

BROKEN ARROW

©By *Rosemarie Taylor-Perry 2020*

*“Can you cut behind the mystery?...
Can you see what I see?
Do you feel what I feel?
Let's make it so that's part of the deal...”*

Broken Arrow

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Chapter One

“Captain's Log, Stardate 9921.26:

“The Enterprise is finally refit and underway. We're supposed to be picking Yaelat up from a Federation Membership Commission Conference Starfleet sent him to a week ago, on a planet not too far from the Klingon border. This planet's been a provisional member for the last century. It's odd that it's only now decided to accept full membership. It's also odd that Starfleet hasn't heard from Yaelat in several days. He hasn't contacted the ship, either. I've sent a communiqué to the government of the provisional planet, to interrupt the Commission Conference if necessary so I can be certain that my crewman is all right.

“We're due to pick up a Federation medical team from Arron Colony to take them to Bradford Colony, which is three months overdue for its yearly medical exam, before we pick up Yaelat. However, should Yaelat or some governmental official not contact the Enterprise in the two days I've allotted, I've decided that Bradford Colony will simply have to wait awhile

longer. Lieutenant Qat was scheduled to contact us at midnight tonight, Enterprise time; it's now six hours past that mark, which allows more than enough time for the temporal glitches subspace communications so often encounter to have smoothed themselves out, and there's been nothing. Part of me says that it's altogether too early to worry, but the fact that I've received neither summaries nor the agreed-upon contact tells me something else altogether.

“It's troubling, as these provisional members are supposedly some of the most peaceful people the Federation's ever encountered, and Yaelat's never dilatory—much the opposite, in fact, sometimes annoyingly so. If we don't hear anything from Yaelat within the next couple of days.... well, that's a subject for later.

“Compounding my load of concerns is the fact that the Enterprise B has been gifted with some of the most unlikely and interesting new senior staff I've ever worked with. I mean this in the most tongue-in-cheek manner possible. My hope is that they will, ultimately, cease surprising and amusing the rest of the crew, or rubbing them (and myself) in various

unpleasant directions.

“The easiest one to get a handle on is my new tactical officer, Marcus Justice Fletcher, who goes by the moniker EmJay. Possibly, this might be only my own personal opinion, since the man is human. Nevertheless, I was somewhat alarmed to find him wandering the ship with a thatch of smoldering grass at midnight, ship's time, yesterday morning.

“He explained that this is a common ritual among his people, who, as far as I can ascertain, consist of the only humans of British descent (his term was 'Celt') living on the Seventh Mesa Tribal Community on Mars. His stated intent was to free the ship of ghosts. I wished him luck with that. I have double-checked his Starfleet psych evals, and this does, indeed, appear to be a religious ritual and not a psychotic break, though admittedly, it can be difficult to perceive the difference.

“My new head of security's an Andorian whose gender is a matter of grievous secrecy. This individual — its preferred gender derivative is it — is extremely standoffish and prone to inspecting the ship by way of the

Jefferies tubes, several times in the company of a new Orion second-shift security ensign named Tenger, an alarmingly young individual whose service record is, if anything, even thinner and more bewildering than Mel'Taya's.

“For the record, that's something I not only dislike about Starfleet recordkeeping, but it's something which I, as a starship captain, feel could cause potential harm. I realize that Command headquarters and the Academy's been decimated, which is why I don't demand that you send me more information; probably, you don't have it. Still, my strong suggestion is that you ameliorate this problem as expediently as possible. I am aware that the current iteration of Enterprise is the beta-test for the capacity of large numbers of divergent races to work together in harmony aboard a starship. However...

“I've been frightened by both of these new security personnel suddenly materializing from behind various bulkheads, or even from directly within the walls of the ship, when I wasn't expecting it. I don't think I've heard either of them utter more than four to six words, primarily consisting of "Sorry about that,

Captain," and "We're ensuring that the ship's secure."

"I can't argue with the idea that security personnel would be lax in their duties should the ship not be secure. I've been too preoccupied with other matters to devise a tactful way to request that they get the hell out of the walls. Ultimately, I think, I'm just going to have to order them to get the hell out of the walls, assuming they don't get bored of crawling around the Jefferies tubes for no good reason before I get around to it.

"The ship's new protocol officer is a Tellarite fellow by the name of Benbet Agaramashur. No... that should be Arigimashor. Otherwise, I think, I'm calling him a tablecloth. In any case, I've never met a more affable Tellarite. Demora tells me he's surprised and irritated a number of crew members already with his affability. Perhaps affability is not the correct term, but I have been trying very hard to avoid the term emotionally clingy, since it dredges up issues that don't exist either among Tellarites or in Benbet's frankly stellar service record.

"Colin assures me that none of these individuals mean any harm whatsoever, and as I've already noted, all of this is eclipsed by my senior communication officer's sudden lack of communication skills. We'll be picking up the medical team at Arron Colony within the hour. I've requested to meet them in the transporter room alone; the lead physician is elderly, and people setting things on fire, the sudden appearance of unwontedly affectionate Tellarites, or Andorian-Orion security teams manifesting from behind random wall panels...well, that could cause complications, more of which I really don't need right now.

"I'm Relan Tesh."

Yaelat looked around himself wildly, at the apparently abandoned space station — nobody in the docking bays, nobody on any of the station's three esplanades, nobody at any of the restaurant areas, all administrative spaces locked firmly away from potential use. After a great deal of wandering, he had somehow come to find himself lost in the warren of hallways that intersected the station's living quarters where, equally apparently, nobody lived.

The individual confronting him now was the first one he'd seen in... what? An hour? A day? A decade? He wasn't certain. He was, however, suddenly certain that this

individual was the entire reason for his presence.

"Oh, thank goodness — you're the person I was supposed to meet here! No, no, not here...what *is* this place? Weren't we supposed to be having some kind of...Federation Commission meeting? On the *planet*, I mean?"

Gods, what was the name of the *planet*? It wouldn't come to him, no matter how hard he tried, the Federation's penchant for calling a planet and its people by the same name for the sake of convenience, which irritated or offended more than a few races (many of which weren't even Federation members) notwithstanding.

Relan Tesh nodded at Yaelat somberly. "We've met before, though you might not remember. For your own protection, you'll want to do as Mirr tells you from here on in. Do you understand?"

Yaelat frowned into the middle-aged, heavily freckled man's indigo eyes. Relan was a taller man, but lanky and slender, not burly the way Yaelat was. Though Hali'ians in general, like most empathic races, didn't affect the bigger-dog better-dog scenario that so often tended to occur in most humanoid cultures, Qat did so now, out of pure unalloyed frustration and...

Fear. He was afraid. Of *what*? "Who? I think I just got off the shuttle at the wrong place; I realize that I must be terribly late, but I'm lost, I wasn't certain where we'd be meeting. Just tell me; is this where I'm supposed to be, or

not?"

Wait, Yaelat thought muzzily, the planet. Hadn't they arranged to meet somewhere on the planet? But this was a space station. Which station it was, and where it was, the senior communications officer of the *Enterprise* hadn't a clue.

"You're right; this is the wrong place to be for what you were sent here to do. But something's gone badly amiss, and you'll need to remain here awhile. It's really is the only safe place. Try to understand."

The Hali'ian shook his head. "Understand *what*?"

"That you'll need to remain here for some time. I'm sorry I can't tell you how long. Just remember; *listen to Mirr.*" Relan turned peremptorily and began walking back the way Yaelat had come, out of the living area of the station.

The senior communications officer of the *Enterprise* followed along doggedly. Tesh took a junction Yaelat hadn't seen before, which took them past the esplanade and straight to Docking Port Three. This increased both Lieutenant Qat's confusion, and the fear that threatened to crowd all rational thought out of the Hali'ian's mind.

No, Yaelat thought, that junction absolutely was not there before. He reached out and caught Relan's arm. "Wait! Where are we going? Why do I need to stay here instead of going with you? When will I be sent for? You said..." the Hali'ian man wracked his brain and came up

with; "You said before that there was something you wanted to show me."

Yaelat couldn't have said when Tesh had said this, had the other man suddenly opened an airlock and threatened to throw him out unless he could provide that answer. For a long, dizzying second, Yaelat didn't know what was true or false, what was real or unreal, what was said or unsaid. He couldn't even tell if *he* was real, or merely a simulation inside someone else's head.

Relan gave Yaelat what the young Hali'ian man perceived as a sad smile. "I need to get back. Lives are depending on me being elsewhere just now. You won't be alone; Mirr *will* come for you. Wait for Mirr to arrive. I..." he swallowed and looked away; "I don't know when we'll be sending for you. As soon as possible. You just have to trust me. And you absolutely *must* do what Mirr tells you."

"But —"

"Mister! Hey, mister! Oh, thank heavens we found you! We thought we were going crazy. Where *are* we? Why are we here? Jendrey, look, there's someone else here!"

Yaelat looked away from Relan and back over his shoulder momentarily at the small gaggle of what he figured were tourists, one of whom was trying to get his attention. Grateful as he was to see other people on this ghostly station, he turned away from them, back to the man who was supposed to be his host, prepared to demand a

clearer answer.

Relan was gone. No opening and closing of an airlock, no announcement of a docking arrival or departure, just — *gone*. Yaelat returned his attention to the tourists.

They were gone, too.

Without knowing why, without any clear idea where it was he was going or what it was he was running either from or to, Yaelat turned and sprinted away from what seemed to be an abandoned space station docking bay filled with ghosts.

Chapter Two

"I hope you don't mind us bringing our pets, Captain," elderly Doctor M'Benga said in lieu of greeting, as he stepped off the transporter pad. All of the medical personnel carried various baggage around their necks, over their shoulders, on their backs, and even around their waists, including what were obviously small-animal carriers. M'Benga himself held only a carrier.

Renee raised a brow. Obviously, there was nothing dangerous or infective about what the team carried, or it would have been sterilized, held in the transporter's buffer, sent into the vacuum of space, or flagged for deposition in either one of the quarantine rooms the *Enterprise's* CMO stringently maintained in the main sickbay. Still... "I wasn't aware that medical personnel made a habit of traveling with their pets."

One of the women struggling her luggage off of the transporter platform laughed. "We didn't have any when we got here!"

Now Ingram frowned. "Did somebody have a litter of puppies, or are you removing indigenous animals? I need to know, because there are regulations —"

"Federation Regulation Eight regarding the treatment of endangered indigenous species didn't apply. I promise you, Captain, I checked before we left. Everyone on the

planet keeps these; they're common as dandelions in Indiana, and not indigenous. None of the Starfleet regulations about the transport of dangerous animals applies. The little guys are harmless." M'Benga had squatted down stiffly on the transporter pad and opened his carrier as he was speaking. A soft, singsong sound came from the creatures within; two of them, Renee saw, as they peeked gracile, weasel-like heads out of the carrier.

The captain of the *Enterprise* found herself entranced. The little animals were covered in dense, chinchilla-like fur, in combinations of colors as brilliant as the feathers of Terran bee-eaters or rollers. Aqua blue, gold, lilac, mauve and burnt orange marbled the first in a calico pattern, while scarlet, forest green, royal purple, and velvet brown stippled the second in a tabby pattern. Both possessed long, squirrel-like tails.

All resemblance to Terran animals ended there. Both of these alien creatures possessed three wide, bright-yellow eyes that had no apparent pupils; these were set in a triangular pattern into their narrow, triangular skulls. They had long, sinuous torsos sporting six legs, upon which they moved with skink-like locomotion over the transporter pads. The animals had no readily apparent ears or noses, but each one had two narrow, hagfish-like mouths crowded with teeth, which glinted as multicolored as their fur. They fixed their surroundings with sharp, intelligent gazes and hummed softly to one another, seemingly not at all taken

aback by either their new surroundings or having to travel in carriers. Renee's own birds had major fits when forced to travel in carriers.

"We found this abandoned nest of *twyvar* in the tree outside the house we were staying at," one of the medical technicians offered, by way of explanation. The captain of the *Enterprise* sighed. There was no reason to be concerned about this; she was just on edge over Yaelat. And Mel'Taya. And Tenger. And possibly EmJay and Benbet. These were merely exotic little pets, after all.

"Well, I don't see any harm in keeping them here. We may even have appropriate habitats for them; I'll have my chief of operations ask the bursars. What do they eat?"

"They're insectivores naturally, but they're quite happy and healthy when fed most varieties of protein-rich humanoid food. You won't even know they're here, Captain," M'Benga assured her.

Ingram could hardly complain about other people having pets; heavens knew she had enough of her own. "As long as no rules are being contravened by them being taken off-planet, I don't see that there will be any problem. But be aware that there are other animals living as pets on the *Enterprise*, including various insects. I'd hate to hear that one person's pet became the meal of another person's pet. If that's likely, we'll need to enforce a force-field perimeter around their habitats for the duration of the voyage."

There were three snakes on the ship that required this sort of extra precaution, one of them large enough to consume big dogs or small horses, and certainly large enough to swallow the sweet little creatures now nosing en-masse about the transporter pads and luggage. Renee would have to ask the bursars to see that their containment fields were working properly, too.

Yaelat snapped out of a light doze and stared in confusion at the empty space station that surrounded him. It was creepy; there was just no other way to describe it. Presumably, the little knot of lost souls who'd accosted him just inside Docking Port Three had found their appropriate connecting bays.

He was utterly alone here.

The Hali'ian wasn't even certain where to go to find an open restaurant or bar. He pursed his lips, thinking. Well, no restaurant or bar was going to come *to* him, he'd need to go looking for one. *Although*, he mused as he rose from the chair he didn't remember sitting down in to stride determinedly down the upper esplanade, *you'd think if there was one nearby, I'd at least hear the voices of patrons. This place is silent as a...*

He rounded a corner and nearly ran full tilt into a woman. Both she and Yaelat stopped on the spot and bounded backwards slightly. Both of them reached up and pressed a hand against their chest, as if they could still their

suddenly-racing hearts using their fingers — all reactions that were perfectly normal for any humanoid, as was their next mutual reaction; they chuckled nervously and stared at one another.

Yaelat didn't know what she saw when she looked at him, but he saw a tall, willowy, East Indian Terran woman nearing middle age, resplendent in a fuchsia and old-gold sari and hair-veil sewn with little round mirrors. She was hennaed or perhaps even tattooed in an unidentifiable, filigreed pattern from the ruby bindi between her eyes, up into her hairline, and down the sides of her face and neck until the pattern was lost in her somewhat gauzy clothing, and he thought it politic not to let his eyes try to trace it further. Her nervous laughter blossomed into a full-blown smile, and she held out her hand in greeting.

"Hello! I am Mirr. My, how pretty you are!"

Yaelat blinked, nonplussed. "Ah...well, thank you. I think! I'm Yaelat. Do you..." he glanced around him; her comment had made him even more edgy than he'd already been. "Do you have any idea where everyone on the station's gotten to?"

"Oh, dear, yes. There's a... situation on the planet currently." She reached out with a familiarity that Yaelat might have found distressing in a less delicate, obviously friendly and knowledgeable individual, or in a less distinctly ominous setting. As it was, he found her touch immensely reassuring, and so didn't consider trying to

avoid it after the first brief flare of disquiet had flickered through his mind like the spark a dying coal might make when blown upon hard. "There should be a food court open, though. Shall we look together?"

"What sort of...*situation* on the planet? I was supposed to meet someone there in order to...to..." the information required to finish that sentence didn't appear to exist within his mind, and he shook his head hard, as though the answer might be lodged in one of his ears and might appear, given adequate jiggling.

"I, too, but my dear, the best-laid plans of mice and men..." she smiled up at him confidentially; "that *is* an old Federation saying, isn't it? That plans often go awry and we must make the best of what we're left with? I'm afraid that we'll simply have to make do with one another for the time being. Oh, look, there's the replimat; are you starving?"

He had been, he wasn't so much now. A sense of anxiety seemed to be trying to cave his chest in, and he pulled away and crossed his arms over the sudden flash of pain. "You mean we're the *only* people on this damned station?"

Mirr gazed at him with eyes as deep and soulful as the eyes of a fawn, a blue so dark that, for all intents and purposes, they were black. "I believe that's so. Please tell me you're glad I'm here; I *do* so want to be friends — I'm alone, too."

Yaelat took a deep breath and tried to pull himself together. "I'm sorry. It's just..." he shook his head. "This is not at all what I expected."

"What was it that you did expect?" she reclaimed his arm gently and slowly led him closer to the replimat, as though frightened he might bolt if she wasn't both gentle and slow.

"I... I was called on to be part of a team that..." it was hazy; why was it so *hazy*? He was put in mind of the group of lost and confused tourists he'd first encountered on the station; was it something about the atmosphere or environment in this place?

Wait. *Hadn't this woman been one of those tourists?*

Yaelat reached up to rub his forehead, trying to focus, to clear his mind. His inability to remember was due to the anxiety he was feeling, certainly; anxiety muddled thinking. "I'm trained as an exopsychologist and an amateur cultural surveyor, and I came to determine if a planet...no, I mean the people...the *culture* of the planet was...is...suitable for full Federation membership."

"You're a Federation ambassador?" she seemed excited by this news. He found himself scowling at her.

"Um...not exactly. You're telling me you've never met a Federation ambassador before? They're thicker than Catralian ticks on a — wait. Aren't you human?"

She laughed; "Oh, heavens, *no!*"

"But..." he considered her seriously again, "you *look*

human. Like you're from a specific human culture." Most humanoid cultures that had ever existed were actually extinct. Studying, reviving, and revering these was a passion among some humanoids, Yaelat included. The Federation encouraged such pursuits. Entire humanoid colonies existed in which people lived their lives according to the customs and mores of ancient cultures, some from planets and races not even their own.

She laughed gaily. "We're not all what we seem, it appears! I saw this...*outfit* somewhere here, on the station, and I liked it, so I took it for my own. Are *you* human? Can you tell me about the culture this clothing comes from?"

For reasons he couldn't define to himself, the thought of this sweet-natured woman engaging in a little light shoplifting — what else could it be, with the shops unstaffed? — made him smile. "I'm not human at all. I'm Hali'ian."

She clapped her hands like a child, as if he'd just revealed a marvelous secret. "How wonderful! You must tell me all about your culture and your people." She half-turned and nodded at the bank of active replicators. Not a person in sight, but an entire bank of six active replicators — probably programmed for every food known to the Federation, Yaelat thought moodily— "while we eat."

Chapter Three

Yaelat was right; the damned replimat even had a program for fresh *rhaenar*. Not even the *Enterprise* replicators had a program for those, and these particular fruits surprised Yaelat, as fresh tasting as though he'd picked them right off the tree.

He'd been astounded by how much the willowy woman across from him could eat. They were dining cross-legged on one of the replimat sofas, their repast spread between them, which was much the same way Yaelat would have eaten with his family on Hali'ia. Mirr had told him that she wanted to imitate his people's customs.

Together, they'd plowed through a terrine of heavily peppered shrimp *methi malai* with basmati rice and a pile of garlic *naan*, while he'd told her what little he knew of the human East Indian Hindustani culture. She'd laughed when he apologized for his lack of depth on the subject, and realized only at that point that he'd been holding forth about Terra and its ten- thousand mind -boggling cultures for the better part of an hour. They'd moved on from this to an entire plate of sweet-sour Hali'ian *clem*-fish, which he explained were more like tiny Terran soft-shelled crabs than anything else, at which point she demanded to split a soft-shelled crab sandwich with him.

He enjoyed the berrylike flavor of the *rhaenar* he'd just popped into his mouth, and knew he would enjoy its savory nutlike kernel just as much, but he was even more certain that if he ate any more, he might explode. He was in the middle of telling her about his people's festivals, a topic brought on by the *clem* and the *rhaenar*:

"Our people held it to be an article of faith for many millennia that we were not alone in the galaxy. I mean, it's like we *knew*. *Aeshamar* is our Winter Festival of Dreaming; all our wintertide feasts in the old days would revolve around sharing the dreams we'd received from the sacred black fungus, about all of those among the lonely stars we hadn't yet met, whom we'd call our brothers and sisters in *Rumael*." Yaelat stretched his arms and legs, his joints crackling the way they always did after he'd been sitting cross-legged to eat for a long period.

"How did those festivals and feasts change once your people realized they were *not* alone among the stars?" Mirr paused to pop a *rhaenar* into her mouth; berry juice dripped down her chin when she threw her head back and laughed in delight at the flavor. He'd never known anyone who tossed themselves into pure awareness so readily, or delighted so thoroughly in sensation. Still smiling gaily, Mirr wiped her face carefully clean with a napkin, and added, impishly; "And that not everyone was either a brother or a sister?"

Yaelat chuckled. "You can eat the kernels in those,

too. They taste like nuts. Nowadays, we simply share the *Aeshamar* with anyone who wants to come. There's quite a scramble among families to host people from other planets. Most Hali'ian families compete to see who'll host at least one Federation group. My own family shared their hall last wintertide with a group of Bzzit Khaht. Other families who aren't selected for the honor always show up, and it can get incredibly crowded in the ancestral halls, which of course is handled better by certain races than by others.

“The Bzzit Khaht, for instance, can't abide large groups, and my family had to turn everyone else away to keep them from being stressed. Meeting the other races of the Federation makes a lot of our young people want to join Starfleet.” The Hali'ian glanced around the station and frowned. “It's so...*empty* here. The only other people besides you I've met all seemed to be lost. Are you certain —”

“It's essential that you wait here. There are...” she paused and knit her brow in thought; “issues currently occurring on my planet that could bring you to grief. We wouldn't want that. Tell me more about the wonderful beliefs of your people!”

Your planet? We're on a station over...where? He opened his mouth to ask her that question, but she overrode him with a question of her own, much as she'd done all evening. She came up with questions whose answers were

so complex and entwined with other questions that...

“What is this *Rumael* that you — well, I guess that *we* — are all brothers and sisters in?”

“Oh. Where would I start the explanation for that?”

Yaelat thought for a moment, chewing meditatively on another *rhaenar* — he’d have to try to remember to get the replication code for these before they left, though considering how full he was and how sleepy he was becoming, his head felt like a sieve, and he made a mental bet with himself that he’d forget to request a molecular-recipe chip. “I’m currently a Starfleet communications officer, but I started out in the Federation Cultural Survey Corps. Have you heard of them?”

Mirr shook her head, watching him raptly, as though hanging on his every word. It should have made him uncomfortable, but it didn’t; he kept meaning to ask her if she was, perhaps, empathic.

