed the rest herself, she'd be the only true Theskhe left at this headquarters. There *were* other things derived from the same genetic pool as herself: Sports saved from the end of the process, when the chromosomes had become frayed and tired and no longer produced properly, but such technological toys posed her no immediate physical threat. She tossed the soiled *varchuk* in the general direction of the hot tub. It wasn't a particularly messy weapon, so she didn't have to spend an inordinate amount of time cleaning herself off and changing her clothing, though she wouldn't have wanted to touch the chain.

Shrev *had* been in here, of course, and she *had* let him sneak out. The thought amused her; she had been able to see him, hear him, smell him, and even *feel* him leave the room. How could he not know that? Did he really think he was a creature of such stealth? It was adorable. And she doubted very much that Gleevah would punish her for either killing her aftershadows or for stealing the *varchuk*. Not with the havoc Shrev might be able to create, as she kept letting him escape. Over time, the hybrid whose body had created her own would certainly come to see that she wanted to help him, that she loved him.

The room she'd stolen the ancient punch-dagger from contained a lot more than *varchuks*, and Gleevah had so helpfully — if not altogether knowingly — shared with the Theskhes so much of the technology it had created, that it wasn't difficult to imagine how she might lose both herself and Shrev from Gleevah, in that room. Theskhe was pondering her options relative to this as she left the opulent bathroom, so lost in her own thoughts that she nearly ran right into the Augment, who stood waiting for her outside the door.

"I thought one or two of you would prove worthy of my efforts, given the right impetus," Gleevah rasped. Theskhe narrowed her eyes.

"Two?" Shrev's transclone snapped.

Gleevah chuckled dryly. The Augment had been alive long enough to know how to use such a sound as more than

a wordless warning. It also knew exactly which Theskhe this was, and it was more than a little bemused to see that the old cloning maxim was, indeed, true: The original transclone retained sharper enate behaviors than her aftershadows.

Gleevah eased around her to peer into the recesses of the lavatory, where the steam had begun to thin due to the door remaining open while Theskhe stood in the doorway, the mass of her body breaking the invisible photon thread along which it slid closed. The Augment shook its head, affecting sadness. "That animal's not worthy of this sort of sacrifice. Surely you know he'll never surrender to such passion?"

Privately, Gleevah was beginning to regret not having taken full advantage of those things that actually might have made Th'raess'Aen surrender. Or, had the hybrid continued to show spirit, those things with which they could break his mind, which had been Gleevah's plan in the first place. The Augment had capitulated to the Theskhes' wish to try and convince Shrev to join them willingly because Gleevah found the transclones' longing for the creature to be amusing.

Gleevah's amusement had waned. Much of the time, the hybrid was unconscious in the transclone bed, but too much time spent that way would kill a humanoid.

The Augment wasn't ready to kill him, at least not quite yet.

Gleevah would have to reconsider the steps they had

failed to take with Shrev. Conscious, the hybrid was proving to be tiresomely intractable, and his draw on the female transclones had come to irk the Augment far more than it would ever be willing to admit. Or Gleevah would have to convince this Theskhe to reconsider the steps they had failed to take.

Yes: it would be much more effective if the Theskhe could be convinced to do it herself. Which meant she'd have to be kept both alive and docile, herself, until the thing was done.

This Theskhe had just proven to be exactly the sort of transclone the *Aatuu'hari* was wanting. This knowledge substantially improved the Augment's mood. With the cells Th'raess'Aen could provide, they could produce billions more like her, without needing to resort to jaded aftershadows. "Give me a few decades, and I could create you some Shrevs that would be very content to play your *Feso'ando* games with you."

Theskhe scowled. "I want him *now*, not in a few decades."

It was the Augment's turn to scowl. She did want the big hybrid Andorian immediately, too: Gleevah wasn't so enfeebled of body, or so limited of physical senses, that it was unaware of the aura surrounding the female clone. Composed partly of chemical pheromones, partly of electrical fields emitted by her eadilium, which played erotically across her skin...

It made the androgyne's atrophied, undifferentiated

sexual organs ache.

Gleevah offered Theskhe what it knew to be the repulsive equivalent of a reassuring grin. "Hasn't it occurred to you yet that I possess the capacity to make tomorrow yesterday and turn later into *now*? There are powers, Theskhe, beyond what it is that drives you in this moment. I tell you that Vraeth'uutr'Shrev Th'raess'Aen loathes you and everything that you desire. If I can prove this to you as a truth, will you consider the alternatives I've tried to offer you? How would you like to be able to perceive the animal's *thoughts*?" Gleevah could use its own precious Theskhe sport to help carry this out.

As the Augment had imagined it might, this got her attention. It would take some time to reprogram the chip Gleevah had implanted in their captive's skull — but what did Gleevah have, anyway, but time? And that implant...Gleevah pulled a small, computerized screen out of one pocket. Yes, indeed; the implant had already located their captive.

Chapter Thirteen

Shrev wondered if he was being followed. If he wasn't, that probably just meant that there really wasn't any easy way out of this part of the complex. Or that he was being trailed at a distance, probably by the Theskhe who'd pretended to let him escape.

He was fairly certain that there was more than one Theskhe clone. He was also fairly certain that this complex somehow existed in more than the four basic dimensions of length, height, width, and spacetime. Some parts of it seemed to fold back upon themselves endlessly, and the structure was not otherwise so large that a person with a precise sense of direction and a decent memory for landmarks could lose themselves in it for over two hours, as Shrev irredeemably had.

Although the weirdness of the building did make him feel as though he'd ignored the hookah-smoking caterpillar and started nibbling on the wrong side of the mushroom, the ostensible endlessness of the building didn't completely unhinge the mind of someone who'd spent the vast majority of their childhood in underground living circumstances — not as much as it would have if he'd been raised solely on Terra, where he'd spent his adolescence learning to tolerate constant exposure to wide-open spaces, some of which were not too far from Earth's Antarctic, and easily as cold as parts of Andoria.

Not that it really seemed to matter whether he left the complex. It hadn't so far; everything just kept ending at the ocean. Ever the optimist, he continued to explore his apparently limited options, nevertheless.

Th'raess'Aen literally jumped when he rounded the next corner, but not much higher than the child who was standing at the end of the corridor, near a blank wall. She backpedaled into it away from him, eyes wide as saucers. He was entirely too preoccupied; he should have known she was there long before he rounded that corner.

"I'm sorry," Shrev said softly, in Standard; "I don't mean to scare you." She should have known that he was approaching before she saw him, too, come to that.

Unless one of us isn't really here. Shrev made a wry face at his own too-creative thoughts. Her only response was to fold her arms over her chest and cringe further into the corner. Her antennae arced sideways and down, nearly beneath her hair: She was terrified. Shrev looked around himself — still no sign of pursuit — and took a step deeper into the blind corridor, falling to one knee.

"*Aalfraim'doreazh iiphzhel'mailir*," he murmured what he'd already said in Standard in *graalen*, his movements slow and his voice soft and coaxing, as though he was trying to soothe a small, frightened animal. "*Emdas iiphvair amor'neszhuu?*"

Her antennae went straight up in surprise, and she threw a glance over his left shoulder, prompting him to do the same. One of the tongueless *zhen* stood there; her

antennae, too, were stiff with surprise. The *zhen* brushed past him and knelt down by the child. Now they both fixed him with saucer-like eyes. The little *shen's* antennae had gone back to announcing her fear, but now their arc was further forward — sadness and fear. The *zhen* reached up and ran a gentle hand through the child's shoulder-length curly hair and made a soft, encouraging sound that her antennae duplicated.

"*Il'amor m'tui'ial,*" the child replied to Shrev's request for her name brusquely, in a nearly subvocal tone. Then she pursed her lips and shook her head at him, throwing another look over his shoulder. He glanced back again. Nothing. Shrev was baffled. *My name is a secret?* Well, okay...

"*Kinzaa'snai,*" the child added in the same hushed tone.

Shrev frowned. A *kinzaa'snai* was a vicious little weasel-like creature that hid itself in Andorian snowbanks in much the same way that a Terran ant lion laid in wait for prey in sand dunes — except that a *kinzaa'snai* was fully equipped to rip off a humanoid hand or a foot, if a person wasn't careful. They were no good to eat, and were usually hunted like vermin, for sport and to protect both unwary people and precious free-range alicorns from their nasty little steel-trap jaws. *Kinzaa'snai* was also an old-fashioned Andorian epithet for *Klingon*, though he doubted that was pertinent in this situation. She tossed another significant look over his shoulder, then around at the half-

corridor.

Shrev smiled, nodded understanding, got up, and walked the other way.

This is a trap, was what the little girl had been trying to tell him. He attempted to appear unconcerned, but he wasn't; he was suddenly filled with trepidation for the *zhen* and her charge in the half-corridor. What sorts of games —

"Enjoying your time out?"

Again, Shrev jumped. Constant jumpiness made both Andorians and humans cranky. Irritability rose up out of the bottom of Shrev's psyche like swamp gas, and he scowled. The voice confronting him, when again he hadn't sensed anyone there at all, was somehow *creaky*, like a series of poorly maintained, old-fashioned door hinges.

The sight of the thing that confronted him wiped the scowl right off his face.

If the *chae-na* was four feet tall, Shrev would have been surprised. This was primarily caused by a pair of legs stunted and twisted all out of proportion to the rest of its body. Its body, too, was strange — not wholly a *chae-na's* body conformation, but that paled to insignificance beside the fact that its warped legs appeared to be powered by some variety of cyborg implants that ran from its skull down its back beneath its clothes. Its clothes were of fine, thick Andorian silk in the most modern hues and cuts, impeccable.

Its skull was wrinkled, bald, of an unhealthy hue, and sported two working antennae as well as a supernumerary

one, as warped and twisted as the thing's legs, straggling out of a blasted-looking socket near the abnormally-long but serviceable right antenna. Supernumerary antennae were not a terribly unusual occurrence, but they could warp or destroy normal antennae buds, facial features, and the motor-neuron centers through which they grew. Such potentially-destructive outgrowths needed to be removed well prior to birth, at their source — the inner core of the *eadilium*, which took up space in Andorian skull sinuses that, in other humanoids, was usually hollow. What might have happened to children born with such a congenital defect before the technology existed to repair it wasn't known, and people didn't like to speculate.

There was a *lot* about the history of their race that Andorians simply refused to speculate on.

Shrev had lately been wondering whether that tendency wasn't partially to blame for the situation he currently found himself in. "What...mmm, who are *you*?" He followed simple instinct in the face of the veiled dismay the thing seemed to emit, like some sort of particularly repellent cologne, and took sanctuary in audacity.

Look like a victim and you're liable to become one, the psyche of races spawned in brutal environments insisted, and with good reason. It showed up in different cultures in different forms, but regardless of the weave of its mesh, its outside appearance presented a daunting barrier. It was a non-uncommon Batesian-variety mimicry that, backed up

in sentient species by formidable minds or weapons or both, tended to be quite effective, even when the mind was befuddled and the weapons non-existent. Such an instinct didn't usually kick in without reason, however: That would be counterproductive, as occasionally happened between races who both hailed from brutal environments, prompting war for no particular reason anybody could define.

This creature, though, was somehow dangerous, and would have been regardless of the forbidding nature of its exterior. It offered Shrev a cold smile that its warped face displayed as a smirk. Its teeth were tiny and jagged.

"Myself? I am Gleevah. I own this place. I made it. What are *you* doing *here*, Th'raess'Aen?"

The wizened creature might as well have introduced itself as Kokopelli or Grendel. *Gleevah* meant 'grim androgyne', the title of a mythical Andorian goblin, a compassionless, grasping sprite who desired to possess the souls of those who themselves were selfish and cruel: A morality tale for children. *The gleevah will get you if you don't learn to* (insert particular social construct here)! had been a common refrain when Shrev was growing up.

Somehow, he doubted that his aunts and uncles would be pleased to know that those particular predictions for his future had suddenly come true. The confusion, horror, and surprise the unlikely *chae-na* instilled in him forced the truth out of Shrev's suddenly dry throat:

"Actually, I'm lost. I tried to ask directions from the

little girl down that last corridor —"

"What little girl?"

He shrugged. "I've no idea. She seemed afraid of me."

The ugly creature lurched gracelessly to the corridor and peered down it. "There's nobody here."

Shrev followed after and peered down the corridor himself.

The psychic shock that the hybrid man experienced upon looking back down that hall weakened his knees, and he caught himself on the doorjamb. The corridor went all the way down to a bank of windows overlooking an arbor-shaded waterfall, and turned sharply left. Not a blind corridor at all. The chill that shot up his spine felt like somebody had suddenly jammed an icicle up the back of his shirt. "This place is creepy," he muttered to nobody in particular.

"And we don't want you wandering around in it," Gleevah snarled. "There are no *children* in this part of the complex — they're not allowed here. And *you* are not allowed anywhere alone. I am growing weary of playing with you."

Had the original layout of the corridor been some sort of holoprojection? And the little *shen* — had she even been there at all? Why would a holoprojection warn him? Or were they simply trying to make him paranoid to the point that he'd think he'd lost his mind, and was somehow here for his own protection?

This thing that called itself *Gleevah* was certainly no illusion, unless somehow the holoprojections in this place bore particularly repulsive odors. Shrev's sense of smell was as dual-tuned as the rest of his senses, and the monstrous-looking *chae-na* wafted the trace of an odor that suggested there might be rancid blood somewhere upon its person, or that perhaps the same accident of birth that had caused its appalling appearance and useless legs had left it unable to perform adequate personal hygiene. He offered it an equivalently dirty look.

It ignored his overt hostility and cast its gaze over his left shoulder, instead. The purple-caste Orion, who injected Shrev with whatever it was that caused the room to spin and fade before he had a chance to react, was probably no illusion, either.

Chapter Fourteen

"What do you mean, you've lost contact?" Commander Felingaili demanded. Colin frowned at the intercom, though not more significantly than he'd already been frowning for the last seven hours.

"I mean we've lost contact. I thought it might be some sort of astrophysical interference at first, but it's gone on too long. Someone or something has put up a psionic barrier."

"But nothing's happened to Renee?"

"I doubt that I'd be talking to you, and definitely not this calmly, if anything had. But if you want to know what's going on for certain, you will need to contact the people Renee has determined —"

The Orion woman, her voice knotted into an even deeper contralto than usual with anxiety, cut the telepath off. "Which on subspace would take four days from where we are now. You lost contact where, exactly?"

"Tail-end of Sagittarius. More or less. Here's what I'm thinking, if you could home in on whatever psionic damping-signal —"

"Using what?"

Colin sighed. The sound was thick with aggravation. T'Dani sat watching him with keen blue eyes, saying nothing. "How do you track *standard* cloaking devices?" he enquired of the commander of the *Enterprise*.

"Look for energy trails. Standard cloaking devices demand a lot of energy. But the *Blacksnake* doesn't have standard cloaking —"

It was Colin's turn to butt in: "You think they might have some sort of telepathic damping system I don't know about? That was rhetorical, by the way. This is not: How far away are you now?"

"Twenty parsecs."

"Well, if they're anywhere near where they were seven hours ago..." Colin shook his head at the comm link as though it had done something extremely rude. "Never mind; if they're not there, they're not, and we can deal with that when you get six parsecs closer. Which should take you, what...an hour at warp four? Or ten minutes at warp eight. In any case, when you get close enough — and you need to be within fifteen parsecs of whatever you want to scan for this — look for standard Coriolis ray signals in the psionic spectrum. In my office in engineering on deck twenty-nine there's —"

"With the ship as banged up as it is, warp four would be pushing it. Eight would tear the emergency forcefield to shreds, and so won't be happening anytime soon. And within fifteen parsecs, the *Blacksnake* will be able to sense something the size of a starship," the XO of the *Enterprise* argued.

T'Dani decided it was time to throw her own two cents into the fray. "Obviously, the *Blacksnake* has already detected this shuttle. That would seem to put paid to all

our attempts at subterfuge. Finding and protecting Starfleet personnel should be our focus now, Commander."

Felingaili sighed — usually a sound of irritation from the *Enterprise's* first officer. "I concede the point, Doctor. One moment." Josi told Marco and Demora to warp six parsecs closer to the last known heading of the *Blacksnake*, then inquired of Colin: "Yeoman, what was that about deck twenty-nine?"

"My keyboard there has a setting that will allow you to switch the psionic wall matrices into sensor mode." Colin's frown deepened, gouging furrows into his face. "I haven't altered the keyboard into Standard yet, but concurrent depression of the four keys at each board corner should bring up a holographic schematic of the board in Standard, and you can request sensor-specific matrix specifications that way."

"And if somebody hits the wrong keys?" Josi enquired archly.

"If you need to take a committee down there to decide which of the keys constitute the keys at each edge of the board, then do that. Do not hit the wrong keys."

All archness fled from Josi's tone. "Oh, god. What if we *do* choose the wrong keys?"

A half-smile smoothed most of the worry lines out of Colin's face. "I'll laugh at you. You *wouldn't* want that. Don't worry about it, Commander; I changed the sensitivity of the interface board a long time ago. To perform more complex or potentially dangerous functions using the

matrices requires a group of telepaths psionically linked into it. Which requires *me*. You're relatively safe as long as I'm not aboard."

"Yeah, that's what I'd always figured. Bite me. And be warned; I'll hunt you down if the ship turns into some horrible origami arrangement because we hit the wrong keys. Felingaili out."

"You think they'll be able to track the *Blacksnake* that way?" T'Dani inquired skeptically. Colin shrugged.

"I suspect they'll be able to track it some way. I honestly don't think the man in charge of that ship," Colin's expression crumpled into a mask of distaste; T'Dani knew that the telepath felt no fondness for Shawn Kell, and she thought she understood why, as well, "has put up a psionic damping field for our personal benefit. If he felt that our presence posed any sort of irritation to his mission, a vessel like the *Blacksnake* certainly has the capacity to cut out all of our comm links, and probably our warp, sublight, and life support capacities, too. If this damping of the psionics has anything to do with us at all, it's that we're being played with, and nothing more."

T'Dani blinked in surprise. Colin Ingram hadn't been so forthcoming before now. "You got all that from Renee?"

Ingram sighed, leaned back in his chair, and closed his eyes. A long moment passed before he replied. "The *Blacksnake* possesses instrumentation, and therefore probably technology, that Renee doesn't even recognize.

And she has a hunch that Section 31 itself may either be culpable for the rise of the Aatuu'hari, or otherwise involved in the escalation of this particular situation."

The half-Vulcan doctor considered this somberly for a moment. "What makes her think all this?"

"The varieties and intensities of energy that are being expended on this single mission, and the fact that Section 31 is giving away both itself and a lot of technological information to Starfleet by being part of it at all. Renee suspects that Section 31 came forward to take control of the investigation in order to possibly erase their own backtrails. Inoculate themselves against possible allegations of involvement with the Aatuu'hari. Or something along these lines."

T'Dani offered Colin a horrified stare. "And nothing will stand in their way," she breathed softly. The stare that Colin gave her in return was laced with something she couldn't interpret.

"Renee will stand in their way. One way or another, Doctor."

Corrigan had no response for this. She and Colin sat staring at one another until the communications console of the shuttle imperiously demanded their attention. Colin leaned forward and inspected the incoming message. His brows shot up in what was either alarm or amazement or both. "Incoming coded signal. From the *Blacksnake*. It's their current vector information!"

"A trick?"

Colin keyed in an access code manually. "No. It's got the captain's personal signature appended. Computer! Send this information through to the starship *Enterprise* immediately by emergency warp communications channels, code Ingram beta four-four two nine. Confirm!"

The thrum of the engines, the lights, manual console interface, and most of the heat in the little shuttle vanished for a space of two seconds: Emergency warp communications sucked up a lot of energy. Verbal messages could not be sent that way unless they were wrapped in bulky, particle-rich computer code, and such an endeavor could easily take the vast majority of the power a space station or small planetoid possessed. Starships in trouble that performed this maneuver had been known to never regain their life support or engine capacities. It wasn't a form of communication that took place often, or lightly.

Communications transfer confirmed, the computer droned. The heat and light returned to the shuttle, and T'Dani let out the breath she hadn't even been aware she'd been holding. The heat had been off long enough that she could see it.

"I hope Josi realizes that this is her big chance to call for Starfleet backup," Colin observed, dryly. "It's *our* big chance to get scooped up by the *Blacksnake*. Interested?"

"I very much doubt that it matters whether I'm interested or not," T'Dani replied.

The path the *Blacksnake* was following wasn't by any means a straight one; rather, it was composed of coils of coils that wound off of each other at random. This, Kell explained patiently to Captain Ingram, was a temporal-conduction warp-trail obliteration technique that required the use of both temporal waves and enormous amounts of plain old energy. It was the simple potential-to-kinetic residue of the original Bolian transport that they were actually following: They were only replicating the temporal-wave pattern because it was more than possible for something as small as a ship to hide within such an intricate space-time arrangement.

It was late, what would have been fourth shift on Captain Ingram's ship. She sat alone with Kell on the bridge. She had *thought* that Kell, like the rest of his crew, was asleep at this hour. She'd only managed thirteen minutes alone with the *Blacksnake*'s distinctly unusual communications equipment. It had been enough, she thought, but just barely.

Yesterday, something on the *Blacksnake* had put a barrier between herself and the telepathic link she maintained with Colin. Nothing had happened to him or, she was fairly certain, to T'Dani; she would have felt that. This was like an impossibly thick wall of some soft insulation, and there was no getting through it. She'd managed to send out a single, short-range message-burst on Starfleet channels regarding the *Blacksnake*'s shielding, hull, and engine codes, and its known vector information.

The runabout should be traceable to the shuttle using one or more of those particulars.

Unless, of course, the *Blacksnake* could somehow alter all of them with quantum suddenness. And if what she was currently learning about this ship was accurate, it probably could. Kell had appeared seconds after she'd closed the encrypted channel and demanded to know why she was on his bridge, and she'd admitted, honestly, that she was altogether too anxious to sleep, and that she wanted (also honestly) some answers regarding how the *Blacksnake's* computers would ever actually be able to work out where Shrev was being held.

Captain Ingram was still where she had been standing — looking innocent, she hoped — when Kell came through the bridge turbolift doors. He had sat down at what, on a starship, would have been the navigations station, rather than in his own command chair. "Once we manage to track the right temporal displacement thread," Kell began, "we'll have some idea of whether they continued all the way in the transport, which frankly would be —"

"The *right* temporal displacement thread? What kind of quantum analysis equipment do you have on here?"

Kell raised one brow. "Standard quantum analysis equipment. Of course, standard equipment can be ameliorated to various degrees."

"How the hell can you ameliorate a function like quantum analysis? Or..." Captain Ingram shrugged, arms

akimbo, "weapons, say?" she was baffled. And not for the first time, since stepping aboard the *Blacksnake*.

Kell offered her a tight grin. He had, she noted for the first time, dimples: "You spray it on."

"What?" Ingram scrutinized the inspector general's suddenly boyish face for signs of an incipient punchline. None existed. "That's impossible!"

Now Kell laughed. Actual humor tinged the sound. "You mean like the whole concept of a *transporter*? Captain, even twentieth century Earth had spray-on ameliorators — for batteries, say — and *they* didn't have anything even as basic as computational nanites or engineered microbiotes or sub-particulate control-circuit technology back then. Their general population was so damned ignorant that they were using tricorder-level technology to record and transmit simple audio-visuals, while their governments were so damned avaricious that they were trying to use the remains of wrecked extraterrestrial craft to formulate weapons to kill each other with. Largely ineffectively, thank God."

That paragraph constituted the longest continuous spate of words Ingram had managed to wrangle out of Shawn Kell thus far. As most, if not all, of his comments were wont to do, it irritated her. "So then, what else is Section 31 so damned avariciously guarding that they're not sharing with either the general population of the Federation, or with Starfleet Command?" Captain Ingram demanded.

Fruitlessly, though he did actually take some time to consider the question. "You'll see, I suppose."

"When we send your storm troopers in to waste my crewman?" probably, Renee reflected, she should stop baiting this man. She wasn't even entirely certain why she did it — perhaps because he didn't seem inclined to rise to the bait. Or to allow her through the formidable facades that ornamented his persona the way scars and tattoos had ornamented his Doppelganger. Though what, anyway, would be the point of breaching such constructs?

"I thought we'd use your people for that, actually."

Captain Ingram struggled to keep the surprise out of her voice and off her face. She was immediately aware that she didn't succeed. "What are you talking about?"

Kell grinned humorlessly. No dimples this time. "How soon they forget. Your senior technical yeoman will be displeased. I would be, were I in such an inapt situation. Your tracking shuttle *Temujin*? Behind this system's largest moon? Ring a bell yet?"

Captain Ingram felt herself flush, and scowled. "I don't know anything about a shuttle called *Temujin*."

"No, probably you don't, since it's *Saratoga*'s shuttle. You, however, are the one who gave us the codes to it."

"I did no such thing!" *Flustered*, she thought bitterly; *you're flustered and you sound flustered and...and...*

"Sure you did. When you transmitted our vector information to them from my bridge. Sorry about cutting off your other mode of access, but the people we're up

against have psionic activity tracers, as do we. We'll beam your people over as soon as I decide exactly how to fit them into my plans."

Ingram felt her face flame again, and bit her lower lip. Her question to him about unimagined technology hadn't been in jest. Neither, apparently, had his response. Kell grinned; for a fleeting second, the expression held amusement again.

"I need to be honest, Captain. What we seem to be uncovering here isn't quite what I expected to find. I *will* require the help of your people — if I hadn't, I wouldn't have let them get this far. Hell, I wish I had more trained staff of my own." He looked away, toward the viewscreen. "I hope you realize we all might die here?"

"Someone said to me once: *we're all going to die someday. But not right now, not this moment, and that's all we're ever given, really.*"

"And you thought you could keep me from doing what I need to do?"

A question like that shouldn't ever be said in such a gentle tone, Captain Ingram mused. She shrugged. "Now I need to be honest. I had no clue that this particular sewer I currently find myself swept into even existed. And I'm more certain than ever that there are probably innocent people involved that your mission will condemn to —"

"Who's really innocent, Renee? Are you? I know I'm not."

Not in any sort of mood for a philosophical debate,

Ingram leaned over the console and shoved her face into Kell's. His eyes widened and he blinked, but he didn't pull back. She had to hand that to him; he wasn't the kind of man who pulled back.

But he would learn to be, if she had anything to say about it.

"You want the Federation as we know it torn apart into squabbling factions? You want enemies capable of taking over our *bodies*, who are currently considering how to slice up a pie whose heat has kept them at bay up to now, to dig in with a spoon? Then fine — fulfill your mission, as *you* see it. Alternatively, you can help us get those who are blameless for the actions of the Aatuu'hari out before you irreparably destroy their cesspit.

"Understand: There are certain documents in certain places, *Inspector*. They're being updated as we speak, updated with what we say. Whether you believe me about this or not, I couldn't give a damn. They're *extremely* incriminating. If you refuse to go along with my alternative, I'll make it abundantly clear to everybody in two quadrants just exactly who it was that provided the tools to excavate the Aatuu'hari's dung channel.

"You know what I'm talking about, *Shawn*. Or would you like to try and deny that it was Section operatives who helped spread outlawed augment technologies to various alien governments, in hope of causing internal strife or outright destruction of potential enemies of Earth? The documentary proof I've got shows that such a denial would

be an outright lie."

Shawn Kell's irises were matte black in the dim light of the night bridge. Ingram could hear his teeth grind from where she bent across the console, nearly nose-to-nose with him. She imagined that she could also hear the gears of his mind turn — and they were well-oiled. "I can let you *try* to enact a rescue. I might even be cajoled into helping you. I can't be held responsible for whether or not you *succeed*."

"Is that supposed to be a threat?"

Kell snorted. "It's a fact, Captain. And it's a lot more than you had ten minutes ago. I've been apprised that you're apt to go a little bonkers when somebody tells you that you can't do, have, or be something."

He stood, moved away from the console toward the command chair, then turned back toward her: "I can either help *you*, or you'll screw this mission all to hell and gone, is what you're saying." He pursed his lips, crossed his arms over his chest, and sat down in the command chair, eyes narrowed. To Captain Ingram's utter disgust, he seemed to be trying very hard to keep himself from either smiling or, perhaps, laughing outright.

Ingram felt her own face tighten into a bitter fist. "I'll screw every mission you ever want to undertake from this point on to hell and gone. I'll give everyone in the Federation a particularly unsavory reason for why Section 31 even exists. *Or* you could kill the damn pushy starship captain. Sure you could. And that'll release documents

that talk about interesting uses for various viruses that'll turn the undercover Section 31 into a gang of criminals to be hunted down like dogs, along with those portions of the Federation that abet Section 31, which in turn will set factions of the Federation against itself like a —"

He held up his right hand, palm out. "Pushy isn't a pungent enough word. If I find the right one, you'll be the first to know. But for the time being *get the hell off my bridge*, or I'll introduce you to a brig the likes of which I'm willing to bet you haven't seen before."

Chapter Fifteen

"I tell you now that, whatever you may believe about him, even if you're right, you're mistaken."

Theskhe's face tightened into a glare as she peered through the antique one-way mirror, one of the few real items in the complex. Something about it amused or was otherwise useful to the Augment; that was the only reason Gleevah kept anything. "I can make him love me," she averred softly.

Gleevah snorted rudely. "I know what he loves, and you aren't in that little diorama. If you want to know what things *are*, then watch." The Augment motioned with its head toward the scene playing itself out on the other side of the mirror: Four holographic Orion guards with the gray dreadlocks favored by their caste, and an old-fashioned screen and projector set up in the back and front of the room, respectively. The screen and projector were real, as was the unconscious human/Andorian hybrid strapped into a chair to keep him from falling out of it. One of the guards urgently administered a very real syringe half-full of stimulant to the man in the chair and pulled away the restraints as Shrev's muscles and tendons regained their tone.

As the first holographic guard tucked the final restraint into his belt, the second one held Shrev in place while he woke, another dimmed the lights (also real: Theskhe

allowed herself a split second to wonder why the Augment had equipped this room with so much actual equipment, and what that equipment's real purpose might be), and the last switched on the projector.

To Theskhe's utter surprise, the thing projected pure unreality in an odd, warped light that she could sense with her antennae and retinas in unison, but to which she couldn't pin a description. Indeed, the more she looked at it, the less it actually appeared to be light at all. She cast the Augment a narrow sideways glance, but no explanation was forthcoming. Irritated, she folded her arms across her chest and watched as Shrev rose to what she was sure would be an unpleasant consciousness, and the strange, pirated media player repeatedly reeled out utter lies in an endless loop projected on a screen that might or might not be solid, using an energy that might or might not be light.

The part-Andorian's time-sense didn't betray him this time: He'd been unconscious for at least three days. But his dreams...his dreams had betrayed him horribly. He'd dreamed, interminably, of the destruction of the starship he had been assigned to after winning that Zee Magnees prize in Exobiology — six years ago, was it? Or seven? Of course, that depended on *whose* years one was referring to...

He was pondering over the exact year he'd been awarded the right to use Starfleet technology to further his research when it suddenly occurred to him that the

repeating dream wasn't a dream at all. Conscious analysis of its effects told him that it was a false signal, not unlike those given out by electromagnetic dampers. This one was, perhaps, a holo-projection...

Inside his head.

Shrev lifted his antennae and opened his eyes to the unlovely sight of bizarre synthetic lighting on the glossy skin of yet more purple-caste Orion guards. And to yet another replay of what had occurred to the *Enterprise*, as the transport they'd brought his broken body to this Alice-in-Wonderland hell in pulled away from the starship. This one was a literal holoprojection, directly in front of his face. He had been drugged, and probably still was, considering the horrific photonic afterimages that appeared to be smeared throughout his brain every time the images on the screen flickered. The dreadful scenario effortlessly brushed aside the nagging question:

How in hell is something holoprojected into a person's mind?

And with such horrifying multi-dimensionality, too.

To see the *Enterprise* implode into shards and slivers made Shrev's chest ache, as though the same effect was occurring to his heart. Andorians, like many other humanoids, allocated emotion to the heart. The fact that Andorian hearts possessed accessory chambers not found in most other humanoid hearts, which added systoles and diastoles to their heartbeats, was irrelevant: The emotions

were the same.

Shrev curled around himself in his chair, keeping himself from keening by force of will. Behind the nearly intolerable pain of his grief, his mind announced coldly that there were only four guards in the room. If he could disarm them...

With what? Unlikely that slippers would be effective against disruptors. Of course, the *Aatuu'hari* wanted Shrev alive, which made him wonder if the disruptors were even viable. Or real. *Things are lost in even just straight cloning*, he'd told Theskhe, and that was true. His captors knew it, too, or they wouldn't be bothering with him.

If the disruptors were real, and the Orions used them, it would relieve the terrible pain in his chest. It would never go away, otherwise. Curled into a ball, he realized all at once that he wasn't strapped down. Shrev cast a glance toward the floor. The chair he was in — the only chair in the room — was bolted in place. *Excellent.*

Shrev came out of his agonized pose and launched himself over it. Using the back of the chair as a solid fulcrum freed both of his feet, and his body became an effective lever. Something in his right instep snapped unpleasantly when that foot made contact with the first guard's skull, but his left was no more than bruised, and so eminently usable again. Within the space of five seconds, two of his guards lay sprawled on the ground, the surprise on their faces the last expression they would ever make in this life. Orion men tended to be big, but they weren't

particularly dense — physiologically speaking, anyway.

He let the motion carry him to the ground, dropped, and rolled, ignoring the fiery pain that cramped his foot and shot upward through his right ankle. Before he had a chance to locate himself another fulcrum in the room of bolted-down objects, however, the walls themselves put out a current that flattened him to the floor. It had no effect on the last two guards — *so I guess that answers my question about the belts*, Shrev thought wryly. The remaining Orions shot him looks of pure hatred, but didn't approach, signaling that they weren't particularly dense mentally, either. He'd have issued them a challenge if he could have, but his mouth and vocal chords were as bound up as the rest of him. He couldn't even blink. The door to the room opened.

"Kryl was right; you *are* a ferocious son of a bitch," Theskhe announced casually. "Even if you kill everyone on the planet, Shrev, surely you realize that you're stuck here? You could have anything you wanted, here; we'd make certain you got it. Nobody has ever wanted you more than I do, Shrev." She knelt down next to him.

Oh, all-overarching goddess, he prayed, *just one arm*. Just let me free *one* arm from this paralysis field. This woman *so* needs to die — *just one arm*!

Theskhe's face crumpled into an expression of what Shrev was certain he misinterpreted as hurt. "I've read your files, you know. The way you were treated by those brats on Andoria as a child! And I suppose your uncle

never told you that *he* was the one who originally gave us your blood, did he?

"Oh, yes," she blathered away conversationally, as though she wasn't crouched next to a man whose entire being was focused on the desire to take her life; "not long after you came to live with them. We have a number of members in the Am Tal! So, when I tell you I could get you anything you want..." she sighed. "Of course, if you wanted anything off the *Enterprise*, I don't suppose we could get that anymore, could we? Kryl's pretty much just as relentless as you are. Not half as attractive, though." She reached down to caress his face with one hand, and motioned to the remaining guards with the other, offering them a smile that was more than half sneer.

Her hands left his face and explored other parts of his body, prompting the guards to make ribald comments. Theskhe touched him like a *shen* might, and he didn't find the effect pleasant. She lowered her body down against his, her mouth against his ear. The edges of her teeth were sharp. "You don't know who actually gave the Aatuuhari the idea to do all this, do you? And then their descendants reviled and hounded us until we had to take it all underground. Damned hypocrites — you, too, my darling."

Shrev's blood crawled. *I'm their prisoner, they can do what they like*, he thought again. His unblinkable, immobile eyes watered and ached horribly, nearly drowning out the pain in his right foot. He forced himself

to ignore both these discomforts and her rough handling, which most *thaans* — or Klingons, or Deltans, or Orions — would have enjoyed.

He forced himself to find the calm center of the hurricane that was the pain and grief and pure white rage in his soul.

They cannot control my mind, and I will not make myself a prisoner in my own mind, he announced to himself: *I will not panic in my own mind!*

Ah, but wasn't showing him the destruction of the *Enterprise*, knowing what emotions it would elicit in him, an attempt to control his mind? And if they wanted to control his mind so that he would willingly go along with this demented agenda for the destruction of Andorian culture — not to mention millions of people; slavery would be the best the *outmoded* might hope for — what *wouldn't* they show him or tell him or imply? *That did not make it real.* He considered this as Theskhe moved aside, watching with interest as the two big lavender-gray guards ungently manacled him hand and aching foot.

The situation he currently found himself in was obviously real. None of the buildings or the planet were necessarily real, though the effects he'd managed to bring about through the use of that chair did make him wonder about the building. Then he thought of the blind-corridor-that-wasn't, with the little *shen* he'd never seen anywhere again. And the little *chan* who had jumped from that deadly cliff. Why would they even keep wholly Andorian

children around here?

It made no sense. Enough things made no sense, and enough other things were so ghastly when considered at length or in depth, that the urge to panic in his own mind was nearly irrepressible. How, for instance, could his internal organs continue to function under the influence of what was otherwise a full-body paralysis field?

That thought, in conjunction with the callous treatment that he couldn't fight against, the inability to close his eyes or swallow, and the steely presence of the manacles, caused him to feel as though he was drowning. He fought the urge to gasp desperately and forced himself to draw slow, deep, measured breaths, fighting for some sort of control over the only thing in the Universe that he still had any sort of influence over.

"I didn't want to have to *do* this to you, Shrev. Gleevah felt we should, of course, but I thought I could talk you around to seeing things the way I do. Why can't you *see*? The Andorian race would be *us*, Shrev! We'd be heroes, legends, gods ultimately. Our names would be songs of praise on Fesoan forever! It would have been so much better that way. Now I need to prove to you how much better it would have been." She touched a sequence of colors on her belt — Shrev had no idea what sequence, nearly unable to see by this point — and the field released him.

His eyes gushed with tears when he finally closed them, and he choked helplessly on the flood of lachrymal

fluid and saliva that filled his dry, unresponsive throat before he could swallow. Part of his manacle included a stiff metal rod shackled between his neck and thighs, which was very smart; a curled-up Andorian with any knowledge of the martial arts was really just a primed spring waiting for something to uncoil against. The guards hauled him to his feet as he coughed and gasped for breath.

When Shrev finally regained control of his swallowing reflex, he glared at Theskhe. Impotently. He felt his own facial features writhe and distort with hatred at the thought of his own helplessness — though whether the hatred was directed at Theskhe directly, at the situation, or at himself, he wasn't altogether certain. He tended to ask too much of himself, and current circumstances didn't allow him the luxury of reflecting on either the unfairness or the frank vanity of that attitude.

"You're no *Fendsa'ni*, you lying, mealy-mouthed *keeskark'inan* clone: Don't speak to me about Fesoan or the Andorian people again! You'll never be welcome to bathe away your filth in the golden taiga snowfields, can't speak a word of *graalen*, know nothing of *Ghelnar* food or institutions, and your very existence demeans the *keth*! Where have you ever been but this bogus tropical concentration camp where you were *brewed*? You —"

"Gleevah was right," Theskhe hissed. Her voice was shrill and horrible. "I don't need *you*. But I do need to cut out that tongue." She nodded toward the guards: "If you gentlemen can make him open his mouth for me without a

fight, I'll do the honors. All we need is to make certain that he doesn't bleed to death. Beyond that, boys, he's all yours."

Chapter Sixteen

Something as small as a spacefaring ship could easily be abandoned in the curves and coils and switchbacks of a temporal-conduction pattern. It was for this reason that the *Blacksnake* had finally ceased to follow the Bolian transport ship's energy trail.

That vessel had been abandoned in a gradually diminishing orbit around a gas giant somewhat smaller than Jupiter, at the far outer reaches of the Sagittarius Arm, where the Beta Quadrant ended and the vacuum-rich reaches of space between it and the Delta Quadrant began. To a standard Federation starship, the transport ship's presence would have been concealed by the crushing pressures, herculean winds, and heavy ionization present near the center of a gas giant, which was where the transport's orbit had devolved to by the time the *Blacksnake* found it.

The *Blacksnake*, however, was by no means any sort of standard Federation craft.

"Th'raess'Aen was aboard this vessel. As was at least one of the individuals who had been present in that yeoman's quarters on the *Enterprise* before the temporal charges were set off on the Starship," the *Blacksnake*'s Vulcan science officer, a pale, long-faced, hawk-nosed man announced in a monotone drone. He possessed an accent that Captain Ingram, leaning uneasily against the bulkhead

near the *Blacksnake*'s starboard bridge turbolift, couldn't place. "Identification markers are positive at 99.885 percent, given standard temporal-conduction deviation effects. However..." the Vulcan paused and frowned studiously down at the lower station screen in front of him. "Inspector, you must see this."

Kell didn't get up. "Send it over here, Sovar." Directly to both port and starboard of the central chair on the *Blacksnake*'s bridge were full command consoles. Shawn swiveled to his left, and perused the information sent from the science station with a frown. Captain Ingram frowned, too: She could plainly see the information scrolling over the console from where she stood, but she most assuredly couldn't read it.

Whatever it said, it was in Andorian. She could tell that much by the positioning of the script. Ingram shook her head and rubbed at her temples. "What —" she began.

"Well, well, well." The inspector general overrode her: "Can't say I'm surprised. Not at this juncture. Give me a vector?"

Sovar made a sound through his regal nose that wasn't quite a sigh but wasn't quite a snort, either. "X72 Y29, computing by the current and past paths taken by the ship. I can be no more accurate."

"The thing works in seven dimensions, and you can only give me *two*?" Kell snarled.

The Vulcan offered his commanding officer a narrow sidewise gaze Captain Ingram would not have liked to

receive. "It is the multidimensionality in question which is effecting the vector readings, Inspector." The mildness of Sovar's response utterly belied the frosty glint in his eyes.

"Fine. Then give me pulsar-quasar mesh with singularity variant toward X72 Y29, Z factor ninety."

The Vulcan science officer blinked the glint right out of his own eyes. "Ninety? Inspector?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I wasn't actually *finished*. Z factor ninety, Q and S full background. Since we do have to cover *all* of the sector..." Kell grimaced at the screen, "between this edge of the Sagittarius arm and the Delphic Expanse all the way to the Leonis arm."

"But...that could take..." the Vulcan furrowed his own brow spectacularly; "as long as 67.3349 days to complete, Inspector."

Kell shrugged. "Or not. Once we determine the mesh and the singularity variant, we can turn on the bloodhound. Or do you imagine that so many human/Andorian hybrids live in the thin space between galactic arms, inside of the event horizons of black holes sending out quasi-pulsar emissions, that we won't be able to trace this particular one?"

Now Sovar grimaced. "We may not be near enough to source for a bloodhound lock."

"Nearness to source using the bloodhound is bounded by intervening mass. There's not whole lot of mass in the Delphic Expanse, which is why it's *called* —"

"Would you mind terribly, Mr. Kell," Ingram cut in

sharply, "explaining to me *what* the hell you're talking about?"

Shawn Kell offered Renee Ingram roughly the same narrow glare that Sovar had recently bestowed on him, then he sighed, puffing out his cheeks. "Fine. Sovar, the sooner you begin, the faster we get out of here, so I suggest you start the scan posthaste. Captain," Kell turned his seat to face her: The central chair on this bridge swiveled a full one hundred and eighty degrees; "here's the upshot: We have tetraphasic sensors. Temporal, energetic, warp, heat, spectra, mass, psionic and trans-psionic. Look at it this way: *Blacksnake*'s a really big, heavily modified multiphasic tricorder. With enough proximity, or very little mass interference, this ship can identify the given flavor of a lollipop that any particular child might be eating on a vessel up to fifteen parsecs distant, moving at warp in the opposite direction."

Trans-psionic? Captain Ingram began to object; what the man was stating was simply not feasible. Kell held up a hand before she could put her words of disbelief into order, and shook his head at her like a stern father. "You wanted an explanation. I'm giving you one. Whether or not you find it credible is irrelevant. The people who took Shrev left us a time puzzle to solve. Now they've left us a space puzzle."

Ingram scowled. "And the quasar-singularity... thing?"

Kell looked away from the captain of the *Enterprise*,

and she thought for a moment that he might not respond. He did reply, finally, but he didn't look at her.

"We're looking for traces of technologies that..." he sighed, "shouldn't exist." Now he offered her a somber gaze from beneath his brows. "Surely you know, Captain, that bizarre things occur in the spatial expanses between galactic arms?"

Captain Ingram was in no mood to exchange ghost stories. "Do I even want to know how, if certain technologies *shouldn't* exist, you possess the knowledge and capacity to search for them?" she bit back acidly.

Kell looked back up at her. His face dimpled. "Shouldn't isn't *don't*, Captain. They're Section 31 technologies. And if you come with me right now, I'll show you some more."

The main transporter room aboard the *Blacksnake* was enormous. Captain Ingram hadn't seen this area before; she'd been shuttled from the *Enterprise* onto the runabout. It would be more accurate, the starship captain mused, to call the area a transporter *bay*, since it was easily large enough to dock shuttlecraft in. The cavernous area's setup was similar to nothing she'd ever seen before, like some improbable combination of an engineering control bridge mated to a gargantuan sickbay. She tried very hard not to admit to herself that this cavernous bay was easily half the size of the little runabout itself, because that was, frankly, impossible.

"If this is a transporter area...ahm, where are the pads?" Ingram asked.

Ungainly consoles flashed incomprehensible information, either in languages native to the humanoids staffing them — two unlikely Orions, a clutch of Deltans, and a single dour, red-eyed, tusked Tessma — or in some dialect common only to the denizens of Section 31. These workstations, variously shaped constructs of sleek black duranium and golden transparent aluminum interconnected by olive-green crystalline-lattice wall networks, appeared to Captain Ingram to have little or nothing to do with known transporter technology. Indeed, there was no central transporter pad at all in the room that she could identify.

"All the non-console areas of the *Blacksnake* are capable of acting as transporter pads," the Tessma — a female, Ingram realized once she spoke — replied to the question Captain Ingram had directed to Kell. The Tessma's voice was an unlikely, ringing soprano as sweet as birdsong, and she answered without looking up at either her boss or their Starfleet guest.

"The diagnostic beds have that capacity, too, of course," Kell added. Ingram nodded distractedly; the same was true for the diagnostic beds found in *Excelsior*-class Federation starships, as long as the transporters were functioning correctly. The *Blacksnake*'s transporter bay contained a number of such beds.

"How about the heads?" the snide comment was out of

Captain Ingram's mouth before she could rein it back. Every individual in the room offered her some version of a glance that begged:

Please tell me you're joking!

Except for the Inspector General of Section 31. He simply laughed — possibly the first wholly unaffected human reaction Ingram had witnessed the man perform. And, for some tiny span of time nobody had ever attempted to describe before, Shawn Kell was an attractive man, his laugh a ringing shout of pure glee.

"I didn't mean that to be funny," Captain Ingram groused, turning away from him to focus, instead, on the console overseen by the honey voiced Tessma.

"Unless one considers the facilities in a ship's head to constitute a console," one of the male Deltans offered, grinning at Captain Ingram. She drew a deep breath and released it noisily. The only thing more unsettling to the human constitution than a room full of Orions was a group of effusive Deltans. Ingram's hands were cold, a distinctive human physiological response to unchecked Deltan pheromones. She crossed her arms, wedged her hands against her body, and ignored the Deltans as well as she was able, redirecting her attention toward Kell, trying mightily not to...well...

Flirt. Not that she hadn't taken the measure of Kell: He was the sort of man who wanted a woman who knew her own mind, who knew neither fear nor boundaries. It wasn't that she wasn't trying mightily to turn the attentions

of the man toward herself so that they would be less heavily focused on other things. Just...not for real. Anyway, she hoped not. That would be just...

Captain Ingram gave up hunting for synonyms for *catastrophe*, and strove to focus on what she was supposed to be doing. "I don't even know what most of these consoles *are*," she explained shortly, once she felt adequately in control of her voice and facial expressions. "They may as well be lavatory facilities, as far as I'm concerned."

Kell shrugged expressively. Captain Ingram wondered if the stoic man had any idea just how animated his expressions and body language became in the presence of the Deltans. He gestured toward various consoles as he spoke: "Transporter and medical here. Various design functions there. Zuon-reuptake analysis over there. Data and product development pretty much everywhere. Also buffering; a lot of the room's capacity goes toward micro-cellular buffering and re-animation."

Ingram made a face. "I'm afraid you lost me after the first four words, Mr. Kell."

Shawn flashed her another humor-laden, transfixing grin. "Now you understand why I like to speak in four-word sentences." He motioned effusively first toward the Tessma, then at a console-free stretch of the microcrystalline tile floor of the transporter bay. "Sinjah, empty buffer..." Kell, not an inch taller than Captain Ingram herself, lifted himself on half- tiptoe to peer over

the lip of the big female alien's console; "seventeen."

Ingram's first bemused thought — *seventeen buffers? Three Excelsior-class vessels working in tandem couldn't sustain seventeen buffers!* — was interrupted by a golden dazzle like Terran sunlight reflected from ocean waves. Ingram blinked painfully at the atypical brilliance of the *Blacksnake*'s transporter beams. This was followed by a longer series of blinks at what those beams deposited on the transporter bay's glittery gilded-olivine tiles.

Colin and T'Dani materialized on the runabout commanded by the inspector general of Section 31 in the formats they had been born with.

"How did you do that?" Colin gesticulated toward both T'Dani and one of the Deltan technicians simultaneously: "She wasn't —"

"I know exactly what she was and wasn't. So does my transporter buffer," Kell snapped at the big telepath. Colin regarded the inspector general of Section 31 narrowly. Behind her console, the Tessma stiffened instinctively in response to the abrupt sense of tension in the room.

"That's impossible!" Captain Ingram snarled, as much to express her opinion of the *Blacksnake*'s transport-buffer capacities as to try and lay down the feeling of friction that suddenly surrounded her on all sides — an electrically-charged thing like an incipient lightning strike, and it made her want to cringe. She struggled to ignore her unease, and to control the reactions that unease made her want to produce.

Kell tipped his head to one side and offered the little group of assembled humanoids a tight, insincere smile. "I don't know who you imagine it is that you're dealing with. But I *can* tell you that, whatever it is that you may believe, even if you're right, you're mistaken."

Colin made an unpleasant sound deep in his throat. T'Dani had taken up a cross-armed pose much like Captain Ingram's own; the half-Vulcan woman shivered visibly.

Colin, it's the Deltan pheromones, Ingram thought, forcefully. They often had an unfortunate effect on certain telepaths.

"Bullshit," her auburn-haired yeoman snarled, efficiently responding to the inspector general of Section 31 and to the captain of the *Enterprise* in tandem. Only the mask of confusion that momentarily slipped over everyone's face except for Kell's told Captain Ingram that Colin had uttered the curse in his own native tongue — whatever that was.

Colin was at least twice Kell's size, but the cold, grating chuckle that the smaller man made in response to Colin's invective was the most dangerous thing in the room. The instinctive — if ultimately unhelpful — desire that the captain of the *Enterprise* had, to interject herself bodily between the two men, didn't happen: It was overridden by the calculated, manipulative threat of an obsessively-trained assassin, whose captivating voice was suddenly possessed of a daunting underlying timbre about as velvety as low-gauge sandpaper:

"I know my place in the grand scheme, Colin, and so do you. For your own continued existence, I strongly suggest that you get a healthy grip upon your own." Shawn Kell turned away, effectively dismissing Colin, and directed his next comment at Captain Ingram herself. No; it wasn't a comment, she realized, shortly after he'd begun speaking — it was a command, spoken in that same disconcerting tone. "As underhanded and interestingly endowed as this little group appears to be, your underestimation of modern Section 31 paraphernalia notwithstanding, I've come to consider you all primes in this unpleasant little endeavor. Meet me in my quarters in half an hour. I might even feed you."

"To what?" Captain Ingram asked in a half-hearted attempt to lighten the heaviness pervading the room. In return, she received three scowls of varying proportion. The crew members of the *Blacksnake* had turned back to their respective duties and all but melted into the background — apparently, such onerous ambience wasn't something they were unfamiliar with.

"But you will *not*," Kell continued in that voice of raw silk and steel, "walk out this time, just because somebody tells you something you don't want to hear. Because I'll do that, Captain Ingram. I guarantee I will. And you *will* listen."

Chapter Seventeen

Shrev woke from a dream of endless dissection — amateur dissection, performed by sadists, with himself as the subject of interest — to the sight of the Gleevah-creature perched on a tall stool, leering at him. The hybrid man closed his eyes again and attempted to turn his head away, only to find himself paralyzed below the level of his chin. Indeed, all he could really feel of his body was his face, including, unfortunately, his tongue. Though Shrev knew with awful clarity exactly how much of it was gone, as far as his cranial nerves were concerned, not only was it still there, but it was being trod upon by somebody in stiletto heels.

How long had he been unconscious? His mind dredged up a span somewhere in the realm of a Terran month, then briskly shook the concept away for its own protection, like a small animal might try to shed water from its fur after emerging from some deep pool in which it had nearly drowned.

The lump on the stool chuckled at his obvious discomfiture. "I'm told I should apologize for having given Theskhe the idea about taking your tongue, but you *did* have to be a combative bastard, didn't you? Apparently, she had other plans for your tongue, and they entailed it remaining in your mouth, while they *didn't* entail you talking, which she didn't like. What is it the humans say —

can't have your cake and eat it, too?" Gleeovah chuckled mirthlessly at its own rudely sexual double-entendre.

Shrev slit his eyes open again and hissed at the little monstrosity. Part of the root of his tongue had been left in his mouth, ostensibly so that he could still eat and drink, and he could also still manage a recognizable humanoid hiss, though the sound had little force. Gleeovah chose to ignore what was, from an Andorian not manacled within an inch of their lives, a direct challenge to mortal combat, and nattered on:

"We don't usually opt to keep people awake for this, but I'm told that you complained about being unconscious for long stretches of time. Like any other combative bastard, you don't know what's good for you, or when you're being treated well, and so need to be shown what it *means* to be badly used. Mind you, it wasn't *my* idea to go after you at all — or to leave you alive, once we finally did determine that we needed you.