“When a planet is thought to have technology near warp-capable levels, we set up what we call *duck blinds* on that planet — it’s the Federation’s only legal use of cloaking technology.” They’d gotten this technology from the Zyrellians; it worked much better on a planet than it did for a vessel.

Starfleet had tried utilizing Zyrellian cloaking technologies on their vessels time and again, only to find that the holographic programs that provided the cloak demanded so much energy that they continually wore out

the drive systems of the ships they were mounted on. Planet-based holographic blinds also possessed drive systems, though in their case, those systems were specifically utilized to maintain the holography that concealed the blinds, and the amounts and types of wear found in planetary holographic systems weren't the same, since the systems weren't concurrently attempting to maintain and propel a starship.

"You *watch* the people?" Mirr asked. She looked both astounded and incredibly uncomfortable in the face of this revelation.

Yaelat shrugged. "We study the people, their social interactions, their cultural events, family life, religious observances, political dealings — everything. We need to know if they would be an asset to the Federation or a threat against it should they actually attain warp capability. If they happen to attain that while we're there, we have what is usually the honor of first contact. Very occasionally, a society might react in a negative or unpredictable way to first contact, which is one of the reasons why we study them covertly in the first place."

"And this...this cultural study is *Rumael*?"

Yaelat laughed gently. "No. I should have told you that my explanation would be long and convoluted! I told you that Hali'ians dreamed of the other races of the galaxy long before we ever actually met any?"

"Yes; that is what you celebrate in your wintertide

festival," she replied, as gravely as though someone might test her on the information later.

"We think now...well, you see, my people are all empaths, some of us rather strong ones. We believe that our passionate feelings about — and perhaps even some of our dreams of — the other races of the galaxy were due to survey posts similar to ones I just told you about, ones that existed on Hali'ia prior to our development of warp technology, being picked up psionically by some of the more sensitive among us.

"Just before *Aeshamar*, Hali'ians celebrate the Autumn Festival, *Batrael*. Do you know how autumn festivals are festivals of the falling leaves, the declining time of year for some societies?"

"I do now," she replied seriously. "Do all planets have these autumn festivals?"

"Indeed not; not all have autumn, or falling leaves. Not all even have *trees*. A relative closeness to one's primary sun or suns, a certain obnoxious tilt of the planet, and a distinctly cooperative flora and fauna are all required to produce definitive seasons — no seasons, no seasonal festivals."

"How wonderful! Oh, and you were talking about *Batrael*. Is it linked in some way to your excellent wintertide festival, where you invite other members of the Federation to participate?" she took another *rhaenar* and munched it happily.

For all the seemingly obvious things this woman didn't know, she wasn't *stupid*. Yet, there were questions that seemed obvious to Yaelat that she wasn't asking; *why is the development of warp drive so crucial to first contact?* For instance.

Yaelat felt caught in some sort of psychoactive dream — and perhaps, he mused, that was really where he was; he had eaten the *aeshamar* fungus, or perhaps the even more potent *vahnmeare*, the lacelike silver vine that strangled any fruit that hung near the ground, but gave Halyae-kind blissful feelings in return for its meal. He suspected that he might wake at any time in the high attic bedroom of his ancestral longhouse, where the gables were wrought of glass and the light of the stars and moons and gas giants ran like tears of joy across the counterpane on a clear winter night. He sighed.

“*Batrael* is the Festival of the Falling Stars. It’s based upon an ancient Hali’ian myth about an angel fallen from those stars. We sing a song, the *Horath*, which is the mystical lament of a fallen angel who has been banned from the stars of heaven and all the beauty and wonder of the other angels, which is a torment to him.”

Yaelat paused for a moment, glancing around him at the vacant space station again. The *Enterprise*’s senior communications officer felt, for a split second, that he truly grasped the torment the *Horath* was so evocative of. “It’s the torment felt by anyone who wishes to travel among the

stars and learn the ways of the other beings who might reside there, yet cannot, because they aren't given wings."

"Oh, yes, I can understand *that!*" Mirr's tone was impassioned; "And so this angel is *Rumael*?"

Yaelat smiled and blushed. "No; indeed, this angel is *Jomiael*."

Mirr sighed. "And I am confused."

Yaelat chuckled, then began to sing softly in his own language — he wasn't much of a singer, in the opinion of his people or anyone else's, really. The *Enterprise*'s chief medical officer had sung the Horath last Batrael, at the service and festival he'd wanted to hold for the pantheistic members of *Enterprise*, and her performance had brought everyone to their feet begging for an encore:

" '*Jomiael hahnalia ma marou natalia; Rumael tavariel fatra di va Jomiael...*' and the translation is —" Yaelat spoke rather than sung the translation, not at all musician enough to fit the altered words to any sort of equivalent music; " 'I look upon the great overarching with the broken heart of a fallen angel, who must now wait until the forgiveness of Rumael unites us once more.'

"You'll be glad to know that this ritual song does have a happy ending. In general, it's looked upon as a myth that's intended to teach impetuous youngsters the necessities and the ultimate rewards of waiting."

Mirr smiled an enigmatic smile at him. "Even when it's necessary to wait in an abandoned space station?"

Yaelat laughed at her teasing. “Okay, I get the point! Our people have a saying about the rewards inherent in waiting that involves rhaenar fruit and a skittish little mammal we have on Hali’ia, that’s sort of like a cross between a Terran red squirrel and Muntjac deer, called a *tres*. It goes:

“ ‘To show the patience of Rumael is to wait, forever if need be, with gentle coaxings and rhaenar, until the shy little *tres* loses its fear of you as a predator, and comes to sit on your shoulder for love even when rhaenar is not offered. To know the absolution of Jomiael is to never betray such trust. The two together are exultation, unutterable joy, *Jorhaedal*.’ ”

“Oh, I love that! I’ll remember it forever.”

Yaelat raised his brows at Mirr. He was aware that when a Hali’ian raised their brows, it lent their face a mocking expression, but that, in a sense, was actually what he wanted to convey. “Your people are immortal, are they?”

“Oh. In a way. We’re terrific...I don’t know, you might call us professional recorders, or recallers. We keep and weave together all the strands of all the different lives we’re part of — it’s the basis of *our* entire culture.”

“But you don’t actually live *forever*, do you? Not even El-Aurians live forever — they just live for a very long time, relatively speaking.” They also, Yaelat mused, considered themselves professional rememberers. Was this

woman an El-Aurian, then?

“I honestly can’t say whether or not we’d live *forever*, barring accidents. As a modern culture...well, it’s only been about ten thousand years since we’ve formulated it, so a great deal more time would need to elapse before anyone could say for certain.”

Yaelat sat forward. “You’re not telling me you’re ten thousand years old!”

She laughed. “Me, myself? Oh, heavens, no! I’m...” she stopped and performed an arcane counting movement with her hands and fingers, “two hundred and fifty-eight, by my planet’s reckoning.”

“*You?*” Yaelat stared into the seamless, fresh face of the woman before him, “Are two hundred and fifty-eight years old? I don’t believe it!”

“There’s nothing I can do to facilitate your belief in my age. But forget that! You must tell me more about your wonderful festivals!

Chapter Four

"*Alone*," Marco snarled.

The captain of the *Enterprise* had to forcibly restrain herself from laughing. The fact that her chief medical officer was attempting the same feat didn't help. Marco looked as if someone had attempted to shave his scalp bald with an exceptionally dull razor, then reattached little tufts of hair in just such a way as to cause him to resemble a poodle.

A deeply offended, morally upset, carrot-topped human poodle in possession of a receding hairline and freckles.

"Does this have a medical provenance, Doctor?" Ingram managed this, she hoped, without so much as a twinkle in her eye.

Marco had awakened in the night to answer a call of nature and found himself in this state. Whatever had occurred to Captain Ingram's senior helmsman had occurred in a space of no more than three hours after he'd fallen asleep on his lounge in his quarters. Since he'd fallen asleep in a lighted environment, his new coiffure had been immediately apparent.

T'Dani's denim-blue eyes did twinkle, but then, they often did. "No, Captain, none at all that I can see. What's odd is that it almost appears as though his hair was..." she

shook her head and closed her eyes, biting at her lower lip, "washed after this was done. My question would be," the part-Vulcan woman adopted the mock-severe facial expression she sometimes used when she was teasing; "who did you tick off, Marco?"

The navigator glared at both women. "This was *done* to me!" he huffed.

Both T'Dani and Renee Ingram raised hands to scrub at their faces. Surprised, both women snorted, then dissolved into laughter.

"Marco," Ingram reached out to keep her senior navigator from flouncing angrily out of sickbay, "as far as I can tell, this was just a *really* bad joke. A salon should be able to set you right."

"Somebody was in my quarters without permission, Captain!" he growled, rubbing at his own face. Renee sighed.

"You have a point. Computer, who gained entry to Lieutenant Johnson's quarters between..." she looked askance at Marco.

"Ship's time eleven PM and two AM, computer," he supplied sulkily.

The computer didn't respond. The chief medical officer of the beta-iteration of the starship *Enterprise* didn't like, she'd told Renee more than once, to be back-talked at by a computer, and so she'd programmed all sickbay computers to extreme terseness. It was over ten seconds

before the computer responded, which, knowing the capacity of the ship's computers as she did, Renee imagined must be a slowdown caused by the review of all records showing the several people who had snuck into and out of Marco's quarters multiple times, in order to pull off a practical joke like this.

The computer's final response was a surprise. *No individual other than Lieutenant Thomas Marcus Johnson was present in Lieutenant Johnson's quarters at the time in question.*

Captain Ingram considered her senior navigator. His face had gone livid at the computer's answer. This didn't appear to be some kind of joke he was playing on herself or T'Dani, knowing them to be connoisseurs of practical jokes. She'd learned, from working with Marco under Captain Harriman, that the helmsman's complexion and native personality conspired to make him a very bad liar.

Her senior navigator was furious.

"I'm afraid I don't know what to tell you, Lieutenant. I'll see if Mel'Taya doesn't have some ideas on tightening the security of personnel quarters. But no serious harm's been done here," Renee soothed.

"Except to my ego," Marco mourned.

"Okay, so let's see if I've got this straight. Your people have had a modern, space-capable culture for ten thousand years, and you've been alive for over two hundred of

those?" he still wasn't certain that he believed her. Ten thousand years ago, the Hali'ian people were only just coming around to the concepts of writing and large-scale agriculture. "Are your years — what, incredibly short compared to those of other humanoids?"

She smiled at him. "You're *very* easy to communicate with! You fill in all the blanks for yourself. Have you always done that? But I suppose I really should answer your question. Ten thousand years ago, we underwent a sort of civil social reformation, a renaissance in the way we related to others, the others present on our planet —"

Yaelat shook his head and interrupted; "You're saying that ten thousand years ago was your first contact date?"

Mirr blinked at him consideringly. "Definitely. Right there with us all along, like your duck blinds. Sometimes we're so limited by what we can immediately sense that we think that what we can sense is all that there is. Really, though, some things are bigger than we can imagine."

Yaelat nodded; "And that makes us limit ourselves." He wanted to ask a question, but he also didn't want to seem rude to this woman. How could a modern culture ten thousand years old be so isolationist that it was only getting around to making formal galactic ties now? It should *rule* at least one galactic sector. Of course, from what he'd seen of these people so far, they didn't appear to be the sort of people intent on ruling things.

"Yes," she murmured softly, almost as though she was

talking to herself rather than him; "you fill in your own blanks." She reached for the final *rhaenar* and smiled. "Your communication is very...oh, clear is the word I think I'd use. Or vivid, maybe — yes, I like *vivid*!"

"I kind of guessed that from your outfit," he teased. He could come to care for this woman a great deal. Mirr laughed as though Yaelat had made the funniest joke this side of the Delta quadrant.

"Rumael. He's the angel of...? *Patience*?" she guessed brightly, once her laughter had abated. Yaelat shrugged.

"Our people — wait, excuse me, I mean *my* people — are pantheistic. Or maybe you'd say animistic. It really doesn't matter which description you use. We generally believe that there are different spirits, or what my people term *criar*, in everything. Those spirits act to guide us toward things that would enhance our lives, or away from those things that might cause harm. Rumael is the spirit of..."

Yaelat paused to think of a comprehensive way to explain it that wouldn't sound like preaching. It could be difficult describing one's religion, particularly if the individual listening to the explanation insisted on trying to wedge their own personal beliefs into yours or, worse, refused to accept the validity of any belief-system except their own; "The spirit of geologic or aeonic time. Rumael means 'The Great Cycling'."

"And Jomiael is the angel of longing?"

Yaelat smiled; Mirr made him want to smile a great deal. "Nelo, nelo. Jomiael is longing in the way that seeds buried in snow long in their hearts to flower in the face of a summer sun, or the way that the water droplets in great inland lakes dream of falling as snow on the glaciers.

"Jomiael means 'The Great Becoming'. It's one of the graces of Jomiael that whatever comes, no matter how grievous or inexplicable or strange, always existed somewhere at the heart of something else — the unutterable still point at the beginning of time, a subatomic particle, a thought, a beam of sunlight. You see? Jomiael brings realization into —"

"Into the great cycling and in doing so evokes ecstasy!" she finished for him, delightedly.

"Very good — *Tavariel*, which is my people's expression of both perfection and enlightenment, as well as the spirit of mountainous places. And I didn't even infer that there'd be a test later! The oneness of *Jomiael al Rumael* also brings the comfort that what seems to be lost is only —"

"*Waiting*. Oh, I love your people's religion! I may take it as my own!"

Speaking to this woman literally *felt* the same as talking to himself. The thought both disturbed and aroused the Hali'ian empath. "You are welcome to, though you'd need to go to Hali'ia, or maybe visit the *Enterprise*, in order to have anyone else to observe it with, although the

observance — the *fatra* — isn't as important as the enlightenment. Anyone who waits for what Humans call 'the time to be ripe', my people describe as a person 'actively enacting the love of Rumael' — *maroual kah aen Rumael*. Know what it all comes down to?"

"What?" Mirr leaned forward in her seat, as though in preparation to hear a great Universal truth. Yaelat smiled.

"The ecstasy of *Jomiael al Rumael* is the living of life without fear or self-recrimination."

"Yes," she said firmly. "I shall do it; I shall follow this religion!"

Yaelat laughed. He hoped it didn't sound derisive; he certainly didn't mean it that way. This woman was a pure delight and struck a chord in him that hadn't been touched in a very long time. "I...it..." he paused, momentarily at a loss for words, and she leaned further forward toward him, as though anxious to hear whatever he had to say. "There's an easier way, if you truly want to understand Hali'ian religious impulses, and follow them. My people are empaths —"

"As are mine," she cut in happily. Without preamble, she bounced to her feet and came to sit beside him, nearly on his lap, and reached up to touch his face.

Yaelat instantaneously felt half of the blood in his body run directly to the skin that her fingers caressed. Or, possibly, somewhat less than half. The rest of it flowed obligingly toward the only part of the Hali'ian anatomy

with more sensitive, sensuous nerve endings than the one she had chosen to touch. He squirmed with discomfort.

She didn't appear to notice. "Why is your forehead like this? It is almost as if..." she shook her head, "as if there should be some other sensory organ in this area. Are your senses working correctly?"

Qat cleared his throat; he didn't entirely trust himself to speak. "Ah. Well. We...it's related to what we were just talking about. Our...my people once had pit-viper-like sensory organs on our foreheads. It's...ah, it's possible that these were even more thoroughly developed than can be determined by archaeology alone, but we have no writings from so far back in our...um, prehistories." He caught the woman's probing hand in his own before she caused him to significantly embarrass himself. "Whatever sensory organs were there evolved into empathic and telepathic brain regions a long time ago."

Mirr looked down at her hand in his. "You are touch-telepaths, then."

"Somewhat. My people use crystals to facilitate psionic contact between the *oumriel*."

"Oumriel?" the word was a caress as it passed through her lips. Yaelat shivered, releasing her hand to pull his *canar* from one of his uniform's inner pocket and hand it to her. It was warm, but not from his body; like the crystals sometimes utilized in ritual by Minarans, Hali'ian crystals were living beings, and exuded their own heat. Some

canars were much cooler, others nearly scalding to the touch.

That only two sentient species in the known galaxy had evolved to use such crystals bemused those who studied them. Ancient beyond humanoid reckoning, these silicoid lifeforms, whose reproductive capacity was based on Lonsdaleite matrices, were everywhere — in the crust of most terrestrial planets and the ice of nearly every comet. Similar things were used by...used by...he could *almost* call to mind someone's face. Something to do with Lonsdaleite crystal matrixes. Something very important, but the thought was fleeting, in the way that dreams dreamed before morning were fleeting, and he turned his attention back to what it was that he was doing.

"*Oumriel* means both *special friend* and *goodbye*, simultaneously."

"Does it also mean *hello*?" her delicate hands cupped the little crystal as though it was a freshly hatched bird. Yaelat shook his head.

"There is no word for *hello* in Hali'ian."

She blinked up at him. "I'm afraid I don't understand. How can there be a farewell without a greeting?"

"Farewell and greeting are one and the same, in our culture. It's all one in the face of the great cycling. And to have a special friend is, ultimately, to both lose and regain that special friend, over and over again."

Mirr's eyes filled with tears. "Oh! Oh yes, indubitably

yes! Oh, now I understand what they always warn us away from; I'm so *sorry!*" she finished, inexplicably, as the tears that filled her eyes found their way down her face.

Without volition, Yaelat reached out to brush them away. Her skin was so soft that it might as well not have been there at all. His hands fell to her own, to cup them with the *canar* between them, ceremoniously. Among his own people, such an action usually precluded the act of marriage, or blood-brotherhood, or the sealing of vows, or sexual union, or even all of those simultaneously, but with this woman...*this* woman...

The individual whose slender hands cupped the opposite pole of the *canar* was not at all what Yaelat perceived her to be. His mind slid along the surface of what she actually was, but either couldn't or wouldn't perceive it accurately. It was something like that old Terran koan, about what ensued when ten blind men tried to describe an elephant. And she knew far more about the predicament they were in — he hadn't really been aware of it as a *predicament* at all, or that somehow they were in it together — than she was either willing or able to tell him.

Horrible memories assailed him. Hers, or his? There was no way to tease the answer to that question out of his mind. Her mind. *Their* mind. With the *canar* between them, they were one, but the link he felt with her was other than that, more than that. He couldn't have defined exactly what the link between them was had he tried for the rest of

his life.

The docking station he'd been aiming for — the station he was on now? It couldn't be; docking stations didn't possess levels and housing and replicators — had been hit by multiple thermonuclear blasts, or at least it looked that way for as long as his eyes had continued functioning. The attack had occurred just as he arched around the limb of the planet to reach the station's far docking bays; the near ones had already been at capacity. He'd been disgracefully tardy to the conference, because it had taken him a long time to convince Starfleet to allow him to go alone. He couldn't remember why going alone had been important.

The ghastly, shrieking-white concussions had shoved his shuttle away from the roiling space where the station had been microseconds before, and the planet's gravity well grasped the tiny vessel greedily. Its controls had responded only sluggishly to thrusters, and no wonder: It hadn't occurred to him to raise shields inside a planetary system that contained only one inhabited planet, which he'd been told had known peace for the better part of a millennium, while approaching that planet's orbital station as a representative of a Federation that very much wanted that planet formally inducted into its membership.

Memories from so long ago that they couldn't possibly be memories flashed through his mind. Those memories showed Yaelat that members of this planet had already done a great deal to further the goals of the Federation.

But they hesitated to commit because... because...

Because of the elephant that the ten blind men that were his mind could not adequately describe.

Yaelat's skin and the corneas of his eyes had ached and swollen with blisters. The blurring-intense gorge of nausea had risen in his throat as the same sorts of blisters swelled and burst in his respiratory and digestive systems. Heavy-dose radiation poisoning burrowed inward toward his brain as his own vomit threatened to drown him. He *thought* he'd managed to put the shuttle on some kind of autopilot program before he passed out. He *thought*...

It wasn't him who was doing the thinking. The Hali'ian communications officer perceived the situation he was embroiled in clearly for a moment, but his mind refused to process it — parts of it were literally beyond his comprehension:

Some deluded narcissist, refusing to relinquish what little power he had, grasped for more with a fist mailed in a thermonuclear gauntlet supplied by rebels whose delight was the creation of chaos. Someone else, in possession of an arcane knowledge that was beyond the Hali'ian's capacity to understand, had barricaded themselves in the seat of the narcissist's dearest desire, daring the mailed fist to strike. Many someones altogether innocent had died; many more grieved.

And *someone* — whose mind he'd never been meant to know, which resided in an impenetrably sacred place where

he'd never been meant to go — filled him with some kind of telepathic presence that wasn't really telepathy at all. The situation was too bizarre for what remained of the Hali'ian empath's mind to come to terms with.

The *canar* shattered. Its sharp shards seemed to pierce Yaelat's heart, and the agony of that pain, as it coiled and uncoiled in his chest, smashed him into unconsciousness.

Chapter Five

He was awakened by the sensation of...

Well, nothing, really, though for a brief march of seconds, he could have sworn he was cradling some exquisitely soft, perceptive creature against himself. Yaelat Qat sighed and turned over, nearly falling off of the dove-gray, overstuffed space-station couch he had been curled up on.

Where am I?

His mind was distinctly sluggish. It wasn't until he'd sat up and looked at the array of dishes still scattered over the lounge table that he recalled his visit from Mirr. That visit had seemed, somehow, distinctly unsatisfactory. He still, for instance, hadn't a clue why he'd come to be in a space station. If he recalled correctly, the visit also seemed to have ended in nightmare, though the various pieces that made up the nightmare were as scattered and muzzy as the Hali'ian's brain in general.

Mirr appeared to be nowhere — nowhere nearby, anyway. Yaelat rose stiffly and, following some automatic reflex that he didn't stop to consider, loaded the dishes into the nearest replicator. It responded just as automatically and whisked them away. The Hali'ian sighed and turned, then stopped and rubbed his eyes.

He was supposed to meet someone here, someone

named *Relan*. He couldn't actually remember if that person was a man or a woman or something else entirely — not a terribly unusual state of affairs, Yaelat thought inconsequentially, remembering what little he knew about the *Enterprise's* fascinating new head of security.

The *Enterprise's* senior communications officer was having a hard time recalling exactly why he was at this space station at all. Or even where the station was located. The depth of his confusion was almost nauseating, and he paused to let the nausea abate before walking toward the esplanade stairs in search of...

Somebody. Somewhere. For *something*. He rubbed at his eyes again as he descended the stairs, one hand on the railing for balance.

When he removed his fingers from his sleep-crusted eyes, just as he reached the second highest landing of the four-story stairway, the Hali'ian jumped backwards in pure instinctive alarm, nearly tripping over the step behind him. A dour-faced man stood leaning against the banister at the far side of the landing, which Yaelat would have sworn had held nothing but empty space seconds before. This man, elderly but proud and unbent, held out his hand:

"Forgive me if I've startled you. I'm Mirr."

Yaelat blinked. His mind, far sleepier than his body, simply wanted to accept this at face value at first. "You...you're...what, you're saying you're related to Mirr? Where's she gotten off to?"

The old man leaning against the railing grinned humorlessly. "Yes, that *would* make more sense wouldn't it?"

Sarcastic old codger, Yaelat thought grumpily. "Are you her father?" he hazarded. The elderly man had more age spots than Relan Tesh had freckles, and his skin had the porcelain translucency of great age. But...

When was it that he'd met Relan Tesh? Before coming to this seemingly derelict station? On the station itself somewhere? Or only through subspace audio-visuals? Had it been long ago — months or even years before the meeting that was supposed to take place on the planet he could neither seem to get to nor remember the particulars of? Or had it been recently? Was Relan waiting just around one of the corners of this inscrutable place?

You must do as Mirr tells you.

"Everyone in my lineage goes by the name *Mirr*," the old man replied, deftly managing to both answer and evade the Hali'ian's question at once.

"That must make family get-togethers a whole new level of interesting," Yaelat replied. Many humanoids carried their family names forward and sideways through the generations; Hali'ians didn't. Hali'ian immediate families lived in the family longhouse. Extended family members lived in their own family longhouses in their particular clan canton. Related clan cantons formed contiguous congressional interstices. It wasn't necessary

to share names; everyone knew right where they belonged. Hali'ians found other varieties of kinship-relation and rulership mystifying, though fascinating.

Yaelat was assuming, of course, that *lineage* signified *family* or, maybe, *clan* among this particular batch of humanoids, whose provenance he couldn't remember. It didn't among everybody. And perhaps it didn't here, either. It could signify that one belonged to a certain caste, or even that one had chosen to enter a particular trade, as was true among... among the...

Yaelat blinked at Mirr the elder stupidly. He could have sworn he'd only just been thinking about...some spaceship's head of security...which was what, again? *Who?*

He couldn't *remember*.

The old man cut into the knotted jumble of Yaelat's thoughts. "Is there anywhere good around here to eat?" the elder — he hadn't offered a first name, unless *Mirr* was it, in which case he'd offered no last name — asked hopefully.

Yaelat pushed away the confused shreds of what might or might not be accurate past recollections, and smiled, albeit somewhat uncomfortably. "I can definitely see that you're related to Mirr the First — is eating with someone the first time you meet them a custom among your people?"

"I am Mirr the First. And it requires a lot of energy to take care of you."

Yaelat's smile transformed. "Excuse me?"

"Ah," Mirr's father blinked. "I can see you don't understand what's going on at all yet. Don't tell me; she took up all your time with fairy tales, eh?" the old man sighed. "This all started with a situation on the planet that —"

"Is that where Mirr went?" the Hali'ian interrupted hopefully, "Back to the planet? And she sent you up to the station in her place to find me?"

The elder nodded thoughtfully. Yaelat supposed he'd have to follow these people's convoluted conventions and call him Mirr, also. The Hali'ian wondered if this society had been granted only provisional membership status in the Federation because of mysterious customs like this. Or perhaps *Mirr* was a type of clan-identifying name that referred to a duty rather than a direct family line. Yes, that must be it; these were the people slated to take care of unfortunates marooned in their space station whenever 'situations' cropped up on the planet.

Of course, if 'situations' cropped up often enough that a distinct group of people existed solely in order to manage innocent bystanders, that could go a long way toward explaining a provisional Federation membership status, too. Yaelat shook his head; all of this assessment was making his headache.

"Anyway, the replimat's this way," Yaelat motioned to the older man and walked with him back up one flight of

stairs and down the upper esplanade, toward the bank of replicators he'd just left.

"I understand you're an empath. Our people are, too," Mirr offered.

Yaelat stopped walking, as suddenly as though he'd run into a wall. His *canar*! His last memory of Mirr — East-Indian-lady Mirr — had been of the *canar* shattering to pieces when they touched it together. A sense of grief so deep that it was like a physical pain gripped his heart, and he reached into the inner uniform pocket where he usually kept the little crystal.

It was right where it always was, warm and responsive under his fingertips. But he'd seen it — *felt* it — burst apart in her hands...wait. Had he fallen asleep? They'd eaten, and he'd been so sleepy that he could barely keep his eyes open, and she was asking him all these questions about festivals and... he'd fallen asleep! No wonder she'd left him here and gone back to the planet; her family must work in shifts.

The memory of the shattered *canar* was nothing more than the memory of a dream.

"Is something wrong, young man?" Mirr inquired worriedly.

Yaelat shook his head. "No. Not at all. Something you said just reminded me of a dream I had once. Are you touch-empaths?"

"Most definitely. What would you recommend I have

to eat?" the elder eyed the bank of replicators as though he'd never seen one before.

"Isn't this *your* space station?"

Mirr laughed — he definitely had Mirr's laugh.

Yaelat winced. If he started arranging his thoughts in *that* particular pattern too often, it'd drive him off the deep end.

"Why, when I have an outworlder here to introduce me to foods I've probably never even heard of, would I want to eat my own planet's food? Couldn't I do that anytime?" the elder asked, reasonably.

"Adventurous clan, aren't you? An admirable trait. Hm... how about a chef's salad with wild Hali'ian greens, Denobulan sausage, Bolian honey-cheese, Terran glazed walnuts, and Vulcan gaspar-fruit dressing?"

"Excellent," the elder agreed happily. "*Oh*, and I'm supposed to ask you about your planet's seven moons — things like: what myths are they associated in, when are they all in the sky at once or are they ever all in the sky at once...? You get the point." He made himself stiffly comfortable on the very same sofa Yaelat had just risen from not long ago.

The Hali'ian went to order their food — oddly, he was hungry again, too, although he didn't have any real idea of just how long he'd slept, it might have been...

There are no windows in this space station.

Yaelat whirled around, staring about himself wildly,

prompting a distinctly alarmed glare from the man on the couch, who growled; "Now what?"

Yaelat swallowed down a throat suddenly as dry as space dust. "Why...why are there no windows on this station?" most stations, in his experience, sought to show off the panorama of their own little part of their solar systems. *This place...*

"The window areas were all given over to the living sections of our station," Mirr the elder replied tartly. "To change *that*, we'd have to turn the damn station inside-out."

"I'm sorry," Yaelat rubbed his hands together. They were cold, though the atmosphere on the station was neither hot nor cold — it wasn't much of anything at all, now that he thought about it. "I didn't mean to alarm you. It's just...you have to understand, I don't know why I'm being kept here...kept from fulfilling the mission I came here to perform...and I don't have any real feel for the passage of time."

"Your chronometer's stopped." It wasn't a question, and it made Yaelat feel stupid as well as anxious — about as satisfactory a pairing as mustard and milk chocolate, which would not only have tasted foul, but both of those Terran confections made his people violently ill. He hadn't even thought to glance at his chronometer. He slid back his uniform sleeve now to look at it. Its face was a flat black plane that offered nothing.

"No... I mean, yes, you're right, it's not working at all.

How did you know?"

"What's happened to you affected it. You can understand why we wouldn't want you to be caught up in something like that should it happen again."

"What about the other people in the station at the time? And the other Federation members who were supposed to take part in the Federation Committee on your planet?" Yaelat still hadn't moved further toward the replicators.

"We'd evacuated. And some of the other Federation arrivals..." Mirr the elder looked away, his voice dropping so low that Yaelat had to move closer to hear what he was saying. "They didn't make it even as far as you."

The Starfleet communications officer gaped at the old man in horror. "The Federation Committee was attacked? *Killed?*"

"So, you can understand why we would want to keep you safe. It's best that we eat now," Mirr said in the voice of a grandfather trying to calm an anxious toddler.

Yaelat sighed heavily and ordered the salad he'd promised the old man.

Chapter Six

"Hali'ia has eight moons. They all orbit at different speeds, so that some are only in the night sky in summer, and others are only in the night sky in winter, while in spring or fall both of those sets can be seen at either twilight or dawn." Yaelat finished the last of the Terran clam chowder in the heated tureen. He'd suggested to the old man across from him that a chowder would go well with the salad he'd requested.

"That's difficult for me to imagine. There must be a complicated mythology surrounding all of these satellites and their various motions."

"Oh, yes, and you haven't even touched on *phases*. Also, our system's other four planets — all gas giants — are quite close to our own. Anciently, it was imagined that the gas giants were night-demons attempting to mock the true sun, and that they came and went according to some sort of arcane magical seasonal-numerology system, which could control the appearance or actions of demons in general.

"*Ali-kae* is among the Pleiades cluster — what humans used to call the Seven Sisters. I don't know why; there's fifty-two other stars in the Pleiades, and they rise and set all night long. My people can't sleep well without some sort of nightlight in dark environments — it's unnatural.

Speaking of which, isn't this station on any sort of nocturnal-diurnal cycle?"

"It's on assault alert. So, what do your myths make of the fifty-two beautiful sisters?"

"No, Hali'ians never called them that. And there are fifty-nine stars in the Pleiades cluster; one of them is our sun. Hali'ia has a four hundred and sixty-four day-long year, composed of fifty-eight eight-day weeks, and two otherwise irreconcilable minutes that the people who developed our calendar tucked into the seventeen days of the Wintertide Festival.

"Every day on Hali'ia shares the name of a particular moon, while every week belongs to, and shares the name of, one the stars in the Pleiades Cluster that's *not* our sun. Each individual season is considered the provenance of one of the gas giants in our system, with the exception of the days of the Wintertide Festival, which modern Hali'ian religion considers to lie outside of normal space-time or, in other words, they're *demonless*.

"That's how an Hali'ian knows what day and time of year it is. There are also fifty-eight minutes in an Hali'ian hour, and fifty-eight seconds in an Hali'ian minute. The stars in my home cluster have always been highly revered. They represent virtuous ancestral souls to my people, souls who watch and guide — kind of like the human concept of angels."

"Angels?" the old man's face was crumpled with

concentration.

"Usually-invisible winged people with divine powers."

Mirr laughed. "*Winged* people?"

Yaelat was charmed by the fact that Mirr took issue with the idea of winged people, but not with the idea of invisible people. "Oh, yes, that's a humanoid myth-construct that shows up *everywhere*."

"Vulcan has its winged avengers, Earth has its winged protectors, Bolians have winged sprites that they blame for everything from stuttering to miscarriage. Klingons used to believe in winged demons, but their mythos maintains that they killed them all off a long time ago. Feathery wings or membranous or insectile ones, as need or native fauna dictates, I suppose."

"Is your Jomrael a winged angel?"

Yaelat blinked at the elder Mirr. He must have been debriefed by his daughter, although he'd butchered the pronunciation of the name. "All the nature spirits of Hali'ia are winged — but being constructs of mammalian creatures, they're winged as mammalian creatures would be, kind of like bats. Your planet does have some form of bat, I suppose?"

Nearly every planet with a fauna, whether inhabited by sentient beings or not, that Yaelat had ever studied or heard about, had its equivalent of the bat — they were more prevalent in the galaxy than insects. Only humanoids were more common in the Milky Way than the sonar-voiced,

often fuzzy, leather-winged aerialists that humanoids called *bats*.

"Tiny ones of many different colors. They're very furry; they live in ice-caves along the arctic cliffs at the far apex of our northern continent. How about your planet's many moons — do they host bats, too?"

Yaelat smiled fondly. "Two of our moons have life, which includes bats. Those moons have been turned into nature preserves. Our ship's newest captain says that someday soon she wants to visit Hali'ia and the moons with me, to go foraging. Of course, if she tries to forage for the cactus fruits that the *mikwe* bats eat, she'd probably get hurt. They're pretty big animals." The Hali'ian's smile devolved into a frown; "You know, I'm supposed to check in with my captain at least once every day or so while I'm here. If my superior officers start worrying about me, they'll probably come looking for me."

"I thought a starship wasn't allowed to enter openly into a non-Federation system unless the people who live there give it leave to enter?" Mirr butted in — combatively, the Hali'ian thought.

Yaelat sighed. "That's true, too, but I guarantee you she'll find a way. Never in your life have you met a woman as resourceful as Renee Ingram. Or a man, either, I'd bet." A man. He'd been thinking about a man and a Lonsdaleite crystal network; the memory came back to him now, and he could almost, almost see the man's face...

Yaelat sighed, and let the thought wander away.

"It must be reassuring to know you have someone like that looking out for your welfare."

"She's going to be beating herself up, for letting me talk her into persuading Starfleet I should come here by myself. We're supposed to never leave the starship by ourselves, not even for shore leave. She had to get me special permission to be here." *Wherever here is*, Yaelat thought to himself sourly. He also couldn't remember what had made it so important that he come alone.

"If there had been more people on your shuttle, I don't think we could have saved everyone," the old man stated baldly.

"I was injured? I don't remember."

"The injury's inhibited your ability to remember. Tell me more about your planet's moons. What are their names?"

The Hali'ian offered the elder a skeptical stare. "How does it make sense for you to ask me to remember something when you've just told me my memory's been impaired? What, is all of this questioning some sort of memory-therapy?"

Mirr nodded. "There you go. And it's more pleasant for you to exercise your memory on your planet and culture, certainly, than on memories of fear and pain. Your planet's moons, and their movements?"

Yaelat shook his head at the old man. "It's so

complicated that, sometimes, visitors to our planet come to believe that we actually have eighteen moons! But really, we time our year by the movements and positions of the moons rather than the planet's movements around Ali-kae."

"That's your sun? A blue giant, isn't it?"

Yaelat wondered where he came by that information. "It is. It's a wonder to the Federation that our system ended up with any sort of terrestrial planet that survived at all — of the six original terrestrial planets that formed after Ali-kae was born, five of them became either asteroid clouds or rings around the Hali'ian system's gas giants."

"Or they became your moons?"

"Some think that's the case of Clem-ma, the little moon, for certain, but they suspect that Glaes-ma, the blood moon, probably was, too."

"When does the Hali'ian year start, then? With which moon?" the elder paused his seemingly endless inquiries to chew on a thick, greenish, leathery confection he had peeled from the translucent white crystalline dish the replicator presented it in.

Yaelat had ordered Mirr the elder Taralian custard for dessert. In the entire galaxy, it was the one sweet wholly indiscernible in flavor from Terran chocolate, but the man appeared to be having issues with its rubbery consistency; it was one of those foodstuffs you either loved or hated for this reason.

Terrans tended to hate it, but then, they could eat

actual chocolate, which made Hali'ians, and many of the other humanoid races of the Federation, violently ill. The substance could kill three or four entirely unrelated sentient species outright, not to mention being toxic to uncountable numbers of non-sentient lifeforms, and so it was largely considered a toxin in the Alpha and Beta quadrants of the galaxy.

Federation science was trying very hard to find an acceptable and harmless replicated substitute for chocolate. When and if that occurred, Yaelat had no doubt that the actual product would be outlawed everywhere but Terra. There were actually a lot of substances like that in the Federation. It was one of the reasons why landing party medkits contained synthetic morphine for pain, when in fact there existed far better systemic analgesics, including ones that could speed healing. All humanoid cells contained simple opioid receptors, making morphine harmless to all known humanoids. Some of the more powerful and potentially remedial analgesics of the galaxy, however, were also lethal poisons to particular races.

The Hali'ian blinked, then realized he hadn't performed that biological necessity for at least a minute. Where were these unrelated, and seemingly irrelevant, thoughts coming from? His mind didn't usually wander like that. He pulled his thoughts back to the question he'd been asked:

“Midsummer starts our year, when Ya-ghaema rises

with the first stars. It's called the Moon of Golden Nights for this reason, though the satellite itself is more of a tan-buff color. Jarie-ma, the green moon, is actually the harbinger of spring, while Halia-ma, the blue moon, is the harbinger of late summer. Any three of these moons are in the night sky together at various times during the summer."

"And the green and blue moons are your *nature preserves*, correct? You know, I think I like this stuff so long as you just suck on it; trying to chew it is like trying to chew shoes."

"Most people who end up liking Taralian custard eat it that way. Yes, Jarie-ma and Halia-ma are our moons that support life. Those colors in terrestrial planets are pretty common harbingers of life in the galaxy, followed — and I've always thought this was weird — by red and white."

"But your red moon — what did you call it? — has no life?"

"Glaes-ma. No life at all; it's a big chunk of iron oxide, with neither an atmosphere nor a geothermal core, which is the *real* indication of whether a planet's suitable to the evolution of life, regardless of its color from space. I'm told it's the position of the green and blue moons to the nearest gas giant and to us — to the planet Hali'ia, I mean — that causes the right internal geothermal stresses for them to have active cores."

The old man finished licking sticky custard off of his fingers and stretched. "I understand they're still not

entirely certain why some planets in a system have active cores and others don't. And am I correct in assuming that your people's name for themselves means 'the blue ones'?"

Yaelat laughed. "Not even Bolians call themselves *that!* It means 'blue-star people', so in that sense, okay, I'll grant you the name. And as far as the geothermal mystery is concerned, Terra's the greatest conundrum, but again, its active core is probably due to some very particular relationship between its orbit relative to its system's gas giants and to its primary."

"But aren't the distances of Mars and Venus comparable?"

Yaelat shrugged. "Comparable...what would the Terrans themselves say about that? Oh...comparable only counts when dancing slowly and shoeing horses? Or some such nonsensical thing. Like I said, though, it's something of a mystery. Betazed's active core is, too. Why do you think so many people still worship gods —"

"Or nature spirits?" Mirr interrupted, smiling. Yaelat nodded. "So, what moons signify winter on Hali'ia?" the old man quizzed.

"Belor-tal'ma and Clem-ma; the white-winter moon and the little moon, when they rise as the stars appear."

"And you have mythologies relating to all of this satellite motion?"

"Do we! It's all like an incredibly convoluted space opera. And we have some remarkable tides in the larger

lakes; a lot of those actually have multiple basins. Another great fortune is that Hali'ia has no major oceans, though of course, the myths say that the moons divided the oceans into controllable portions so that all of them would get some, and not have to suffer the pain of envy and strife."

Mirr the Elder snorted softly and changed the subject; "I'd rather hear about these *nature preserves* of yours." He rearranged himself into a half-reclining position on the couch. "I'm not as...let us say...*intent* on mythology as my...ah, daughter, but I do *dearly* love natural history."

Chapter Seven

Surely we should say who it is we are, what it is we wish.

It was highly irregular to engage in social intercourse while creating a Dream. It interrupted the flow of the Dream, the entire torrent of emotions that went into building such complex arrangements in the limited space-time plane.

If there is truly sentience here, it will be able to perceive the meaning of the Dream.

Though the Being was actually one, it had been many, long ago. Long ago, and immensely far away. It had lost its physical forms when the need for intellectual evolution had impelled the many that made up its oneness to cross the barriers formed by the tempestuous dance of the black holes centering and surrounding all galaxies, to explore the long silent reaches between them.

The Being was an explorer by nature.

The Being talked among its myriad Selves now, excited by the place in which it had found itself to the point of budding off Selves into various Dreams. Buds that could understand, empathize, wonder, analyze. Buds that could locate the One who was wanted, who would join them and carry the Dream onward to other galaxies.

In the course of its explorations, the Being had found

that there existed entire galaxies empty of life above the level of sluggish paramecia. These the Being studied and tried to nurture, setting right what could be set right and hoping for the future. There existed galaxies torn by war and strife and the joy of pure gluttony. These the Being fled, grieving for what might have been in the past; it did not attempt to enter the past, or stay within those galaxies, even there were surely many who would choose to be One with them there, to escape. The Being knew that in such a case that it could only compound the pain that it had found, and it had no wish to make that pain its own.

There existed interspatial interstices, full of highly developed creatures whose viewpoints were as oddly dimensionless as the spaces in which they had learned to thrive and grow. The Being explored these, too, finding hive minds, perpetual short-sightedness, ennui that sought the absurd and the shocking for its limited entertainment value, or a quasi-religious state of acquisitive bigotry.

All of these subsumed everything they touched, leading the Being to shun the interspatial rifts that it had entered so hopefully, and limit its exploring to that part of the Multiverse in which it had evolved. That the creatures of interspace followed the Being meant little. Such creatures found existence outside the interstices difficult, were unable to breed or were vulnerable to real space as though it was a disease, and would ultimately perish without technologies capable of ameliorating their

existence.

What meant a great deal was the Being's earnest quest for *something more*...something for which it had searched so long that it had forgotten just what name by which to call that something. Whatever it was that the Being searched for had long ago become, like the Being itself, a myth, a metaphor.

A Dream. So the Being satisfied itself with finding the Ones it could find, in order to make up for the parts of itself that could be lost by budding, and to search, always search, and to set right or nurture what could be set right or nurtured.

There existed galaxies filled with creatures that seemed sentient, but whom the Dream could not stir to wakefulness. These were the most abundant of all galaxies, and to encounter them again and again had led the Being to the very edge of a yawning abyss called *despair*. And there existed galaxies empty of all but the ravening music of ancient quasars and infantile pavane of nebular hydrogen gas spinning itself into spheres large enough to burst spontaneously into fusion combustion, with very little to speak of between these two extremes.

This galaxy, though, existed almost as though it had been planned. As though someone had softened and harrowed its ground, scattering it with Dreams specific in their shape and natures. Something had tended those seedlings that survived the merciless plow of time in this

place. Such unusual, compelling creatures! Attractive, affectionate, social things, their hues and sounds, senses and habits strangely alluring. As alluring as the habitats they required in order to flourish. The same could be said of the myriad other creatures they chose to live among.

So compelling were these lifeforms that other ancient travelers of the intergalactic voids sought to emulate them, and in so doing, came to despise them, out of jealousy over that which they could emulate, but never truly possess. The Being acted to protect the creatures from the ancient travelers of the intergalactic voids, but never did the Being allow the creatures to realize this. It had been a very long time since the Being had dared to broach contact. It was not certain, at this juncture, which result it most feared to encounter again: Hope, grief, torture, or despair.