"It was your Theskhe who talked me into it, finally. I had such high hopes that your children would provide what we needed, but their cellular material contained altogether too much variability. It was difficult to find the set-point around which to play everything else." Gleeovah made a face and waved a hand through the air as though trying to banish a noxious insect or a bad smell: "Too much tendency to split into irritating dual-chain-quatrains and useless little epigenetic bundles. We kept them cryogenically, of course, in case you didn't work out.

Would you like to meet them? Surely they still have faces — those not being the first parts transgenic researchers tend to use up, you understand. *Memento mori*, eh?"

The thing's lying, Shrev thought to himself desperately, as the insane Augment's obnoxious voice droned on. His own mind betrayed him now: Memories of a little *shen* cowering in a half-corridor that was no corridor at all, a little *chan* leaping from a cliff into a raging maelstrom of water and stone. *Those were holoprojections*, he begged himself, though he hadn't a clue what the *chan* might have been projected on. They had some mind-blowing technology here; he'd assumed that was the actual reason why they didn't want him wandering the corridors. Because the gods knew, whatever this chamber of horrors was actually concocted of, he couldn't get out of it regardless of how far or how artfully he wandered.

He had *not*, he insisted to himself unconvincingly, been visited by the specters of his own children. The jagged precipice of madness reared before him, and he sought to turn his back on it, close his eyes to it. It kept reappearing. How could they have even *known* about his children, unless they'd...unless...

"...easy to find. We can mind-sift, and fecund *chae-na* have become quite the scarce resource among Andorians. It's always been a matter of bemusement to me how very attached the things become to their little charges in such a short period of time." The literally cold-blooded creature pulled out what looked like a large hypospray and inserted

its nozzle into what Shrev assumed was a corresponding socket on the side of the biobed.

And the biobed came alive.

Even had he not been so severely manacled, Shrev doubted that he was capable of movement — his body was numb, as though he'd been given a spinal block somewhere between his sixth and seventh cervical vertebrae. Which, the terrified Exobiologist thought now, as the bed enfolded itself around him horribly, he probably had — assuming they hadn't just severed his spine for good measure.

They did this to my children, he thought dazedly, children he had never even seen in life and now would never have the chance to know, as the bed inserted various sharp-edged tubes, probes, and less easily identifiable instrumentation into his femoral arteries and throughout his inguinal area. He was so focussed on this — nearly cross-eyed, straining against the metal pinioning his neck and shoulders in order to watch the horrifying process — that when the bed began to extend similar projections toward his head, it came as a surprise.

They'd cut out his tongue, not his vocal chords.

Shrev screamed.

Most of the Theskhes Gleevah had produced functioned only as providers of genetic material. The Augment had often bemoaned the misfortune that the blood sample Shrev's uncle had provided had successfully sported off only that single female transclone. There were

male transclones now, of course, but they were three-month-old fetuses still developing in their transclone cradles. And there was enough of Shrev's DNA available to produce an army of transclones, should Glevah desire it.

The Augment certainly wouldn't be doing that *here*. This was Glevah's most expendable base, which was, of course, why the creature had taken the chance of bringing Shrev here rather than to a more technologically advanced, heavily defended compound.

After the production of a certain number of transclone repetitions — ten thousand or so, say — they began to turn out either irreparably autistic or physically ruined. Just before this happened, however, the aftershadows ceased to clone true. Rather, like plants, they began to appear as true sports. Three or four of these unique aftershadows had turned up with certain of Vraeth'uutr'Shrev Th'raess'Aen's latent genetic capacities in full-blown form. These aftershadows Glevah scattered through his several bases, and never used for their eggs; they had more valuable uses.

The Theskhe who performed surveillance on this base lacked optic vision, which did not mean she couldn't see. She could see as well as any other Aenar. She was as serene and easily manipulable as an Aenar, too, thanks to certain alterations made upon her as a fetus, alterations that also made her capable of direct instrumental interface. She was wholly loyal, at least as far as Glevah was concerned.

She had worked very hard, all her life, to keep the Augment believing that. From keeping the thing from simply turning her into another useful battery, as it had done with others before her. She did not possess an Aenar's compunction about never forcing telepathic contact; she possessed very few compunctions, and no freedom. She had one function: To monitor the space around whatever base Gleevah was on at any given time. She had one overriding desire, and it wasn't Shrev:

It was to escape the unrelenting nightmare that was her virtually interminable life. And she thought she just might be able to do so, if she set various plans in motion. She imagined that the gathering storm that she and her intimate electronic paraphernalia could detect gathering would allow her the luxury of finally doing so.

T'Dani was the first to arrive at Kell's quarters. She sat at a great round oak table, in a room now denuded of most of Shawn Kell's colorful, eclectic furnishings, eyeing a trio of covered tureens with a raised brow. Various crew, including an obnoxious English chef, bustled into and out of the room; this was obviously meant to be a staffed captain's dinner, and from the number of settings and plush chairs at the polished table, the function would include seven people.

Kell himself was absent when Colin and Renee arrived. The refectionary staff was busy setting the table with platters of Vulcan and Andorian breads, Terran salads, and

an array of sauces and spreads both identifiable and otherwise. The trio of Starfleet personnel reclined in silence at the table until the busy flow of staff ceased. The half-Vulcan doctor was the first to break the silence.

"A lovely repast we've got." T'Dani's melodic voice dripped irony like rain from a sheet-metal roof. She half-removed the lid from the first tureen. All of them recoiled slightly from the aroma of the olive-green broth gently simmering in the self-heating serving bowl. "Vulcan rocklichen soup, *plomeek*, whose flavor can be approximated only by boiling various heavily-mildewed items in a vat of sour milk for three days."

"That's an experiment you've conducted?" Colin joked as T'Dani replaced the lid on one of the few foods in the galaxy which Captain Ingram knew she truly loathed. The captain of the *Enterprise* knew few humans who could stomach it, either, though those who relished the stuff had told her that it was both highly nourishing and extremely filling.

When T'Dani lifted the lid on the next tureen, Colin didn't merely flinch; he physically pushed his chair away from the table. A dense, sweet, licorice-like odor emanated from the sticky little cakes heaped in the dish. "Andorian *katheka* cookies." The doctor actually looked and sounded happy about these particular confections, the greening of Colin's face notwithstanding.

The telepath took the tureen cover out of the CMO's hand and replaced it rather more firmly than necessary over

the bowl. Licorice-flavored food made him violently ill. His beloved smothered a smile, and T'Dani offered her a bemused look.

"Oh, but you haven't met the main course, Captain. Though I think it's a little far gone for you to be able to mend what's wrong with it." The half-Vulcan woman murmured, lifting the lid off the largest tureen. It was filled with fragrant, crisped squab, quail, and songbirds, replete with heads and feet in ancient European style.

Captain Ingram made a disgusted noise and offered her best friend such a look of malice that T'Dani hastily covered the tureen.

"But I thought you *liked* birds, Captain." Shawn Kell's pseudo-cheerful tones filled the little quarters.

Three individuals followed the inspector general of Section 31 into the room. The human tactical officer with him smothered a guffaw. The Vulcan science officer regarded both Shawn and his Starfleet guests impassively. The Andorian communications officer rolled her eyes. Shawn uncovered all the dishes crowding the table while his staff seated themselves. The captain of the *Enterprise* didn't miss the delighted looks on their faces when they saw what the tureens contained. It wasn't often that a Vulcan allowed themselves that particular facial expression.

He actually cares about these people enough to be concerned about what they'd like for dinner? Ingram mused. A sense of healthy cynicism in the presence of a

Section 31 operative caused the thought to manifest as a question. Of course, any number of things about Shawn Kell manifested questions in Captain Ingram's mind. She pushed this one into the same discomfiting tangled pile where she kept the others.

The dark-skinned human woman smiled at Captain Ingram and held out her hand. "I'm afraid we weren't formally introduced, Captain Ingram. I'm Nadura Kaminski."

Captain Ingram accepted the woman's hand and looked askance at the Andorian, who leveled a serious dark-eyed gaze right back. "I am ar'zhell'B'varri Adrii'sharr'saah, Captain." She also offered her hand — something that Andorians, even Andorians well-versed in the customs of other humanoid races, seldom did.

"Thank you for the introductions, ladies. Sovar," Ingram nodded at the Vulcan man, who nodded somberly in return, "I already know, and Inspector General Kell, of course. I'd like to introduce you all to Doctor T'Dani Corrigan and to Colin, my primary technologies yeoman."

Kell smiled at his crew, and began, as was his prerogative as ship's commander, to serve out dinner, announcing without a whiff of pleasantry as he did so: "Nadura will be accompanying Colin and T'Dani when I send them into the Aatuu'hari compound, in order to provide one prong of the triple diversion I've planned. I'll send other operatives elsewhere on the surface, and *Blacksnake* will attack from orbit."

Captain Ingram, shocked into silence for the interim, didn't bother touching the food Kell heaped onto her plate. She was altogether too keyed up to even pretend to eat, but she motioned both Colin and T'Dani to do so. Both offered her skeptical glances but complied. "And where will I be in this grand scenario?" Ingram finally inquired, icily.

Kell looked up from speculatively stirring with the ladle at the *plomeek*. "You'll be on the *Blacksnake* at all times, Captain."

"You consider me a prisoner, then." She managed not to hiss these words.

Kell sat down without helping himself to soup. Taking a bite of heavily dressed green salad instead, he chewed and swallowed at his leisure before replying. "I prefer to consider you a tactical advantage to the *Blacksnake*. You know how to command a ship." His dark eyes were lambent in the room's diffuse light. Captain Ingram was certain that he was laughing at her behind them. "Should I be forced to aid my operatives elsewhere, or be killed, I'd require you to do that."

Captain Ingram forced down a shudder. "I can't command a ship whose tactical and associated paraphernalia I'm unacquainted with. If you want that sort of help, you'll need to trust me a lot more."

"Like you trust me?" Shawn purred softly, taking another forkful of salad.

"Things like trust travel two ways, Inspector," she purred back. Colin and T'Dani performed a spectacular job

of pretending to eat. So did everyone else at the table, mired in a level of tension they hadn't expected. Only Kell actually appeared to be savoring the food.

"You enjoy keeping people off-balance, Inspector General?" Colin inquired conversationally. Captain Ingram wondered if the bitterness in his tone was as obvious to Kell as it was to herself.

Kell ignored Colin Ingram with spectacular aplomb, took two more bites of salad, then announced: "It may come as a surprise to the three of you, but we've been hidden in the northern magnetic pole of the planet where the kidnappers brought Shrev for roughly three hours now. It's a —"

T'Dani more or less tied herself into a half-Vulcan knot in her chair upon receiving this information and snarled: "Three *hours*! And we're wasting time sitting here —"

Kell overrode the doctor's opera-trained tones as though she wasn't actually speaking — a difficult feat for a human to perform without a voice modulator, or at least without yelling, which the inspector general didn't. "It's a desert planet. Type-L chlorine-argon. Distinctly unfriendly, under its veneer. I want to make certain that you all know what you're getting yourselves into before this operation begins. And do not," he added sternly, "try and tell me that I'm the one who's gotten you into this. I've a Starfleet shuttle that claims otherwise."

The man's vocal anomaly wasn't lost on T'Dani

Corrigan's exquisitely sensitive hearing organs. She offered the man from Section 31 a narrow glance: "What exactly are you, Mr. Kell?"

He grinned back at her cheerfully, finished his salad, and helped himself to a sticky, fragrant *katheka* cake. "Missing your medical tricorder? Or was that a career inquiry?"

"*Veneer?*" Ingram dragged the conversation back onto its previous track.

"Multidimensional holographic emission programs," the inspector general replied, still grinning. "Fueled by micro-fission initiators and EPS power-stabilizers. Sort of like the ones we use on the *Blacksnake*. Fairly easy to uncover using multi-phase-discriminators or quantum beacons."

Colin shifted uneasily in his seat and ceased to pretend eating. The captain of the *Enterprise* swallowed the *what?!* that Shawn Kell's every other statement prompted her to speak, and asked instead: "How can you know that what you perceive of the planet isn't also a holographic program, in that case?"

Existing Federation holographic technology, a gift of the Zyrellian people, had some serious drawbacks, the prime one being the energy required to keep it functional. Something the size of an *Excelsior*-class starship would require a starbase in order to pull that kind of energy without burning out critical systems. A *planet* using holographic shielding...Renee Ingram forced herself away

from this conundrum, to listen to what Shawn Kell was saying:

"...and nanoprobes have been sent to the surface. These brought back samples of soil and atmosphere. All of which accounts for the time we've been *wasting*." Kell directed a sharp glance at T'Dani: "Is the plomeek soup not to your taste, Doctor?"

The part-Vulcan woman, whose favorite food was pizza (as the Section 31 operative certainly knew), drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I don't care for plomeek in anything, Inspector. What is it we'll be expected to do when we reach the surface of this decidedly unfriendly planet?"

"As I said, Nadura will supply one diversion. There are two things I want off of this planet: Your shanghaied Yeoman, and the creator of this entire —"

"Personally, I was under the impression that Section 31 *was* the creator of this. Or at least in some measure responsible for it. Or do you deny that it was Section 31 who came up with the concepts behind Augment technology, and that it's some offshoot of this technology that's being used on Shrev?" Colin interjected venomously. Everyone at the table, including Shawn Kell, winced and blinked at him, wide-eyed. Kell let his eating utensil fall to his plate and leaned forward, considering the telepath for a long march of seconds.

"There's not much you're afraid of, is there?" the inspector general of Section 31 replied finally, his voice as

hard and flat as the top of an anvil. "I think I should tell you, though, that there *should* be."

Colin stood up. Shawn Kell followed suit. Before Captain Ingram or anyone else could react to this unexpected turn of events, the comm link between Shawn's quarters and the bridge squawked to life:

"Evidence of other cloaked ships in the vicinity, Inspector!"

"Sovar, take Doctor Corrigan and the yeoman belowdecks. B'Varri, Nadura, Captain, you're with me." Kell's attention snapped back to Colin: "You can go willingly or not. I couldn't care less. Sovar, see to it." He turned and stalked precipitously out of the room, followed by his officers. Ingram threw a concerned glance at Colin, then hurried after the Kell.

Chapter Eighteen

"Where are you sending my people?" Captain Ingram demanded when she caught up with Kell and his officers a hundred feet from the turbolift. He paused and considered the captain of the *Enterprise* speculatively, then tossed his head and turned back to the lift. Before he could board it after his people, Captain Ingram reached out and grasped his arm.

Wiry muscle like tensile steel stiffened at her touch. The inspector general of Section 31 was very warm. This close to him, she could smell his skin. Shawn Kell smelled like fresh peaches.

"I'll follow you both," he said to his officers, who were holding the lift open and staring at the inspector, obviously awaiting instruction. "The captain and I need to talk."

He waited until the lift doors had closed to turn to face her. When he did, he looked down at her hand, still clinging tenaciously to his arm. He grinned insolently. "You can release me. I'm not going anywhere."

Captain Ingram bit back a helpful suggestion regarding just exactly where the inspector general might go, and released him, standing arms akimbo. "You say you want my help, but you keep pulling the rug out from under me. *Where* are my people?"

"In the transporter bay. It's the safest spot on the *Blacksnake*. Depending on whose ships those are we've

sensed, either you'll see them again or you won't. But right now, you're going to come with me if I have to heave you over my shoulder. I don't, do I? People might say things. I wouldn't want to be accused of causing conduct unbecoming to an officer."

Captain Ingram rolled her eyes and followed Shawn into the turbolift.

"Is it the *Aatuuhari*?" Kell snapped as the turbolift door opened. Apparently, his ship had some way to distinguish one cloaking device from another.

The human at the helm shook her head, standing to relinquish her post to B'Varri. "It's Am Tal."

"This was supposed to be an *undercover* operation," Kell snarled.

"I thought the Am Tal *was* an undercover operation," Captain Ingram noted dryly. Nadura flashed her a grin. Kell shot Ingram a largely indecipherable look that certain Alpha Quadrant cultures would probably have translated as an eloquent curse, then requested an open channel.

The pale aqua-blue Andorian male who appeared on the screen was roughly Kell's own age — *male* and *female* being titles that were tolerated in good nature by Andorians when used by the dual-gendered humanoids who comprised the majority of the sentient species populating the Milky Way Galaxy. Dual-gendered people often had trouble differentiating between the four Andorian sexes. The hue of the *chan*'s skin bespoke part-Aenar heritage.

He sported functional storm-gray eyes, and a pair of frontal antennae that shot up in surprise when he got a good look at Kell. The two stared at one another wordlessly for a long moment.

"You're Th'raess'Aen's uncle," Kell announced in a voice that somehow managed to be grating and gentle, lilting and monotone all at once. The Andorian snorted.

"And I suppose *you're* human? Or is this some sort of psychological tease?"

Kell's smile, to Captain Ingram's surprise, radiated actual warmth. "For the most part." He didn't clarify further — assuming, of course, that one cared to consider his response any sort of clarification at all.

Ingram wasn't sure which individual to stare at in confusion first. Ah, the pleasure of working with undercover operatives...

The Andorian shook his head — forbiddingly, the captain of the *Enterprise* imagined: Such body language was a sign of intense agitation in the natives of Andor. "Fine, then. Frankly, I don't care. Which we're assuming is Section 31's take on my son —"

"He's your *nephew*. And he's a Federation citizen, for chrissakes."

"He's the only child I'll ever have; his provenance is irrelevant. And Section 31's not a recognized Federation venture. Also, I *refuse* to trust your face."

Now Kell laughed. "You'd have trusted the original, Uncle."

"I do *not* trust the facsimile!" Jeshrie snarled.

"Feh. What facsimile? *Aanov'feswa oortezh'shelth-karaev, cha'chi.*" Kell opened his mouth and tilted his head far back. From where Renee sat, she could clearly see that his hard palate was double cleft, like an Andorian's.

It could simply be a surgical ruse. But to what purpose? And now she thought she understood the old-fashioned setup of this bridge's console layouts: Not standardized for possibly blind crewmembers, but for one particular person on the ship who couldn't see in color. Apparently, he'd decorated his own quarters, and probably didn't get many visitors — or at least, he didn't get many visitors with the gumption to tell him that his fashion sense needed work.

Renee wondered whether the mesmerizing voice Kell possessed suggested that he had an Andorian voicebox, too, and decided that it probably did. She threw her two cents into the fray: "He's telling you the truth..." she wracked her brain; it was in there somewhere; she was certain of it... "Jeshrie."

Now it was their turn to look askance at her. "I'm Renee Ingram, Captain of the Starship *Enterprise*. I made..." she sighed, "certain plans and provisions to keep Section 31 from just waltzing in and wasting Shrev along with this nest of vipers." She allowed her gaze to wander from the screen back to Shawn Kell. Give him cobalt-based blood and antennae...

Remarkable. Though to save her life, Renee couldn't

have said how the genetics worked. T'Dani would probably know. Had his Doppelganger possessed the same genetics? And how many *greats* went into a partial-Andorian lineage? Perhaps he'd be willing to entertain those questions from her, sometime. Assuming, of course, that one of them wasn't compelled to kill the other first. Ingram swallowed a sigh.

"So, you see," Kell said, managing to include both Jeshrie and Renee in his comment, after handing the captain of the *Enterprise* a final look of frank astonishment, "I'd damn well better nab this bunch of fanatics. Else I'll be joining Shrev in whatever glorious phantasm they've got him roped into down there," Kell inclined his head in the general direction of the floor, and the planet in whose magnetic pole all of their cloaked ships were hiding. "I'm led to understand that my quatrain-gen *shen* had an unreasonable fondness for the tint of human skin."

"Obviously," Shrev's uncle replied, deadpan, which was the way most Andorians replied to pretty much anything. Becoming inured to Shrev's behavior could cause a person to forget things like that.

In any case, Captain Ingram's questions about both the generational conundrum and at least a portion of Kell's genetics had been answered, though neither of those things was really either her business, or pertinent to the current situation. "Can we move on, gentlemen? Time, as they say, is a-wasting."

Kell smiled. This time, it was predatory. "The captain's right. And you know, Jeshrie, your presence here might make things go a lot more smoothly. But only if you agree to turn your operatives and your vessels over to my command."

Jeshrie's face became a cold blue stone. "And if I refuse?"

"Then," Kell replied softly, the metal burrs back to shred his silky voice and Captain Ingram's nerves, "you will shortly cease to have a presence here." He turned to Nadura at tactical: "Tell me; how many Am Tal ships are there within a parsec, what's their shield harmonics, and how many forms of weaponry do we have trained on them, currently?"

Nadura sighed softly. "There are eight Am Tal ships currently within a parsec of the *Blacksnake*, Inspector. Their shield harmonics are set to fluctuate randomly; the Riemann lock on the fore, port, starboard, and aft photon targeting systems are fluctuating in tandem with them all, so even if they change them now, it won't matter much." She smiled tightly: "I suppose you could say we're surrounded."

"This is a ruse!" Jeshrie snarled. His face crumpled into a tight fist of anger, his antennae drawing back steeply.

The inspector general of Section 31 shrugged expansively. "I'm sorry you feel that way. As a gesture of goodwill, I'm willing to let you choose which of your ships we demonstrate our earnestness upon. Unless, of course,

you accept my previous suggestion to let me determine the plan that your operatives and vessels follow for this mission. I will not have living fifth columnists crawling up my —"

Jeshrie held up his hands in a universal humanoid gesture of resignation. "You imagine I'm in league with the *Aatuu'hari*? Perhaps you should indeed immolate me..." he shook his head aggressively, "whoever the hell you are. I have only her," he tossed his head in the general direction of where Captain Ingram stood relative to his viewscreen, "word that you can be trusted."

Kell laughed. "If you don't know who I am, *cha-chi*, I'd guess that the Am Tal has lost every edge it ever possessed, and the *Aatuu'hari* might be sharing your bed with you, and you'd never know. You *do* know who I am, Jeshrie. Don't prevaricate with me. We don't have time."

The *chan's* eyes narrowed. He didn't reply; his eyes and antennae turned toward Ingram. "I know what Admiral Arsnell says of this man. Do you, Captain?"

A chill ran down Captain Ingram's spine. Was Kell really planning to immolate eight Andorian ships if he didn't get his way? And was Jeshrie planning to lie outright every single time the inspector general of Section 31 asked him a question? "No," she replied, tightly.

Jeshrie nodded at her thoughtfully, as though the word she'd just uttered held the weight of some great universal truth. "Very well, General. We've been here for nineteen hours already, and we've detected a roughly triangular area

of thin coverage in the hologrid that shields this place. A monitoring base, we believe. The emitters, though lacking any and all failsafes, don't appear to possess ground-to-air defensive capacity of any sort. I've already got a group hidden planetside waiting for my orders. What is it you want my people and vessels to do?"

Captain Ingram blinked, utterly nonplussed. What had she missed? The higher levels of Starfleet were involved with this mission? Had the Andorian meant the comment about Arsnell as a threat? What had Jeshrie told Arsnell about this operation? And what, furthermore, had Arsnell said to the *chan*? Had Jeshrie possibly gotten some sort of unconscious psychological hint from her just now that had caused him to change his mind, or was this just another sub-rosa game? If Ingram had ever wondered how people dreamed up wildly unlikely conspiracy theories, dealing with Section 31 and the Am Tal was answering that unspoken question.

"I'll send over schematics of where your ships should concentrate fire. I need diversion, and a lot of it. Where are your people waiting?"

"Far north of the complex; they've bored a hidey-hole through the holographic jungle bordering the ocean and are waiting in the actual crater that underlies the illusion. And they tell me that just outside the far northeast section of the complex, there's a vertex of some kind."

"Vertex? Part of your people's hole in the emission spectra?"

Jeshrie shrugged, a human maneuver he must have picked up from Shrev. "Part of the hole touches the area, but no, the vertex is separate. My operatives theorize that it may be some sort of weapon. It's so heavily warped that it can only be sensed from the planet itself, and it appears to be below the crust."

Kell made a face. "I thought this was a storage planet; they weren't supposed to have —"

Captain Ingram made it to Kell's side within six seconds, and physically turned him to face her, aware even as she did so that if he hadn't chosen to let her do so, she probably wouldn't have had much success at making him move at all: He was alarmingly strong for a man of his stature. "You *know* what this place is?"

Shawn considered her for a brief moment, then shrugged away from her and turned back toward the viewscreen. "Have half your ships attack the complex between the damned vertex and your operatives, then, so that they have an opportunity to infiltrate. Have the other half of your ships enfilade fire on the other side of the spyhole that I'm willing to bet the Aatuuhari's opened in their holographic field in order to watch us; it'll be to the southeast of the main complex of buildings somewhere.

"My people will infiltrate from the south and west, while the *Blacksnake* engages over the eastern complex sites to draw unfriendly attention there. That should facilitate the entry of all operatives. Am I clear? *You*," Kell turned back to Ingram; this time, he took her arm. His

touch was gentle but firm, and it brooked no argument, "come with me."

Shawn Kell lifted two molecularly programmed, sub-atomically computerized, pseudo-handkerchiefs out of the servo bin of an instrument that wasn't exactly a replicator.

They were, of course, both different. Colin had been able to discern that as soon as they materialized. He didn't trust the inspector general of Section 31 as far as he imagined he could throw the man through the vacuum of space using the assist of a starship's tractor beam for leverage. The *Blacksnake*'s all-pervasive psionic dampers notwithstanding — only the runabout's transporter bay was relatively free of psionic damping; the machinery there was dependent upon psionic spectra, as both the bay's microcrystalline floors and the unmistakable psionic polarization of the cloths in Kell's hand demonstrated — Colin was absolutely certain that the master of destruction and deceit who called himself Shawn Kell wasn't about to reveal that bit of intriguing information about the cloths in his hands unless he was forced to.

"These are zuon-maps," Kell began, holding one out to T'Dani and the other out toward Colin. "Their purposes are —"

"Both entirely dissimilar," Colin interjected shortly. Kell turned mild eyes in a mild face toward him and replied in a mild tone that belied everything that Colin knew that this man, and the covert operation spearheaded

by him, actually was.

"Of course they are. We need to locate two distinct things in the installation below. One is Shrev, naturally," Kell handed the first cloth to Colin; "the other is Shrev's kidnappers." The undercover operative gave the telepath the second cloth. "Neither target offers less danger than the other. Both the Am Tal and my own agents will be on the ground as backup, but don't forget that you're going to be in a holographic maze latticed in seven dimensions, meaning that ultimately —"

"They're on their own." It was Captain Ingram who overrode the inspector general this time. "I *really* don't like this, Kell!"

T'Dani shifted position and pointedly took the first cloth out of Colin's hand. "We didn't come this far not to help," the half-Vulcan woman fixed vibrant blue eyes on Kell, who returned the frank appraisal with absolute aplomb. "And what's that old human saying? *This is a dictatorship, not a democracy*, isn't that true?" she gave the inspector general a sharp-edged smile.

He didn't return it. "No, Ms. Corrigan, but if we put any more emotion or any less..." Shawn Kell scowled fiercely down at the transport tiles for an instant, "ah, *cooperation* into the current venture, it may irrevocably become a human aphorism whose first word is 'cluster'. Here," Kell pulled a tiny info disc out of one of the numerous pockets of the voluminous coat he wore everywhere, even, Colin had often imagined, to bed, and

handed it to T'Dani: "This is a command chip. If any other operatives try to delay you, give them this. They can upload it into whatever data device they might be carrying. They're my orders. The Am Tal's given me their word to follow them." He shifted his gaze from the petite blonde half-Vulcan doctor toward the captain of the *Enterprise*.