Nevertheless, the Being hadn't been able to resist the exploration of a galaxy whose background radiation echoed with the singing, laughing, and weeping of creatures whose deepest internal nature was curiosity, whose driving force was to evolve beyond their own boundaries, whose desires did not strive to eliminate adventure for the sake of serenity, or compassion for the sake of efficiency. Therefore, the Being had come to this particular shining point in time, to appear in this manner, and to attempt interaction...

Using the *Dream*. Would the attempt at contact be feared, rebuffed, or even comprehended? Why it should

matter to such an extent, here, now, confounded the Being, and that lent a whimsical air to the Dream it created with the limited capacities it had imposed upon itself, in order to attempt communication in a way that wouldn't overwhelm these creature's minds.

Relan Tesh.

Yaelat blinked out of his reverie, wondering exactly when he'd fallen into it. He was leaning cross-armed and cross-legged against the railing of the station's upper esplanade. And he'd just been talking to *Relan Tesh* — he was certain of it. Except that, when he glanced around, the other man was nowhere to be found.

Mirr is here only to help you. And you are here to help Mirr. You must trust me. You must trust Mirr!

It was a moment before the Hali'ian man realized that there was a woman leaning against the railing near him. He gawked at her dumbly for a span of seconds, and she smiled, holding out a slender, freckled hand.

"I'm Mirr."

Yaelat shook his head at the woman. "You must have a different mother than your sister does." He swallowed. He hadn't meant for it to come out quite so bluntly, but...

The woman next to him, so carefully-scrubbed that the freckles on her pale, shell-pink skin stood out like star-clusters and constellations, handed him a look that he interpreted to be annoyance with his brusque comment, and

she gazed at him for so long that he wanted to fidget with discomfort. He hadn't meant to be rude; it was just...

These people were *odd*.

"Yes, I'm Nethalie Mirr — I definitely have a different mother than Meldya did."

Yaelat gave a sharp sigh of relief. He'd been right; this *was* a family taking turns looking out for his welfare. "Sorry. I didn't mean to be uncouth, It's just —"

"You're confused and apprehensive. I understand, trust me; I feel the same way myself."

Yaelat took in her appearance; strawberry-blonde hair severely swept up into a bun, somber dark attire covered with a tailored, sleeveless lavender vest that reached from her shoulders nearly to the floor. That vest signified something, but he couldn't remember what.

"I'm a nurse," she volunteered, as if she was reading his mind — which she might have been. He seemed to remember both Meldya and her father telling him that they were empaths. Or...had he dreamed that? Nethalie went on:

"I can tell when people are upset. You know," she reached out and took his arm, and the communications officer was forcibly reminded of her sister, which made him smile despite himself, "there are some wonderful plants on my planet that calm the nerves. Do you have the same on your planet? Maybe we could share some infusions made from them. And I was wondering what

you'd use to sweeten or otherwise improve the flavor of something like that, where you come from?"

Back to the replimat they strolled. It occurred to Yaelat to wonder how it was that he couldn't seem to get more than a hundred feet in any direction without being steered back to the replimat by one Mirr or another. This was certainly a family who took their food and drink seriously.

They were a curious bunch, too. Friendly. That went a long way toward calming Yaelat's anxiety. "Ah. If you really wanted to talk about this in detail, you'd want to be in a room with my ship's doctor and captain. They'd talk your ears off. Hali'ian medicine's based almost entirely on medicinal plants and fungi, or the synthetic derivatives of —"

"But isn't that true of most cultures?" Nethalie interrupted animatedly; again, Yaelat was reminded of Meldya. "Don't people just forget, as they become more technologically advanced, that the basis of their medicine blossomed from the soil or the seas of their planet?"

Yaelat threw her a narrow look. He could have sworn he'd once heard that sentence issue out of Renee Ingram's mouth, word-for-word. But when? He shook his head as though that might clear it. He felt, again, as though he was caught in some ongoing dream — something he was certain he'd felt before, and not long ago, but when he tried to think of *when*, time eluded him like a *n'ga*-beetle.

The Hali'ian man quit trying to follow the Escher-tortuous path of what might or might not have been memory and answered her question instead. It was true what wise men of all ages and cultures said — it was always easier and less frustrating to focus on the *now*:

"I would tend to agree with that assessment, myself. Hali'ians haven't forgotten quite so thoroughly as most, and still preserve some of the more arcane...well, I guess you'd call them rituals, associated with the collection of medicinal plants. I don't know very much about this firsthand, mind you. I actually learned what I do know about it from listening to conversations between T'Dani and...and..." he grasped after the name of the woman whose delicately-boned face and fall of dark curling hair he could see in his mind as clearly as though she stood before him. The name wouldn't come. "T'Dani and my captain," he finished. He swallowed, then added:

"We have a huge fungus that's antimicrobial, and we farm them in certain forests, but we still maintain ancestral methods of just how the fungus must be cut, and with what sort of knife, and by whom. Our healers still insist that the analgesic *werr* grass be harvested young, and at certain times of day, so its properties aren't lost."

"And do these rituals have a scientific basis?" Nethalie inquired, letting go of his arm and settling him onto one of the many couches that surrounded the bank of replicators, as though he was an old man, or sick and indigent and only

slightly in possession of his right mind.

He frowned up at her but answered her question as though compelled. "I think so. For instance, if the fungus isn't attacked hard enough, say it's cut with a razor-edged knife rather than the blunt, serrated ones that are customarily used, it doesn't put out poisons. That's what the antimicrobials are, really; they need to be heavily processed to make them useful."

"True of all abadherent antimicrobials I've ever heard of! I wrote a paper on it once. And I'd bet that the *werr*'s analgesics either volatilize away or remain in the rootstocks if the temperature isn't just right — maybe even the wind and humidity, too, I'd suppose?"

Yaelat shrugged. He hadn't a clue what half of what she'd just said meant. "Yes, you'd *love* to meet my captain and CMO. They'd be able to answer your questions in a lot more detail than I can!" he motioned at the replicators. "Those should actually have a list of sedative teas that they'll provide for you if you ask. I know of only one, the *kiavas* root, but I think it's more of a narcotic than a sedative."

Nethalie approached one of the replicators and entered something onto the keypad on its face. It responded with a scroll-down list. "It's necessary to be extremely careful with narcotics. They can have hugely varying effects even between individuals of a single species, and between species they can kill."

Yaelat gaped at her. Now, he *knew* that very thought had been his own. Moments ago? Hours? Days? The memory eluded him even as he grasped for it, and suddenly he wasn't so sure the thought *had* been his own.

The nurse remained quiet for a couple of minutes, as she read over the replicator's offerings. "There's a huge list of Terran plants here. More of these medicinals come from that planet than anywhere else. Some kind of Starfleet bias, do you imagine, or some aberration of nature?" she read from the list, her pronunciation making Yaelat grin:

"Hemp and elm samaras and poppies and passion flower and skullcap; hypericum and hops and chamomile...I don't know where to start, except that the poppies are a narcotic, and we don't want those!" she shook her head at the replicator as though it was being naughty. "I'm going with something I recognize. What was it you said your people sweeten their infusions with?"

"Uh..." Yaelat gave this serious consideration for a march of seconds. "I didn't. Anyway, I don't *think* I did. We have..." Yaelat scowled. What was it he was trying to say? He couldn't remember the words. "A moss that is sweet," he continued lamely; "I want to say that it lives in caves, but..." he scowled and shook his head. "It's the oddest damned thing! Apparently, I've been away from home altogether too long.

"Terrans also have more natural sweeteners than anybody else in the Alpha or Beta quadrants. Humans *love*

their desserts! I think Deltans use a lot of different sweetening agents, too. And there was something about *poppies* that I..."

He shook his head, his scowl deepening. Nethalie waited patiently while he tried to wrestle his memory into some semblance of order. "Something that I *know* has to do with insects on Hali'ia. Starfleet beats the information into your head — well, metaphorically speaking, and it's important because..." Where the knowledge should be was nothing but a great black maze. The senior communications officer of the *Enterprise* puffed out a sigh of frustration. "I simply can't *remember*!"

"But we were talking about sweeteners from Earth. Most of their dried fruits are cloyingly sweet, and they have insects that make sweet things, insects that *are* sweet things, plant leaves that are sweet, roots that are sweet, a whole host of trees and grasses and a sort of cactus. All sweet, or capable of having sweetener extracted from them once they're processed the right way."

"And what is the name of one of their sweet things?"

Suddenly, Yaelat felt as though he was taking some sort of oral quiz — like one of those dreams in which you're failing an elementary-school class; you realize that it doesn't matter whether or not you pass your dream's Reading Comprehension or Remedial Math finals because you're a Starfleet officer already, although in the dream it does matter, and desperately:

"I...it...that would be..." the little yellow things. He was always fascinated with them as a boy — they were an aerodynamic impossibility, something that really shouldn't exist at all. They made poison, and they made...

"Honey! See what it gives you when you put in *honey*." He felt absurdly proud of himself.

Nethalie entered the word, then raised a wry, freckled brow at the replicator. "What it *gives* is another list. Acacia, buckwheat, clover, fireweed, goldenrod, Hymettos, Klamath, licorice, mint, pecan flower —"

"Hymettos," Yaelat mused, shaking his head slowly. "I have no idea what it means, but the captain would use it. I think."

Nethalie shrugged and entered the rest of her recipe. "Hopefully it goes well with the algae-flower tea my people like to use after a long day." The nurse shook her own head and smiled at Yaelat over one shoulder. "Well, *some* of my people, anyway." Her delicate fingers continued to wander over the face of the replicator as it synthesized whatever tea she'd requested of it. She gave a snort of laughter.

"You also have things you can apply *topically* to help ease swelling, pain, *and* anxiety. I wonder if there's a reason why most of these sound like the names of unfortunately unattractive girls? Arnica, coleria, datura, marthina, tritta, vieesha — and here's our tea!" she turned away from the replicator and walked toward Yaelat, who

was smiling at her last comment, and handed him one of the cups she carried. He took a tentative sip.

"What do you think?" she asked, taking a larger swig of her own steaming brew and settling down on the couch across from him.

There was no way to be diplomatic about this. "Well, you know, on our planet, and on other planets with temperate climates like Hali'ia, there are animals who gather in herds in areas having certain types of vegetation. Many of these animals, on planets that have evolved sentient life, are kept as livestock, and some of those are actively used to keep down the overgrowth of certain unwanted plants."

"And you're going to tell me that this tisane tastes to you like the dung of those animals after they've eaten certain unwanted plants?" her voice held a barely contained laugh. Yaelat wished she'd quit trying so hard to contain it; he imagined it would be delightful to hear.

"I wasn't going to use the word *dung*," he averred, wide-eyed.

Now she laughed. The sound held a hundred impossibly tiny bells. "Your people are a forthright race, aren't they?"

"Extremely. Also inquisitive." He took another drink of his tea and winced. "I think I understand how this medication works, Nethalie. Humans have a saying that describes it perfectly; *why do I hit myself in the head with*

a hammer? Because it feels so good when I stop!"

Chapter Eight

When the shipwide emergency alert went off, Captain Ingram was pulled forcibly from a dream of having to surrender several pounds of chestnut boletes to the person from whose property she'd plucked them. Ingram's dreams were vivid, brilliantly colored things that involved all of her senses; it took her several seconds to untangle dream from reality.

The captain of the *Enterprise* blinked and shook her head, making certain she'd be able to maintain her balance before vaulting out of her bed, away from her lover who was engaged in the same activity on the opposite side; if there was an emergency, Colin might be needed in Engineering. She had long ago advised her senior officers that they were free to pull training alert drills anytime it struck their fancy; she'd been known to do the same. As had her predecessor, John Harriman. She was fairly certain that his had concealed a relatively high level of passive-aggression in the exquisite nature of their timing, but she'd never been able to prove than conclusively.

This felt like one of John's alert drills. That unfortunately futile longing was dashed by her first officer's voice announcing *this is not a drill*, and the fact that the pulsating lights to which she'd opened her eyes were blue, not red. Intruder, not emergency, alert.

"Computer, mute that damned noise," Ingram muttered irritably once she was in the turbolift at the far end of the senior officer's hall from her cabin. It was at that point that she looked down at herself in alarm.

She had any number of scathingly embarrassing midshipman drills to thank for *that*. Show up to surprise-formation in skivvies...she still had dreams about that, too. "Josi," she added, in much the same voice. The computer recognized immediately that what the captain wanted was a communications link, and opened one; "what's going on?"

"Somebody's been tampering with computer-core interfaces." The XO turned directly toward the bridge-right turbolift to continue her explanation as Renee emerged onto the bridge.

The recent Psionic War had ended the longstanding, but potentially lethal — and lethally stupid, in Ingram's estimation — custom of a starship's bridge having only one turbolift. Ship's interior design colors had been altered, too, from the dark, severe olives, blacks, and blues of the original Excelsior-class design to dove grays, earth tones, and pale aqua and lavender, which offered a less-jarring juxtaposition to the bright greens, blues, scarlets, and golds that dominated information pouring into bridge consoles from the computer and sensory cores of the ship.

It was nearing the end of fourth shift, and the bridge crew for that shift, which on this particular mission consisted of a grand total of four cadets, stood at attention

along the walls. Seantie and EmJay still hadn't made it to the bridge, Ingram was gratified to see; it was embarrassing for a captain to respond to an off-shift alert less punctually than her entire senior bridge crew. "Various chips are missing," Renee's XO went on. "Also, a rare, potentially lethal substance has gone missing from sickbay. I've taken us out of warp —"

Renee held up a hand just as Mel'Taya emerged from the turbolift behind her. "Fine. First shift is to assemble in the situation room. Fourth shift is to resume battle stations but do nothing without a direct command from one of us. Understood?"

A muted chorus of *yes, sir!* accompanied a general flurry of motion from the cadets, at which point Renee took the opportunity to yawn. From Josi's comments, she assumed that drive chips or sequencer chips had been tampered with. She couldn't imagine what might have been taken from sickbay, but she supposed she'd find out soon enough. EmJay and Seantie arrived in tandem, sour looks on their faces. Ingram ushered them into the situation room ahead of her.

"What clued you off to this, Josi, and exactly what's happened?" Ingram snapped, taking her seat at the head of the table. Everyone leaned forward as avidly as could be expected at four-thirty in the ship's morning, to hear the executive officer's explanation for this alert. Felingaili sighed.

"I was slated for a general checkup this morning," Josi began. The XO of the *Enterprise* possessed Orion genes. Like any Orion, she slept in two- or three -hour stretches once every fourteen hours or so, meaning that she might be found doing pretty much anything at any given time. Her most common activity, this early in the morning, was playing racquetball. The fact that she'd had a checkup on this particular morning was why Ingram hadn't been up playing racquetball with her, something that the captain did every third or fourth morning.

"When I went to retrieve another months' worth of pheromone-suppression enzymes for her," T'Dani cut in, "it was apparent that the authorization-only cabinet had been raided. Whoever did it didn't even try to rearrange anything so that it looked —"

"Who else has your authorization code?" Ingram interrupted.

"Exactly what I asked," Josi said. The CMO shook her head.

"Nobody who's currently on the ship, that I'm aware of."

"Might the tampering in the computer core interfaces be related to this?" Seantie suggested. Mel'Taya sent pertinent data called up on the audio-visual staff table to everyone else's station, and replied:

"That occurred to me, too. However..." the Andorian whose files referred to it as a *chae-na* (neither male nor

female) sighed and rubbed sleepy eyes. "As you can see, that tampering consists of the removal of various interface chips. But the chips that are missing are random and largely useless, at least as far as any sort of sabotage is concerned. Three of the missing chips influenced the activation of the flushing mechanisms for the heads on deck seventeen, sector G." The head of security drew a deep breath, and continued:

"Six of the other missing chips influenced the data-storage capacity of outgoing subspace communications of various personal computers in the ambassadorial quarters on deck twenty-four, all of which have been entirely empty for the past two months. And four more were taken from the ship's translation processor. *Those* chips were involved in the translation of an ancient non-Federated language called something that I'm not currently in the mood to even attempt to pronounce." Mel'Taya's antennae both drooped slightly and arced toward one another, body language that touched on both the frustrating and the humorous nature of the situation.

"And my entire collection of ceremonial peyote fans is missing," EmJay added. "Seantie and I have been looking for them for the last four hours. I was going to show her how the ritual's conducted —"

Ingram drew an audible, irritated breath and rubbed at her own eyes. "You did invoke an *intruder* alert, right, Commander? Because it's seeming more and more as if

I'm still in bed dreaming all of this."

"We're definitely awake, Captain," Marco replied. "I can guarantee that; I haven't been asleep all night!"

Josi didn't even try to hide a smile. Apparently, Captain Ingram thought, her senior helmsman was still anxious about his hair. The captain of the *Enterprise* sat back, crossed her arms, and directed an inquiring stare around the situation-room table full of senior staff.

"Whoever raided the main sickbay's locked cabinet took all the *saf* ampoules we had on the ship," Doctor Corrigan offered. Mel'Taya's antennae made another interesting motion, but the head of security remained otherwise determinedly mute.

The captain of the *Enterprise* frowned at her CMO. She was pretty sure she'd caught the gist of Mel'Taya's body language. "What the hell would we need...no, never mind, never mind, forget I asked; I *don't* want to know. How many ampoules would that be, anyway?"

T'Dani, entirely ready to answer the first question that Renee hadn't entirely asked, swallowed her reply and made a wry face instead. "Two. But still..."

Demora snorted and motioned at the computerized display console set flush into the table before her. "So, who is our intruder? Somebody who wants to be irrepressibly intimate in a malfunctioning bathroom while reciting other people's private mail in Khotim'harran?"

Seantie took Demora's ball and ran with it.

"Somebody's trying to take over the *Enterprise* by keeping the heads from flushing properly, or maybe somebody's planning to threaten us in an obscure language while wielding ceremonial fans."

EmJay Fletcher nodded at the Betazoid science officer, wide-eyed, and embroidered; "They want to learn the deep, dark secrets of ambassadorial birthday greetings, or maybe they hope to," Fletcher shrugged and grinned, "get very, very lucky in their love life, which incorporates the use of feathers."

"I guess what everyone's trying to get at," Raphael Buonarroti, the *Enterprise's* senior engineer, dragged the conversation onto a more appropriate track, "is that it looks like somebody went through the subprocessor core and just sort of pulled out random chips to go with a random collection of other stuff. The *saf*...well, it *is* an aphrodisiac, right?"

"Right," T'Dani, Mel'Taya, and Renee chorused. The senior officers gathered around the table gazed at one another, trying not to appear too amused. Renee sighed and shook her head.

"Computer, what if any *physical* or external similarities are there between the missing subprocessor chips and the missing *saf* ampoules?" Seantie inquired of the great brain of the *Enterprise*. "I mean," the senior science officer explained softly, "there must be *some* sort of similarity. Usually, that's what drives criminal thought."

Working, the machine came back. It *worked* for a far shorter time than Renee would have imagined, and actually came up with an intriguing answer:

All of these objects possess electromagnetic polarization characteristics that render them multicolored in a way that humanoids would consider opalescent.

Renee nodded slowly. "And if I know my peyote ceremonies, Mr. Fletcher, the same might be said for your fans." *And this meeting*, she added to herself.

No psychedelic pun intended? Colin, the formidable Minaran telepath who had become a non-commissioned part of Renee's crew during the recently fought Psionic War, asked her telepathically from sixteen decks away. Ingram bit back a wince, and thought back:

Starfleet said a terrible thing to me before they released us from McKinley Station after our refit; This is a simple, straightforward mission to allow you to get to know your new officers and crew. Command should know, by now, never to say things like that. It disturbs the nature of the Universe and draws unwanted attention.

Captain Ingram was only half-joking with her lover.

"So, what we're looking for is an *artistic* weirdo," Marco said dryly.

"Distinctly," Mel'Taya replied, deadpan.

Renee shook her head again. "Artistic or otherwise, we can't have weirdoes going around yanking random subprocessor chips out of the computer core interface.

Computer, activate public and sensitive area audio-visual monitoring, directed at the computer core and its interface accessways, in three dimensions. Command Ingram alpha twelve seagreen."

Retinal scan required, the computer replied somberly, activating the new holographic retinal scanner built into the table at Renee's place. The starship's computer was able to perform video surveillance of any area of itself at any time but, because many of these areas were private and/or sensitive, the activation of such scans was made relatively difficult. The captain of the *Enterprise* allowed the unit to scan the unique arrangement of veins and arteries at the back of her right eye.

Ingram beta twelve seagreen command for public and sensitive area audio-visual monitoring in three dimensions confirmed. Secondary command activation required.

"Command Felingaili beta zero seven one silver," Josi said, submitting herself to the same retinal scan that Renee had. The computer next asked Demora for her command activation and a retinal scan. Satisfied at last, the computer went on:

Parameter specifics *desired?*

"Three parameters, computer: High activity level plus-furtive movement plus-or aberrant context. Set for looking if all parameters are met concurrently," Renee said.

Relevant contacts?

"Private contact only, computer; command and security, specifically myself and Mel'Taya. If we are unavailable, direct contact to any available senior bridge officer."

Parameters input. Surveillance begun, Starship Enterprise Stardate 9921.07.

The previous afternoon, Ingram had set the ship on course for the system in which Yaelat had gone missing. As this system was relatively nearer the Beta quadrant than the area from which she'd recorded her last log, the Stardate supplied by the computer might be incorrectly assumed, by an observer unfamiliar with the use of Stardates, to mean that time was moving in reverse.

Though, in a relativistic sense, due to the complexities of warp mechanics and the vast distances traversed by a warp-capable vessel, it was in fact doing so relative to the positions of galactic buoys, which sent out the signals that aided the ship's computer to determine Stardate, the literal passage of time within the ship itself had not altered. However, when they finally found Ingram's missing crewman, more or less perceived time might indeed have passed for him than had passed for the crew of the *Enterprise*. Only a constant space relative Stardate, free of the subjective passage of time itself, allowed individuals traversing galactic space to be able to maintain anything even vaguely like a schedule.

"Computer, secure from general quarters. Whoever is

perpetrating what's looking more and more like a very bad practical joke," Renee announced, standing and allowing herself to stretch, "isn't an intruder; it's somebody already on the ship."

Chapter Nine

They'd talked about medicinal plants and nursing until Yaelat was entirely talked out, which was well before Nethalie had finished her own mug of tea. The Hali'ian was trying assiduously to avoid his own. It was, if possible, even nastier when cool.

"This is all very nice, Nethalie," Yaelat said finally, "but I *need* to get in touch with my ship. Do you know any way I can do that from this station? All the station offices appear to be closed. We're supposed to report in at least once daily, to let our senior officers know what's happening."

Nethalie's face crumpled into a mask of dismay. "I'm afraid it's not possible to do that from where we are now. I'm sorry, Yaelat, but..." she set her cup down on the table between them, pulling her legs up and crossing them in front of her — a position similar to the one the *Enterprise's* own CMO preferred when sitting at her ease. Something common to medical practitioners, Yaelat supposed, not that he really cared all that much. What he cared about right now, and with a sudden intensity bordering on desperation, was being able to contact the *Enterprise*.

"I mean," the Hali'ian went on, "if I don't contact them, they're going to come looking for me. I can't...I don't know how long I've even *been* here. It's as if..." he set his own

cup down. Whatever was in the horrid drink she'd chosen, it made his head feel muzzy.

"There *is* no time where we are now," the nurse answered gently. Yaelat offered her a disbelieving glare.

"You're saying we're in some kind of...what, alternate dimension here?"

Nethalie considered this for a moment. "Certainly. We're where we need to be for your protection right now."

Yaelat shook his head at her in frustration. "Protection from *what*?"

"From uprising. Invasion. Anarchy. From death. Is that answer enough?"

"And when does it end? Because, you know, if they don't hear from me, my people *will* come looking for me." Aware that this was the second time that he'd stated this fact, and that he meant it as a threat, he tore his gaze away from hers. Was he being held as some sort of pawn in this place?

Nethalie regarded him consideringly. "Your role here was to determine whether or not my people merit full Federation citizenship, wasn't it?" she picked up her teacup and drained it. "This infusion really isn't to your liking at all, is it?"

"I'm not sure if I'm remembering correctly, but...I seem to recall that there might have been some reason why you felt that the Federation wouldn't be willing to extend membership to your people. If you commonly have

uprisings on your planet between the main government and disenfranchised factions of your populace, then I can see why you might have thought that," Yaelat replied, tartly. "And the tea makes me feel...odd."

"Definitely don't drink it, then." She stared at him for a long moment. He stared back. "Actually," she continued finally, "we haven't had an... *uprising* anything like this in nearly a millennium. Or a war. It never occurred to...well, any of us that there were even such weapons as the one that caused your injuries still on the planet."

Injuries? Weapons? Questions crowded his mind, and the one that forced its way out first wasn't the one that clamored the loudest. "So, your family is involved in the governance of..." he tried madly to recall the name of the planet they were orbiting above, and failed utterly — if that was, in fact, what they were doing. According to Nethalie, they might be in some alternate... *something*, he was still unclear on exactly what sort of situation he'd landed himself in, but she was giving him more information than the rest of her family had, and he wanted to keep her on the subject; "ah, your planet?"

She shrugged. "Mirr the Elder was." Nethalie rose gracefully, taking her cup with her back to the replicator. Odd way to refer to one's father; perhaps they were estranged.

"But I suppose that now he's retired. Yet your family is the one caring for me here — or holding me hostage,

nobody's given me enough information about what's going on for me to be clear about that yet. Which leads me to suppose that so much of your government's been destroyed that your father felt it necessary to return to his old post? Or is your family the one that instituted this..." now Yaelat shrugged; "*coup*?"

Nethalie laughed. "Hardly! Interesting deductions, though; perhaps you ought to finish the tisane I made for you, it seems to be helping your powers of imagination." She set her cup back into the replicator and chose another variety of sedative tea. "I think I'll try *agave* in it this time," she announced gravely. Yaelat made a wry face, and not merely at the interesting pronunciation she foisted on the Terran word.

"Don't change the subject. *Are* you holding me hostage? And how badly fractured is your legitimate government?"

She walked back with the steaming cup, sat down comfortably, and took a tentative sip before replying. "Oh, I do like this *chamomile* of the Terrans!" Nethalie enthused with yet another interesting pronunciation. She went on:

"You're aware that if the first question you'd just asked could be answered in the affirmative, I'd not have answered any of your questions up to this point honestly at all? Though..." she took another sip from her cup, "in a way, I suppose you *could* say we're holding you hostage. But we certainly never intended to! If your people do come, in a

ship which I understand is capable of defending both itself and others, that could be either a very good thing or a very bad thing, depending upon —"

"So, you're holding me hostage in order to lure the *Enterprise* here?" Yaelat rose, his fists clenched. She shook her head at him slowly, making the face a mother might make at a recalcitrant child.

"You should be aware that you can't harm me without causing significant harm to yourself. Though of course, you can't really harm *me* at all. Try to understand; neither of us are really here. You wanted me to answer the rest of your questions? All right, I will:

"Our government is *gone*. What else could it be, when there have been no armed conflicts, and therefore no need for defensive armaments, for at least twelve of your generations? This was one of the reasons why certain factions of our government felt it necessary to form some sort of alliance with a larger galactic community — to have defensive support, should something like this arise."

"But the Federation wasn't the only galactic community you approached?" Yaelat snarled. Nethalie didn't appear at all fazed that an angry man was looming over her threateningly. The nurse shook her head silently, sipping unconcernedly at her tea and motioning Yaelat back toward his seat.

"The Federation wasn't the only one that approached *us*," Nethalie clarified. "We were also approached by the

Klingons and the Orions." She lifted her head from her mug and offered Yaelat a piercing glance. "Both of them seemed too...temperamental? Unpredictable to us, you might say, though the Klingons didn't appear wholly unreliable, as the Orions did. One of the main reasons we wanted to put off joining the Federation was to help the Klingons when Praxis exploded. I understand that the reasoning of the ambassador we sent to them was that they might reject our aid, were we to formally join the Federation prior to extending assistance to them."

"And so now a coup is what you've gotten for your compassion. Don't you imagine that it might have been the Klingons or the Orions themselves who *loaned* your disaffected parties the weaponry to pull it off?"

Nethalie blinked up at him and smiled, before nodding down at the cup that he was standing over tensely. "You really ought to finish that, even though you don't care for it — it *does* seem to be helping you! You see, your shuttle was attacked, Yaelat. Can you remember any of that?"

Yaelat scowled down at the smiling woman. It seemed to him that she was just trying to change the subject again...but a dream reared up from somewhere, of blinding light and searing pain, and then...nothing. Nothing until he found himself here. "It seems more like a dream than a memory," he replied, surprised to find that his voice was hoarse. He cleared his throat, sat back down, picked up the cup, held his breath, and choked down the rest of the cold,

slimy, foul concoction.

"Some of us do believe that it might have been a faction of Orions who've fueled this attack, although..." Nethalie sighed and shook her head, setting her teacup down and rubbing her hands together as though they were cold, "we don't have anywhere near the information we need to be certain of that yet. I suppose we should be grateful they didn't do to *us* what they did to Praxis!"

The Hali'ian offered the nurse a skeptical frown. "You...you think *Orions* blew up Praxis? Look, Federation scientists are pretty certain it was a natural catastrophe —"

"And we have someone not currently on-planet who can prove conclusively that it wasn't. How grateful we'd all be if..." Nethalie replied flatly, then pursed her lips around the remainder of what she was going to say. "You were wanting to know how the coup was staged? They set off something like a thousand thermonuclear warheads all at once. It wasn't a coincidence that this happened during the Federation Commission, either."

"Thermonuclear...? Ye gods, who even uses that sort of weaponry anymore? It's filthy, it's indiscriminate, it's...*cas-halyae!*" the word Yaelat spit out like bad meat meant *inhumane*. All humanoid peoples had a similar term — usually, it could be easily deduced by listening carefully for a particular race's term for itself in it. The woman across from him offered him a dry look in return.

"Interesting choice of terms. Such weaponry is also

relatively easy, cheap, and clandestine to make — not to mention devastating."

"You're telling me that my shuttle was struck by a thermonuclear warhead?"

Nethalie nodded silently. "The shuttles of everyone coming to this commission were. Our entire docking station was destroyed." She picked up her cup and finished the tea in it, then rose to take it back to the replicator again. Yaelat watched her walk past the groups of soft chairs aligned in pleasing geometric patterns against the backdrop of the soaring lines of the...

Space station walkway.

"So, my shuttle was destroyed, and your space station was destroyed. I'll ask again — where the hell *are* we, in that case? Is this just some..." he gesticulated wildly, "some kind of planetary installation made to appear to be a space station for some unknown reason?"

"Something like that," she replied blandly, programming something else into the replicator. This time, she removed two steaming cups, and handed one of them to him as she walked back to her seat. He shook his head at her, entirely at a loss for words.

"This is passion-flower-leaf tea, infused into passion fruit and guava juice. The replicator says it should help calm you down — it works on most iron-blooded humanoids, and it's only poisonous to people with silicon-

based —"

"Nethalie," Yaelat set the cup down firmly, "why are you people keeping me here?"

She sipped at her tea, then made a face. "Figures; *this*, I don't like. Of course, I don't have iron-based blood, either. Yaelat," she set her teacup down, and pushed it away for good measure, "I don't know how to be more direct with you than I'm being. We're *keeping* you here in order to keep you alive. And we're hoping that your people do indeed come for you...before more of *us* die, too!"

The Hali'ian made a conscious choice to believe the woman across from him. What other option did he currently have? He picked up the warm juice drink she'd concocted and sipped it meditatively. He'd heard of secret installations, buried deep underground on his own planet, that had once been meant to shield the great families of Hali'ia should some unforeseen catastrophe befall. *His* family, he reflected grimly, wouldn't have been among those. The idea that this was just such an installation, and that these people had some sort of equivalent caste-based survival scheme, left him cold.

This fact would definitely keep them from being approved for Federation membership.

He swallowed the rest of the heated juice in an attempt to warm away some of the existential chill such thoughts seemed to spread through the chambers of his heart. Before he could share his thoughts with Nethalie, he felt

his very consciousness withdraw. The woman who was and was not there or anywhere with Yaelat gently removed the half-unreal cup from his fingers, and he fell back against the ostensible couch cushions, unconscious once more.

Chapter Ten

The very early morning again, and again, the starship's audio-video monitors were quiescent.

Renee Ingram's new protocol officer was not. He clung forlornly to an aqua-green sofa pillow while curled into a dejected, furry-faced ball in one of the chairs in Renee's ready-room. "My entire *collection*! I've been collecting them since I was *seven*! There are lepidoptroids in that collection that have gone extinct on their home *planets*! Corillian jewel-wings and Porovid skippers, Terran and Orion monarchs —"

"Benbet, naming the butterflies isn't going to call them back. What we need to know," Ingram inclined her head slightly at her security officer, one of the three people who sat across her desk from her in her ready-room, "is exactly *when* they were taken."

"A butterfly collection and a jewelry-making kit," Mel'Taya offered tonelessly. "This has to be some sort of arcane human joke."

Josi sighed, sank lower in her seat, and said nothing at all.

Captain Ingram agreed with Mel'Taya's assessment. Andorians, in general, didn't consider human jokes particularly funny, especially when that humor incorporated practical trickery or slapstick, as whoever was

perpetrating the minor larceny currently occurring aboard the *Enterprise* appeared bent upon doing. Benbet scowled at the head of security.

Captain Ingram sighed. Her XO hadn't been anywhere near as upset about her gems going AWOL as Benbet was about seven Ryker boxes full of deceased insects, but then again, Josi wasn't a Tellarite. And it was only coincidentally that the senior officers had learned that more people than just Marco'd had their coiffures creatively rearranged as they slept.

Ingram herself was beyond tired of this extended practical joke, if joke it was. "If it's a joke, Mel'Taya, it's one I don't get." Renee didn't need to ask Mel'Taya whether or not there was anything on the scans being performed in the more sensitive areas of the *Enterprise*. If there had been, the ship itself would have contacted her. She had just begun to offer her protocol officer sympathy for his missing treasures when Colin, there to help empathically ameliorate Benbet's towering grief, overrode her:

"I have another theory," the big man offered softly from where he stood to Ingram's right, half-reclining against the tall window seat that ran the length of the room's ceiling-high viewscreen. A telepathic damper flashed violet-blue through a wavy curtain of his auburn hair, allowing the psion to experience only those thoughts and emotions he chose to experience from others.

Ingram turned her head and raised her brows at him. "Which is?"

He shrugged. "I don't believe this is a joke. I believe that whatever has taken the missing objects — hair, feathers, wings, jewels, multicolored synthetics — is somehow able to function either without being seen, or..." Colin scowled, licking his lips thoughtfully; "Or by otherwise controlling the space-time dimension, so that we're not aware of its presence."

"And what would you imagine capable of such an act?" Mel'Taya inquired.

Renee sat bolt-upright in her chair. "The *twyvar!*" she hissed. "They're the only things aboard the ship that weren't here before all this started happening."

The *Enterprise's* XO gaped at Renee and Colin in turn. "Animals? You imagine that animals are capable of manipulating space-time?"

"Or maybe just door controllers and audio-visual equipment," her commanding officer supplied.

"And the things are insectivores, aren't they? Though my butterflies were full of fixative, and you wouldn't think they'd want them. I'll bet they made them sick. We should check to see if they've been sick," the little Tellarite protocol officer insisted.

Mel'Taya's head and antennae nodded decisively at Benbet. "I would more willingly tend toward that assessment myself, Captain Ingram."

Renee sat back in her chair. "Some electromagnetic effect, maybe? Computer, locate Doctor M'Benga and open a channel."

"M'Benga here, Captain," the doctor replied at once. "How may I be of service?"

"Tell me, Doctor, these creatures you've adopted as pets. Do they have any sort of electromagnetic...oh, I don't know, biological cloaking mechanism that enables them to snitch brightly colored things without being caught in the act? What I mean is, do they show the sort of hoarding behaviors found in corvids or bowerbirds?"

"Ahm..." even over a communications channel, the confusion M'Benga felt at being asked such questions was apparent in the elderly physician's tone. "No. Twyvar don't exhibit those sorts of behaviors. And *cloaking* mechanisms..." M'Benga allowed the rest of his statement to meander away until it was lost in the folds of disbelief that shrouded his words.

"I realize that these are odd inquiries, sir. However, since the animals were brought aboard the *Enterprise*, various unrelated items of either a non-integral or a personal nature, but all very brightly colored, have gone missing. No one is fully aware of when they were taken, or of where they might have been taken to." Ingram looked over at her head of security, and changed the subject obliquely:

"And frankly, we have larger issues at hand. My

senior communications officer's gone missing, while taking part in what should have been the final provisional-to-permanent Federation membership conference for a planet friendly to the Federation for the last century and a half. I haven't been able to raise either him or the government of the planet he's part of the commission to, so the *Enterprise* has currently been diverted to —"

"Go looking for him. I understand *that* completely, Captain. But this...*issue* with the twyvar..." the elderly physician ended this sentence with a sigh. "No, they're not attracted to brightly-colored objects, unless you consider other twyvar brightly-colored objects, which of course they are.

"And they don't exhibit hoarding behavior. Much the opposite, in fact. When twyvar have a glut of food or anything else they value, they share it out among themselves. They're intensely social, loving little animals. They're even known to adopt each other's young. These are the reasons why the twyvar were so very easy to domesticate. And ours haven't been out of the habitats you've provided for them. They like the habitats so much we were considering asking if we could keep them for the twyvar when we left the ship."

"I appreciate your time, Doctor. My head of security will be taking point on the investigation of the missing items aboard the ship. What you know of the twyvar notwithstanding, it's also possible that space travel has

affected their behaviors in ways in which you're not aware.

"Depending upon what we find, we *may* have to seal your pets' habitats behind a force field for the remainder of this voyage, but of course, you're welcome to take their habitats with you when you beam down to Bradford Colony. Ingram out." Renee closed the channel, and leveled a serious gaze at Mel'Taya and Benbet:

"Like I just told M'Benga, I need to put my attention into searching for Yaelat. I want you two to take Seantie and Ramesh, and go over every second of audio-visual that the ship's picked up in the last —"

As though speaking his name had summoned him to action, the young Sikh who was pulling double shifts as bridge communications officer in Yaelat's absence cut into Renee's orders over the subspace link directly appended to her ready-room computer. "Captain? I've got a live-feed hail for you from the first planet in the Vega Canaris system."

"Patch it through to my ready-room in sixty seconds please, Ensign Kanchumurthi," Ingram replied, at once relieved and tense. Finally, a response; if it was Yaelat, she'd be glad to learn that he was okay. Nevertheless, he'd be in a deep, sticky vat of trouble unless he had some exquisitely good reasons to back up the sort of flouting of Starfleet regulations that he'd just performed. If it *wasn't* Yaelat...

"You're dismissed, everyone. We'll take up this

conversation again later," she said to Benbet, Josi, and Mel'Taya. The XO, *chae-na*, and Tellarite all recognized a direct command when they heard one, and exited Ingram's ready-room without further ado. Colin didn't move; he knew he would be wanted to help decipher exactly what was going on if it wasn't Yaelat on the line.

It wasn't Yaelat.

The captain's ready-room desk had received the same upgrades as all desks and computer terminals on the ship had, but the holographic transmission that popped up was fuzzy and muffled, as though some sort of major ionic interference at the source was effecting it. Captain Ingram switched the holographic feed over to a simpler quantum-digital display feed on the monitor built into her desk, which helped clean up the interference somewhat. Aware of her trepidation at being faced by a complete stranger rather than her senior communications officer, Colin, who had moved to stare over Renee's shoulder at the feed, directed all the psionic attention he possessed toward the situation at hand.

A bald humanoid man with a soft, bowed mouth and cold gray eyes confronted the captain of the *Enterprise* and the telepathic Yeoman across less than a light-year of unusually murky communications network. "I am attempting to contact Captain Renee Ingram of the starship very important in some circles, for a starship captain other attributes must certainly –"

Who was this person? Renee had never seen him before. She cut him off. "I am. I directed my queries to your government. I would like to speak to Chancellor Rey regarding the whereabouts of a crewman sent to you as a —"

"Rey has...I'm afraid she's been deposed, Captain. So badly, so sadly deposed. A sadness, really. I am her replacement. My name is Relan Tesh." The man went on talking, ostensibly giving her information about his status or reputation or some damned thing, but Renee tuned him out.

Deposed? Captain Ingram tried to remember what little she knew of this planet's government. They possessed both a Senate building and a complex voting system; this made them a republic, and as far as she was aware, no republic-type political system *deposed* people; they'd have to be impeached through appropriate congressional or parliamentary proceedings.

This planet's republic had requested full Federation status by supermajority in 2284, but hadn't yet submitted the cultural documentation materials required by the Federation before any planet could receive full, as opposed to provisional, Federation status. A Federation cultural surveyor had been requested by that republic after the Psionic War. There was something they felt the need to personally reveal before completing their cultural documents. Yaelat had been eager to fulfill that role. The

acceptance of those articles by the Federation Council would finally grant full Federation status to a people who had been allies of and assets to the people of Terra since before the Federation even existed.

It would be a great historical moment, and besides, Yaelat Qat loved nothing so much as a mystery. That was what had drawn him to the Cultural Survey Corps, and then out into deep space, in the first place.

Tesh's use of the word *deposed* implied that some sort of coup or cultural revolution had occurred. How much, the captain of the *Enterprise* mused, did the confusing term *deposed* have to do with the planet's unwillingness or inability to complete its Articles of Confederation paperwork? And how much did *that* have to do with her missing crewman?

Captain Ingram recognized the man's name, if not his countenance. She cut him off again; "You're the person who was supposed to meet Yaelat for the convocation of the Federation Commission. Has Yaelat not received my messages? I need to know where my crewman is, Mr. Tesh, and what's going on there currently," she demanded frostily. He'd said he was Rey's replacement; he had *not* said that he was Chancellor, and Renee refused him the courtesy of the title.

The man behind the ornate desk heaved an irritated sigh. "There's a... a situation on my planet currently. A terrible situation, but there were some of us who foresaw it.

A coup has recently been declared. Some of the Federation Commission's shuttles were..." he licked his lips and looked away from the screen; "fired upon. We're not...not all of the commission members have been accounted for. It may be that they're being held by the radical faction who organized the coup."

Ingram nodded soberly. Republics were generally governed through long, convoluted congressional or parliamentary sessions that had been known to span years. How many people had been killed, in this case, in order to drive the wedge of coup into such a behemoth, and in what manner had the takeover been staged? A chill of pure horror slid unpleasantly down Ingram's spine. "You're saying that my crewman's being held hostage?"

The man who called himself Relan Tesh looked back at Renee without speaking for several seconds. She could tell that he was under extreme stress — he was pale and sweating, looked almost to be in shock. She wondered how he had managed to escape a coup designed by individuals armed to bring down spaceborne craft. "We're still not sure," he husked quietly. "In any case, I'm not sure. I mean, that may be absolutely what's happening, but I'm not currently in a position to give you all that information now. You must believe me when I tell you how sorry I am that you've been embroiled in this. I mean the Federation. They were —"

"If you require aid in rescuing your people, or finding

common ground with those of your citizens who feel so disenfranchised that —"

"No! Oh, no, no, no, that wouldn't be good at all, that would be so bad! Captain, you must believe me when I tell you how *badly* it could work out for everyone involved should a Federation warship enter our space. You have no jurisdiction in this system. No leverage. No authority now that our government has gone down the way it has."

Captain Ingram considered the man projected on the screen before her thoughtfully. "I'm not certain that you meant for what you just said to come out the way it sounded. Nevertheless, I feel compelled to tell you that the Federation doesn't respond well to threats. I didn't say we needed to bring the *Enterprise* into your system; I'm offering to come myself, if you feel that I might be...ah, useful to you in bargaining with...whomever it is you may be trying to bargain with, in lieu of my crewman."

The same tingle of horror she'd felt only moments before returned in force. Captain Ingram took the seconds between Tesh's receipt of her answer and his reply to puzzle out the fact that it wasn't her own emotion. She pushed Colin's sense of trepidation for her away; there simply wasn't time to deal with it. As he usually did, the formidable psion erected what amounted to a telepathic wall between them, in order to keep it from occurring again. He would keep whatever he felt behind that wall. He had promised the upper echelons of Starfleet that he

would never come between herself and her duties as a Starship captain. The fact that he'd submitted proposals to Starfleet urging them to reverse their policies on allowing Starship captains to take part in landing parties, well, that was his prerogative as a Federation citizen.

Not today, she thought, knowing that even though she could no longer feel his thoughts or emotions, he was aware of hers. She loved sharing deep emotions and sensations with him, but they could be troublesome while she was working.