And said absolutely nothing. Colin's first instinct was to chafe at the man's truculence. But they were in the psionically unshielded transporter bay, and he could feel... could sense...

Shawn Kell had no more control over his own involuntary emotional feedback than he had over the beating of his heart. Indeed, this hard man wasn't even wholly cognizant of what it was that he was feeling. And Ingram was trying very hard indeed to play with Kell's feelings, in order to keep him from focusing too hard on the outcome of this mission. A momentary stab of compassion, verging on pity, trembled through Colin. He shook his head and allowed his own gaze to follow Kell's.

To find the woman he loved glaring daggers at the inspector general. *Hatred is love betrayed and disillusioned*, Colin mused. He was a highly-skilled psionic worker; if he chose not to reveal a thought or a feeling, it would never be revealed — not even to that person to whom he was closest emotionally. Another aphorism walked hand-in-hand with the first one he'd considered upon seeing Captain Ingram's malevolent expression:

If you love something, set it free. She'd considered doing this for him, once. That entire situation, and all their time both together and apart since, had taught him a lot about interacting with — and disengaging from, and cooperating with — other people. While Renee Ingram did not get along well at all with people similar to herself, which Shawn Kell most markedly was, Kell himself was falling in love with Renee Ingram. He had no firm idea at all what sort of hatred and terror his Doppelganger in a mirror Universe had spawned in her.

Colin had no intention of telling him about it, either. The big telepath sighed, and decided to offer the most neutral opinion that he could manage, considering that he was faced with the daunting task of working with a man who had feelings for the woman he himself loved. "He's right about the detachment of emotion from what we need to do here. We want to rescue a friend, and capture —"

"And to *destroy*," Captain Ingram snarled, her glower engraving her face with an age it shouldn't possess, "an installation that almost certainly contains more than just one innocent victim."

The inspector general of Section 31 lifted his brows and nodded at the captain of the *Enterprise*. "Hopefully all three, simultaneously." He turned back to Colin and T'Dani:

"Do not hesitate to use the personal forcefield chips my transporter will insert into your wrists sub dermally while attempting to access the complex itself, but *do* be

aware that there are probably sensors inside the complex that can detect personal forcefields, so you'll want to turn the fields off once you gain access, unless you run into a violent situation. If the complex possesses technologies that can deconstruct our personal forcefields, the chips will turn into homing beacons, on the assumption that you're under attack.

"Colin, when you find the creator of this installation, the cloth itself will contact me. Doctor Corrigan, yours will not: I'd rather keep Shrev's whereabouts as quiet as possible once you sneak him out of wherever the *Aatuu'hari's* holding him. Keep in mind that their most unassailable position would be to convince Shrev to help them willingly.

"Their usual modus operandi to convince the unwilling is to cut out the tongue, then perform old-fashioned, straightforward brainwashing, if a subject whose genes they're interested in still won't cooperate. Removal of speech organs is standard. Easier to brainwash a subject isolated in their own mind. And Captain, dramatics won't alter any of these matters."

He didn't add that the little command chip he'd given T'Dani would keep a tab on her whereabouts, as well as on the emotions she happened to be experiencing at any given time. Colin elected not to volunteer this information, either.

Ingram's face flushed a vibrant shade of red. "Stop condescending to me!"

"Then quit acting out."

Misprojected feelings shone out of two sets of dark eyes like some sort of baleful circuit of black light. Neither owner of either set of eyes backed down a millimeter. Captain Ingram very much wanted to punch Shawn Kell. Kell very much wanted to kiss the captain of the *Enterprise*. The big telepath, caught in the whirlpool of these emotional currents, folded his arms tightly across his midsection and looked away, keeping everybody else's opinion to himself.

"What *will* this thing do?" T'Dani broke into the battle of willful eyes sharply, shaking the colorless piece of material at Kell. Ingram and Kell turned their united glares on her.

"Take you to Shrev," the inspector general replied. "It's his DNA map. It's programmed to him — sort of a compact version of the *Blacksnake*'s bloodhound program. It's also been programmed to you; only you will be able to read it."

T'Dani offered Kell a look that plainly said what she was thinking —that he was mad, and that they were all mad to be following him so blindly, but the Tessma at the transporter controls responded to Kell's beam-them-down-now motion before any such comment had a chance to make it out of her mouth.

And before Captain Ingram had another chance to object.

Chapter Nineteen

"Shrev?" Theskhe's touch was the first thing he was conscious of. He had no idea, anymore, how long he'd been here; it might have been years. His body had begun to ache from the procedures they performed on him — or with him, or to him; who knew? Certainly not Shrev. He hated this woman's touch more avidly than he hated the absence of his tongue, or the steel rods that held his arms, legs, and torso in traction. Perhaps those were the real reason why his body, otherwise largely numb, had begun to ache. Or maybe the ache, like so much else — in this place? In his mind? He'd begun to have difficulty differentiating between the two things anymore — wasn't actually real.

Maybe *he* wasn't actually real.

He pretended he wasn't conscious. Certainly, though, the readings of the biobed let her know otherwise. He didn't care. Perhaps next, they'd cut off his eyelids so he'd have to look at things he didn't want to see, but that hadn't happened yet. How they'd cut off the sensory ability of his antennae, he didn't know. Didn't want to imagine. He tried to hold them as still as he was capable of holding them, but like his toes or his fingers, they were utterly numb, insensate. He might have been performing puppet shows with them, for all he knew. Or they might not be there at all anymore.

Shrev wasn't certain that he cared. Why didn't they just perform a prefrontal lobotomy on him or something? For the love of the all-overarching, why keep playing with him like this? The things they'd already forcibly removed from his body would make a good-sized list, notwithstanding they'd replaced some of them. Why get all squeamish about three hundred grams of brain tissue?

The answer, of course, came: Gleevah hated him for everything he was that the depraved creature wasn't. The androgynous nightmare enjoyed having power over Shrev. It enjoyed knowing that Shrev knew it had that power. Puppet shows, indeed. And Theskhe...his *clone* Theskhe...

I hate you. Shrev concentrated on the emotions of hatred, of disgust, of loathing so deep and wide that it couldn't be penetrated. Everyone and everything and every situation he'd ever had cause to abhor, he poured into the feeling. And in doing so, he had one of his theories about Theskhe confirmed, for all the good it did him.

"I know you're awake, Shrev, your antennas are moving. Please, just look at me?"

She hadn't the first clue what the motions and positions of ghelnoid sensory appendages meant, even when he was sending clear, non-ambivalent signals. Some anti-Andorian bigots liked to maintain that, because they were largely involuntary, the motions of Andorian antennae were animalistic, like the motions of insect antennae, with no intrinsic meaning, as though Andorians weren't sentient, weren't people. For someone of Andorian blood not to

comprehend basic antennae positions was, he thought, like not knowing what a yawn meant.

Had someone once explained the meaning of antennae motions or facial expressions to *him*? If they had, Shrev couldn't consciously remember it. Considering the limberness and inventiveness of his antennae, he doubted it. All facade, no substance — that's what these clones were.

Or should he consider them children? Grandchildren?

He wondered, without really caring, how deep that particular rabbit hole went. Whether if the younger children were given to some loving Andorian family, they would ever really develop into...*people*? Or was there something fundamentally flawed in them, were they perhaps lacking whatever part of the humanoid genome it was that caused one to weep when another was weeping, to feel embarrassment in the face of rebuke, which read anger or attraction from another's body language and tone of voice? Because that was what the innate movement of Andorian antennae was — body language, which was always primarily spontaneous, regardless of which part of the humanoid body was speaking.

Now Shrev thought of anger: Blue-hot, all-consuming anger. He concentrated and could just feel the lightest touch on the top of his head, as rage sent the tips of his antennae backwards to brush against his snarled, ratted hair. He let the emotion fill his facial features, too. He knew she was watching him; he could sense the effect of

her focus on his face as plainly as he could feel the touch of her fingertips on his skin.

"Oh, Shrev, are you in pain? I'm so sorry! I can hardly bear to see you like this; don't you know that? Just open your eyes, look at me, look at me *now*, let me know you'll go with me, and I'll get you out of all this. It's what I've come for, don't you understand? There's so *much* we could do together, have together, Shrev! I've dreamed of you all my life, of everything you are, what we could offer each other. Can't you understand? I *love* you, Shrev! If you'd just...if you would stop fighting and just cooperate, we could —"

Her words cut off with a gasp and a sharp, popping snap.

Shrev scowled and peered out through his thick human lashes, white as Andorian snow. *Now what insane...his eyes flew open.*

No way. No way in *hell*...

"Oh god, Shrev, how do I get you out of *this*?"

There wasn't an ounce of recognition on his face. His features were as hard as meticulously chiseled blue lace agate, his dark eyes narrowed into unfriendly slits. His antennae, nearly lost in the tangled mat that his own struggles had made of his downy, luxuriant long hair, were making those indecipherable motions she'd come to read as irritation — which, considering the situation they were currently immured in, made absolutely no sense. Perhaps,

it occurred to her incongruously, she should just *ask* him what they meant, sometime.

Assuming, of course, there was a *sometime* in which she could do that. Right now, Shrev lay fastened to some psychotic madman's version of a biobed like a butterfly pinned to a specimen board. Shawn Kell's admonitions rang in her memory: *Their most unassailable position would be to convince Shrev to help them willingly. Their usual modus operandi to convince the unwilling is to cut out the tongue, then perform old-fashioned, straightforward brainwashing, if a subject whose genes they're interested in still won't cooperate. Removal of speech organs is standard. Easier to brainwash a subject isolated in their own mind.* T'Dani shuddered; she didn't want to know how the cold, evocative man from Section 31 had learned that.

The half-Vulcan doctor stepped away from the bedside, to find a temporary hiding place for the corpse she'd created. *Tal-shaya*, properly performed, was relatively silent, bloodless, and didn't produce the standard messy effluvia of death — at least, not right away. She stripped the body of its paraphernalia, which was considerable. Half of it was also unidentifiable, which made the doctor nervous about handling it. She dragged the corpse into what appeared to be a cryogenic cupboard, locked the thing behind her, and returned to the remarkable and horrifying biobed.

The bed basically appeared to have been fused, via the

insertion of an assortment of probes, tubes, and needles, with various parts of Shrev's body. She couldn't begin to determine how to remove the links, cylinders, and syringes without causing him significant harm, and she was absolutely positive that if she simply cut into the bed, she'd give away her presence instantly. Who or whatever ran this nightmare complex surely believed that the *shen* she'd just killed was personally guarding their prize prisoner. That should buy T'Dani time enough to figure the bed out.

Alternatively, the *shen's* intent had been to kill Shrev, which meant that T'Dani wouldn't have a lot of time to get him out of here, if anyone was monitoring the readings of this bed remotely. Unless she'd gotten very lucky, and the dead woman had somehow switched off all remote readings, and everyone else in the complex was currently too busy to care.

T'Dani shuddered; she had no way by which to confirm or deny any of these potential scenarios. Colin should have been here by now: His only task had been to locate the designers of this place, not to keep them busy. Shawn Kell had made it plain that keeping them busy would be his job. Frankly, she doubted that even the powerful telepath could help her figure out the workings of this bed or the purposes behind what was happening to Shrev, but his continued absence meant she had two people to worry about.

Chapter Twenty

Colin was, in fact, hopelessly lost. None of the multiple positioning devices he carried (tricorder, communicator, damned inscrutable Section 31 positioning unit, or the usually excellent compass he possessed between his own ears) appeared to be able to function in the endless, Escheresque corridors and stairways that made up the complex he'd entered. Indeed, from the outside, the place hadn't looked even a fraction as large as it was turning out to be.

And whatever might or might not have been programmed to show up on the dun-colored cloth he'd taken from the Inspector General of Section 31, nothing was forthcoming there, either. The anxious telepath entertained, and subsequently discarded, an unpleasant hunch that Kell had put him into this position simply to get him out of the way.

He also entertained the equally unpleasant thought that whatever it was that was so severely skewing his psionic senses had somehow brought him purposely to this particular intersection of corridors. Colin shook his head at the useless bit of cloth he held and pushed away what was probably just a paranoid ideation as he pushed the cloth into a side pocket of his uniform. He knew from past experience that working with Section 31 spawned paranoia.

So did the setup of this complex. There were no windows at all in the maze of interconnected buildings. That claustrophobic fact alone might have been what caused Colin to imagine that he was in some deeply underground part of the complex, regardless of the fact that he had become lost after mounting his second set of stairwells upward.

Heaving a frustrated sigh, he paused in the center of one corridor where it formed a junction with another, near the slender, unremarkable door of what he supposed was some sort of janitorial closet. He looked up and down, back and forth along and across both corridors, in a futile attempt to gain some vague idea of where exactly he was in the rambling complex. The adjoining corridor was relatively short, perhaps two hundred feet long, and formed a second junction with a corridor running parallel to the one he was in.

He thought that the adjoining corridor *might* take him back nearer to the point at which he'd begun this foray. He made a wry face and shook his head. The communicators had been jammed as instruments of actual communication in the period before Section 31 and the Am Tal were scheduled to begin their strafing of the holographic transmitters which, according to them, were what truly designed this place. It was still difficult for Colin to believe that something that felt as real as the building he was in could be a holographic projection.

He checked his chronometer. It had stopped working.

Colin blinked at the blank, dark face of the device stupidly for a second. Both space and time, it appeared, were elusive here.

The sound of determined footsteps echoed from somewhere down the parallel corridor, immediately pulling his attention away from the nonfunctional chronometer. He glanced around wildly for cover, finally pressing nervously against the entry-plate on the wall outside the janitorial closet — blessedly unlocked. He darted inside.

Only to come to a dead stop, dumbfounded. The door closed behind Colin in automated silence. What had appeared, from the outside, to be a storage closet — *I suppose, in a sense, this could be considered a storage closet*, went skittering through his distraught mind, pursued eagerly by a cold wave of utter horror — was, in fact, a vast, echoing chamber full of hundreds of thousands of people. Which, naturally, made absolutely no sense whatsoever.

The space wasn't a cryogenic freezer. Nevertheless, the humanoids arrayed in it sat or stood or hunched or lay in frozen poses, like mannequins. *That's got to be what these are*, Colin offered himself soothingly. He reached out to touch the nearest mannequin, in order to prove his hypothesis correct, only to feel the unmistakable sensation of warm, living flesh greet his fingertips.

He jerked his hand away and stared into open, glazed, almost certainly unseeing eyes as blue as the powder-soft skin of the female Andorian, her pupils as impossibly wide

and motionless as those of a corpse. Unless he could get into their minds, Colin had never been able to tell the Andorian sexes apart; he generally just thought of them as male and female. At the moment, he couldn't have cared. He doubted that any of the other immobile people in the vaulted room did, either. If his disarrayed psionic senses could be believed, none of them appeared to possess a functional brain.

Like everyone else crowding the space, the individual he'd touched wasn't visibly breathing. She stood in a posture that reflected the expression of pure surprise locked onto her still features, antennae drawn back in what looked to be a painful arc. Colin reached out to touch her again, tentatively seeking her right carotid underneath the high-necked, unusual clothing she was wearing. He'd never seen similar apparel; it appeared to be seamless, tied around her limbs and torso with ribbons.

No pulse, either; even though her skin was otherwise warm, supple and alive under his hand. He shook his head slowly. "What the hell *is* this?" he whispered.

She didn't reply; if she had, Colin might have jumped out of his own skin. He half-turned away from her to look more closely at the room he found himself in, and with an impossible heave, as though sighing in frustration at what it considered to be Colin's idiotic incomprehension, the room changed shape. Or size. Or dimension. Or *something*. He leapt backwards and tripped over a nearly naked child who lay apparently sleeping on the floor,

knocking the breath out of himself on the...

Floor? Even as he fell, the room twisted, and he remained on his feet. The room obligingly repositioned everyone else. The whole —

How many people? One million? Two?

Colin's mind gibbered impossible numbers at him frantically. Possibly more — almost certainly more, some wearing what looked like various costumes, or uniforms, or both; others in the multi-plated, sharp-edged, dangerous armor preferred by Andorians for particular sorts of combat; yet others in styles of clothing that bespoke times or places that he was currently too overwhelmed to fathom.

The room couldn't possibly be so large. The entire *complex* hadn't seemed large enough to hold multiple dozens of people, much less multiple hundreds of thousands, but here they all were, frozen into some mysterious sort of stasis at relatively comfortable room temperature.

Of course, the temperature of the room itself might be an illusion. Certainly, the planetary environment was. Colin honestly wasn't certain whether he was *on* the ground, above the ground, or underneath it. Though the people in the room didn't *seem* to be illusions: The child Colin had tripped over hadn't moved or responded, but the room had reset him gently up against the wall near the door, and a livid bruise was forming on his upper left arm, where the telepath had stepped on him.

This fact caused Colin to discard his next comforting

hypothesis: That this was an unfeasibly large collection of androids. He'd never had personal experience with such constructs, but he'd heard about them, personally and at great length. In fact, the person he'd been regaled by regarding them had also been trying to develop holographic technologies that could mimic this roomful of distinctly fleshy individuals, too.

Why in hell would the Aatuu'hari require androids or holograms that can be injured?

He considered that question for a great deal longer than he might have in a less bizarre situation, but was unable to come to any sort of conclusion before he heard footsteps, this time halting and unsure. He ducked back against the wall, behind a small group of people in a tight huddle, as though they had been gathered together for safety or solace prior to somehow having been interred in a self-warping, impossibly cavernous, incomprehensible stasis chamber full of the living dead.

"Oh, please," a bored voice that sounded like it desperately needed to be oiled echoed through the enormous chamber. "You're not an Andorian. Furthermore, you're a telepath and breathing in real time. Also, you're dead if you don't show yourself immediately, so stop wasting *my* time. I have places to be," the voice broke into a high-pitched chuckle that anyone anywhere would have recognized as madness, "and people to do, as you've obviously seen!"

Chapter Twenty-One

Far-off explosions, sounding like the clatter of heavy cookware muffled under a layer of down comforters as it fell down a stairway, had long been occurring, and now, they were moving closer to this particular section of the complex. T'Dani scowled. Between the Am Tal and Section 31, she wasn't sure how much of this planet would still exist by this time tomorrow, though certainly, there were things in this fantasy complex that people in both undercover organizations would want to get their hands on. She wasn't entirely certain which group she was more dismayed by having to deal with: Section 31, the *Aatuu'hari*, or the Am Tal.

Corrigan shook off her anxiety and focused her attention back on the part-Aenar human/Andorian hybrid who had been mutilated and obscenely interlinked with the biobed upon which he lay. The CMO of the *Enterprise* knew that Shrev had communication abilities beyond his tongue and vocal chords.

He continued to stare at her coldly, almost unblinking. That she'd finally begun to admit to herself how very deeply she cared for him aside, T'Dani would *not* have wanted to be looked at by Shrev like that if he hadn't been so irredeemably fused to immovable objects. He'd given her a similar sense of dismay the first time she'd met him, and he hadn't really been all that upset then. *This was like*

being regarded by a hostile, extremely irritated, and wholly unsympathetic predator trapped in a cage. She knew very well just how powerful this gentle man really was, and there was no way she'd have dared to free him from his bonds right at that instant, even if she'd known how. Unless she could somehow communicate with him and verify the reality of her presence in this sinister place, which had probably damaged his mind — considering, for instance, the nightmarish biobed he was intimately entwined with — he would kill her.

T'Dani didn't necessarily require Colin's help to try to communicate with Shrev mind-to-mind, but to perform the act alone in an unsafe situation would make both of them extremely vulnerable in the face of incredible danger. She stepped nearer to the bed, cradled his face between her hands as gently as she could considering the probes and tubes and steel cables they had rigged over and into his skull, and did it anyway.

His skin was clammy, with a sickly-sweet reek. Whatever nourishment he might be getting, it obviously didn't make up for what they were taking from him, if the acetylene stench of ketones emanating from his pores was any indication. This, too, would affect the functioning of his mind — a little starvation-icing on the torture-cake. She'd mind-melded with him before...

But where she found herself now was a prison. Dungeon. Haunted house. Or all three, really, in varying proportions. Its phantasmagoria was built of the stone,

mortar, and metal of horror, grief, isolation, and pain. She realized instantly that this was an edifice she'd be unlikely to be able to entirely disassemble alone. Significant time would be required to unpick the weft-lies from the warp-truths that had gone into the clever weaving of the awful tapestries that adorned its walls.

Naturally, he thought her presence in his mind was another brainwashing technique — another falsehood that he had no way to differentiate from reality. Another reality that he had no way to differentiate from a fabricated horror story. That was the essence of brainwashing. Nothing penetrated its effluvia: Not the light of her psionic signature, vivid as founts of human blood in this dim, stinking place; not the naked admission of her own worst fears; not the revelation of her most secret dreams.

He believed that, somehow, they'd just taken all of it out of his own head. She understood why he had to believe that. To believe that everything they'd revealed to him in this place had actually happened would break the humanoid mind and spirit. He had no grasp of the fact that what he'd been shown, in the very specific manners in which it had been revealed, combined with targeted forms of torture, hope of escape, and inconsistent gentleness, was what *had* broken his mind.

If his spirit had broken as well, T'Dani Corrigan couldn't say. He would not allow her close enough. It was as though, the CMO of the *Enterprise* thought, Shrev had internalized his inability to speak. That was

understandable. She could see fragments of the memories of what they'd done to him woven into the horrible wall tapestries:

His hand and foot and antennae lopped off, the stumps carelessly heat-sealed until his flesh had cooked, the next few days spent drifting into and out of feverish semi-consciousness while manacled into a box...

The *Enterprise* and all her crew turned into a quickly dissipating cloud of shards and fragments...

His own clone — *clones* — expressing romantic desire for him, while concurrently sharing the dreadful knowledge of the rapacious cultural and biological defeat that the Aatuu'hari ultimately planned to visit upon his *shen*, *chan*, and *zhen*'s people...

Being beaten and kicked just unconscious enough that he couldn't defend himself while the tongue was cut out of his mouth a few centimeters at a time, the most difficult struggle he'd ever faced in his life focused on not choking to death on his own blood, so grateful at last for the ghastly white-hot kiss of the nucleotide-cauterizing iron that he'd sobbed...

The children he'd never even seen ripped to shreds and lying in a freezer, from which their ghosts visited him in hallways and on wind-scoured cliffs...

Which of these tortures were real or not real, which were physical, and which were psychological, was beyond his capacity to grasp anymore. Trying any harder to force the issue would probably only lead her deeper into his self-

imposed penitentiary, where the tapestries would become subconscious and, she suspected, yet more lurid. T'Dani considered the appallingly thorough embrace of the bed he was part of, the immovable steel pinions which interlaced the manacles that held him otherwise as rigid as a day-old corpse, and shuddered.

She remembered what he'd said to her — was it only nine weeks ago? She cried out to him one last time, before disengaging their minds — she'd have to pull back, and soon; anyone could come looking, anytime, and she still had absolutely no backup plan. "Shrev, I *am* part of your life. And I want to be! Please, don't shut me out now when you most need my help."

From somewhere in the ruins that were Shrev's psyche, she got a response. Certainly not the one she'd wished for, but a response, nonetheless. "Isn't this hell enough for you already? Because if not, I'd suggest you go find another."

He honestly didn't *believe* it was her. Rather, he was convinced that she was a phantasm designed by one of his tormentors, set to drive him deeper into the prison his own mind had become. Probably, he thought she was the Andorian woman she'd just killed (Shrev's *clone*? The concepts behind what T'Dani had glimpsed in the woman's markedly unstable mind the moment she'd touched her skin were difficult to grasp), particularly considering that the things T'Dani most wanted to say to the tortured man were much the same things she'd heard from the woman's own

mouth, while creeping slowly into the room behind her.

The belief that this was yet more psychological torture ran deep. They must have accessed his subconscious mind and worked out his fears and desires, tragedies and triumphs. Or even accessed and warped them; she lost herself for a split second in her own memory of having once been strapped into a chair by the Husnock as a test subject for a mind-sifter.

Upon recalling this, she immediately wished that she hadn't. Now he was *convinced* that she was nothing more than a projection created by his kidnappers; her memory of her own torment tormented him in turn. Disgust, depression, and pure exhaustion rose up like dust to choke her. What had been done to Shrev would have killed a pure Andorian by now. His endurance was human, though she was certain he'd wished more than once, trapped in this place, that it wasn't.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Colin's first terrified impulse was to reach out telekinetically and somehow disarm whomever it was who had cornered him here, and he followed that urge, only to feel something *pull* on the psionic projection as though it was a stray thread of yarn, and attempt to unravel his mind like a poorly constructed scarf. He cried out and grasped at his head, falling to the ground retching.

The room didn't reassemble itself around him this time, and he hit the metallic floor unforgivably hard. It would be some time before it would occur to Colin that the warping of the room shortly after he'd entered it must have been some sort of alarm system.

It was also several moments before Colin was lucid enough to focus on the creature that stood over him. Very old, with gray-blue skin and pale eyes as hard and waxy as fire-cured flint. Its short stubs of legs appeared to be wired to its bald cranium by a network of wires and sensors that ran beneath its carefully tailored clothes and the wide, multicolored belt that spanned its torso. Its hands were equally misshapen and gnarled; so were its antennae, of which it had three of unequal lengths.

Jagged little teeth glinted behind thick lips when it smiled at the big man's agony: "I told you I'd hurt you if you continued to waste my time. If you don't answer me, I'll hurt you more. Who are you? Where did you come

from?"

Its hands caressed a pattern against the belt it wore, and whatever held the frazzled threads of Colin's mind released them, and instead grasped his body like a merciless iron fist. The tangled mass of telekinetic intent, which was all that remained of his original plan for subduing his discoverer, made Colin dizzy. He tried to moan but couldn't. Some deep-seated instinct made him want to scramble across the floor away from the source of his torment, but he was unable to move so much as his eyelids. Then that static pressure against his head and face eased, and he swallowed convulsively, gasping.

"I asked what you are doing here. Well?"

Colin glared at the wizened little creature. Its face contorting into a horrible mask, it laughed.

"All right, then. There are...what's that old human aphorism? Lots of ways to flense the tiger?" it glanced around the room searchingly, its gaze settling on one of the elaborately-armored figures. In the warrior's belt was a more or less triangular weapon, one edge rounded by a glistening row of serrated teeth, the other squared off by a hand grip, the rest glinting with sharp planes and angles. It was one of two ways in which modern Andorians preferred to contour the weapon, though there were as many as five or six different designs — possibly denoting clan distinctions — available in the general vicinity.

The ugly little bionic troll strolled across the floor with an unnatural, jerking gate and yanked at the hilt of the

blade in the warrior's belt. The leather holster that had cradled it gave way like rotten cloth, wafting the scent of antiquity and mildew Colin's way. His captor then lurched back toward him, and toward the group of unarmed Andorians Colin had attempted to hide among. It paused before a *thaan* sitting on the ground, his legs drawn up against his chest but his hands flat on the floor, as though he had been preparing to jump back up.

Colin was relatively certain that the gnomelike creature wasn't endowed with any great physical prowess. It didn't seem to require much force, however, to send the well-kept, brutally sharp blade through the man's knee joint, though it did take Colin's horrible captor several blows to sever the joint completely.