"Oh, that would be inadvisable, Captain! These people...they're quite mad. If we can simply let the situation gel for a while? You know, with madness, when you're dealing with madness, you can't just suddenly jump in and be part of the fray. You have to let the situation gel." the man knotted his hands into fists on the table before him, a beautiful thing with a translucent nacre like polished abalone shell visible even through the lousy subspace commlink, but not before Renee noted the way that those hands trembled.

Fatigue? Fear? she quizzed Colin, silently and tersely.

Not only could Colin maintain a psionic wall for anybody else's benefit, but he could speak from behind it. It wasn't, after all, real, except to those for whom Colin projected it. Terrifying, frankly, in its implications, if she hadn't known the innate gentleness, kindness, and patience

of the big redhead. Though she'd also seen that gentleness and patience wear through...

Fear, certainly. Also, grave confusion, and a sense of internal struggle. And rage. Intense rage, the Minaran hybrid she had brought into the Federation from elsewhere replied. The psionic matrix he had linked to the ship's sensors was able to pick up these emotions. Any empath or telepath in the same room with the commlink would have been able to perceive them, if they wanted.

This was one of the improvements that had been made to the flagship of the Federation, one that would continue to be worked into the schematics of every Federation starship designed from this point forward. Being able to divine a potential adversary's intents or emotions from a long distance was an unparalleled benefit for starship crews intent upon exploration who also needed, occasionally, to defend themselves. Captain Ingram wasn't a telepath, herself, but was more or less helplessly open to Colin's thoughts and feelings due to mass quantum entanglements between them.

She sat back, drew a deep, calming breath, and tried to clear every other thought out of her mind. "Can you at least tell me what sorts of warheads were used to target the Federation shuttles?"

The man chewed at his lower lip and looked away again, as though selecting and discarding options. "Ones we believed long defunct, Captain. Of course, no one

reckons on half-lives of ten thousand years, what that really infers, do they? Old weapons, old fashioned, but still - "

Ingram rocked forward in her chair, wanting to reach through the screen and physically throttle the answers she needed out of the stranger on the other end of the subspace link. "You're telling me that there's been a coup on your planet by individuals in possession of space-capable thermonuclear weaponry?"

Tesh looked back at the screen and nodded silently. "They also appear to possess some form of electromagnetic-pulse weaponry. It fries the interiors of some things; computers, aircars..." and the man rambled on, giving a quite thorough list of what EMP's could cause to malfunction.

Ingram closed her eyes and shook her head. From what she understood about Relan Tesh, he hadn't been in any sort of political position whatsoever when Yaelat requested permission to take part in the hastily assembled Commission. Relan Tesh was...she searched her memory for a moment. A surgeon? An anatomist? Yes, something like that. It didn't require any great leap of imagination to believe that the person she was talking with might actually be the perpetrator of the very coup that he was warning her of (or, more accurately, trying to warn her away from).

The first thing she'd need to do, after closing the channel on this miserable fruitless conversation, was to

have her senior science officer determine how to safely beam active nuclear arms off of a planet and into that planet's star. She'd also need to determine who was actually supposed to be governing that planet's people. Then she'd need to inoculate whoever she sent looking for Yaelat with vaccines against beta, theta, and omicron radiation.

Captain Ingram felt a flash of gratitude for the fact that the *Enterprise* was currently hauling around a group of highly skilled physicians. And, at some point, the atmosphere and water and upper crust of the planet would need to be rendered harmless, preferably sooner rather than later, since the radiation load would render transporters useless.

Mostly, she had to figure out *some* way of getting Yaelat — alive or dead — off of that planet without menacing the populace further. The captain of the *Enterprise* reopened her eyes, and removed her figurative kid gloves:

"Be advised, Tesh; unless someone in *actual* authority is willing to work out some option that returns my crewman to me alive and unhurt, I *will* come there and search for him myself, regardless of what you and your people do or don't want in their system."

His response came attached to a prolonged glower. "I have enough to concern myself with right now without worrying about the whereabouts of a single individual

who's probably dead. If your ship comes into our system, you shouldn't be surprised if it, too, is attacked."

"Thank you for the warning, but simple thermonuclear weaponry poses no hazard whatsoever to a shielded *Excelsior*-class starship." It wouldn't pose any hazard to them should the shields go down, either; after the Psionic War, she'd made certain to request old-fashioned, direct-contact plate-hardening of the *Enterprise*'s hull as part of its post-war refit, which could provide crucial seconds of life should the systems of a ship under attack go down. In battle, seconds mattered. She didn't bother mentioning this to Relan Tesh, but instead added:

"You might, however, want to research just exactly what sort of defensive *and* offensive latitude a Federation starship attacked by a provisionally-allied planet has." Renee closed the real-time communication channel and threw the psion standing to her right an inquiring glance.

Colin regained his seat and drew a deep breath before replying. "He's terribly apprehensive, but not specifically about us. It's as though something he's done offended a number of people whom he actually meant to...*help*, somehow; either people he cares about or people he fears, individuals who have some sort of hold on him, whom he never meant to alienate.

"About Yaelat? He doesn't have a clue. And the knowledge of our presence somehow both infuriates him and..." Colin shook his head, his brow furrowed in

confusion; a hybrid of several psionic humanoid species as well as Minaran, his brow had a unique conformation, "ah, *delights* him. Also, I get the feeling that he's ill, which I suppose shouldn't be surprising if the planet's been irradiated, but the illness seems to be something else, something I couldn't relate to, somehow. And is the ship also hardened against electromagnetic-pulse weaponry?"

Renee sighed, crossed her arms, and chose to ignore Colin's question. "You got all that from *this* far away?" the *Enterprise* was at rest outside the Vega Canaris system proper, peering into it as though it was a glass-enclosed orrery they couldn't enter.

Colin nodded. "I doubt, though, that we could scan the planet for Hali'ian life signs or much of anything else from here. And I *definitely* wouldn't chance using the transwarp matrix crystals' psionic boosting for the transporter from this distance — taking a chance on a scrambled comm transmission is one thing, a scrambled person's something else again."

It was time to contact Starfleet Command about this. It seemed to Renee that these people, who'd been a provisional member of the Federation longer than any race Ingram had ever heard of, and whose people had contributed to the betterment of the Federation in no small way, were concurrently both hiding something, and in some kind of terrible trouble.

She was pretty sure that more than just a single

Starfleet officer would be in need of rescue on that planet. Before Renee got the chance to either request a Command link or talk to her tactical and engineering crew about how to harden the ship's shields against electromagnetic-pulse weaponry, however, her comm system chimed again:

"Ship decloaking twelve thousand kilometers starboard, Captain!" the second-shift tactical ensign announced tensely. Renee bit back a curse, closed the comm, and said to Colin:

"Hurry down to Engineering and help them find a way to harden the shields against electromagnetic-pulse weapons, assuming that's either possible or something we haven't already got."

Standing, the captain of the *Enterprise* hurried onto the bridge.

Chapter Eleven

"It's the IKS *Klothos*, Captain. Its shields aren't just lowered, they're powered down, sir. So are its weapons," the ensign at the tactical board announced without being asked, before Ingram could give in to the almost visceral urge to tell him to raise shields.

The Federation was allied with the Klingon people at the moment, though the residents of Qo'Nos and her colonies had made it quite plain that they had no intention of actually *joining* the Federation for any reason whatsoever — though they had, both publicly and in private, politely ceased to refer to the United Federation of Planets as *nest of vermin*. Alliance had allowed them access to Federation space, and they weren't at all shy of utilizing such largesse.

"They're hailing us," Ramesh offered. The captain of the *Enterprise* didn't respond immediately; she was riveted by the sight of the well-kept, old-fashioned Klingon warship that hung uncloaked, unshielded, and quiescent as a Christmas ornament off the starboard bow of her ship. The name of the sizable destroyer seemed incredibly familiar to Captain Ingram; she dug through her memory for it as though she was in some family attic browsing through a chest.

"Return their hail, Ensign, and open a channel," she

replied finally.

Renee blinked at the screen for a long march of seconds after the video feed snapped on. A distinctly not-Klingon, foppishly handsome humanoid man with coppery hair and liquid blue-gray eyes stood on the Klingon command deck. It didn't seem to occur to any of the Klingons manning the bridge terminals of the *Klothos* to consider this an unusual occurrence. "Federation Starship! What is your purpose here?" the stranger barked. Well, he sounded enough like a Klingon...

The captain of the *Enterprise* had the distinct impression that this situation was only going to get weirder as it went along. "My name's Renee Ingram, Captain of the Starship *Enterprise*. To whom am I speaking, please?"

"*Enterprise*?" a voice from behind the redhead boomed out, and he turned; the screen pulled the area of the Klingon bridge behind him into sharper focus, and the big man in the commander's chair — also handsome, though his forehead was scarred with the transplants common among Klingon victims of the Augment virus — bared fine white teeth at Renee in the fierce approximation of a smile. "I must say, it was a gloomy hour that I learned of the passing of her *true* captain."

Renee didn't return that smile. She was trying furiously to figure out exactly what the Klingon, whose rank insignia identified him as *commander*, meant. John Harriman, whose place she had taken up after the Psionic

War, was not dead — she refused to even entertain the scenario that her gentle, brilliant friend could be dead. He'd been kidnapped, she was personally certain, into the alternate Universe from which she herself had brought Colin and, unknowingly, the very creatures that had perpetrated the Psionic War.

No good. "I'm afraid I'm uncertain, Commander, regarding exactly to whom you are referring, and why exactly it is that you are *here*."

The burly Klingon snorted. "You do not know of the exploits of *Kirk*? There was a worthy adversary! I should think that all Starfleet officers —"

Recognition snapped on in Captain Ingram's brain with photonic force. "Of course I know of Captain *Kirk*, Commander *Kor*. What I do *not* know is what that has to do with why a Klingon warship's prowling around the perimeter of the Vega Canaris system. Please, enlighten me further."

Kor's face went as hard and unreadable as stone. "We've tracked a weapon-running, chaos-scattering murderer and his cadre here. My friend asked you a question, eh? *Why* is there a Federation ship of war at the outskirts of his *home* system? You, *Enterprise*, are the one who does not *belong* here!"

"Federation starships are vessels of exploration. It's hardly the Federation's fault that the individuals they encounter are sometimes less than friendly. *Your* friend is

impolite and didn't offer his name."

Kor motioned at the redhead, who offered Renee a frosty smile. "I'm Curzon Dax. Kor and I are blood-brothers."

Ingram considered the man and his revelation. He was obviously a citizen of Trillius Prime, where Yaelat had gone missing. She decided to confide her predicament to him; the blood-brother of a Klingon in what was actually a ship of war might be of great value to her.

"Well met, Mr. Dax. Here's my present situation; a crewmember of mine was sent to act as a representative of the Federation Commission, at a meeting that was ostensibly convened at Leran Manev on Trillius nearly one Terran week ago. After hearing nothing from my crewman in that time, I was finally able to contact a person who claims to be your planet's current government representative. It seems that some sort of armed coup has taken place, and may still be in progress — the individual who returned my hail wasn't exactly forthcoming."

"*Please* tell me you're kidding." Curzon's face had lost all color as Ingram gave her explanation; the leopard-like spots that ran down his face and neck stood out like finely carven jet sigils pasted to his skin.

The captain of the *Enterprise* shook her head at length, folding her arms across her chest.

The Trill man closed his eyes, sighed deeply, and went on without opening his eyes again. "I'm Trillius'

representative to Klingon. The reason that Chancellor Azetbur agreed to my role as a mediator at the Khitomer Accords was because, though we're cognizant of the Federation's rules, regulations, and technical expertise, we *hadn't* fully accepted full Federation status yet. That doesn't mean my *legitimate* government doesn't want permanent Federation status. What they *wanted* was to help the Klingons, and the Federation thereby." He drew a deep, quivering breath, reopened his eyes, and went on:

"However, there are small, vociferous factions on my planet who believe you'd withdraw even provisional Federation membership from us if you knew certain...oh, let's call them religious observances of ours, and so we've been content with —"

"We *don't* deny Federation membership on the basis of religious observance, Mr. Dax, unless you're in the habit of performing religious sacrifices using sentient species," Captain Ingram cut in tartly, before the man veered off on a tangent they really didn't have time for:

"Be that as it may, whoever is currently in control of your government has no idea where my crewman might be, or whether he's alive or dead. I want my crewman back. You, obviously, want your planet returned to its rightful government. Shall we assist one another, or do I have to find a more creative way to get to Trillius Prime and bring my crewman home?"

Behind Curzon, Kor laughed. "Shall the Federation

and the Klingons work together to liberate the Trill? Or shall we watch the captain get creative? You know," the Klingon commander leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, "the Organians said that one day, we *would* work together as friends. I'm not sure which I'd dislike more; seeing Curzon's people torn by civil war, or proving the Organians right."

"Just because we work together, Kor, that doesn't mean we have to be *friends*," Ingram said, offering the Klingon a grim smile. "Though I was under the impression that the explosion of Praxis and the subsequent Khitomer Accords had more or less settled that issue. Speaking of which, Khitomer was quite a while ago — are you just now returning Ambassador Dax to his home?"

"As my friend explained, we're hunting a renegade group together, Captain," the Trill man offered by way of explanation; "Child-killers, plague-spreaders—"

"And the *Federation* received a number of bases in *Klingon* territory with the signing of the Khitomer Accords," Kor cut in belligerently, his eyes narrowed into slits.

Renee Ingram considered the two men on the screen for a moment. "Increased territorial requirements are often necessities when aiding an ally, particularly where potential incursion by forces unfriendly to both parties is a likelihood, Commander Kor.

"Tell me, does this weapon-running, chaos-scattering,

child-killing, plague-spreading group deal in thermonuclear weaponry? Because all reports indicate that there had been no sign of any such thing on Trillius prior to this coup, which I'm told — reliably or not, it's hard to say — was performed using such weaponry. I've no doubt that plenty of children were killed in its utilization."

Curzon stood speechless, his face stricken, but Kor swore softly, his countenance losing its predatory lines and falling, instead, into an expression of grim sadness. "Indeed. The group he leads sows turmoil and pain like bitter seeds."

"And I'm assuming that he — or his group — knows what ship you're tracking him in? Mr. Dax, I'd be happy to offer you, Commander Kor, and whomever you felt pertinent to bring with you a lift on the *Enterprise*, if the *legitimate* representative of Trillius Prime to Klingon will give me leave to enter his home system."

"You have a cloaking device on *Enterprise*? Because it seems to me that would be a requirement, if we want to take these *puh'Takh* by surprise," Kor said.

The captain of the *Enterprise* had to concede that the commander of the *Klothos* had a point. She inclined her head to Kor.

"What does it matter? We have two warships here, and my people have been taken hostage by —" Curzon began insistently.

"Commander Kor is correct," Ingram soothed the

anxious Trill. "The tactics we use when we get to your home planet, Ambassador, will depend entirely upon the strategic approach we choose to take now, and we need to discuss all of that before anyone goes anywhere. We might not get there in one piece, otherwise.

"Commander Kor," Captain Ingram returned her gaze to the handsome Klingon, noting, this time, delicate streaks of white in his coal-black, curling hair, "I agree that your ship has the advantage of surprise, both due to your cloaking technology, and the fact that the coup faction probably doesn't know you're sitting here having this conversation with us. However, you'd still need to lower your both your cloaking device and your shields in order to beam anyone anywhere. Correct?"

The Klingon commander nodded. "And that will make us vulnerable to either enemy ships, or to anything powerful enough to reach us from a planetside position. Without shields, even thermonuclear missiles pose a threat."

"We're not in range to scan for either ships or missile capacity on Trillius from here. I happen to know that Klingon ships don't carry either shuttles or escape pods. If, however, you could revamp an outer cargo bay or two that we could park a couple of *Enterprise* shuttles in, we could use the cloaked *Klothos* to scan for armaments or enemy ships from Trillius Prime space, without being detected.

"If we then find that the issue is only ground- to air

-based missiles, Federation shuttles have shields capable of deflecting most ground-to-air armaments. We could send the shuttles to the surface with armed ground crews, to capture the perpetrators of this coup and to search for my crewman. I sincerely suspect that the two matters are linked. Also, the sudden presence of a Klingon warship decloaking over the Trill homeworld will focus the coup leader's minds heavily, and we'd most likely be able to land the shuttles and infiltrate without anyone noticing.

"If the issue is enemy warships, that'd be something we humans call *a whole different kettle of fish*, and it would call for a different strategy. The implementation of that strategy would take a longer amount of time, but what I'd suggest in such a case is that the *Enterprise* be brought into the equation.

"The enemy ships could be coerced to concentrate their attentions on my ship, which wouldn't be cloaked. You, Commander Kor, could then follow my ship in with your cloak in place, and, assuming that your ship can fire while cloaked —"

"To do something you humans call *shooting fish in a barrel*," the Klingon came back, with a wry grin. "Agreed, so far. If you send us the specifications your shuttles require, we'll modify our cargo holds. What if there are both orbital ships and ground armaments, however?"

Renee Ingram tried not to allow her countenance to reveal that Kor had just told her a great deal about recent

modifications to the *Klothos*. Uneasy allies or not, she *would* be letting Starfleet Command know about them. "Then we enact both strategies at once. From what I've been able to glean from the conversations I've had with the man I suspect to be the coup leader, I've a feeling that they may have compromised some very necessary social, surveillance, and possibly military infrastructure in staging their coup."

"If the renegade group we think is behind this actually is, they would want such damage," Curzon said bitterly.

"You think they'd try to take over your home planet for themselves?" Captain Ingram asked. That would distinctly complicate matters.

Curzon shook his head. "It's never happened. No, they spread chaos and disease during social unrest, when the military has their hands full. What they'll do on my planet..." he shook his head once more, desolately, "I just don't like to think."

The captain of the *Enterprise* sighed. "You'll have to tell me more about this group later, Mr. Dax. For now, Commander Kor, it seems to me that the forces you'll want to send to Trillius in order to attempt to lay down this coup will require the vast majority of the space on the shuttles. Once they can gain control of ground-based weaponry, it should be relatively safe to beam down larger groups, from either the *Klothos* or the *Enterprise*.

"But I do want to look for my crewman. I propose that

the *Enterprise* landing team be composed of three people, including myself. We can aid you in dealing with this coup and its instigators, but you will have to provide us with security, and the surety of security while we're aboard your vessel. Will you do that, Commander?"

Chapter Twelve

"How could they endure those conditions?" Seantie asked, her voice striking a tone somewhere between awe and disbelief.

The answer to the conundrum of the strange goings-on aboard the *Enterprise* had been at least partially answered when the crew had shut down the starship's warp engines, in order to enter the Vega Canaris system on silent running. A shutdown of any of a starship's critical systems needed to be monitored both directly and indirectly. Direct monitoring had found the treasures and oddities that had gone missing since the twyvar boarded the ship, arranged artistically along one of the catwalks overlooking the warp core itself.

"They *couldn't*. No living being currently aboard the ship could. Those feathers and wisps of hair shouldn't be tolerating it, either; it's about four hundred degrees and full of tetrion and magneton radiation in there, and that's when we're not in warp," Mel'Taya replied.

"Could they be somehow tolerant of high heat and radiation? They might be building some sort of nest," Benbet said. "Maybe their kind requires heat and radiation to breed successfully?" the Tellarite had taken up a position so close to the Betazoid that the Andorian could see the fur of his hand brush hers. The sight made Mel'Taya feel

lonely. The *chae-na* pushed the emotion down and away, as though it was some sort of smelly, excessively amorous pet.

"Creatures that require those sorts of extreme environments to breed aren't mammalian, at least not that we know of," the senior science officer replied. "And they definitely don't exist on terrestrial planets; they're all from gas giants, or sometimes nebulae. They *certainly* wouldn't build nests out of computer chips, feathers, gemstones, wire, fabric, butterflies, and hair!" Lieutenant Voss argued.

"How do you imagine they managed to do all this without setting off the security camera parameters the captain requested?" the *Enterprise's* head of security disliked this situation for reasons that weren't apparent to anyone else watching the live-time feed of what was going on in and around the maintenance catwalks of the warp core. Sneaky little thieving alien fauna weren't something that particularly bothered Mel'Taya. What was really bothering the *chae-na* was the presence of an energy that didn't seem to belong to any spectra that Andorian antennae could perceive.

It wasn't something that either the Betazoid or the Tellarite were equipped to sense. Mel'Taya had learned that upon receiving odd looks from the other two when the fast-moving, indescribable flashes were pointed out to them. And whatever sort of energy it was, it didn't bear heavy scrutiny. Now here, now gone, it dissolved like mist

in the sunshine anytime Mel'Taya tried to focus on it.

Ensign Kanchumurthi chose that moment to return from his impromptu visit to the owners of the little creatures. His classical Dravidian features were ashen. Everyone in the security- section meeting room looked askance at the ensign, who motioned limply at the computerized table, which was currently projecting a holographic image full of busy little animals, before dropping bonelessly into a chair next to Mel'Taya. The human's fingers, the Andorian noted dispassionately, were trembling.

"None of the twyvar are outside their habitats. They were asleep, in fact. Twyvar are crankier than I am when you wake them up. Those things there," Kanchumurthi gulped audibly and pointed a quivering finger at the image, "can't possibly be the animals the doctors brought aboard *Enterprise* with them. Do you need me for anything else? Like maybe contacting the captain and letting her know what's going on?"

"We're on silent running, Ensign, but do contact Commander Felingaili and Lieutenant Buonarroti and let them know what we've found. They're going to want to see this," Seantie replied. The young Sikh nodded and left the situation room hurriedly.

Mel'Taya agreed. The ramp-down of the warp engines hadn't commenced until delta shift, when many of the senior officers were asleep. The engineering crew had,

naturally, contacted the specific group of individuals whom the captain had put in charge of this particular investigation, but in the Andorian's estimation, these findings certainly warranted rousing the ship's senior staff from slumber.

"So... the ship was infested with other twyvar at some other time?" the Tellarite protocol officer offered. Mel'Taya cast another look at the live-feed image. Even if the warp core itself had been malfunctioning, the Andorian didn't think it would put off energy emissions like this. Indeed, Mel'Taya had never experienced such emissions.

"I don't think that what we're looking at are twyvar at all," the security officer averred softly. Mel'Taya hadn't been surprised by Ramesh's discovery. Everyone else present stared at the Andorian in disbelief. Mel'Taya stared back for a long moment, then shrugged and announced to the air:

"Computer, are there unusual irradiative emissions present aboard the *Enterprise* currently?"