Once that had been accomplished, the twisted little monstrosity kicked the lower leg away, careless of the cobalt-based blood that oozed from the obscene, still-unmoving remains of the *thaan*'s knee joint, where ambient light off of bone and cartilage shimmered wet and white, and marrow pockets glistened black, beneath an unnaturally languid flow of obscenely brilliant blue blood leaking from the ragged remains of the large vessels that traversed the length of any humanoid leg.

The sight of the carnage it had created made the troll-like being's face twist once more, obviously an expression of pleasure. The thing took a moment to regain its breath, then began to wax hideously poetic:

"Biologically active, metal-nucleated carrier cells are

fantastic, aren't they? Amazing what can be made of a little oxygen, hydrogen, carbon, and nitrogen when they form a band around a metal core. *Blood!* The liveliness of its colors — almost doesn't seem real, does it?" the horrible creature bent down toward its captive, its distorted body forming improbable knots beneath its chic clothing, bringing the vicious weapon, still sluggishly dripping impossibly vivid cyan drops from its razor-edged teeth, level with Colin's eyes.

"You'd think that, like paints, they'd form exciting secondary and tertiary hues, too. Sadly, though, since they *are* alive, they carry enzymes that muddy everything to brown or black or gray. I've tried. *In vivo* it's different, of course, but it's *dissection* that's the subject of this conversation, eh?

"I can tell simply by the hue of your dermis that you have iron-based blood. I also know that if I put this through your neck right now, or your arm, or turn it sideways and slide it through your face into your brainpan, the resulting lovely crimson jets will *not* mix with whatever he's got left in him to become some vibrant purple, much as that would please me. I was astounded to learn what sorts of prices that paintings made of such concoctions fetch through the Orion syndicate! Done on carefully smoked humanoid skins, there are even species who will pay dearly for such paintings to *eat*, like exotic flatbreads. Unwanted hybrid children have financed a great deal of my research in just such a manner.

"So. Do you imagine *now* that you could tell me what it is that you're doing here —how you *got* here? You're not Andorian, and your joints will be much easier to sever. Also, your bones are more fragile. Brittle. And this *hurts*." The dwarfed little *chae-na* nodded toward the man whose knee joint it had so casually amputated. The *thaan*'s blood had begun to form a small pool on the slick, cold floor, clotting blackly at the edges. "If I reactivated his temporal metabolic pathways to run concurrently in real time, his screams would verify that for you. Of course, he *is* screaming in this phase-space as well: Just too slowly for you to hear. It will take him over a year to die."

This was not by any means an illusion, or if it was, it was indistinguishable from reality. Colin could smell the sharp, sickly-sweet metallic tang of humanoid blood clotting on the blade of the *ushaan*. Indeed, the weapon was so close to his face, and so thickly spattered with gore, that he could nearly taste it. The telepath tried not to gag on the raw meaty odor, or the awful images that formed in his mind. Or on the awareness of how near the blade's merciless wielder stood.

Chapter Twenty-Three

T'Dani *had* to get through to Shrev. There was no way she was going to be able to get him out of here by herself; even if she could loose him from the deplorable bed, he'd kill her. She'd sparred with him on a regular basis for two years, and she harbored no illusions regarding how efficiently he'd be able to take her life.

Damn it all — what could she offer him that he would *believe*?

Fesoan. She could offer him Andoria. She adored the Andorian people, had secretly longed to be one as a teenager. Fate had handed her Shrev like an impossible gift all but wrapped in a bow, and the night-terrors of a child that she frankly didn't like very much had struggled to toss him back, until she'd had to face the prospect of a life without him. If she died with him here in this chamber of horrors, so be it — *raiidh*, in Vulcan — because she was *not* going to lose him again.

The utterly unique scent of a chirurgeon's herb chamber.

The intense need of her new little stepsister's part-Aenar, part-Vulcan mind for close, warm contact as Myral's little arms wound around her neck, and T'Dani received at the age of sixteen her first, fearful glimpse of what it might be like to fall in love.

The mazelike, wonder-filled hallways of the Andorian

Art Institute, where despite his denials, she firmly believed Shrev's artwork belonged.

The reverberating effects of the enormous Hall of Infants in Agrana, where the carefully chosen stones in the exquisitely fashioned arches rang like voices when bondgroups brought their four-month-old infants there to sing them their first lullabies.

The particular way in which *katheka* and *srjula* were fermented in order to give them their unique savor — the first as dark and dense as licorice, the second tart and bitter like grapefruit, acquired tastes as much as the human taste for tea or coffee or lemonade.

The ice-borer chambers set aside for the production of Andorian silk, as soft as the love-knots of Andorian hair that bondgroups offered one another as a sign of their devotion. And the ten million songs of Andor — anywhere one went on that planet, there was music. And dancing.

The undulating hymn to *Fesoan*, which the Federation knew as Andoria, was sung before any ritual activity from the making of *hari* to the *shelthreth*. It celebrated the peerless birthplace and cradle of their varied cultures, and mourned the mythos which stated that, one day, that birthplace would become the mausoleum of them all:

...*Uumaruu Fendsa'luuru ...glai'maa'a'aah sae'dyuu...*

Or the clipped, martial-sounding anthem sung before any political gathering, even ones that included the Federation as a whole, proclaiming the Andorian people's uniqueness in their passion and subtlety, announcing their

unity in concord with their differences, the suppleness and resolute nature of their minds, and the distinctiveness of themselves and their home in the Universe. And the song that, to T'Dani, summed up the Andorian race as a whole, all they had been, all they had chosen to become, the place they'd always seemed to have held in her heart for as long as she could remember for reasons she'd never been able to enunciate: Union born of conflict, conflict transformed to love.

T'Dani's memories of his home, people, culture, and language were not Shrev's own memories, and they appeared legitimate to him, in a way very little had for these agonizing weeks that seemed to have swallowed up the rest of his life. Shrev's psionic signature was dark — a true black light — but it glowed like a beacon in this unnatural place he'd fashioned for himself. "T'Dani? Is that really *you*?"

She nodded. "Can't you feel my fingers against your face?"

"I can't...can't feel much of anything, really. They killed you! I saw the *Enterprise* explode."

"The *Enterprise* wasn't destroyed; only part of the hull was blown out. They did it to try to hide their tracks, but they were careless. They..." she paused, not at all sure she should add to or even amend his burden of pain, but she had to build some kind of bridge of truth that he could cross.

She had to be a *Vulcan*.

"They killed fifty-nine people in the blast. We believed they'd killed you, too, until we found pure Andorian blood in what was left of your quarters, and transporter traces on what little of your body we could find in space. We're working with Section 31 and the Am Tal right now. They both want to entirely destroy this planet —"

"There are innocent children here, T'Dani."

She smiled. This was the Shrev she knew — in some dreadful, dire situation, he thought about everyone but himself. "That's why the captain sent us. Look, Shrev, look at my memories of Renee — nobody could possibly know those, right?" the *Enterprise's* CMO had been Captain Ingram's best friend for most of her life, and had memories of them traveling with Renee's adoptive parents, an Ambassador and a Beta-Quadrant-renowned chef. She shared them with him, losing all track of time and space.

"This place you're in, it's *your own mind*. You don't have to live here. It's in your power to change this place, leave it behind. Did you know you're the one who taught me that? I *finally* understand what it was my mother and her people were trying to tell me for so long, but you're the one who led me to that understanding.

"No situation holds any fear, or pain, or sadness, or danger, unless one allows those things to first dwell in *one's own mind*. Jettison this place and come with me! We'll determine what's real and not real together, but right now, I need to figure out how to get you out of this

awful...*instrument* they've got you melded with."

He regarded her with suspicion. Of course he did. She sighed and tried again, patiently. *Raiidth*.

"Lies aren't *effective* unless they're presented on a framework of truth. That's what they kept doing to you, it's why you're having trouble distinguishing the truth now. But here's the truth; the Am Tal and Section 31 are systematically breaking down this place, and either they or the *Aatuu'hari* are going to come for us soon.

"I killed that woman — what was her name? Theskhe? But they're going to figure out that she never finished whatever it was she came in here to do to...with...*about* you. I'll die here with you if you feel you can't face this, but that would be poor payment on my behalf for all you've given me, *Corvathi'nass*. Now," she repeated the first thing he heard her say when she saw him; "any ideas how I can get you out of this...*thing*?"

"It's a... I saw it put what looked like a... a large hypospray in some...I don't know, some outlet on the left side of the bed." Shrev shared the memory with her. The rest of it — the part about his children — came, too, as though he'd tugged on a loose thread and unraveled an entire shirt. The half-Vulcan woman tried to hide her horror, both of the torturer he called *Gleevah* and of what that thing had told him it had done to his children.

"No, Shrev, that's a lie, it's got to be. Listen, there are people here to destroy this place who know every damn thing about everybody. They'll know the truth about your

children, too. But right *now*, I need to get you out of this monstrosity you're stuck in. I don't know if it will hurt."

"Don't worry about that. Just do what you have to. T'Dani?" his psionic signature had solidified, but it wasn't the man she knew. It was, rather, Shrev as he currently perceived himself.

She considered this wretched apparition with trepidation. "Yes, Shrev?"

"I... I owe you so much. I..." the apparition crumbled a little more.

"You owe me nothing. Everything I give you is free of obligation. Anything else is as illogical as the creature you're currently pretending to be." She turned her mind into a projector for a moment, and introduced Shrev as he currently perceived himself to the Shrev she knew.

The apparition flinched. "I can't possibly live up to that, T'Dani!" he gasped, as though in pain. She smiled.

"Just as you owe me nothing, you owe yourself nothing. *This* is simply who you are. I know your potential, the same way you know mine. Nothing less will get us out of here." Her psionic trace held out a hand.

His mind grasped it the way a drowning man might grasp a buoy.

Chapter Twenty-Four

She wanted to escape Gleevah. That was her main plan. She'd take whatever children she could with her. She wished she could take the prisoners with her, too — she'd opened as wide and shallow a hole as she'd dared in the hologrid. Gleevah always demanded reliable transport and escape routes, so the Augment had allowed her to oversee and maintain a hole in this base's defense grid; she did not believe that her creator paid much attention to the hole she maintained.

She had been both excited and frightened when Gleevah had revealed to her that there were potentially adversarial vehicles in orbit around this base, so excited and frightened that she had relegated the Augment's exact words to computer memory. She ruminated over them now:

"Escape pods have already been prepared. They've a limit on how many life forms they can sustain, of course. You'll want to take three of the children with you — Keska, Modrol, and Ansi would be the ones I'd choose." The Augment turned and smiled at the Theskhe. Her face crumpled into a snarl that she couldn't control when Gleevah had added: "Kill the rest."

She didn't let on that she knew just exactly what ingenious tombs Gleevah's escape pods were. She didn't let on that she *remembered* that Gleevah both had in the

past, and could in the future, make more of her — that she was expendable to the Augment (who made the critical mistake of reusing certain electronic instrumentation because of its scarcity or cost without spending precious time and resources quantum-wiping it first).

She didn't let on that the quantum-outcome of such miserliness was her ability to *care* about what became of herself. She had to maintain the illusion that she was nothing more than what Gleevah believed her to be: An emotionless, unfeeling cyborg. "I'll see that it's done. And you?"

"I will be required elsewhere."

She knew, of course, that there were things the Augment had never shared with her. It was possible that there were things regarding the bases that Gleevah had made certain were purposely wiped out of even its own mind, so that no one else could ever be privy to them. It was easy enough to rig an imperceptile, inter-cranial mnemonic key to some physical affect of any occurrence, so that a proper — or pre-programmed — response to it took effect only when the occurrence happened.

Gleevah had done that to the mind of the kidnapped *Federati*, after all. Her great fear was that the Augment might have hooked something similar to the inner workings of her own brain — or maybe to the technological interfaces irredeemably fused to that organ. The only reason that she doubted that Gleevah had done such a thing was because such an interface would effect the

workings of the technology itself. She was betting heavily on this hypothesis when she'd opened that wide, indelible hole in the defense grid, in hopes that the people she hoped would come looking for the *Federati* might be able to...

Her own programming protested that she was a cyborg: She shouldn't even be able to *hope*. And what was it she wished they'd do? Save *her*? It had occurred to her more than once that the concept was ridiculous, and more than once she'd pushed this knowledge aside roughly. Help the clones who were responsible for the disappearance of a Federation member? Help a planetful of people stranded from elsewhere? Why should the Federation do such things? How *could* they?

She didn't know. There were so very many things she didn't know. But of one thing she was certain: She would never know those things, or ever have the slightest chance of learning them, trapped on the Augment's bases being used as his adjunct invasion-awareness unit.

This was not Gleevah's most important base, it was a mere storage depot; it didn't even have the simple reconstruction capacities of a repair base. It certainly didn't possess the heavy offensive fortifications the Augment had salted liberally around and throughout the experimental bases. And it was the first of all the bases that anyone outside the Aatuu'hari's carefully maintained inner enclave had ever located and subsequently recognized for what it truly was, as far as she was aware.

It was her first, if not her last or only, chance to break

free. She didn't care a damn about the kidnapped *Federati* fusion, though the man appeared to have driven her foreshadows mad. She was not allowed anywhere near him, and in any case, he was even more a prisoner here than herself, and could afford her no assistance.

Gleevah's need to transport the hybrid's precious DNA off the storage base and to the experimental bases located in various parts of the Delta and Gamma quadrants had afforded her more freedom than the hybrid prisoner possibly could. The Augment's avarice had led him to trust her to help him with the transports, and had ultimately allowed her to open an indelible real-space vertex in the carefully maintained holographic shield the storage planet maintained without setting off base alarms.

Of course, the hole in the shield should have been minimized or even closed hours ago. She frankly doubted that Gleevah himself even required it: The ancient Augment's capacity to bounce between Quadrant bases spoke, to her mind, of some sort of intergalactic transporter device. Or even an interdimensional one: It wasn't as though Gleevah's genetic material wasn't already a tattered mess that couldn't maintain the Augment's life without serious outside assistance, anyway.

And she certainly couldn't effect the size of the hole now, in any case, even had Gleevah known where she was and what she was doing. She wasn't in her assigned place, wasn't hooked up to electronics appropriate for that function. Which was not looked currently looked upon as

unusual by any of the harried personnel, real or holographic, of the base: Almost nobody was in their assigned place right now.

There was an incursion to fight off. Not even those who knew of her existence imagined that she was key to that incursion. With luck, none of them ever would.

The machinery to which she'd been intimately wired not long after weaning was easy enough to control using the force of her mind — something she'd taught herself to do in the twenty-five years that made up her life as an invasion-awareness unit. Teaching herself that trick had been her first lesson in sabotage. Gleevah had appeared to be unable to discern the difference between honest mistakes brought about by the uncomfortable linkage of a sentient mind composed of meat to a series of metal circuits, and the effects that occurred in those circuits when the organic puppet that had been connected to them took over the running of the show.

However, her accessory machinery was heavy, and it made noise when she moved. She'd strapped it to her body, which minimized the weight, the clanking, and the potential for bruising, but even Andorian muscle — and particularly Andorian muscle that didn't get a lot of exercise — quailed under the load she carried. She was not a cyborg unit that had been created to move around much, but that didn't matter, she comforted herself:

The *Federati* here to retrieve their kidnapped man would have some method of ameliorating that. She would

prove to them, somehow, that she had helped them, that she could make saving her worth their while.

"It's some sort of...neural clip. It's energetic, not material. Hold still; don't even breathe...there!"

The medical instrumentation in this place could do things T'Dani had no idea medical instrumentation could do. She'd love to be able to take some of it back to the *Enterprise*, but she doubted she'd be given that opportunity. Of course, there was also a strange implant in Shrev's brain — that, she'd need surgery to remove. The idea terrified her, and she tried valiantly to keep it from him.

Shrev bit his bottom lip until it bled to keep from crying out, as sixty hours of suppressed sensation hit him all at once. He must be thirsty, T'Dani thought with compassion. Starving. Exhausted. Every bone, muscle, joint, and tendon in his body probably ached as though he'd been strapped to some ancient torture device.

Corrigan supposed it could be worse. He could, for instance, still be in that *modern* torture device that had, finally, freed him. It had taken it awhile; apparently, and mercifully, it was set to heal the worst of its wounds as it withdrew its talons, although he'd be black and pink all over for a while.

Shrev pulled his shoulders up and arched his back. His entire spine, both scapulae, one clavicle, and part of his sternum crackled. He rolled his neck and his cervical vertebrae voiced similar complaints. He flexed his knees

and rolled his ankles until they popped, too, before attempting the tricky maneuver of standing up. T'Dani hovered around him solicitously, then reached up and touched his temple.

We need to find you water. Then we can —

He shook his head. *We need to get the hell out of here.*

But first, show me the corpse.

T'Dani grimaced and pulled her hand away. *I love you*, Shrev thought as she turned to open the cryogenic cabinet. She was aware that he wasn't certain whether she heard or felt the thought, because she didn't respond to it.

Now was simply not the time.

Theskhe had already begun to go an ugly purple-black where the blood had flowed en masse out of the white sheaths of her arteries to congealed in her muscle tissues, the process hastened by the cold. Her face, puffy with blood, wore the same alarmed look it had possessed when T'Dani had snapped her neck.

Shrev considered the corpse until the room began to grow uncomfortably cold. T'Dani opened her mouth to suggest again that they leave; an ear-numbingly loud impact, close enough nearby to cause the room to rock so hard that the doctor and the yeoman had to reach out to one another to maintain their balance, beat her to it. In that instant, T'Dani could see that Shrev had considered, maybe, spitting on the corpse of his clone, but found that the urge had fled. It had been his own flesh, animated by some cold, alien spirit fashioned by the unnatural longings

that loneliness and lack of care could spawn, and his hatred had morphed into a sort of horrified pity.

Shrev sighed and reached out to touch T'Dani's face. She pressed her cheek softly into his into his hand and looked up at him with luminous eyes that melted his heart. He smiled. *We need to try and get the children*, he thought. *What they are is not their fault. What they might be, they deserve to be.*

T'Dani nodded, and followed the part-Andorian, who was clad in nothing but a clinical robe that she had found for him in a drawer, carefully out into a hallway that echoed with silence interspersed with the rattle and clang of big guns — whether fired from space toward the planet, or from some bastion of the planet toward the fleet of covert ships assembled to crush it, T'Dani couldn't have said, but it did seem, somehow, that in a hallway not twenty-five feet away from the room that had just rocked beneath their barrage, the impact of the armaments was significantly reduced.

Chapter Twenty-Five

"There we have it," Shawn Kell announced into the depths of the scanner housing, turning on his heel for the turbolift.

"What?" Captain Ingram, her disposition as brittle as over-tempered glass, leaped up from the chair of the quiescent console she'd been relegated to. Kell executed another ninety-degree turn but didn't cease walking toward the 'lift. He pointed with one hand at Ingram, and with the other at the Vulcan man at the science station.

"Sovar, you keep her here. I don't particularly care what you have to do in order to perform that feat but see that it's done." The turbolift doors closed on Kell's final word. Sovar stood and leveled a gaze at the captain of the *Enterprise*.

"It would be inadvisable for you to go against the Inspector's wishes, Captain," the Vulcan stated this patent observation in the same droning monotone with which he had stated every utterance she'd thus far heard him make. Captain Ingram didn't make the mistake of confusing this tone for inattentiveness.

"Please, Sovar, just tell me what's going on. Are my crewmembers in jeopardy? I promise, I won't try to follow the inspector."

Sovar considered her for the space of three seconds. Captain Ingram very pointedly did not move. The Vulcan

actually heaved an audible sigh and turned toward Shawn Kell's central station. Ingram watched anxiously as he keyed in a series of codes that would allow him to review the information available within the face-shield scanner.

"I am unable to access all data from this station. However, it appears that your crewmembers have made contact with their assigned individuals." Sovar stood and redirected his gaze at Captain Ingram, a question blatantly obvious in his eyes.

It occurred to Ingram, at that point, that it was more than just a little bit likely that Shawn Kell was the only person aboard the *Blacksnake* who possessed all the data relevant to exactly what it was that Section 31 knew regarding the mission they were currently on. Her mouth curled into a grimace.

"But my crewmembers are safe?"

Sovar shook his head marginally. "I am not in privy to that particular information, Captain. I have, however, been instructed to take you on a tour of the ship, to introduce you to all personnel and their roles, as well as to inform you as to the technological functions our instrumentation performs. The inspector felt this might be necessary; he does intend for you to take command of the *Blacksnake*, should he not return."

The captain of the *Enterprise* swallowed down a throat suddenly gone dry. "What likelihood does he give himself? To return, I mean?"

The Vulcan man considered her somberly for a long

moment. "The likelihood of any one of the on-planet operatives returning is approximately 82.31277 percent, as long as significant opposition calculated to force us to abandon the planet, or its holographic compound does not occur. Should such opposition occur, its implementation will constitute an unknown factor, as no Aatuuhari methodology for instituting such opposition to the forces currently arrayed here is apparent to any sensor possessed by the *Blacksnake*. Opposition of this type will reduce the likelihood of any on-planet operative returning to between 21.84 and 56.26 percent. I can be no more precise.

"As for the likelihood of your own people returning," Sovar added, unprompted, "their odds increase by a factor of 16.256 percent if Shawn Kell is present to aid and abet their escape. He possesses many...advantages."

"Technological or personal?" Captain Ingram quizzed. The Vulcan shrugged.

"Yes," he replied shortly. "If you will accompany me, Captain?"

"We knew you were a traitor."

She thought, perhaps, that the nearly subsonic hiss had come from some terrible, self-sabotaging part of her own mind. That fantasy persisted for what the instrumentation wired down through the marrow tubes of her antennae told her was nearly two-fifths of a second, before the group of wet-nurse thralls she was guiding responded with fear to the sound themselves. She was using her own machine-

ameliorated Aenar senses to find her way through trackless, seven-dimensional holographic halls folded back and forth upon themselves like so many layers of fine pastry. Which begged the question...

"How did you find me?" her voice held only the serene, melodic tones of the Aenar; they were the only tones she could produce, unlike the low, uneasy sounds currently coming from the thralls, or the whines that the cloned hybrid infants and toddlers made in response to the fear they felt emanating from their caretakers.

The heavily armed *shen* sneered at the aftershadow and her pathetic entourage. "You're a damned antenna terminal. But it wasn't you I'm after. Not specifically. You're... what do the humans call it? Gravy?"

"Gleevah told me to take the children to safety," she replied with a half-truth. The *shen* shrugged.

"You're a creature with entirely too much power and information. And you'll die a traitor regardless of what Gleevah told you."

"You can't —"

"Because that," the *shen* continued, her own voice lowering to a soft purr, "is what Gleevah told *me*."

The *zhens* cowered around the children they held in their arms and pouches, and whimpered. The armed *shen* appeared to enjoy the fear that her words had inspired, and bared her teeth in a wholly humorless, purely Andorian smile of victory. "You think the creature that made you didn't know what you'd become? You're not my main

target, like I said, but..." she shrugged and leveled her weapon at the cyborg Theskhe, "you'll do."

The muffled sound of humanoid conversation stopped Shrev and T'Dani in their tracks; together, they sidled along the walls of two corridors until they were able to see what it was they were hearing. Even in the chamber of horrors that constituted this complex, the sight came as an unpleasant surprise.

A Theskhe stood defiantly in front of a group of *zhens* and their charges — and she did so while under a heavy burden of instrumentation, some strapped to her back, some to her head. This Theskhe was oddly colored, of a gray-tinted aquamarine so pale that it was translucent. And her eyes...

Shrev tried mightily to comprehend what it was that he was seeing. He'd thought, at first, that her eyes were the flat, lightless steel gray found among the full Aenar. They were, indeed, flat and lightless. But they were composed of steel, or some other metallic alloy.

Yet they saw. And what they currently saw was the same thing Shrev saw: An Am Tal operative possessed of *varchuks*, *hrisal*, palm phaser, photon grenades, and a disruptor rifle whose barrel was directed into them.

T'Dani gaped in horror; Shrev pulled her back against the curve of the wall before the people in the hallway could sense their presence. They *zhens* cowering away from the disruptor-toting *shen* were all carrying much younger

children than he'd seen in that classroom the first time he'd tried to escape this place. Some were infants. Shrev felt T'Dani shudder.

"A couple of those grenades would come in handy right now," Corrigan wished aloud, *sotto voce* and fruitlessly. She pressed the toggle switch that she could feel beneath the skin of her left arm, nestled uncomfortably against the small bones that made up the humanoid wrist, and hoped that it would actually accomplish something.

As the Am Tal operative pulled the trigger on her disruptor rifle, the half-Vulcan woman eluded Shrev's grasp with a practiced movement. "*Udimothzhop'ensaat!*" T'Dani snapped — *Get behind me, right now* — stepping out from the questionable security of the adjoining hallway and directly in front of the group of zhens.

Carefully but quickly skirting the remains of the Theskhe and the astounded, momentarily shocked-motionless *shen* with the disruptor rifle, they did as they were told as well as they could, T'Dani being neither a wall nor a particularly large person. The Am Tal operative controlled her gape, lowered her weapon marginally, and offered the petite half-Vulcan woman an expression of utter ridicule.

"Get out of my way!" the *shen* hissed.

Shrev decided that the time was right to compound the operative's difficulty. He moved slowly out of the corner and placed himself in front of T'Dani. Both Andorians scowled at each other, and the *shen* snarled, changing her

stance and pulling up her disruptor rifle. Shrev reached back to touch T'Dani; anywhere would do.

This woman's not on the side of goodness and light, Doctor, he announced with droll telepathic understatement. Unfortunately, she seemed to still be operating under the mistaken conclusion that the *shen* was one of Kell's people.

T'Dani danced out from behind Shrev and approached the operative. "Your orders are old! Shawn Kell changed them, and I can prove it," the half-Vulcan woman pled, moving to stand between Shrev and the homicidal *shen* while searching for Kell's miniature verification compadd. The operative sneered at her again.

"If you don't get out of the way right now, I'll kill *you*, too, *Federati*!"

As Shrev had suspected, this was no Am Tal operative. He hissed at the *shen*, who understood the challenge for exactly what it was. She offered a cold Andorian laugh of sure superiority in return.

"Disruptor rifles trump bathrobes. Or do I need to say that in *graalen*?" the *shen* leveled the rifle over T'Dani's head, at Shrev's.

The *Enterprise's* CMO raised herself on tiptoe and moved forward, raising one hand to ruin the *shen's* aim using the little 'padd that the inspector general of Section 31 had given her. Shrev realized all at once that the idea that she didn't know what the *shen* really was, was mistaken. "Here: Kell himself gave me this to show you!"

The *shen* backhanded T'Dani roughly, nearly knocking

the smaller woman over. No sign of the Section 31 personal forcefield was in evidence. Shrev felt his blood run cold.

"I don't answer to that *tezh'makh!*!" The Andorian female backed up, turned her head, spat, then sighted along the rifle's barrel with cold sea-glass-green eyes. Obviously for show, they were standing so close together that she could have turned her back, held the weapon over her shoulder, pulled the trigger, and obliterated them all. "Now, Mr. Sensitive, get her out of my way before I —"

Disintegrate. The entire group of people in the corridor flinched away from the orange beam that laced out from behind an assemblage of little metal storage bins at the end of the hall. Two of the older children began sobbing.