Working, the great brain of the starship replied blandly, adding, after a short pause:

There is a sharp increase in Berthold radiation within the hull of the Enterprise.

The computer announced this in a conversational tone in which Berthold radiation should never be discussed. The dusky-blue Talish *chae-na* felt its own countenance blanch, and everyone in the room cringed back into their

seats, a maneuver which would, of course, do absolutely no good; Berthold radiation disintegrated carbon-based tissue in a number of particularly nasty ways.

"Why wasn't this increase in Berthold radiation reported immediately?" Mel'Taya snapped, anger a thin veneer over a roiling mass of horror. Obviously, more was wrong here than a few missing personal items and some meaningless interface chips.

This radiation is low-spectrum, broad-band, and isotopically contained, the computer replied.

"Is it being put out by a sensor? Or some kind of..." the Betazoid matron posing the question shook her head, frowning; "*cloaking mechanism, computer?*"

Possibly both, the machine admitted.

"*Why wasn't this aberrational radiation and the possibility of alien sensors or cloaks not reported, computer?*" the *chae-na* demanded again in a low, melodic, poisonous hiss, a not-uncommon sign of murderous irritation in an Andorian. Sneaky little thieving alien fauna were one thing; sneaky little thieving alien fauna with the capability to conceal their true natures, which potentially included the desire to destroy a starship or its crew, were something else entirely.

Computer interface reaction to this variety of irradiative emission has been shut down, the machine confided, again conversationally, which was the way the ship's modified tenor confided anything. Mel'Taya snarled

out a long expletive in Thalassan, in too low a frequency for the Universal translators of the others to catch. "By whom?" the *Enterprise's* head of security demanded, far more loudly.

Uncertain, the computer replied. Benbet, Mel'Taya, and Seantie shared confused, terrified glances.

"I guess this means we're going to have to find out?" the little Tellarite protocol officer's tone was unhappy.

"Blood *wine*?" Renee Ingram said, with some trepidation. "Your people make alcoholic beverages from blood? Most cultures just...ah, stick with making gravy. I'd imagine that blood would turn into more of a..." she shrugged; "yogurt or cheese when fermented. How do you keep it *liquid*?"

The captain of the *Enterprise* regarded the pale violet beverage without a great deal of enthusiasm. It was served warm, like Japanese saké, but in far more enthusiastic quantities. Indeed, the cut-crystal goblet Kor had handed her resembled a soup bowl on a stem. Real cut crystals, too; hers was banded agate, Kor's was smoky quartz, and Curzon's was citrine.

They were meeting in Kor's private quarters, without the tiny *Enterprise* team Kor had agreed she could bring with her. Captain Ingram had determined that she needed a physician skilled in trans-humanoid medicine and Hali'ian psionics, and a security officer who possessed enough

physical brawniness for Klingons to respect, and also one whom they wouldn't wish to kill, which they most certainly would should she show up with an Andorian in tow. If there was one thing that Klingons disliked more than tribbles, it was the natives of *Fesoan*.

The *Enterprise* had taken a path into the Trillius system that would allow it to remain hidden in the electromagnetic shadow of Beta Canaris, close enough to respond quickly. Colin had determined that psionic energy fed into the shields should be able to protect the ship from electromagnetic-pulse weaponry, but this also meant that although her ship would be shielded from electromagnetic pulses, her shuttles would not.

The Klingon ship, just by having the cloaking device, was safe from EMP discharges; the electronics of a Klingon cloaking device sucked in stray electromagnetic particles, like those that caused an electromagnetic pulse, and fed off of them. Cloaking devices on ships cost too much energy to run, unless they were made this way. Ensign Tenger was currently ensuring the state of the shuttles in one of the *Klothos*' revamped cargo bays, while Doctor Corrigan was setting up a medical bay in one of the larger chambers of the Klingon warship, which didn't have one.

T'Dani was quite the object of interest among Kor's crew. Ingram had a distinct feeling that her CMO was going to have to draw boundaries at some point. She just

hoped that the process wouldn't entail drawing them in lurid mauve Klingon blood.

Ingram glanced around Kor's quarters. She had never seen a vessel with decor as dour and inflexible as that found on a Klingon ship. Things that weren't naturally or customarily metallic and hard in most contexts or cultures had been made to be metallic and hard — the seat she was currently ensconced in, for example. The beds were constructed along the same lines. She'd have to let T'Dani and Tenger know that they'd probably all want to sleep in the shuttles.

Kor offered her the ghost of a smile. "The beverage is named for its color, actually. It's made from a fruit called *zilm'daZH*. But fermented blood *is* the basis of blood pie."

"I've heard of blood pie. Similar to Terran spiced blood sausage? Or is it more like liverwurst?"

The Klingon commander raised his surgically modified brows at Ingram. The particular ridges and patterns of the Klingon brow, when untouched by the Augment virus, told the proud story of a person's family line. This was obliterated in Klingons who had been victims of the virus and survived, and neither plastic nor genetic surgery could wholly repair or duplicate it.

Human Augment technology, an ultimately terrible idea foisted on Terra by short-sighted individuals for what was mistakenly believed to be the best of all possible reasons, had created levels of suffering that would torment

the galaxy for generations to come. In any number of humanoid species, the Augment virus warped the natural shape of their bodies, their foreskulls, and possibly their brains. Federation researchers were fairly certain that the social upheavals on Qo'Nos, following the first wave of the virus, hadn't been caused solely by the sudden alteration of the Klingon countenance.

"Would you care to sample blood pie? We can make it part of dinner tonight," Kor inquired politely.

"I'd like that." Renee took a sip of her wine, blinked, and forced herself not to cough. She'd had freshly distilled whiskies that were less alcoholic, and smoother, than this. "Is this liquor distilled, or do you just use an enormous amount of sugar in its fermentation?"

"Yes," Kor replied, lifting his goblet to her. She smiled wryly and returned the toast. It went down easier the second time, since she was expecting the rough, acidic burn. "Perhaps sometime you would be so kind as to introduce me to the two foods you just mentioned?" the Klingon commander added.

Renee lifted her goblet to Kor in reply, hazarding another careful sip. "I'd be happy to. They're wonderful, which is also what I think of Klingon seafood in general." Ingram turned slightly in her uncomfortable seat to consider the other person sharing the room with them.

Curzon sat frowning into his goblet. The captain of the *Enterprise* imagined that he was probably more than a

little impatient with these niceties, considering what was occurring on his homeworld.

She offered him a smile, which he didn't return. "Before we get to Trillius, it'd be good for all of us to be in possession of as much pertinent information as possible, Mr. Dax.

"Someone who likes to call himself Relan Tesh claims to be heading your government right now. I checked, and the man who finally answered our hails is *not* the same person who was supposed to meet my senior communications officer. Either Relan Tesh has been killed and his identity stolen, or Tesh was part of the coup in the first place, and has lent out his name, being busy holding Yaelat hostage. At this point, either one of those suspicions appear equally likely to me."

"You have a visual of this person?" Dax snapped.

Renee Ingram nodded, pulling the compadd she'd brought with her from the *Enterprise* from an inner pocket in her uniform jacket. The compadd held the entire conversation she'd had with the man who wasn't Relan Tesh. She handed it to Trill's Ambassador to Qo'Nos, and Dax set the instrument to replay.

Ingram allowed the recorded conversation to play back for a few minutes, before inquiring:

"Are you acquainted with him?"

Curzon made the face Renee had wanted to make upon first tasting the blood wine. "Unfortunately. This is

Kiellon Daulet, the leader of the Trillius Prime Separatist Movement. Right the first time, Captain — the leaders of the coup are running the show. And Relan..." the Trill sighed heavily; "if *he's* dead..." he shook his head, shut off the compadd recording, and left the comment unfinished.

"So, there are factions of your people who dislike the thought of permanent Federation membership to such an extent that they're willing to wage a civil war of this magnitude?"

"Not everyone approves of the Big Thumb, Captain," Kor offered. Dax shot him an irritated glance. Captain Ingram looked down into the still mostly full goblet on the table before her. Until she'd gotten all the information out of these men that they'd be willing to share — and was somewhere other than the heart of a Klingon warship — she thought she'd let the gibe pass.

"There are factions of my people who still don't believe that the Federation either understands us, or will still approve of us, once they do," Curzon replied tightly.

That didn't strike Renee Ingram as a serious enough reason to launch ground-to-air nuclear strikes, but then again, it was more than a little apparent that she wasn't in possession of all pertinent data, and that the Trill in general were reticent to supply it. "May I inquire why?"

The Trill sighed again. Kor gave an irritated grunt.

"Some of them are joined species," the Klingon commander volunteered. Dax offered the Klingon whom

he claimed as blood-brother another irritated glance, but didn't speak.

Renee considered Kor's revelation from several angles, but regardless of how she turned and twisted them, the words refused to give up their meaning. "And that signifies?" she prompted.

Both men appeared so reticent to elaborate that she wished momentarily that she'd dared to bring Colin along to take part in these proceedings, but Klingons regarded Minarans, and telepaths in general, with deep suspicion and distrust. Though Colin was by no means an average Minaran, and didn't even come from this space-time continuum, *Thl'Ingan* people were not known for their ability to forgive what they felt were affronts. The presence of even an atypical Minaran, who looked Rumantian and utilized crystals like an Hali'ian, and whose psionic abilities were by no means limited to telepathy, might be perceived by them to be just that.

Dax replied without returning Renee's concentrated gaze. "It *means* that there are non-humanoid species on our planet, Captain, who are sentient but largely unable to experience life as you or I experience it. Shortly, you might — if you were an insensitive, uncouth boor, which I'm sure, Captain, you are *not* — consider these sentient beings to be highly-evolved livers or brains. Or perhaps both.

"When joined with a symbiosis-capable humanoid,

they share the knowledge and memories of their minds, both of which are considerable. They store humanoid memories in their own flesh, and we offer *them* a larger sensory experience of life. They have different sensory apparatus than we do.

“Joined this way, progressing from host to host over time, these sentient Symbionts are, for all intents and purposes, immortal. And because they store the memories of our lives, for all intents and purposes, joined Trills like myself are immortal, too.”

Renee took a slow, contemplative sip of her blood wine.

Chapter Thirteen

"Computer, commence bombarding the catwalks around the warp core with ionizing therion radiation, and polarize all core-directional verterium plating in the main warp core," Lieutenant Rafael Buonarroti, the *Enterprise's* senior engineer, focused his gaze somewhere in the middle distance, as most humanoids did when addressing a starship's computer. As he finished latching the helmet of his radiation suit, his dark-eyed gaze returned to the other officers in the room with him, and he added:

"Whatever the hell the things are, that should allow us to hold them in this area."

"Assuming that these are all there are on the ship," Mel'Taya retorted glumly.

Everyone present had donned the radiation-shielding garb that took up space in the lockers lining the warp-core accessway anteroom walls. Radioactively inert core-access areas on Federation starships were composed of verterium cortenide plating. These plates could be removed at need and fed into one of the ship's industrial replicators, in order to produce shrouds for working parts in the reactor itself, should the reactor's original verterium shrouds wear out, which they did anytime a starship was forced to maintain high warp speeds for long periods of time.

"The therion radiation should, at least, rip apart any

illusory projection these things might be making," Seantie said. This technique had been invented by the Cairn during the Psionic War, much to the detriment of their planetary environment. It had been Voss' idea to try it on the *Enterprise*.

"And hopefully," Benbet added dourly, wriggling uncomfortably in an environmental suit at least two sizes too large for him, "it won't rip us or the ship apart, as well."

He was the smallest, most pale-furred Tellarite that anyone on the *Enterprise* had ever seen. Added to his atypical personality style, it was no wonder he was so starved for affection; he must get rebuffed among his own people a lot. Hopefully, Seantie thought to herself, serving aboard the Federation flagship would allow him the opportunity to make close connections. The current iteration of the *Enterprise* had been created as a beta-test for the mixing and matching of a large variety of humanoid species, and the test had so far worked out better than even the most hopeful exopsychologist at Starfleet Command might have wished. Granted, there *were* occasional cataclysmic failures...

Lieutenant Voss drew a breath of canned, continually sterilized air, and focused on the matter at hand. There were no viewports in this room or its access hatchway that would allow them to see what was going on — what they would really encounter — on the catwalks around the warp core. Anything solid that the animals (if they *were*

animals) had absconded with to assemble on the catwalks would be held in thermionic stasis, as would the creatures themselves, until the irradiative field Buonarroti had set up was dismissed.

After which, all of it would simply cease to exist, including, it was hoped, the strange low-frequency Berthold effect which the high-frequency thermions should corral and, ultimately, consume. However, if the Berthold effect altered in frequency while the thermions were active...

Seantie shuddered and followed the other three people involved in this potentially lethal analysis of the reason for the strange goings-on aboard the *Enterprise* into the access hatchway of the airlock between the changing room and the warp core catwalks.

The captain of the *Enterprise* thoughtfully considered the male Trill across the table from her. "And... this *joining* is biological? Consensual?"

Dax met her stare unflinchingly. "Entirely. Roughly half of our people — humanoid Trill — would make suitable hosts for Trill Symbionts. That's a *heavily* guarded secret, however. Fewer than one-tenth of those are ever selected for training, and less than a tenth of *those* are ever chosen to become hosts. Trill humanoids outnumber Trill Symbionts roughly twenty-five to one.

"We don't put pressure on the Symbionts to breed

more, or faster, and they've never been cloned. Both of those actions are forbidden. It's a *sacred* duty, and a joy, to be joined to another sentient being, Captain. The Separatists among us insist that nobody else in the Federation either can or will be disposed to understand our feelings regarding this relationship."

Renee took another sip of wine. It reminded her, vaguely, of peat-smoked scotch in combination with a particularly good cabernet. She determined not to drink more than half a goblet of the stuff; she needed to remain lucid.

"Your Separatists are mistaken, Ambassador Dax. The Federation hosts entire systems full of empaths and telepaths who would implicitly understand just what such a relationship means." Renee pointedly ignored the sour face Kor made at this suggestion and went on; "I suspect that might be why Federation officials chose Yaelat as a representative. He's a skilled cultural surveyor, and Hali'ians are empaths. Tell me, Ambassador; is this symbiotic relationship something that both sentient species on Trillius evolved to over time?"

Dax shook his head slowly. "There was a time, perhaps a dozen millennia ago, that Trill humanoids thought of Trill Symbionts as having no more sentience or nobility than pets."

Humans, at that time, were hardly past the ice age that had forced their pelt-wearing, fire-wielding, hunter-

gatherer bands into caves. When reviewing the available information about Relan Tesh before beaming over to the *Klothos*, Ingram had also learned, to her surprise, that modern Trill culture was as ancient as the modern culture of Vulcan. "But you learned better? And I assume that now they're treated with the dignity and respect due sentient beings, even when not joined to a humanoid Trill?"

Curzon offered Renee a sad smile. "As a rule, yes. Unfortunately, there's always got to be exception to every rule. As this coup demonstrates, there are those among us who consider Trill Symbionts to be more worthy of respect and dignity than Trill humanoids."

Renee considered this information in silence for a moment. What variable among all of these revelations, she wondered, might spur a nuclear-warhead-backed coup? "It seems to me that somebody considers the sentient Symbionts of Trillius to be of *value*. There's a distinct difference, Mr. Dax, between value and worth.

"In which case," she leaned forward over the table toward the Trill and the Klingon, pushing her goblet aside, "is it possible that one or more Trills who consider themselves Separatists would *actually* like to be in...oh, not-so-respectful control of the Symbionts, in order to, say, sway the remainder of the humanoid Trills to their own agendas, whatever those might be?"

Dax raised an eyebrow at her. "The Federation doesn't put idiots in command of its starships, does it?"

Kor offered a raucous bark of laughter.

Captain Ingram grinned. "I should hope not. Any idea of what Kiellon's dearest thwarted plans might entail?"

"Well, he *is* a Separatist. He doesn't want to be part of the Federation —"

"What *does* he want to be part of?" Ingram interrupted sharply.

Curzon blinked and sank lower into his chair. "Once? He wanted to be a joined Trill. He couldn't pass even the simplest socialization requirements for entrance into the program. Then he made several bids for government posts. He's lost every one he ever made — he doesn't pass *those* requirements, either, of course."

"Of course?"

The Trill shrugged. "He's an eccentric neurotic, prone to bouts of unwarranted narcissism and a distinct lack of compassion. Anyone or anything that doesn't meet the needs or standards of the little troll's..." Dax pursed his lips, closed his eyes momentarily, and came at the rest of his point less passionately:

"He feels that Trill are — or, considering his general worldview, *he* is — unique in the galaxy, and to join the Federation would be to compromise that. He points to your tendency to..." he threw a forbidding look at Kor, and the Klingon obligingly snapped his mouth shut around whatever verb it was that he'd been prepared to supply; "*standardize* everything."

"Not true. I say that both in reference to the standardization comment, and to the idea that Kiellon wants to remain *separate*. What he probably thinks is that *he* will receive a fairer deal, or at least the realization of his thwarted desires, elsewhere. Not uncommon among the sort of individuals you imply Daulet to be.

"Which is interesting, but the integral question is this; any idea who it might be that's funded all of these lost political bids he's made?" Renee cast Kor a long, considering glance.

The commander of the *Klothos* bridled. "Are you *implying* that the Klingons have backed this coup?" he snarled. Ingram shrugged.

"No idea. How about this criminal organization you think might have supplied the coup with weaponry. Is its leader a Klingon?"

Renee watched the muscles work in Kor's jaw and forehead for several seconds. The newly implanted regenerating bone in his skull flushed an ugly puce. The big man was infuriated rather beyond what that question warranted. It occurred to her that Tenger would be a great comfort to have in the room right about now. Ingram picked up her goblet and sipped at it, in order to cover her sense of alarm.

Dax reached over and laid a hand on Kor's arm. "She's trying to work out the truth, Kor."

"The *truth*," Kor spat, "is that this *puh'Takh* killed my

infant son! The *truth* is that the *ghay'cha Qatl hquy'Ip* should have died at birth and spared Qo'Nos and her colonies the shame of having to either admit or endure his existence. The *truth* is that I will hunt Qagh like a rabid targ until I bring him down. *That is the truth!*"

Renee choked on her blood wine; it wasn't a pleasant experience. "*Qagh?*"

Both the Klingon and the Trill fixed her with skeptical, disbelieving stares.

"What would you know of Qagh?" Kor hazarded finally.

The captain of the *Enterprise* rubbed at her streaming eyes. "He nearly killed my senior helmsman about three years ago, using a variant of the Klingon Imperial virus. I was first officer of the *Enterprise* then..." she shook her head and turned her full attention to Kor. There was something about this that the man wasn't telling her.

"I'm sorry about your son. You must believe me when I say that." To Klingons, a bond of blood was a bond of steel, and she wouldn't hesitate to use that if it fostered understanding, or at least tolerance.

This information about Qagh, though...

Three years ago, Hikaru Sulu had helped to locate the renegade Klingon, wresting the cure to the virulent disease that the renegade had imposed on him and, through him, his daughter, from the certifiably insane young Klingon albino and his followers. But both Hikaru Sulu and John

Harriman had been under the impression...

"Starfleet Command believes that *Qagh* is dead."

Kor tore his gaze away from hers, rose, and went to pour himself more blood wine. It was Dax who replied:

"No. Like a *merzh*, he seems to have a hundred lives. At birth, he had...medical issues that caused his mother to expose him, per Klingon custom. From what we've been able to piece together, he was taken by Orion slavers and ended up being raised an Orion privateer."

"Ah." Renee set down her drink and considered the myriad implications of this. John Harriman hadn't volunteered this information to his senior staff. She and John had been close; she could only imagine that it was information that her then-CO hadn't been aware of, himself.

Captain Ingram regarded Kor's broad back. *Medical issues*. She did know that sickly or handicapped Klingon infants were once exposed and claimed to have died before or during parturition by their families. Outside of direct family members involved in the exposure, others usually weren't aware that a birth had occurred. It simply wasn't spoken of. Nowadays, of course, a pregnancy that might produce such a child could be ended by a Klingon woman and her healthcare provider well before such steps needed to be taken.

Who was this *Qagh*? Kor's own brother, perhaps? One whose role in his life had been taken over by Curzon

Dax? Not that relationship really mattered in the grand scheme of what was happening now.

"You tell me the sentient Symbionts on Trill have never been cloned or made to reproduce by force, and have never been obligated to take part in unwanted association, but that they offer their humanoid hosts the equivalent of immortality. Does it sound to *you* like cloning Trill Symbionts into a sort of slave-race that would willingly take part in obligatory association might be tempting to..." Captain Ingram shrugged, "oh, say the *Caju-tara*?"

Kor, about to sit back down with a refreshed goblet, set his blood wine on the table with a thump, as though he'd nearly lost control of the glass. The crystal rang bad-naturedly. "The ruling houses of Orion?" he breathed.

Renee shrugged. "And all the power they could bestow upon Qagh. That's just one theory; it might not be exactly —"

"You're saying that Qagh's plan is to sell my planet into slavery?" Dax hissed. His expression was horrified. Again, Renee shrugged.

"It's one possible suggestion. It would certainly make whoever was in control of your planet exceptionally powerful. Does it strike you that Mr. Daulet would be satisfied with being the Emperor of Trillius, with an appropriately tamed Symbiont to ensure his immortality? Because, you know, cloning the Symbionts *could* augment whatever traits one desires into them. And would Daulet

also be willing to hold a Starfleet officer as surety against Federation involvement in this non-Federation issue?"

Curzon scrubbed at his ashen face with both hands. "Though it would be much more reassuring to me if Starfleet captained it ships with idiots, I suppose we should be glad that it doesn't. What the hell do we *do* about this?"

Chapter Fourteen

"You're a pretty little thing. I could eat you in two bites!"

Kor glanced up at his subcommander, Glash; the oaf was obviously drunk. The commander of the *Klothos* bit back an irritated growl.

The part-Vulcan doctor from the *Enterprise*, to whom the subcommander had addressed his interest, appeared to ignore him entirely. The Orion security man, directly across the table from the captain of the *Enterprise*, directed a fascinated grin toward Kor's inebriated XO, the look that some humans would call *schaudenfreude* and Klingons called *mAk'tAgh* lighting up his preternaturally solemn countenance.

"That is a *really* bad idea," Tenger announced. Captain Ingram directed an indecipherable human expression toward her junior security officer. The captain of the *Klothos* was going to enjoy watching the Orion extract the little doctor from harm's way.