Shawn Kell appeared like an apparition from behind the bins — one wouldn't have imagined that he could fit into the space he stepped out of. Shrev offered him a fixed, wide-eyed stare that developed into a full-faced gape, his brow furrowing as though he was trying to solve some particularly difficult calculus theorem.

"Your timing might be better," T'Dani groused, rubbing at her bruised face. Andorian *shens* could be vicious when they didn't get their way.

"She pissed me off," the inspector general of Section 31 offered by way of explanation. "Doesn't answer to *me? Feh!*" he walked toward the group of *zhens*, pausing along the way to squat down beside the machinery-laden remains

of the female Andorian. He shook his head slowly, reaching out to touch the machinery that she was carrying. Watching Kell, T'Dani realized with dawning horror that the individual in question hadn't been *carrying* anything: She was, in fact, somehow biologically integrated to the mass of instrumentation.

"Like a damned Borg. But Andorians *can't* be..." Shawn Kell muttered — obviously to himself, but T'Dani had Vulcan hearing. She shuddered; *there* was a scenario that would drive her straight into madness.

"Is it really *dead*? Are there more?" she demanded, looking around the corridor wildly. Shrev offered her a confused glance. Yeomen were generally not privy to the full depth and breadth of the adventures sometimes foisted on the ships they performed their scientific analyses on, and the Borg were one particular nightmare that the officers of the *Enterprise* held close to their vests. Everyone who'd ever chanced to meet those horrors did: Starfleet insisted on it.

Kell stood and gave Corrigan's shoulder a companionable, reassuring pat. "Not here, Doctor, there aren't." He turned to face the group still huddled behind T'Dani and handed the *zhen'in* and Shrev each a large blue tablet. "Swallow this, right now. *Enh'ra'iit!*"

Everyone threw him petrified looks. The man with the palm-disruptor scowled at them darkly. They complied. Apparently mollified, he went on: "Let's go, folks; apparently, somebody's group's been compromised. *Move!*

This area'll be a smoking Type-L pit in about twenty minutes."

"Where's Colin?" T'Dani demanded.

Kell frowned forbiddingly. "With you, I thought."

The half-Vulcan woman shook her head, biting at her lower lip. "He didn't make the rendezvous."

Shawn looked back over his shoulder. "Shit," he snarled.

"Here," Kell reached into one of the pockets of the heavy overcoat he wore and tossed a small, round disc to T'Dani: "Get to the east side of this holographic nightmare; there's an automated scanner-beam vertex that's making the hologrid shield thin there, he might be investigating that. It should be quiet enough there for *somebody* to lock onto this. Remove the backing *only* when you're in position and tell it to beam you up. You can all go together as long as you're all touching." He paused for a moment, pulled some other small gadget out of another pocket, consulted it briefly, then turned and pointed, seemingly at random, down a corridor. "Get out of here. Now!"

Shawn Kell raised his arms over his head and, without the shimmer of a transporter touching him anywhere, disappeared, the effect beginning at his head and cascading downward. They could hear him walking away, because he was talking — ostensibly to someone else, requesting yet another round of torpedo barrages — as he went.

More than a little overwhelmed, T'Dani and Shrev did as the alarming man bid, herding the child-carrying *zhen* in

front of them down the long corridor he had indicated. It ended in a steep, strangely spiral staircase. The *zhens* took it without pause; Shrev stopped momentarily and peered after them. "Who the hell *was* that?" he panted.

"Shawn Kell, Inspector General of—"

"I must be in *really* bad shape. I thought, there for a minute, when he came out from behind those cabinets, that we were being rescued by Hravishran th'Zoarhi." The language Shrev used was Greater Andorian, the Thalassan *gra'ana* that modern Andorians used to denote a sense of awe, respect, or very deep affection.

T'Dani considered that comment while they thundered down a staircase which her muscles, to her intense dissatisfaction, kept trying to tell her was actually headed *upward*. His announcement made her forget, for a brief flash of time, the crawling terror she had that this holographic complex might dissolve from beneath them at any moment, sending them all flying through the thick, toxic atmosphere who-knew-how-many storeys to the ground. Shrev hadn't had a fever. Wishful thinking? Or that thing implanted in his brain?

Though, the more that T'Dani thought about it... "His voice *is* kind of similar, isn't it?"

"Was it? No, that's not what — wait! I'm *talking!*"

Medications did exist that could cause the growth of new organs. But they all required some amount of time — half of a Terran Standard hour, at minimum — to function. Few of them worked imperceptibly. And *none* of them

worked on Andorians, from whose natal metabolisms their factors had been synthesized. Like the scrap of cloth that T'Dani had forgotten upon finding Shrev — like the distinctly *real* but nonetheless virtual, impossibly long stairway they were currently traversing — such things didn't and *couldn't* exist in the realm of possibility.

"It was that pill he gave us," one of the *zhens* panted from in front of them, attempting, simultaneously and without success, to soothe the frightened, squirming toddler in her arms as she ran. Unlike Shrev, she spoke in the Lesser Andorian dialect of *graalen*, with the twang found among people raised near the Ly'xli'ik Sea. "And I agree with you — the disappearing man was the image of Thy'lek Shran!"

T'Dani shook herself mentally and wondered when either a large white rabbit wearing a purple waistcoat, or someone riding a jet-powered broom, was going to come tearing by, citing tardiness. Or had they passed that point by now?

Chapter Twenty-Six

The psionic signature of the most powerful telepath known to the Federation shone like a beacon on the little soft-cloth screen. Like the vast majority of Section 31 paraphernalia, Starfleet hadn't been apprised of the technology that created these yet, and unless somebody else patented something similar, they might never be.

What Shawn Kell carried was a single-use, zuon-scale computerized cloth, which could be programmed for whatever sort of tracking, positioning, or stealth requirements were needed. They could, furthermore, be programmed to function only when in the possession of a certain individual or individuals, rendering them no more useful than a standard handkerchief or blanket to anybody else. It was a similar, if significantly larger, cloth that kept the inspector general of Section 31 from being seen as he followed Colin's psionic signature, what the ancients called an *aura*.

Such cloths, which Section 31 personnel referred to as *z-wipes* — useful for the better part of an hour, before their constituent parts began to break down — could be programmed for any sort of tracking or positioning anybody could imagine. Like some sort of cloth bloodhound, they could even be programmed to a particular person's pheromones or DNA. It was using one programmed to Shrev that T'Dani had found the kidnapped

hybrid. The inspector general of Section 31 wondered, idly, if the group of people he'd sent toward the ostensible holographic exit had managed to get beamed up, and if so, by whom.

Kell scowled at the material in his hand. Without a doubt, somebody was using Colin Ingram like prey to draw him away from somewhere else. Where else, exactly, he hadn't a clue. The individual who had conceived of this lovely tropical hideaway — in reality, a series of meteor-blasted craters in a type-L desert alternately frying and freezing under a baleful chloride-yellow sky — wasn't one to be found if it didn't want to be. Even though Section 31 possessed every last molecular nuance of that one's genetic code. Even though Section 31 had...

Shawn Kell pushed *that* train of thought away like some kind of slobbery, smelly, green-fanged pet — one which he was pretty sure was known to the man he was trying to find — and focused on getting down two levels and west half a block, in a holographic maze latticed in seven dimensions. Which, according to the calculations performed by his quantum positioning unit, meant he needed to turn around and go back the way he'd come, in this neurotically efficient-use-of-space place where up was down as often as it was likely to be sideways.

Assuming that there was no living organism except for Colin actually in the room that he finally paused in front of, before stuffing the cloth screen carelessly into one of the dozens of well-stocked pockets his coat possessed, he

ought to be able to take a visual chunk out of the wall without making it apparent to any holographic character, but that didn't mean he had to be stupid about it. There were no failsafes in here — anything could, and probably cheerfully would, kill you. Shawn opened a space roughly the size of his right eye and flinched mentally at what he saw through it.

Sometimes the crudest interrogation methods were the most effective. Careful bladework and very old-fashioned flexible zip-ties could keep blood loss to a minimum, while inflicting interesting levels of pain. This wasn't something that Kell was unaware of. Nor was he unaware of the frightful visage possessed by the creature he hunted. Unfortunately, this wasn't actually that creature: Beams from the portable Mandelbrot Penetrometer he carried went right through it, the same way they did through the wall, or the floor.

Damn it, the inspector thought. It was fortunate for Colin, though, that it wasn't really Gleevah performing this torture. Shawn Kell would have very willingly sacrificed both the telepath's life, and his own, for a chance to kill that monstrosity. Surely there was only *one* Gleevah. Kell very much doubted it had ever cloned itself. He suspected that it was altogether too impatient and self-involved to have done so; also, it would have considered the reproductive expense of the bionic implants required to keep it alive to be prohibitive. Kell knew the psychology of the thing wearily well, and it no longer held any

surprises for him. It had ceased to surprise him ten years ago, when it had gone temporal.

What currently bemused the inspector general of Section 31 was the intensity of the psionic signature that Colin, naked and artfully divested of most of his metacarpals and metatarsals, was able to put out while knocked unconscious by unremitting pain. He figured it must be something like the electrical fields certain fish and insects produced and could continue producing even after significant portions of their nervous systems had been sheared away. Also bemusing was the fact that no visible form of restraint held Colin down. Not that they needed such here. The tethering fields Gleevah used were probably very similar to, if not exactly the same as, the ones Section 31 used to restrain the uncooperative.

Kell weighed his options. He couldn't kill the thing whose obvious final program was the methodic torture of captured enemies, which was meant to draw pursuit away from prime targets. It wasn't alive to kill. And he was somewhat reluctant to sweep the room with the hand-held holographic disruptor he had with him, not with the way the walls behind the hologram and its prisoner were shimmering; they'd be likely to dissolve, too.

The fact that they hadn't dissolved already had obviously told the commanders and crews of various ships that at least part of the holoemitters they were dealing with were somewhere on the surface of the planet itself. Kell had surmised this a while ago, due to the occasional sound

of random blasts striking the planet, causing the floor beneath his feet to quiver as though the thing was actually real.

Which he supposed, in a sense, it was — what was reality composed of, after all, but the solidity of electrons moving infinitely near the speed of light around an infinitely dense mass of infinitely small protons, a dance whose infinite tune was composed by infinitely tiny bosons and associated subatomic particles, whose waltz was kept from becoming a deadly brawl solely by an infinitely thin partition of weightless, formless, motionless neutrons?

Shawn sincerely hoped that they were somewhere within twenty feet or so of ground level, or things might get really messy. He pushed this thought away, too. His mind hosted many compartments, few of which he particularly enjoyed opening more than once, and none of which he would have wished to reside near, were they actual spaces. He pulled his attention away from the room and scanned the hallway he was lurking in. Nothing. They had no intention of actually trying to somehow preserve what they had here under the threat of attack. Which told him that this was a storage base in what was probably a maze of the same. Shawn shook his head slowly and applied his attention to the inside of the room again. Would this nightmare ever entirely end?

How much of Shrev's DNA did the Aatuuhari have? Why couldn't that hybrid humanoid parfait simply have been born a *chan* — a nice, quiet, compliant, unassuming

chan, whose parents hadn't called undue attention to their intriguing proclivities by getting slaughtered in such a high-profile fashion?

It had taken two generations of intermarrying humans before Kell's particular branch of his family had quit producing entirely Andorian-sexed people, and by then they could pass as human easily enough, particularly if they had their antennae surgically removed, which had become something of a puberty rite-of-passage among them, as was working with the Am Tal, and funneling what they learned there to Federation contacts through to Section 31. Shawn was actually the first of his generation to be born without antennae — hence, when he looked in at the holographic simulation of the criminal he'd spent his life pursuing, none of what he saw was in color. It didn't have great swathes of depth, either.

The nasty holographic creature — ugly as the cloned Augment they were trailing and had been trailing for the past hundred and sixty years: Truth be known, this creature was but one of three or four alarming reasons why Section 31 had been created in the first place — lifted a hypospray and pressed it against the telepath's neck. The big red-haired psion came half-awake with a shuddering moan of pain. To speed the process, the hologram turned the weapon it held — an antique variety of *ushaan'chaka*, which would, Kell mused, be worth a small fortune on Andoria, if only it had been real — sideways, and whacked the flat of it against Colin's mangled left hand. The man

screamed, and this time Shawn flinched physically away from the little virtual spyhole he'd bored into the wall, flexing his own left hand and wrist in very real, altogether unconscious, empathy.

Ouch. Well, Colin was more or less awake now, anyway. And Kell knew from personal experience that he was an incredibly *good* telepath...empath...whatever.

Hold your breath.

Colin drew a ragged, sobbing breath and half-turned his head toward the wall Kell stood behind. Kell received no sort of coherent thought in return, but he hoped the man was in possession of enough of his mind to comprehend coherent thought. Because...

The hologram intent on its torture swiveled the blade again and made to bring the business end of it down on the sole remaining digit on Colin's hand left.

Ingram! Hold your damn breath — now!

Of course, the atmosphere could also sear one's eyes and inner ears...

Without further thought, Kell swept the room with the palm-sized holographic destabilization unit he'd retrieved from one of the pockets in his voluminous overcoat, and the creature about to assault Colin Ingram vanished. The terrible Andorian weapon didn't. It fell onto Colin's hand, lacerating it to the bone, and once more Ingram cried out in agony. Shawn avoided giving in to any feeling of surprise that might have slowed him down: The room hadn't given way all at once, and Kell managed to get to the telepath's

side in time to slap a nitro-diox patch over his face before the real nature of the place came crashing down on them.

He paused long enough to put one on, himself. Made of Deltan biologic semi-synthetics, they molded themselves to one's nose and mouth, and provided a good half hour of nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere before expiring and, finally, vanishing. Really, they could be formulated to provide any sort of atmosphere one liked — ether, hydrogen sulfide, biologically-undetectable cobalt cyanide, you name it.

Some part of Shawn's subconscious had seriously considered, for three eternal seconds, using one of those on the semiconscious, wounded telepath. This self-serving — and potentially highly self-destructive — impulse forced Kell to undergo the agonizing emotional process of building an entirely new thought-box to stuff it into. It was a terrible thought-box, shaped like Renee Ingram, but he did build it: Regardless of what others, the captain of the *Enterprise* included, might believe, he wasn't entirely without compunction. Eventually, he'd manufacture some kind of psychological structure to put his newest thought-box into, as well, but he had neither the inclination nor the energy to do so at the moment.

Not to mention the general lack of time he could feel pressing against him like a demanding hand at his back. He returned his thoughts by main force to the situation in front of him. The fact that the room hadn't simply vanished when he swept it was both a fortunate occurrence

and a bad sign, simultaneously.

While mulling over these various unpleasantries, Kell placed nitrox patches over his own eyes and ears, and the eyes and ears of the wounded man. He had begun to encase Colin's feet and hands, wrists and ankles in anti-substance-P bands that would stem bleeding, form immobile pressure-casts, and remove all sense of pain, again for about half an hour, when the hologram finally gave way.

The inspector general of Section 31 had been trained for similar circumstances. Colin had not only never been trained, but he was incapable of much response anyway. Fortunately, they only fell twelve or fifteen feet, Shawn curling into a controlled fall and striking the acrid ground rolling, Colin going down like a bag of concrete. On-again, off-again bits of holographic architecture still rose shimmering around the crater they were urgently deposited into, making Kell's freshly bruised skin crawl. They must be almost directly over some portion of the underground emitters, here:

If what Kell had done to the holographic room had extended the vertex to this point, it would shortly become ground zero for a spaceborne barrage.

Colin was unconscious once more when Kell scrambled back to him. Shawn swore, and not softly. Great; now the big ox had a concussion and a broken clavicle on top of everything else. Kell pressure-bandaged these injuries, too, and injected Colin with a chemical

cocktail that ought to wake him up and make him lucid enough to —

Shawn half-threw himself over the larger man in a mostly unconscious response to the violent burst of photonic fire that arced over them like the end of the world. It came down about fifteen miles away. The small shrapnel that whizzed into the shallow crater they were in shredded away portions of Colin's hair and skin and peppered through the back of Kell's jacket. It was fortunate that the blast hadn't hit much closer, and more fortunate yet that they were in the bottom of a crater. The larger shrapnel that had winged over above them had sung arias of seven-hundred-degree metal-and-rock-shard death.

Kell pulled a transponder auto-response disc out of one of the nooks and crannies of his jacket and slapped it onto Colin's hirsute chest. He pulled out a second one for himself, noting not dispassionately that the backs of his hands had also been peppered with shrapnel. They bled and stung in the noxious air, and they trembled.

"Beam us *up*!" he yowled into the confines of his nitrox patch. Fortunately, the modified-cloth rebreather wasn't impervious to sound waves. The horrible atmosphere stretched and warped his voice like taffy, but the transponder did its job. Directly wired to a specific buffer on his ship, unless the ship itself was out of range or destroyed it would have done its job in response to any sound, including the shriek of more incoming photon torpedoes, which Kell heard moving directly toward their

location just as his consciousness was yanked away and consigned to a transporter buffer.

There wasn't a thing wrong with his ears.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"Swaf! Amaahra aath'nde'luiilath!"

The transport from the surface had not been easy. T'Dani had heard of, but never before experienced, a rough transport. She wasn't immediately certain, upon being deposited wherever it currently was that she found herself, not only exactly where she was, but momentarily, she forgot where she'd just come from, and also whether or not she was a complete being.

Well, she was breathing, anyway, so it couldn't be all that bad. Starfleet sleep-taught its midshipmen the attitude that gave them that particular take on things. They'd learned decades ago that people in space could be driven mad otherwise.

Usually, she ignored her Universal translator's take on *graalen*. This time, she was forced to ignore it because the translation itself was a rush of nonsense. She'd never heard of that happening with Founder languages before, most particularly not in regard to the primary language of the people who had come up with the concept behind the Universal translator in the first place. She *had* heard of humans whose native tongue was Navajo becoming confused and upset on Andoria, when not supplied with Universal translators. Navajo and *graalen* sounded superficially similar to an eerie degree: When translators were finally supplied for the shocked and offended

humans, a game of *Here's what I Thought You Said*, often held over several large pitchers of Andorian ale, usually provided hours of amusement for everyone involved.

T'Dani's mind handed her the usual mismatched bouquet that *graalen* always thrust toward a person, insisting that the listener arrange everything into a pleasing format. T'Dani was so giddy that she fell back on Marthan's Web to untangle the *graalen*, a beginner's language tool that worked from the outside of a comment inward, the way *graalen* was written, removing all modifiers and tenses in order to tease out the underlying meaning of a phrase — a language tool that Andorians seemed to be born knowing:

(exclamatory shifting tense)
bad afraid I
nothing never again
Shrev
I will not you
(indeterminate sensory apparatus)

Rough translation out of the literal nonsense: *Shrev, I was so afraid I'd never see you again!*

T'Dani opened her eyes. The first thing she noticed was that the Andorians in the room were clustered in interesting knots, both sitting at work consoles and standing, something one would imagine T'Dani would be used to. Instead, it made her feel unaccountably lonely.

The *zhen*, upon finding themselves in a room full of their own people, had latched on to the nearest individual for comfort — it didn't matter who, to an Andorian seeking solace. The toddlers followed their caretakers' lead and clung, too. The room was full of soft reassuring sounds. The next thing she noticed was Shrev, locked the fierce embrace of a heavily armed *chan*, which he didn't return. The hybrid man's face was a study in anguish and rage, but that wasn't the focus of T'Dani's attention.

Much too large for a male Andorian, too thickly muscled and with too much hair, Shrev's face, body, skin tone, and even his antennae harbored an alien cast that wasn't immediately identifiable: A caricature of an Andorian.

They sometimes had trouble countenancing my countenance, Shrev had once told her, in regard to the children who had sometimes tormented him in his youth, and she'd groaned at what she'd taken as nothing more than a bad joke. Now she understood. Or anyway, as the room came into sharper focus around her and her mind lurched into present gear, she understood for the space of nearly two seconds — compared to your average Andorian, Shrev was a freak.

T'Dani took in the room in which they stood. High-vaulted, as were most Andorian rooms — Andorians tended to have an avid dislike of tight spaces — it was decorated in colors soothing to the Andorian psyche, meaning that it was dark to her eyes, all deep blues and

matte grays, raven-browns and black. Schematics flashed and hummed in similarly patterned hues along the room's consoles, dark amber lights signifying normal operation, bright blues flashing warning, pink signifying equipment malfunction and the need for immediate diagnostic or calibration services, and eye-piercing whites appearing only when danger or destruction was imminent.

No wonder the transport was rough; they weren't even in a transporter room. T'Dani could have told anyone, anywhere, that this was a bridge on an *Omtil*-type runabout designed to appear, from the outside, to be nothing more than a harmless transport vessel, but in reality, harboring high-warp engines and an impressive weaponry array concealed behind non-standard dampening fields. She could have told anyone, anywhere, why Andorians chose the color schemes they did, why they behaved as they did, how the next room probably looked and what it was probably used for, all in stultifying detail.

What the CMO of the *Enterprise* could not have told anyone, until this very moment, was *why* she knew all of this. Why she had spent her life —or, as more than one person had implied more than once, *wasted her time* — poring over Andorian culture, Andorian music, Andorian literature, Andorian medicine, Andorian martial arts, immersing herself in everything Andorian she could get her hands on. T'Dani had always thought that it had been spurred, at least in part, by her love for her stepsister, and she still believed that she wasn't entirely wrong in that

estimation.

But she realized now that she had been looking for something, the way a day-blind owl scans the darkness for prey, the way a man abandoned alone in deep water searches desperately for anything that will float. T'Dani had been rummaging around for something that no one else was either capable of seeing, present to see, or wholly able to appreciate. She had been searching for that space, somewhere between all the medicine and music and culture and *karakom*, into which Shrev, and only Shrev, could fit.

The man in question raised furious dark eyes away from the now weeping *chan* and directed them her way, and his glance struck her like a physical blow. She staggered, and a nearby *zhen* reached out to steady her gently, firmly, breaking the spell that seemed to have settled on everyone.

"Commander, who are these people?" the *zhen* assisting T'Dani inquired. The *chan* released Shrev, who redirected his gaze at him and lifted his upper lip in a snarl. The *zhen* kept her hold on the *Enterprise*'s CMO, as though she feared the half-Vulcan woman might either fall over or float away if she didn't.

"This is my nephew," the *chan* replied, before fixing T'Dani with an interrogatory stare. Interrogatory stares from Andorians could be embarrassing; many humanoids confused the body language that accompanied them with romantic interest.

T'Dani didn't. The part-Vulcan doctor drew a deep

breath: "I am Lieutenant Commander T'Dani Corrigan, Chief Medical Officer of the Starship *Enterprise*. The rest of these people are prisoners we've —"

The intra-ship and inter-ship speakers all suddenly switched on. Lights flashed white and hot pink from every console, then froze and stayed that way. Every crew member present went momentarily rigid with alarm, and T'Dani felt her own muscles grow taut in a reaction she had no control over any more than she would have been able to keep from yawning, had that been their response to the unexpected action of their ship's communication system.

The message was given by the husky, metallic voice of the ship's own computer, and in *graalen*. This time, neither T'Dani's translator nor her mind had any trouble with the language:

An unlikely number of individuals almost certainly uninvolved in the Aatuu'hari conflict have been discovered to have been held hostage on the planet below. You are ordered by Shawn Kell, Inspector General of Section 31, to beam up as many people as your buffers will hold and still allow your vessel's life support to function. Start with the adolescents, beginning with the zhen, any chae-na, children, and finally the chan. Only if you have additional space in your buffers after this point should you also take shen individuals; if there remains further room in your buffers, beam any individual below twenty-three years of age into them. Repeat...

"Is that real?" Jeshrie bellowed, in order to be heard

over the ship's computer, which was bellowing its message at such a volume that everyone on the bridge — T'Dani included — cringed. The people assigned to bridge stations had already extricated themselves from the clasps of unknown *zhens* and various thickset, sticky toddlers, and were working the consoles. The repeat of the message came through at a more bearable level.

The *shen* at tactical made a sound of disbelief. "Feh! It's not just real, it's *impossible!* Temporal-displacement waves all over the place, and if it keeps up, the planet will implode!" she looked up from her seat at Jeshrie, wild-eyed, antennae twitching with anxiety: "Our scans say there are over two *million* people down there! How can we know these signals aren't some sort of trap?"

"Where's the message from?" Jeshrie stalked toward his tactical station, but it was the *thaan* at communications who replied.

"The *Blacksnake*, Commander."

Jeshrie spun around and hissed out: "How many people could our ships hold in their buffers?"

"You're not *serious?*" the tactical officer hissed back, even as she input his question into her console as a series of mathematical variables. "Fifteen thousand, maximum, if we want to use the engines afterward."

"Give a general order to beam up ten thousand of them and get us away from here, then!"

The *shen* sighed noisily — which was the way *shens* always sighed — programmed in the guidelines the

message demanded and followed this up with a warp tangent away from the planet. "Why do you trust this —"

"Shawn Kell's got more integrity than is good for anybody, is what I was told. And: *It can make him appear insane at any given moment.* I was told this by an individual I trust. And," he cast a glance at his nephew, "having raised someone very much like Shawn Kell, I can tell you that such a person may be trusted."

Shrev had latched onto T'Dani the moment Jeshrie walked away. She let him. "What the hell is this about?" he whispered. She shrugged, mystified. She could feel that he was terrified — terrified that this was some sort of fresh, elaborate torture being visited upon him. She needed to get him into a sickbay, and soon, but for the moment, she simply pulled him closer.

The transporter deposited Kell almost immediately onto his own bridge, sans nitrox patches, shredded jacket, various implements, and minor abrasions. He followed the irrepressible urge he always had after transponder-patch beaming, and spent a second or two making certain that the buffer's injury/contamination detection system hadn't also removed his clothes, which could be tough on morale. The transporter had done that once, when his clothing was surreptitiously harboring deadly, micron-sized fire-spider larvae, which had spun themselves irremediably into the warp and weft of his attire. The sub-microscopic temporal energy displacement required for a transporter to function

would have caused those larvae to hatch, and the buffer program hadn't had any option but to deliver him stark-naked onto the bridge of the *Blacksnake*.

As he had expected, Captain Ingram confronted him immediately. "*Where is Colin?*"

Shawn regarded her silently for a long moment. His general presence appeared to be enough to cause this particular woman to seethe, much less should she be burdened with concern for a loved one. Were the situation significantly different, he might have been fascinated by the effect he had on her. He might, even, have encouraged it.

Under the current circumstances, he found it trying. "He'll be in the transporter buffer until his injuries are healed."

He watched with interest as various comments and questions filled her eyes. She didn't respond right away, though. He'd noticed that, if she attempted to respond while questions and comments and commands and emotions were still vying for prominence, she'd stutter like an idiot.

"What injuries? Where is my CMO? Did you find Shrev?" she snapped finally, a starship captain's question-cascade.

"Injurious ones, none mortal. Some of the specs for the transporters we use were inadvertently lost in the process of obtaining the technology, so we still aren't sure how to calibrate them to ameliorate mortal injuries. Every

time we've tried, we've *caused* mortal injuries. Your CMO and her boyfriend...where exactly are they, B'Varri?"

"They were transported aboard the *Ko'ath*, five minutes ago," the helm officer replied.

Helm and navigations had been merged into a single function on Kell's ship, something never done in Starfleet. The redundant operations between the two positions were a form of failsafe, should anything go haywire. The *Blacksnake*, however, utilized programs that Starfleet was not only currently authorized to apply to its ships, but didn't even know existed. Ingram had just spent the better part of an hour learning exactly what sorts of unauthorized programs the Section 31 runabout possessed, many of which Starfleet had no inkling could even exist.

The *Blacksnake*'s transporters could perform more than medical functions; they also performed informational upgrades for Section 31 higher-level operatives every time they used them. And Captain Ingram hadn't ceased to keep a log while aboard Kell's ship. Shawn, therefore, knew without asking that Ingram had pirated away some of the *Blacksnake*'s technical specs. What the captain didn't know was that the ship's technologies were due for an upgrade, and that it was common for Section 31 to release certain beneficial, if outdated, technologies to Starfleet via starship personnel channels.

It made Starfleet look good. And it kept Starfleet in their debt.

"Inspector General?" the Vulcan man at the science-

sensor station interjected into Kell's musings. "Various energetic and fluctuative readings are emanating from the core of the planet, none obviously related to the barrages targeted toward ostensible emitter locations."

Barrages which, Kell thought in annoyance, walking across the small ship's bridge away from Ingram, *are having very little effect*. Half of the tiny sub-holographic island, and the vast majority of the sub-holographic sea that surrounded it for twenty square miles, was still visible.

A flurry of small ships suddenly fled the planet's atmosphere: If Kell had been required to automatically pin a number on them, he'd have guessed fifty. Upon reaching escape velocity, they flurried off in fifty different directions. Shawn physically leapt toward the science station. "Life signs?"

"All of them. All Andorian," the Vulcan replied tonelessly, answering the question nearly before Kell had finished asking it. The inspector general opened his mouth to give an order, but Sovar overrode him in the expressionless monotone that, Kell had learned long ago, could signify nervous tension in some Vulcans, though this particular one never varied the tone of his voice:

"Sensors indicate inter-planetary stresses increasing exponentially. If such a buildup continues..." the man paused. His eyes widened visibly as he leaned toward the screen that scrolled data out for his perusal. Glowering, and he called the data back. Finally, Sovar turned his face up toward Kell. "Inspector, sensors indicate the sudden

presence of two million, seven hundred sixty-three thousand, four hundred fifty-five Andorian individuals on the planet below. If the —"

"No!" Kell snarled, physically reaching out and nudging the Vulcan out of the science station chair, "That's an impossible figure. Somebody's putting out a sensor ghost." Shawn took over the man's seat and manipulated data, the speed and intensity of that manipulation increasing visibly as the seconds ticked by.

With an oath that Captain Ingram's translator wasn't quite up to unraveling, he swiveled around and demanded of the *zhen* at helm: "Run the rehash matrix! Our sensors look like they've been —"

"No, Shawn, they're not. I've run the rehash through twice *already*. There *are* over two million people down there, and what Sovar was trying to tell you about the planet is that it's going to explode in about ten minutes."

"Nine minutes, fifteen point —" Sovar began, helpfully. Kell offered him a look that caused the Vulcan to purse his lips, hard, around whatever else it was he had been about to say. The inspector general then turned toward the young Andorian *shen* on communications.

"Open a general channel to all ships in the immediate vicinity," he husked.

She nodded at him. "Already done. What do I say?"

"Beam up as many people as- your ships will hold, and as many into the buffers as will fit and still allow life support to function. Start with adolescents: *Zhen*, any

chae-na, children, and then the *chan* —"

Kell cut the message short, rising to meet Captain Ingram as she marched across the bridge toward him. Sh'aara would know well enough what the rest of the message should entail. The last thing the crew of the *Blacksnake* needed was to have to deal with potentially adversarial *shens* and *thaans* by the hundreds. And if those were friendly *shens* and *thaans*, they'd shortly become quite adversarial indeed should they learn that their people had been left behind in lieu of themselves. Kell simply didn't think that anybody trying to smooth out this ever-more snarled mess could tolerate that full a dance-card.

Ingram was ticked at him, Shawn figured, either because he was beaming up unknown and potentially dangerous individuals from a hostile planet, or because he was beaming them up selectively. Or both. He supposed it didn't actually matter. The inspector general of Section 31 suspected that he knew who these people were, where they had come from, and how long ago. It shouldn't, he mused as he watched what was a truly beautiful woman stalk toward him with blood in her eye, be that much of a surprise to him to find them, suddenly, here. '31 was receiving solutions to an unusually large number of mystery-birds for a single cast stone, this time.

Pitiful that so many of those birds will wind up dead, Kell mused grimly.

He was expecting the ringing backhand slap that Renee Ingram laid across his right cheek. He let her hit

him, then caught her wrist in his left hand just as the dark-skinned human woman running his ship's tactical station gave a yelp wholly unrelated to the tense situation playing itself out on the bridge. Really, they didn't have time for this.

"Starships heading this way; *Enterprise*, *Saratoga* and *Cairo*!"

"Send them after those escape pods," Kell hissed. Renee reached out, and he moved to stop her from hitting him with her other hand, but she didn't try to hit him; she pulled out her communicator, instead.

"That won't work from here, Captain," he assured her. Captain Ingram's lips peeled back from her teeth.

"You'll let me talk to my ship, Kell, or I'll have you up on every charge I can think of that lies between abduction and sedition," she barked. He narrowed his already slitted eyes at her, and tightened his hand around her wrist. She ground her teeth in time to the unnatural movement of the small bones above her radius and ulna, but didn't give him the satisfaction of wincing. He could see in her eyes that she was roughly half a second away from performing what she hoped would be a distinctly injurious maneuver with her right knee. He half-turned away from her to keep it from happening, and tossed his head at his still-standing Vulcan science officer.

"Open the good captain a channel, Sovar. And *where* the hell are those people I told you to beam up, B'varri?"

"Some kind of restriction field around them. We're all

doing the best we can!" she retorted.

The inspector general turned his face away from his helm and back toward Captain Ingram. "If you think that in *this* scenario you can get everybody out alive, you're insane and should be stripped of command!" he hissed venomously, releasing her wrist and pushing her away in a single, fluid motion. She turned her back to him.

"Ingram to *Enterprise*," was her only rejoinder.

"*Enterprise* here, Captain. What's happening?" Josi's voice sounded almost sanguine to Kell; he imagined that Ingram had to bite back an urge to snap at her exec.

"There are people trapped on the planet we're over — a *lot* of them. When you're able to get at them, have the *Cairo* and the *Saratoga* beam as many off as their ships can hold, and keep as many others in their buffers as possible without jeopardizing the engines. There have also been escape pods carrying probable criminals recently ejected from the planet, and the *Enterprise* should attempt to intercept these immediately. You've got about six and a half minutes to scoop up as many as you can, then you all need to get out of here at the highest warp you can manage — the planet's been rigged to explode in about seven minutes. Ingram out!"

Cutting the channel without waiting for any sort of response, the captain of the *Enterprise* turned back to Kell. "If you wanted a lackey, you should have gone elsewhere to request *help*. And if you wanted me out of the way, you should have just killed me."

Shawn's jaws worked as he chewed on comments that he didn't feel like making on his ship's bridge. Captain Ingram put her communicator away with significantly more force than was required and stalked off the bridge of the *Blacksnake* to go find her telepathic yeoman.

"That is one confident woman," Nadura, who had gotten back to the *Blacksnake* shortly before Kell, noted in an admiring tone, half under her breath. Shawn shook his head.

"Trust me on this: She came that way."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Ingram returned to the bridge of the *Blacksnake* more or less immediately, apparently having capitulated to the reality that Colin would be in that ship's medical buffers (apparatus that Ingram had almost certainly never imagined, much less heard of) for at least fifteen more minutes, though Shawn imagined that the extent of the man's injuries would stretch that time out to something more like half an hour, Terran Standard time. Surely not even Renee Ingram, Kell mused, would demand that the laws of physics be altered to suit her.

No; I'm probably wrong about that, he mused, and turned his attention back to the business at hand.

The tone of voice in which the captain of the *Enterprise* enunciated what she had to say upon stepping back onto the bridge of the *Blacksnake* came as a surprise to the inspector general of Section 31, who stood impatiently over the left shoulder of his tactical officer, gritting his teeth. Ingram had, Kell noted not for the first time, a dulcet, sensuous voice, more suited to the humming of lullabies than to the strenuous, dangerous career she'd chosen for herself:

"Thank you for rescuing my crewmembers. Your ship's buffers are something that Starfleet really could use. Now, who are these people you're so callously dividing up to live or die? More clones, or more slaves?"

He turned his head and wasted a precious four seconds staring at her, this woman who prompted rage and amazement, admiration and long minutes spent shaking one's head diffidently. "I am not the one who put them here. And you're welcome, Captain. The rest of it's a story for later. We're going to be getting company soon. Sovar, how long...?"

"Three minutes, twelve point seven four-four seconds, Inspector."

Ingram opened her pretty mouth — to argue with somebody over something, Shawn had not a fraction of a doubt — but before she could begin, the bridge began to fill with alarmed, angry, bewildered people who had never seen the inside of a ship that wasn't a sleeper-vessel, much less humanoids not of their own race, before.

"Get us the hell out of here!" Kell snapped to the bridge personnel at large.

One of the new arrivals grasped Captain Ingram by the hand and tugged her, somewhat ungently, away from Kell, who moved to stop the adolescent *chan* before he hurt the captain of the *Enterprise*. Ingram held up her free hand to quell Kell's forward motion, and simply went with the *chan*'s tug. He didn't pull her far, only enough to turn her directly toward him. He reached out to explore her face with his hands. He couldn't have been more than sixteen Andorian Standard years old.

His countenance a war between fascination and dread, he whispered: "Are you a *person*?"

If Captain Ingram's facial expression was anything to judge by, her Universal translator blatantly refused to do its job on the antiquated Andorian vocabulary the *chan* spouted. The inspector general of Section 31 had no more knowledge of how to construct a sentence in it than he would have been able to construct one in Middle English, but he caught the question's gist, and replied to the clingy child in a snarl of modern Lesser Andorian.

The young *chan* stared at Shawn as though Kell had kicked him. "You speak strangely. Are you, too, a person?"

The pawky look Ingram offered Kell let him know that her translator had compared the *chan's* graalen with his own and found the similarities. Shawn scowled, and replied, still in graalen: "Last time I checked. B'varri, Fraahl, get most of these people off of my bridge and into quarters somewhere —"

"Where do you want us to put them?" B'varri replied in Standard, her antennae lowered in dismay. "You told us to beam them up, and now they're all over the ship!"

"My quarters. Your quarters. Sickbay. The heads. I don't *care*, just calm them down and make them comfortable. Leave anybody who's actually trying to communicate reasonably; take the rest. Make them coffee or something."

"*Sovar!*" Kell prompted his Vulcan science officer anxiously, interrupting a three-way conversation between the Vulcan and the two fascinated Andorians whom he was

suffering to touch him: "Warp us out of here *yesterday*!"

He tried to keep his mind off of how many people he was condemning to death — no, not him: Gleevah had done this. What other heartbreaks, Shawn allowed himself to wonder briefly, agonizingly, before shoving the thought away, into one of any number of vile thought-boxes, had that *thing* visited upon Andoria? The Federation at large?

Sovar responded with a brusque nod, and extricated himself delicately from his audience, who tagged along. Given something concrete to do, Kell's Andorian crewmembers turned their minds wholly to their work. Given some sort of direction by B'Varri, the mass of confused Andorians — at least thirty, which packed the bridge uncomfortably — did as they were told. The act of following direct, unambiguous orders comforted them, *zhens* and *chans* especially. That was part of the Andorian psyche, evolved from numberless eons as a profoundly social animal, whom individualistic action might very well condemn to a premature, icy grave.

A number of other races had made the mistake of confusing this tendency with either spinelessness or idiocy and attempted to invade Andoria, prompting unexpectedly deadly reactions. Once, another race (or more accurately, one particular individual of the human race) had seen this tendency, and recognized it for what it was, for the potentially staggering influence it might be harnessed to wield. On account of this, nobody messed with the gentle, fierce, soft-spoken, dynamic Andorian people anymore,

unless they also wanted to mess with the humans, the Vulcans, the Tellarites, the Grazerites, the Deltans, the... *Federation*.

"You stay," Kell said to the *chan* who had been inspecting Captain Ingram. The young Andorian threw Kell a horrified look.

"How can he not know who...or, *what* we are?" Captain Ingram inquired softly, gently patting the *chan's* hand. The Andorian responded by taking both of Ingram's hands into his, as if she was some sort of lifeline, as his people trickled out into the equivalently packed hallway, herded gently by the Andorian members of Shawn's bridge crew. Andorians didn't mind being very close to one another; of course, Kell had known this, too.

"He hasn't been conscious in about two hundred and thirty years, Captain," Kell replied dryly. At her horrified glare, he added; "welcome to my world, Renee. But first — *imtalas iiphvair amor'neszhuu?*" Shawn inquired of the *chan*. His translator kicked on and altered the sentence.

Languages could change a lot in nearly two and a half centuries.

"Who are they?" Colin asked.

Kell considered the telepath sitting on the biobed for a moment. All of his digits had been regenerated, he'd been clothed in a soft lavender medical smock, and he was free of pain; nevertheless, it was standard procedure to keep humanoids who had been healed by the transporter-buffer

program under close medical supervision for whatever length of time constituted a standard day length on their planet of origin. Nobody had been able to supply that for the *Blacksnake's* medical team, so Shawn had opted for thirty-six Terran hours, figuring that would help to keep both Colin and Renee more or less out of his hair. Which, in retrospect, might or might not be a good idea.

The inspector general of Section 31 had not expected the repercussions that had occurred when the Augment's storage base blew up. Sensors suggested that Gleevah had set up a quantum-phase tunnel to teleport through — an intergalactic transporter device, to use more common, if less accurate, verbiage. What had been a planetoid was now a fluctuative wormhole expanding at a rate of one-tenth of a millimeter every one hundred and twenty Terran hours. It would have to be stopped, and the sooner the better, since eventually even such minuscule growth would swallow the Milky Way Galaxy, then go looking for even more to chew up.

If that wasn't enough to keep the *Blacksnake* and the Am Tal from trying to trace and follow the Augment, Gleevah appeared to have rigged some kind of transporter-weasel into the mind-bogglingly enormous group of people that the explosion of the planet had slaughtered, and the *Saratoga* had picked it up. As far as anyone could tell, the program had raced through the starship's buffers to attack the drive-control computers.

The starship had been rendered incapable of

movement: When the planet had very violently turned into a small but hungry wormhole, it had taken the *Saratoga* with it.

And this didn't even begin to address the rash of empathic casualties and injuries caused by the sudden death of over two million people. Several Vulcan, Hali'ian, Betazoid, and Napean crewmembers of the other two starships, and Sovar on the *Blacksnake*, had experienced brain hemorrhage from the shock and magnitude of the experience. Sovar's had been irreversible. Gleevah had roused his prisoners before slaughtering them — and the Augment had, furthermore, made the impending facts of their deaths horribly plain to every one of them.

Upon returning to the *Blacksnake*, Kell had ordered Colin to be left in the buffer until he ordered otherwise, in order to keep the man out of his way. He realized now that, had he restored the telepath to physical form sooner, he might have saved Sovar. Alternatively, Colin might have died of the psychic shock himself. The inspector general wasn't certain which eventuality he might have preferred, and musing upon either one, much less both simultaneously, put him into a foul mood.

He had just opened his mouth to reply to Colin when the intercom interrupted him. "Shawn? I have Jeshrie Ch'yaal'inivah on the line for you. He says we've broken our word to the Am Tal, and wants an explanation."

The inspector general allowed all the nuances of meaning that such a statement might possess to the

Andorian mind to occur to him, and finally replied: "He does, does he?" He closed his eyes and rubbed them. "Fine, Sh'aara; patch him through." At least, he thought wryly, the *chan* hadn't beamed over to the *Blacksnake*. Surely even a pissed-off Andorian knew better than that. Or shuttled over, rather, considering how full all of the Am Tal ships' transporter buffers probably were at the moment. Kell supposed that was something, although the *chan* would be incensed that he wasn't receiving a response over a video channel.

As Shawn had expected it might, Jeshrie's voice trembled with anger. "Damn you! Open a channel! I want to see your face when I —"

"I'm with wounded crew, Jeshrie. You can either tell me what you want to tell me over the channel you've got, or I'll meet you when we get to Andoria."

"You killed one of my operatives! Shrev saw it!"

"Indeed. And did you consider finishing your conversation with Shrev before storming off in a huff to find a comm channel? Because I'm sure that he'd also tell you that she was a fifth columnist for the Aatuuhari. I thought I made it clear what my response would be should any of those show up? And another thing I'm sure of is that Shrev, at some time in his life, has told you that humans have a saying for situations like this." Kell smiled humorlessly: "It's '*kiss my ass*'." The inspector general of Section 31 made a dismissing motion toward one of the med techs, who flicked the sickbay intercom toggle to the

do not disturb mode.

Shawn turned his attention back to the big man in the biobed. "Who these people are — or were, I'm still not certain which tense to use at this point — is quite a story. Have you ever heard of the Trilith Disappearance?"

"What do you mean, you can't beam them out?" Josi rounded on Demora, who threw up her hands in frustration.

"I mean, Commander, that the pods themselves appear to contain materials that skew standard transporter signals."

The executive officer spat out an Orion curse. "Set the tractor beam on wide spread, then, and haul in as many as you can reach while getting us out of here!"

This amounted, ultimately, to roughly half of the pods. The others sped away into every imaginable stretch of the Delphic Expanse. The *Enterprise* — and the *Saratoga*, before it blew up — had put out repetitive calls for Starfleet or Federation backup, both for pod recovery and, ultimately, to help shuttle the people popped out of those pods and beamed off the planet (which was now a wormhole) back to Andoria. Which, Josi mused, wouldn't amount to much; the nearest Federation starship or Conjunction ship was at least a month away, at high warp. It would take a subspace signal longer than that to reach them, from here.

The twenty-seven pods that the tractor beam had managed to haul in filled all three active shuttle bays and Mel'Taya's evacuated quarters. Unfortunately, the pods

were equipped with holoemitters that put out absolutely false information to the ship's sensors, and the first thing that was required when dealing with them was a heavy-radiation barrier. The skins of the pods were embedded with some radiative compound that the scanners could neither clearly see nor identify. To compound matters, none of the pods possessed anything like a doorway. Twenty-eight *Enterprise* crewmembers were put into sickbay with radiation burns and poisoning while trying to break into the pods, before the false holoemission signals were revealed.

Nearly an eighth of the ship's compliment was in sickbay. *It is somewhat difficult, the XO of the Enterprise mused, to respond to a danger situation effectively when thirty crew members are in sickbay with heavy radiation damage, two senior officers and five juniors all suddenly keel over with strokes, and three yeomen do the same.*

All those effected by sudden stroke had been psionically overwhelmed by the death of what amounted to a continent full of people. Two of those so overwhelmed had died. Josi scowled and punched the arm of the ship's command chair a great deal harder than necessary to open a comm link to engineering.

"Lieutenant Buonarroti? What's the status on those damnable escape pods?"

"Confusing, Commander. We think the pods are coated in raw dilithium, and that's what's precluding beaming out the people inside. But we can't safely remove

that, or even robotically attempt to breach the pods, without beaming everybody off first so they don't die of radiation poisoning because of the scouring or forced opening of the pods. I've sent out a request to Federation vessels in general, triple-coded: Anybody ever hear of anything that can break down dilithium that's *not* a warp drive?"

Commander Felingaili was appalled. "You think the pods are coated with radiative *dilithium*? Sweet mother goddess! That message will take weeks to reach Starfleet, but it'll be translated in about fifteen minutes by every pirate in at least two sectors. Let's hope nobody answers. How are we certain that the life signs we're reading on the damn pods are even real?"

Rafael sighed. "Well, we don't. Sensors just keep saying that there's between four and eight sentient beings in each."

"The sensors *also* keep telling us that the pods are harmless." Josi pursed her lips and frowned at nothing for so long that Rafael prompted:

"Commander?"

The XO shook her head. "Jettison the escape pods, Lieutenant Buonarroti."

"I...it...Josi, if there are people —"

"*If* there are people aboard them, there's no way we can get to them without severe risk to ourselves, the pods' occupants, and the *Enterprise*. If Section 31 wants this particular Tar Baby, it's welcome to it, but —"

"We *can't* just leave people trapped in the things! Are we still within hailing distance of the *Blacksnake*? Maybe Captain Ingram —"

"Lieutenant Buonarroti! I am in command of this ship. You will follow my orders, or you'll take yourself to the brig. Am I clear?"

Rafael sighed again. "Like crystal, Commander. I'll have the pods out of the ship in a few minutes, but we'll probably want to leave the radiation shields in place until we're certain the danger's past."

"Agreed. Thank you, Rafael. Felingaili out."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Captain's Log, Stardate 9993.87

The Blacksnake and the Am Tal flotilla have deposited the people overrunning their hallways and their buffers on a class-M planet 1.34 parsecs from what was basically a parts depot for the Aatuu'hari, at the far edge of the Delphic Expanse. Yeoman Vraeth'uutr'Shrev Th'raess'Aen tells me that this depot was maintained by an Andorian Augment calling itself Gleevah.

According to information gained by the sensors of the Enterprise, no cloned Augment or individual who was a fetal victim of the Augment virus was present on the depot planet before it exploded. Seantie theorizes that various energy-flux residues that the ship's sensors did pick up before that explosion, which were implicated in the explosion itself, may have been the kick-back of an interdimensional transporter device capable of eluding the detection of those looking for it, and of hiding all traces of where its user ultimately goes after using it.

The Am Tal and Section 31 left the area immediately after depositing the people in their buffers onto the planet. They took as many survivors as they could back to Andoria with them,

perhaps as many as a thousand, but that leaves us with 87,412 frightened, angry, and bewildered people to provide for. Josi is leading a landing team combined of Enterprise and Cairo crew, whose purpose is to provide these people with both the necessities they require for comfort, and to attempt to answer their questions, of which they have many.

I've put in a call for all available Federation vessels to ultimately ferry these people out of here back to Andoria, but since we're easily two thousand light-years away from the Procyon system, they'll need reliable food, shelter, and medical care for the interim. Note to Starfleet for future reference: We need a starbase out here!

Impossible as it sounds, these people are the only survivors of the Trilith Disappearance. Nearly two hundred and fifty years ago, Andoria lost contact with Trilith, her most successful colony. When warp ships were sent to investigate the loss of colonial response, they found, and here I'm quoting: No Ghelar Fendsani left alive on Trilith. As it turns out, that terse report was more than a little inaccurate, made so by the inclusion of the word alive...

Humanoids required food, water, and shelter. In this case, that would, Josi Felingaili noted acidly, constitute eighty-two thousand bedrooms, bathrooms, and living

spaces fitted with forty thousand food replication devices.

Which, using the resources available to two starships, was impossible, the fact that *Excelsior*-class starships carried Class Four heavy-duty replicators in their shuttle bays notwithstanding. Everything that was made had to be shuttled to the planet from those bays, and it was slow going.

Josi threw up her hands in frustration. She and Benbet were part of the two-hundred-person landing team sent with temporary shelter, medicine, food packs, and water. The Tellarite shook his head at the XO of the *Enterprise*.

"No, remember, we're dealing with Andorians, Commander. First, divide part of what you just said by sixteen; it wasn't at all uncommon for Andorians to live in parties that dense roughly two hundred years ago. So, we need six thousand bedrooms, bathrooms, and living spaces. And banks of food and drink replicators can easily service five thousand people, as long as they're all not lined up at once. Replicators with twenty-five banks, spaced at a one-mile radius from one another...well, here," the Tellarite pulled a compadd out of an inner uniform pocket and called up its engineering application to sketch out what he meant. "Then, we make everything in these living spaces and bathrooms large and communal —"

Josi raised a brow at the protocol officer. "Beds, too?"

"Beds, too." The ground crews had separated the people into roughly sixteen groups of five thousand, and put Andorian crew in charge of the people seeing to their

needs. This included Mel'Taya and four junior officers currently serving on the *Enterprise*, as well as two yeomen, two senior officers, and eight junior officers from the *Cairo*.

It was fortunate, Mel'Taya had confided to Benbet, that these kidnapped people were *Fesoan* colonials. There were both Vulcans and Tellarites in the crews sent by the *Enterprise* and the *Cairo* as relief and rescue teams, and their presence could have caused a riot, the *chae-na* explained, had individuals from Andoria's own past been revived.

Confused and fascinated by the aliens in their midst as the Trilith survivors might be, they didn't perceive them as either competitors or enemies, which people from Andoria most certainly had, two hundred years ago. It was a universal truth that the cultural evolution of colonials very quickly split away, for better or worse, from the cultural evolution of the planet or planets of their origin.

Which, Benbet thought wryly, should make the creation of eight thousand really big beds and four thousand enormous couches seem not so bad, in retrospect. The protocol officer knew that the replication of the dwellings and infrastructure themselves would be the easiest part of the process: Their setup would be far more complex, since geotechnical and hydrological modification of the planet needed to be performed before that infrastructure could be set in place.

Nevertheless, it absolutely had to be done, people

simply could not be maintained in starship transporter buffers for long the period of time that would be required to return to Federation space, and any ships sent by the Federation to help transport the survivors back to Andoria would not be arriving for at least three Terran Standard months. It would take further months to shuttle the survivors back to Andoria.

For humanoids to attempt to live in temporary housing for the spans of time it might conceivably take to shuttle all Trilith survivors to Andoria was an invitation to disease and open revolt: It was psychologically difficult enough for them, confronted with an utterly unknown political entity, filled with alien people and concepts that they were expected to adopt as their own, without foisting physical hardship on them, as well. Most of them had lost integral parts of their families, and all had lost their previous lives. Renee Ingram was prepared to orbit the planet for a year, if she had to, rather than expect such traumatized individuals to make do with a tent city and an open latrine.

The nearest warp-capable society, non-Federation but friendly, had offered assistance, but the best the humanoids who called themselves *Bajorans* had to offer were hands to help build infrastructure: Their ships were capable of no more than warp three. From the far edge of the Delphic Expanse, it would take a ship travelling at warp three eight Terran Standard years to get to the Procyon system and back. Also, the Bajorans possessed no sort of replication technology at all.

Captain Ingram thanked them for what aid they could give, however (food, physicians, construction, psychologists), and told them that they were welcome to the infrastructure that would be left on the planet in return for their labor, once the kidnapped Andorians were finished with it — a deal that the Bajoran government accepted eagerly.

"Are the survivors still having trouble with the concept of the Federation?" Josi asked Mel'Taya, who had just returned by runabout to the staging area where she and Benbet were interacting from the ground with *Enterprise* bursars busy trying to replicate or locate what the XO and the protocol officer said were necessary. The team that had come with the security officer in the runabout fanned out to locate medication, replicator parts, and the machinery necessary to create septic and well systems in class-M soil and rock.

Mel'Taya snorted. "Of course. Most of them can't get past the concept of the Aenar. Remember, well prior to its people gaining any sort of spacefaring capacity, Andoria was exceptionally militaristic, and the Aenar at that time felt that their only option for survival was to withdraw. So, to these people, the Aenar are about as believable as..." the *chae-na* considered Josi for a moment, "you were raised by humans?"

The *Enterprise* XO nodded. "Yeah. Why?"

The Tellarite protocol officer butted into the conversation. "Oh, sure, I see what you're getting at,

Mel'Taya. Josi, if I told you that the Federation Council had just taken governing advice from an enclave of fairies, what would your response be?"

Enterprise's senior security officer nodded. "Yes, that's *exactly* the sort of thing I meant, Benbet, thank you."

"But..." Josi frowned, "fairies aren't real. Aenar people are."

"And would we happen to have a non-hybrid Aenar handy, in order to prove this mythical race to be real?" the *chae-na* inquired.

"So, what you're saying is that these people can't wrap their heads around the concept of the Federation because they don't believe in Aenar?"

"It might have been easier if we'd come up with a way of telling the story by leaving the Aenar out of it in the first place," Benbet offered. Mel'Taya gave him a disbelieving look.

"But it was an Aenar *chan* the Romulans kidnapped, in order to —"

Josi held up a restraining hand and pulled out her communicator. "Felingaili to *Enterprise*."

"Ingram here, Josi. How are things going down there?" the captain of the *Enterprise* sounded irritated. The commander of the *Blacksnake* hadn't said so much as *goodbye* before saddling her with this situation.

"Fine, for the most part. We're starting to break ground for infrastructure placement. Captain, has the Federation received our request yet? And if so, are there

any *Aenar* in any of the ships headed this way?"

"I... honestly have no idea. I can check, if you think it's necessary. May I ask why?"

Josi smiled tightly. "No *Aenar*, no Federation."

Silence ensued over the line for four seconds. "Ah. I can always try raising the *Eagle*. Would the Trilith survivors believe a viewscreen? And if not, I'd really like to know why it is that they believe their rescuers should lie."

Mel'Taya made a come-here motion, and Josi handed the *chae-na* her communicator. "They're Pre-Federation Andorians, Captain. My people have changed a great deal, sociologically speaking, in the last hundred and fifty years."

"You mean the same people who disowned you because you joined Starfleet?"

The *chae-na* sighed. "Progress, not perfection, Captain. No, what we need is an *Aenar* person or people, *here* personally, to tell the somewhat unbelievable story of the founding of the Federation. I mean, if you think about it —"

"Understood, Mel'Taya. Josi, I'll contact any ships that might be coming and also try to raise the *Eagle*, to see if they don't have or can't somehow include an *Aenar* person, but if I can't, will the survivors remain civil until they can be returned to Andoria? They significantly outnumber us, and even if they don't want to believe in the Federation, it'd be nice if they'd at least believe that we mean them no

harm and only want to return them home."

It was Mel'Taya, not Josi, who replied: "Their home isn't Andoria, and they have no real perception that they've been in stasis for two hundred years. All we can do is what we can do."

"As a security officer, do you foresee any sort of danger in working among them?"

Mel'Taya sighed, an unusual display of emotion for the senior security officer of the *Enterprise*. "Some of them have a few odd but ultimately curable diseases, and there are many families mourning their *thaans* and *shens* and children, but illness, disbelief, and grief aren't the same as violent intent, at least not in any humanoid species of which I'm aware. I will, however, will keep you posted."

"How's Shrev?" Josi inquired, retrieving her communicator from Mel'Taya once Ingram had closed the communication channel.

"Oh, he seems fine. The Am Tal allowed the *Blacksnake* to beam both him and T'Dani over for transport to the *Enterprise* by Section 31. The transporter in the *Blacksnake* removed an implant T'Dani said the Aatuu'hari had put into Shrev's parietal cortex, something called a *self-altering technological interface*, which I've never heard of, but which Section 31 is probably delighted to include in their array of impossible technologies. Their transporters somehow even repaired the hormonal and psychological injuries his kidnappers inflicted on him."

Josi nodded and dismissed Mel'Taya. She was

already aware that Captain Ingram had gotten her hands (or, more accurately, a series of communicator-interfaced compadds) on quite a bit of the astounding technology possessed by Section 31, but their exact transporter specs had turned out to be too much for such cobbled-together spyware to handle. Captain Ingram had wondered aloud to her XO whether Shawn Kell would come looking for her, once he realized what she'd done. The captain of the *Enterprise* had confided that the possibility filled her with such an odd chiaroscuro of emotions that she tried not to think about it.

Josi was, however, thinking about it. She had asked her CO: "Has the computer managed to get much more off of those 'padds regarding the *Blacksnake's* technology, or were most of them fried by data overload and spyware tracking?"

Ingram had laughed teasingly. "Oh, you'll just have to wait and see along with everybody else, Commander!"

Chapter Thirty

"You should just do it!" Myral shook her dark, wet head at her older stepsister. Her eyes were a flat pale gray, blind Aenar eyes that had neither retinas nor pupils. The half-Vulcan *zhen* saw with a sense that, T'Dani remembered Shrev saying once, was *sort of like a pit viper, but not*. She never did ask him how in the world he could know something like that. He was roughly one-sixteenth Aenar himself, but his human-inherited eyes possessed perfect color vision.

Shrev's antennae could also perceive color, in parts of the EM spectrum that were invisible to most humanoids. He could differentiate between shades and tints that T'Dani was unable to tell apart from one another or, sometimes, even *see*. He'd proven it to her once, using the ship's computer to verify what he could perceive but she couldn't, when the physician had accused him of teasing her when he announced that he could tell exactly what mood people of any race were in solely by the particular hue of their facial skin.

"It isn't as if he's going to reject you," T'Dani's stepsister added.

T'Dani let herself sink lower in the spicy-scented hot water, until everything below her chin was submerged. These pools grew a soft, thick mauve lichen over ancient stone seats that had been carved and smoothed to the shape

of the humanoid form. The lichen released cleansers and mild sedatives when it was touched, and she'd never experienced anything more relaxing. You just didn't want to get out, regardless of how wrinkled your skin became. "I know that, *zhi'd*. It's just that I have *two* issues to deal with now; the fear of losing him, and the fear of having him."

"I certainly wouldn't fear having him," Myral teased.

"You're a *zhen*!"

"Ah, but I'm creative. Just because other people don't want to be, that's their issue. I can think of at *least* three..."

T'Dani dunked her head under the bubbling water before her stepsister had a chance to plague her with certain images. It was true, of course; when you loved someone, you found a way. The CMO of the *Enterprise* had heard of both couples and groups who had overcome far greater difficulties in the name of love than anything she seemed to be going through — different food requirements, body chemistries, environmental needs.

T'Dani's issues were largely psychological and entirely her own, and were beginning to seem patently frivolous to her, in comparison to the potency of the feelings that she had for the hybrid Andorian man who had come fuming into her sickbay over four years ago. He'd spent the intervening time scaring her right out of her own comfort zone with his anger and intelligence, his clemency and beauty, and she'd never managed to worm her way back into that outgrown shell since.

She came up sputtering and rubbing at her eyes. "You're going to make me jealous, you know," she teased her stepsister back.

"Something's got to get you moving in the right direction. None of us are going to live forever, *Dya*, no matter what we might wish, and you need to take a chance while you're still..." Myral grinned wickedly, "supple."

T'Dani splashed water at Myral. "You're incorrigible. And Shrev wanted me to ask you something."

Her stepsister smiled. Myral, in fact, smiled more than anyone else T'Dani had ever known — she'd been like that ever since she was a toddler. "Does it have to do with what we were just talking about?"

"Not really. He was wondering if you'd be interested in raising some of the children we rescued from —"

"The *Aatuu'hari*?" Myral's smile fell away as though her face was a cliff.

T'Dani sighed. "You know, we spent a great deal of time and effort trying to figure out who'd kidnapped Shrev and blasted the crap out of the ship. As it turns out, we could have asked pretty much anybody else, considering how much everybody else appears to know about it. This underground group..." she pursed her lips, trying to think of the simplest way to explain this; her stepsister had what she liked to call an *allergy* to science, "they took the dual-sex-specific parts of Shrev's second-generation DNA," — this allowed her to wholly circumvent the word *clone*, which was not generally a welcome word among anyone

T'Dani had ever heard of — "and randomly rebuilt the rest of the children's genomes around that. They did it that way so every child would be different."

"Is Shrev going to raise any of these children himself?"

That was, in fact, a damned good question. "I think he wants to finish out his time aboard the *Enterprise*. He doesn't want to leave the children in foster homes or as orphans; he'd rather they had good, solid families from this point forward. Preferably Andorian ones. All of the children have Andorian phenotypes —"

"Is that some sort of new toy?"

T'Dani laughed. "They all *look* Andorian. The intention of the *Aatuuhari*, you know, is to *replace* Andorians with a dual-sexed race that looks Andorian, but to whom Andorian culture and values have no meaning. It'd allow them to inculcate whatever beliefs they want this new race to have into them firsthand. Shrev, even as a half-Andorian, has a great respect and love for —"

"Describe to me Andorian culture versus lack thereof," Myral interrupted, settling herself into her own seat. "Weytahn looks to be where I'm going to live from here on out, and it is not *Fesoan*. Nor is Nisus, which is my real home as much as it's yours. And my parentage hardly makes me the epitome of your average Andorian."

"Imagine Andorian culture stripped of all its myths. Its heavily-strictured rules for engaging in combat. Divested of the Infant Welcoming ritual, the rituals of

death or *shelthreth*. Of its warrior culture devoid of its artists, scientists, priests, chefs, poets, and singers. Of slave-labor camps — possibly entire slave-labor *planets* — where those of non-dual sexual orientation are sent to work until they die."

"Stop. Just...stop," Myral held up both her hands and turned her face away. "That's nasty, *Dya!* Andorians lost their history thanks to *gaarky'in* like that. Why didn't you just..." she sighed deeply, then dunked her own head, staying under nearly two minutes. Andorians could hold their breath, while performing active labor, for ten minutes, thanks to the osmolarity of their tissues, but this water was hot, and not terribly comfortable against either the face or the antennae for long periods of time. She came up shaking her head, sending sprays of water everywhere. "Why didn't you just *kill* them, T'Dani?"

"Kill children? Because that would be *nasty*, Myral. It was what the *Aatuuhari* was doing before we managed to stop *them*.

"To perform acts that are the same as or similar to those of someone you consider your enemy makes *you* the enemy. To show an erstwhile enemy love and compassion until they are able to return it leaves you *without* an enemy."

"Mount Seleya, much?" the grin returned to Myral's face. The *zhen* had her father's Vulcan ears, but not much else. T'Dani shook her head somberly.

"I hang around with Starfleet captains a lot. It rubs

off. We're trying to find people we'd like to see these children emulate, who have a lot to offer them. Also, ones we can trust to behave ethically, and ones we can keep a firm eye on."

"You keep a firm eye on me? I'm touched!"

"They mostly roll when I look at you, actually. And I'm afraid the paintings I promised you for your gallery that I shouldn't have promised you because it wasn't my place got blown up and burned."

"He was *that* offended?"

T'Dani snorted and pulled herself out of the pool to sit on the edge; it was getting extremely warm. There was a deep, cold pool in the brightly tiled room, too, and she was about ready to dive into it; every inch of her skin, flushed a deep amber, steamed. "It happened when they kidnapped him and tried to hide their tracks by setting incendiaries, you nut. But the screens in his *cha'chi's* house —"

"*Those* are his? Oh, the images you sent didn't give a clue to their depth. Even the one with the hatching birds?"

"Yes, that one, too. He calls it his *patience* screen. If you watch long enough, you'll see that one of the birds is actually a turtle. He says the turtle represents himself."

"He's really not very fair to himself sometimes, is he?"

"He's terribly hard on himself, actually."

"Which brings us right back to the beginning of this conversation," Myral lifted herself gracefully from the water. Raven-haired, statuesque, and a pale copper-green, she was in many ways the polar opposite of the delicate,

pixielike stepsister who had helped raise her, and whom she loved fiercely. "You need to tell him how you feel, so that he can start to understand how exceptional he is. He's probably accepted a lot of second-hand goods all his life, when he deserves the best. He deserves *you*, T'Dani."

T'Dani opened her mouth to reply, but got a good look at her stepsister first. "You're pregnant!"

The *zhen* smiled. "Surprise! That was going to be my next question; are any of these..." she paused, made a face, and chose the word an Andorian would choose when faced with a potentially threatening, frightening, not-wholly-ideal situation or proposition: "*challenging*-sounding children infants, by any chance?"

T'Dani nodded and stood up, walking to the cold pool. "Two of them, about nine Terran months or so." The *Enterprise's* CMO looked down at the deep, cold water in the basin, tiled in white and brown — or, as she'd been told more than once today, *red-green*. *M'telal* was the Andorian word for that color, which nine-tenths of all humanoids were entirely unable to perceive, the red either cancelling out the green, or muddying it into brown. There were no stairs or ladders. She drew a deep breath and cannonballed into it. If it was fifty degrees Fahrenheit, she'd have been surprised. The air poured out of her lungs in an agonized huff, and her sinuses threatened open revolt, making her see stars until she surfaced, grabbed the lip of the pool, and hauled herself out. "Oh, that hurts!"

"Actually, it'll feel really good in about two minutes,

you know." Myral sat down beside her and gingerly lowered her shins into the water as the door behind them opened.

"You've got half an hour left, ladies; my *zhev'a* is making *ja'aith* and nobody will save any for us if we don't go to dinner now or sooner."

T'Dani reached over for her robe. "She is? Now I'm starving!" *Ja'aith* was a variety of salted, smoked, and fresh Andorian meats, finely ground and mixed with a variety of Andorian spices, carefully wrapped around several varieties of vegetables, nuts, mushrooms, and eggs — not always from Andorian flora or fauna — seared nearly black in a hot skillet, then nestled tightly into a crock and very slowly braised under a layer of grated tuber-root. The people who cooked it always complained that it would fall apart and be ruined if it was cooked too long. Nobody who ate it ever cared; it was delicious regardless.

In deference for the non-Andorian people potentially present, Shrev also sported a robe. He watched in interest as T'Dani donned hers. His gaze fell to Myral, and a smile crossed his face.

"Congratulations, Myral! No one told me."

She stood and smiled at Shrev. "Thank you. And congratulations, yourself. Nobody probably told you this, either, but you're the star attraction of the new gallery I'm hosting. I'm shamelessly stealing your family's room and window screens. I'm paying them with a house on

Weytahn, and you with a house on Nisus, if you all want them, and even if you don't. Think you can make the opening? And maybe a few more paintings?"

"Pushy," T'Dani hissed under her breath. Her Vulcan-eared, aqua-green hybrid stepsister grinned and flounced out the door. T'Dani blinked up at Shrev, suddenly shy.

"I never did ask, but you weren't hurt in the explosion of the *Enterprise*, were you?" he inquired gently.

T'Dani shook her head and shivered. "No. Colin was, and Demora and Marco and Josi. I was in route between sickbay and my quarters at the time; I might not have gotten away unscathed in either my quarters or sickbay. It hadn't really occurred to me until then just how many things we keep loose on a starship are mortally dangerous. My glass collection's in smithereens."

"Oh, I'm sorry!" he knew that some of those Vulcan sand glass pieces were heirlooms. One had been a gift he'd given her, and they'd engaged in a private cold-war about that for nearly a month afterward. He licked his lips and offered, softly; "You know, I'm acquainted with one of the artists who —"

"I don't want *things* from you, Shrev," she insisted softly.

He looked away, frowning, distress making his face flush and his antennae droop. That she'd placed just such a limiting threshold on their relationship, in an attempt to keep him at bay emotionally without abandoning him entirely, had been the cause of all their conflict earlier.

T'Dani shook her head and moved next to him, close enough to touch. She reached up and stroked his face tentatively. He turned his gaze back toward her in surprise, then lowered it again. "I *want* your presence in my life, *Corvathi'nass.*"

All her life, she had longed for him. Yet T'Dani wasn't certain, at this moment, which frightened her more: The thought of saying the things she truly wanted to say, which she'd thought she'd never have a chance to say, or the fact that her fear would hold her back from saying them now that she actually had the chance.

She loved him.

He could feel it, through the touch of her fingers on his face. He blinked at her, astounded, then closed his eyes, allowing himself for one blissful moment to revel in the touch of her mind. He'd never experienced the equivalent, though he had longed for it all his life. All his life, he had longed for her.

Shrev could clearly see the conflict and anguish and intensity in her eyes when he opened his own again. He reached up and took her fingers in his own, gently. To Vulcans, such a touch meant something very profound indeed, and he was more than comforted by that fact. She seemed to be telling him that she wanted him in her life *because* he was him, a sentiment he'd encountered far too rarely. Hearing it from her was a precious gift. *Feeling* it from her was more precious yet.

He loved her.

She could feel it through the lightest touch of his fingers. She'd never allowed anyone who wasn't family this close — not even Renee. It was like walking through a doorway into a whole different Universe. She shivered. There would be no going back through that doorway — the only way through was forward. "It might take me...some time to get used to this...way of being," she whispered.

I understand, he replied softly — telepathically. She blinked up into his face for a long moment, and he had to physically override his own human male urge to kiss her. He gave in to the Andorian male urge instead, and diverted his gaze from hers again, shyly.

Her body responded with horrible profundity to both of his subliminal signals, and she shivered again. The medication that had been formulated for her as a little girl couldn't touch this, and for the first time it occurred to her to wonder why she imagined that it should. She'd thought that she'd always managed, in the past, to elude such situations before. Not until she'd believed that Shrev was dead had she realized that she'd never been *in* such a situation before.

"I'll try..." she whispered, "never to push you away again. You have to know I don't want to."

He closed his eyes and nodded. "Okay," he agreed softly. "And you have to know that I won't..." she seemed to respond best, he'd come to realize, to the Andorian side of his nature. He wasn't a *thaan* — he was a man — but that didn't mean he didn't possess an abundant variety of

the same urges as a *thaan*, or that those urges didn't overlap. Ice cream and icicles, his *cha-chi* used to point out to him when Shrev was in his hyper-agonized teen years, were both frozen substances, after all; "*stipulate anything.*" *It's all up to you*, he considered adding, but didn't.

That, after all, would be a stipulation, his inner *thaan* explained. Shrev grinned.

T'Dani grinned back, then reached up to touch his face once more, and bring his forehead down against hers.

Renee Ingram was enthralled by the view of the Andorian city. She'd been to Andoria before, of course, but it was difficult to become inured to either its beauty or its strangeness. Something always offered a surprise. She'd heard it had all been a great surprise to the Trilith survivors, too, who had by now met more than one Aenar, and more than one high-level administrator of the Federation. *Fesoan*, overjoyed by this infusion of new life, had mandated this second month of high summer to be Trilith Recovery Week; Captain Ingram had little doubt that it would be a week of revelry, and very little else, for centuries to come.

The city, like all dwellings on *Fesoan*, depended upon the large, semi-subterranean cores of volcanic vents, which rose up to two thousand feet between underground rivers and boiling pools, tamed and channeled for use by the Andorian people, and the upper, icy crust of the planet. In

this particular area, the gigantic vent from which the far northern suburb of the city depended (like so many great glistening bracket-fungi clinging to an ancient oak, tunneling its bark with innumerable hyphal pathways) rose between a beautifully forested, snowy volcanic plain, and the ancient remnants of a surface land-bridge seven miles wide and a mile across.

The long, fleeting rays of low-hanging Alpha Indri — which Andorians called *Kuy'va*: Their own planet was really one of the moons of *Andor*, an enormous ringed gas-giant five orbits distant from Alpha Indri — glinted off of the snow-dusted, golden-blue, twelve-foot-tall tangle of soft-needled evergreen taiga surrounding the suburb. It was summer, and everything in sight seemed to be carved from precious gems: Moonstone, pearl, diamond, opal, sapphire, onyx, emerald. Wherever the setting sun caught banks of low-flung mist, the jeweled tones glinted ruby and garnet.

The majority of the city spread away south and southeast on twenty other vents, the softly glimmering lights that defined *home* on the night side of every planet with sentient humanoid life flicking on in the gloaming. Every single part of the city was connected to every other part by tunnels, turbolifts, halls, stairs, and antechambers that ran throughout the outer faces of the vents, or underground.

In the last century or so, similar complex, enclosed routes of ingress and egress had been built between the

surface and all of the cities. *Fesoan's* glacial tunnels and moraines were simply too dangerous for off-worlders to traverse, and since not too long after the signing of the Federation Charter, Andoria had hosted quite a lot of those, quite a lot of the time. Aside from the natives, who seemed to inspire an obsessive fascination that bordered on adoration in certain non-Andorians, which Ingram couldn't wholly fathom — thirty-five years of friendship with one such notwithstanding — the planet's incredible hot springs were an enormous tourist attraction. Andorians loved their baths, were in fact one of the cleanest races in the Federation, not to mention one of the most hedonistic.

They can be so incredibly contradictory, Renee mused: The dourest damned sweet-natured people you'd ever want to meet. Better at dealing with stress than anybody else in the galaxy, until they reach the point where they need to kill something, if only metaphorically. Fully capable of behavior as merciless as the environment they've evolved in, without a doubt they're one of the most compassionate and least corruptible races in the Federation. A culture of fierce, individualistic people whose greatest delight is love and friendship, which they'll eventually become ill without. Tough as hell — nearly as strong as Vulcans, but you can kill them with a phaser set on stun. Extraordinarily impatient folks, and you needed to be exquisitely patient with them, or you'll hurt their feelings — which will also make them ill.

And they were individuals, obviously, fond of six-

hour-long baths. This hardly surprised the captain of the *Enterprise*, who was knew from dealing with crew postings that Andorians sometimes spent entire vacations in bed. It certainly didn't keep them from accomplishing anything they set their minds to. And after having taken advantage of one of those marvelous baths in Colin's company the evening prior had helped her to understand the attraction of a six-hour-long bath.

Anyway, Captain Ingram had wanted a chance to talk privately with Shrev's...well, she supposed *zhev'a* was the correct term, but really, she was more like his mother — his *zhavey* — than his aunt. Lara'na spoke to Renee now from where she was busy in the kitchen: "They'd better hurry their baths, or they might miss dinner. *Ja'aith* just isn't any good overcooked. I suppose I should have made a stew instead. Would you like some more *katheka*?"

Captain Ingram turned from the gorgeous view, graced around the edges by tiny, green, nodding flowers of ice-oladra planted in decorative niches along the periphery of the window, and ambled toward the kitchen. The remarkable artwork that formed window-coverings and room dividers in the sprawling, multi-story house was, she'd been told, Shrev's own. "I'd love more, thanks."

"Would you like milk in it, this time? I meant to offer some earlier, but I forgot."

Captain Ingram gave the motherly, deep cobalt-blue *zhen* a look that made the Andorian snicker. Lara'na reached over, pulled open a freezer unit, and took out a

small container of white ice cubes. "Oh, we keep these here for Shrev. We also keep dried milk in the pantry. He's never gotten over his love for it, and he likes it in *katheka* especially."

"Ah, I see. He must have inherited some lactose-tolerant human gene. Sure, why not? You know," she went on, watching the *zhen* prepare her drink, "Shrev's incredibly accomplished."

Lara'na blinked across the counter at Ingram. "You think so?"

The captain of the *Enterprise* blinked back. "No, ma'am; I *know* so. I rather wish he'd take a year or so of Starfleet training. I'd make him an officer, no questions asked." Of course, that could put a serious crimp in his pursuit of Lieutenant Commander Corrigan, which was certainly the reason why he'd never taken Captain Ingram up on the offer. She accepted the Andorian equivalent of coffee from the *zhen*. "Thank you."

Captain Ingram sat down at the kitchen table — a heavily-inlaid affair shaped like an eight-pointed star. Its central portion was hollow. As a single unit, it could seat sixteen; pulled into two units, it could seat twenty-eight. It had been in Thon's family for twenty generations, Lara'na had told her. Any number of Andorian families possessed similar tables, though the need for them...

"Jeshrie says Shrev's your only child?" Ingram sipped at the milky iced *katheka*. Shrev was right — it really was tasty this way. She wondered what animal the milk came

from, then decided it was usually better not to ask questions like that in a culture where the primary milk animal was a person, and where people didn't always take kindly to questions that might be considered personal.

Lara'na nodded and shrugged, joining her at the table. "Yes. Though as you know, he's not actually *ours* —"

"You raised him. Everything he's become is due to your influence, and it takes more than labor pains to make a family. He's yours in every way that counts. Did I tell you that I'm adopted?"

"No; I had no idea. So, you know of what you speak firsthand."

Captain Ingram nodded, then grabbed this opening and ran with it. "Nobody can really pinpoint how many or which factors that go into making a psychologically-healthy individual are genetic, and which are environmental." *Take my career choice, for instance*, she thought wryly. She took another sip of *katheka*, then set the cup down and curled her hands around it, leaning forward toward Lara'na over one inlaid ray of the ancient family heirloom. "You all did an outstanding job with Shrev. Have you ever wanted more children?"

The *zhen* smiled sadly. "Wanting isn't the same as being able to produce, I'm afraid." Her voice held a hollow ring that threatened to bring tears to Renee's eyes. The Andorian whose hospitality the captain of the *Enterprise* shared was no older than herself — still young, in the modern humanoid count of years; Lara'na's people lived to

a hundred and forty, generally. But her entire bondgroup was significantly past bearing age. That became a used-to-be for modern Andorians once they hit about twenty-five *Fesoan* years of age.

Hence the rise of the *Aatuu'hari*.

Ingram sighed and rubbed her eyes. "Lara'na, Shrev wasn't the only person we rescued from that planet. There were children —"

"*Cloned* children?"

As Shrev had expected, what he'd been held hostage to produce wasn't a surprise to anybody in this house — probably not to anybody in this *city*. Most people had strong feelings about clones; those feelings were ardent in the *zhen*'s voice tone.

Captain Ingram sighed again. "In a sense. Though the way it was done, these little ones are more like Shrev's children. The main thing that..." Captain Ingram paused and took another drink, choosing her terms with great care; "the main thing that was *wanted* in them was male/female dichotomy, among a group with enough genetic variability to potentially interbreed. That's what the technique appears to have produced. But they're still just children, Lara'na."

"Did Shrev put you up to this?" the *zhen* demanded. Captain Ingram nodded. Lara'na made a wry face. "It figures. That boy always did have more sentiment in him than is good for anybody. How many of these..." she shook her head, "*children* are we talking about?"

"Uh...six, actually."

Lara'na's eyes widened in alarm. "He expects us to take six? At *once*? If they're anything like him, we'll all have to move into an insane asylum together. What ages?"

Ingram could see that the thought of caring for children — a *zhen's* whole biological imperative, which was often thwarted for them lately, leading to a rise in depression among Andorians in general — was overcoming her distaste for the concept of how they were created. From what Shrev had confided, his *zhev'a* was the mover and shaker of this particular bondgroup. If Captain Ingram could convince *her*...

"Actually, they range in age from about nine months to about four years. And Shrev was planning on talking to his...ah, the bondgroup he had children with? When they get here so that he can meet his own children? To see if they wouldn't —"

Lara'na, to Ingram's amazement, actually threw back her head and laughed. "Now *that*, I would like to see!"