Kor felt a grin tugging at the corners of his lips. Glash was always good for a little light entertainment. Not for much else, unfortunately. As the old Klingon saying went; *when it's windy, you can hear that one's ears whistle*. Kor would have to see about a replacement, once he returned to Qo'Nos. "Sit down, Glash! These are allies in our quest to

free Trill. They're not to be molested. Eat something, Subcommander."

Glash chuckled humorlessly, never a good way to respond to one's superiors aboard a Klingon ship. Kor fingered his eating knife thoughtfully.

The subcommander ignored this blatant warning; "But she *likes* me, Commander. Don't you, sweetheart?" Glash knelt down melodramatically next to the *Enterprise's* CMO to pull her against him, and very nearly out of her chair. "I've never seen a Vulcan so —"

As Tenger must have known would happen (*personal experience?* the commander of the *Klothos* mused to himself), the Klingon subcommander didn't get to further his overtures. As though to keep herself from falling gracelessly out of her seat, the blonde Vulcan had flung her left arm over the subcommander's shoulder. She had small hands, and it was the work of a moment to slide one under the band of armor that crossed his rotator cuff, and find the sensitive cranial nerve nestled between that and his neck.

The drunken Klingon slumped in one direction, and the Vulcan doctor pushed herself away from Kor's unwise subcommander in the other. Rising gracefully, she kicked the unconscious man smartly in the mouth with the heel of her boot, hastening his appointment with the floor.

Kor chuckled under his breath; "*Maj'rAM, Subcommander!*"

He doubted that Glash, whom he had just wished

goodnight, would forget this experience soon — at least not before he'd had his jaw and teeth repaired. Kor imagined that the CMO of the *Enterprise* would not be volunteering for that job. He took a contented swig of wine and sat back comfortably, to await whatever other entertainment chose to present itself at this evening's board.

"Let's get something straight *right* now," The Vulcan snarled at everyone seated around the table at large as she resumed her seat, denim-blue eyes as cold as an encroaching ice storm; "half a hand to the right, and I could have snapped his spine. *Or* I could have kicked half a foot-length higher, and *harder*, and sent shards of bone into his brain. The next one who touches me, *I will kill*."

The commander of the *Klothos* gave the entralling physician a sardonic round of applause. Drunk or not, out of bounds or not, Kor considered his subcommander to be correct about one thing:

Kor had never seen, or imagined, a Vulcan woman quite like this one, either. The effect was titillating. He swept the table full of subtly bristling Klingon officers with his gaze. "Bravo, doctor! Of course, to do that, she'd have to get to you before *I* do. You'll all leave our guests *alone*, and tell your people the same, unless I say otherwise, eh?" he tossed his head at his adjutant bodyguard, while pointing at the unconscious man on the floor:

"Take that to the brig and leave it there for the

remainder of this mission. Let me extend my apologies to you, doctor, but you know," the Klingon commander shook his head and took a deep drink from his wine cup, a metal one this time; "the idiot does that *all* the time. You're not the first woman to break his jaw. The last one who did, he thought he was engaged to for a week, before I managed to set him straight."

Ingram, her security officer, and her CMO watched, variable and occasionally indecipherable expressions fleeting across their faces like cloud-shadows across a prairie, as the subcommander's adjutants picked up his limp form and carried him out of the dining hall, just as the food arrived. Kor was pleased to see that his galley crew had followed his commands to the letter, producing delicacies unlikely to turn touchy alien stomachs.

They are beginning to perceive our true natures. Surely, the sudden therion bombardment is an attempt to communicate? To reveal that, despite their apparently limited, fragile natures, they can perceive the higher electromagnetic ranges?

We must not assume that. We must allow them to approach us. We may harm them mortally, if we reveal ourselves as we truly are. This is the safest approach. We must allow them to show us a mode of communication that won't injure them somehow.

If they are truly so limited, so locked into a

vanishingly tiny band of perception, will they be capable of comprehending the Dream at all? This was the Being's true fear; that despite the appearance of sentience, the inflexibility of corporeal existence would keep the Being from making contact.

They possess instrumentation that allows them to perceive quantum particles and superstrings. Their apparently limited sense capabilities are no more real than the mask we have put on for their benefit. Yet it is also a mask devised to protect them. Would you crush them?

That the creatures the Being was trying to make contact with were an assemblage of many, not unlike the Being itself, was understood. That this assemblage contained non-sentient parts, however, was difficult to understand. That the assemblages of *humanoids* were greater than all the sums of their parts...again, it was as though this galaxy, this particular assemblage of species had been *planned*.

Naturally, the Being was anxious to make contact, to proclaim the reality of itself to other minds that did not, from arrogance and ten billion years of jaded sameness, find it amusing to try and crush other Beings. It had tried, for so long, to initiate just such contact with creatures that seemed sentient, only to find that its methods were either illegible or imperceptible. It required sentient senses, because only sentient senses could comprehend the Gift that the Being wanted to bestow.

It occurred to the Being that, if these humanoids finally did realize what it was they were dealing with, the Being might cause less consternation (the Being could perceive that it was causing consternation, the way a human disturbing an ant's nest might perceive that it was causing the insects consternation) by appearing in true form outside the starship. Simultaneously, it occurred to the Being that this might actually cause greater consternation.

The Being decided that, if the humanoids could not decipher its overtures accurately, it could easily access the archaic hardware that the humanoids in the delicate bubble that bumbled its way through spacetime for them called *computer*. *Computer* was a quantum device, controlled through the passage and placement of subatomic particles within a rubidinium-topaline-silicon matrix, as simplistic in its use as counting-beads on a string, as straightforward as a sharp obsidian blade. This had been determined by the minor manipulations the Being had already performed with it.

We shall, the Being thought, delighted at the prospect of communication with the humanoids, *have to be very careful not to break their burrowing-bubble. Perhaps they would be more capable of perception in another spectra?* There were several that the Being could choose from, but it would be patient, and allow them to show it which spectra they preferred.

Captain Ingram, on edge after Kor's subcommander breached all standards of protocol, decency, and safety to accost her CMO, turned her attention to the fare loaded onto the gleaming metal table with a feeling of trepidation.

An entire *targ* had been roasted to blood-rare in deference to the human preference for cooked meat. This was surrounded by blood pies, which were not at all the pecan-pie-like dish she had been expecting, but an assortment of small pastries (whose fillings were of various obscenely brilliant hues, the captain of the *Enterprise* was alarmed to note). Also present was pre-cracked pripus claw, and a number of platters containing insects or mollusks, whose movements signified their levels of freshness.

"You must try the *gach*, Captain," Kor enthused.

Captain Ingram was glad to have a pretext that would allow her to avoid that grim eventuality. She addressed her response to Commander Kor; "I've been looking forward to the pripus claw and the blood pie, Commander. Would it be rude of me to try the blood pie first? I'm assuming," she added, "that the different...ahm, colors signify different...ahm, preparation methods?"

"No, indeed; different sorts of blood! A *rokeg* is a Klingon creature, with blood like ours. Blood pie's most often made from that, but we also keep livestock from colony planets for their blood. The green and blue and red

ones are —"

"Copper and cobalt and iron-based blood?" Captain Ingram hazarded. When humans made foodstuffs out of blood, they took great pains to disguise it. She bit back a sigh. She was going to have to pretend to herself that they were jelly pastries or something.

"Exactly. Those who prepare blood pies take great pride in how well they can maintain the natural hue of the blood as it ferments, so that it doesn't just form unappetizing brown or black curds, though we also add food coloring to blood pies on my ship.

"I like my blood-pie *bright!* The enemies of the Klingon people, you know," Kor frowned forbiddingly, "spread the rumor that we use the blood of our enemies to make these pies. Not true, of course; such a thing hasn't been done since before the time of Kahless, when blood pies were a celebration of battle well-fought."

Tenger winced, but accepted a slice of roast targ. Across the table from both of them, T'Dani's countenance was Vulcan-grim. She was, her best friend well knew, furious.

Consciously ignoring the allusions to cannibalism that Kor's comments dredged up, while knowing that doing so guaranteed that they would show up again in her dreams soon, Ingram reached toward the platter of pies, and chose a red-hued one. She'd eaten meat containing copper or cobalt myoglobin before, but that had been cooked or

smoked animal flesh, not fermented blood, and she felt it best in such a case to stick with what she found most familiar.

Tearing the pastry in half carefully, she set the half in her right hand on her security officer's plate. This seemingly innocuous activity caused every Klingon present to beat whatever utensils they might be holding against the single long dining hall table present in the officers' mess.

All three *Enterprise* officers glanced around themselves in alarm. "Have I done something against good manners, Commander Kor?" Captain Ingram inquired.

The big Klingon man beamed the mellow smile of liquor over his goblet at them, chuckling softly. "Not at all, Captain. The splitting of a blood pie signifies a desire to mate. My crew was simply congratulating you."

T'Dani, who was taking refuge and probably more than a little comfort in her goblet of blood wine, choked slightly. Tenger flushed the color of sunlight shining through a thick mat of philodendron leaves. Ingram gave the Klingon commander a brittle smile, gestured toward T'Dani, and said:

"Then I guess it's good that I didn't split one with her."

Every Klingon at the table laughed, and Kor toasted Captain Ingram's good fortune, before the Klingons in the mess hall bent their heads as one over their plates and began to eat with great enthusiasm.

Obnoxious narrow-minded barbarians, Ingram

thought grumpily. She didn't worry about anyone picking up her thoughts; had a Klingon been born with psionic capacity, such an unfortunate individual would have been killed. She nibbled at the blood pie, not particularly hungry, but concerned that if she didn't eat, some other grim fate might await her. No wonder the Trill ambassador was absent; he was probably too upset to eat and knew better than to even show up in the mess hall in such a state.

Tenger said, *sotto voce*; "Just kill me now, Captain."

"Now, Ensign, why would you say such a thing?" Ingram whispered back.

"Because it may be quicker at your hands," Tenger replied, toying with the oozing meat on his plate before finally giving up, lifting the unwieldy slab in his fingers, and tearing some off with his teeth. Klingons didn't believe in forks, apparently; knife-like and spoon-like implements were the only utensils on the table. To the Orion's evident relief, this act didn't precipitate howls of either irritation or approbation from the Klingons, many of whom also had their hands full of roast targ.

"What do you think of the blood pie, Captain Ingram?" Kor boomed from the head of the table, inadvertently saving the shy young Orion from the sort of conversation no newly brevetted ensign ever wanted to have with the captain of the ship he was billeted on.

"There's a Chinese delicacy I like, Commander Kor," Renee replied. "Its filling is an exotic Terran fruit called

durian, in a sweet tofu dough fried in oil in which garlic and ginger have simmered. In some ways, your blood pie reminds me of this delicacy. I like them very much. Perhaps someday, Commander, we could meet on Earth and I could introduce you to dim sum."

"Dim...?"

"It means 'little plates'. T'Dani," Ingram turned to her CMO, who had dared to sample the *gach*; Renee had known she would. Timid and resistant as she might be in other situations, in matters of food, she was the most adventurous person Renee had ever met. "How is that?"

"Texture's a lot like seaweed in oil. Tastes something like hollandaise sauce, though."

"They become sourer and spicier as they sit," Kor advised. "More wine, everyone?"

Chapter Fifteen

When Buonarroti, Voss, Benbet, and Mel'Taya breached the inner door of the airlock leading to the catwalks above the now-quiescent and cool warp core, what liquid there was remaining in the mass of objects the twyvar had arranged seemingly at random on the floor of the catwalk one level below them was still reacting with the thermion radiation.

"Critical opalescence," Seantie said, watching the liquid wink into gaseous phase.

"Like everything down there wasn't opalescent enough in the first place?" Benbet snorted.

Mel'Taya surprised everyone by kneeling down on the catwalk — not something even an Andorian could do gracefully in a bulky anti-rad suit — before going on hands and knees and, finally, splaying out prostrate on the walkway.

"What are you doing?" Rafe asked.

"Trying for a closer look. There's something here that I don't think the rest of you are seeing."

"From here it looks like an abstract of a circuit board or something," Benbet said.

"Critical opalescence only occurs at the liquid-to-gas transition phase. And I don't see any animals in here at the moment —" Seantie began.

"Perhaps the animals are dead now."

"Perhaps, as we already know, Rafe, the animals aren't *animals* at all. Perhaps they're something that's evolved to the stage of constant critical opalescence. Quantum critical-opalescence, after all, is the technology behind modern holography," the *Enterprise's* Betazoid senior science officer lectured.

"So, what you're saying is that, once you've evolved beyond a certain point, you become a hologram?" the senior engineer teased.

Seantie made a face at him through the faceplate of her radiation suit. "There've been mathematically-feasible hypotheses presented for over two hundred years that say that *everything* is a hologram!"

The *chae-na* shook its head. "Whatever's made this art below us is still present; I can detect its energy. Why, though, would something so advanced use art to communicate? Why not use mathematics, which is after all a language, or just utilize the computers directly?"

"There must be a reason. What sort of communication is art good for, anyway? Or can it even be considered —" Buonarroti began.

The *Enterprise's* unwontedly exuberant new protocol officer interrupted the ship's senior engineer; "In animals specifically, art has two known uses — Sexual selection via attraction, and the attracting of attention in and of itself. This is thought to promote social cohesion between species

and possibly frighten off predator species. As animals evolve, it becomes more apparent that art serves a function in enhancing the advancement of cognition. Finally, among truly sentient species, art is or can be a form of communication in and of itself."

Mel'Taya had actually rolled over to stare up at the data effusive Tellarite. The rest of the team offered Benbet gazes of equivalently bemused amazement from upright positions.

"In and of itself?" the Andorian parroted, dryly.

Benbet shrugged and held up his hands. "What? I'm a protocol officer. We're supposed to know stuff like that!"

"So I see," Mel'Taya replied, rolling back over. "I am definitely perceiving more in this...*artwork* than I believe any of you currently are. Whether it's the advancement of cognition, or an actual attempt at some sort of communication, I couldn't say. I need you to be able to perceive it as I do. Computer, can you illuminate the area around catwalks... mmm...where are we, Lieutenant Buonarroti, and the level below us?"

"We're on catwalk level twenty-six delta; the catwalk below us is level twenty-seven alpha."

"Computer, illuminate a spherical area with a total radius of thirty feet, whose antipodes are located directly between catwalks twenty-five and twenty-six delta, and twenty-seven and twenty-eight delta, solely in black light," Mel'Taya requested.

Suddenly, the four humanoids weren't in a warp core anymore. They were, instead, suspended in galactic-deep space lit by wheeling galaxies on a velvet-dark backdrop composed of thermionically reactive metals scattered with UV-absorptive human hair, jewels, feathers, and various other items. These items were artfully arranged to compose perfect galaxies and galactic clusters, visible in as many portions of the electromagnetic spectra as a starship's sensors might provide.

"Avincente!" Rafael Buonarroti breathed.

"Who here still thinks that animals made this?" Mel'Taya whispered from the general vicinity of Seantie's boots.

"Computer, scan the artwork arranged as a galactic cluster that's currently visible on the warp-core catwalk directly beneath Lieutenant Rafael Buonarroti," Seantie snapped, "in all spectra in which ship's sensors are capable, and determine what, if any, galactic clusters are similar to it from where the ship is currently located."

Working, the computer replied. The four officers on the catwalk above the warp core gazed downward in wonder until, finally, the computer droned on:

The artwork referenced appears to be a four-dimensional representation of galactic cluster SDSS J1004T4112, commonly known as the Kevas Cluster. In the full representational artwork currently suspended above the warp core, galaxies have been shifted in such a

way as to make this cluster appear as it will be seen ten billion years from now at this location.

This model is comprehensible only since the Kevas Cluster is ten billion light-years away. Similar time shifting as done in this artwork has been performed previously, however, by the technicians of Memory Beta, to better comprehend the true nature of the cluster as it exists in its own time.

"So, are we dealing with some highly-advanced energy creature that comes from somewhere in the Kevas Cluster? That was *not* a question, computer," Seantie said.

"Or creatures. Ones that furthermore know what galaxies ten billion light years away look like as they exist right now," the *Enterprise*'s senior security officer replied, standing back up.

"Some sort of creatures that have evolved into...what, quantum computers?" Rafe said. His tone was skeptical.

"I would imagine you could evolve into a lot of things in ten billion years," Benbet said. "Can we turn the lights back on now?"

Mel'Taya snorted. "Depending on what part of the electromagnetic spectrum you see in, Benbet, the lights *are* on. Computer, visual-spectra lighting throughout the entire maze of catwalks surrounding the warp core."

The computer responded immediately to Mel'Taya's request. Once more, the mass of materials on the catwalks around them resolved into something resembling nothing

more than a messy, multi-textured carpet.

Lieutenant Voss sighed. "And then there's the bizarre little fact that the Universe is finite in time, but infinite in expansion because of the slow decay of the temporal effect. Given that, and a sufficiently advanced non-corporeal being, whatever these are could be significantly *older* than a mere ten billion years."

"Great, Seantie. So how do we let these incredibly evolved creatures know that we realize they're here, but that we have absolutely no clue what they might or might not be?" Buonarroti started to turn back to the catwalk side of the airlock door. The others followed.

"If they're *that* advanced, wouldn't they already know?"

"*Exactly*, Benbet," Voss agreed, following Rafe carefully over the lip of the airlock sill.

"Let's hope that they're benevolent quantum computers," Mel'Taya said dryly.

Rafe gave the Andorian droll look. "I dunno. If they weren't, wouldn't we be toast already? And besides, how many vicious dictators create art?"

"Adolf Hitler of Terra. Berast Mel of Draylax. Korg the Merciless, who did in the extended families of fifteen entire Great Houses during the Klingon —"

"That was a hypothetical question, Benbet, I swear."

"That's what you get for asking hypothetical questions," Seantie teased Rafael, as the warp-core side

door sealed and the airlock chamber flushed anti-irradiatives through its vent ports. It would take three minutes for the cycle to finish, and the inner door to open. "Now we just need to see whether whatever-this-is might be willing to communicate by some less arcane means, or whether we all need to learn how to paint."

"I paint," Benbet volunteered hopefully.

Mel'Taya chuckled.

Chapter Sixteen

"The atmosphere is largely intact," the Klingon woman at the *Klothos*' equivalent of an operations station offered, in response to her senior officer's dour glare. Tenger stood behind Renee, taking in the current state of Trillius prime as silently and thoughtfully as he took in everything. "Sensors are able to penetrate. But there is no one alive at the coordinates you specify, Commander."

Kor jumped up out of his chair and came to stand in front of Captain Ingram and Ensign Tenger to goggle at the readings on his officer's board over her right shoulder. "You're telling me someone performed this dishonorable act to take over the Trill government, and no one is present at the seat of that government?"

The officer moved away from her board slightly and gestured at it. "This is precisely what the data reveal, Commander. All of Leran Manev is a crater. Not even corpses remain. I *do* read the remains of a Federation vessel at the end of the peninsula, but no life signs are present in or near it, either."

Nodding somberly, Kor turned to Renee. "Even after ground crews clean up and rebuild, it's unlikely that anyone will be governing from Leran Manev for a while. I wonder if Daulet took that into consideration?"

"Unlikely," Captain Ingram replied. "But at least now

I know where to start searching for my crewman." She half-turned to look over her shoulder at the only other two people present on the Klingon bridge at what amounted to the wee hours of this ship's morning. She needed to ask Dax exactly what lay at the tip of the Gances peninsula.

Behind the security officer, near Kor's command chair, T'Dani was holding a soft conversation with Curzon, trying to keep the Trill calm in the face of what had happened on his homeworld. "It must be truly annoying when the voices in your head are real," the CMO of the *Enterprise* was saying.

"Humans have the best aphorism to describe that, which is odd, considering that they have no idea what it's like; *the itty-bitty shitty committee*. As a joined Trill, I keep regularly scheduled meetings with mine," Curzon said dryly. "And surely, as a telepath, the other voices in your head are *also* sometimes real?"

"That's why, as Captain Ingram mentioned, any Federation telepath should comprehend the relationship between Trill Symbionts and Trill humanoids."

"It's not me...*us* who need convincing, Doctor. It never has been. It's the likes of Kiellon Daulet's faction." Dax looked away from T'Dani and frowned at the forward viewscreen of the *Klothos*.

Trillius Prime was usually a gem-toned jewel, amethyst swirled with landmasses of emerald and jasper that turned to pearl at the poles, with a higher percentage of

oxygen in its atmosphere than Terra possessed, which caused the Rayleigh scatter-tone of the sky to veer toward green. What the people on the Klingon warship's bridge gazed upon now, however, was a world veiled in swirling grays, browns, and sooty blacks of cloud and smoke that spat bad-tempered lightning.

The planet was temporarily ringed with the detritus what had once been a docking station, and of numerous humanoid-made satellites smashed to smithereens. The fact that there were any Trill comm satellites still in orbit astounded Renee, making her skeptical of their true nature, but to both the *Enterprise* and the *Klothos*, their energy-signatures defined them as simple Trillius Prime CommSats, and nothing more.

Kor heaved a sigh and turned away from the viewscreen to sit down heavily in the bridge's central chair once more. Renee followed, and Tenger tagged along like a well-behaved pup. "Still no signs of enemy vessels?" the Klingon commander snapped.

"No, Commander. Sorry, sir," the young woman at the ops station replied.

Continuous scans revealed that were no apparent spaceborne military vessels other than Kor's ship in the vicinity of Trillius Prime, though the *Klothos* persisted in looking for them. Qagh and his people, both Kor and Curzon reasoned, would require some type of escape vessel, at least.

Captain Ingram wasn't sure whether the apparent non-existence of spaceborne vessels around Trillius Prime reassured her, or made her horribly nervous. Klingon warships, after all, didn't possess the best passive scanner capacity, the only scans that could be performed on silent running. Of course, the option also existed that, if Qagh and his people had been part of this at all, they had already left.

She mentioned this possibility to Kor.

"And lose the opportunity to experience his masterwork? Because that's what he considers the sad and horrific tableaux he creates, Captain. To delight in the suffering of others, as he feels that others once delighted in his own suffering, to see it and smell it, touch it and taste it while remaining secure and safe —"

"How exactly does one remain secure and safe on a planet that's experiencing the aftereffects of nuclear bombardment?" Ingram interrupted Kor. It had occurred to her, more than once, that Kor had chosen the wrong line of work; he could, she mused, have taken the Klingon operatic stage by storm. "This wasn't a couple of dirty-bombs, Commander. The cratering of Leran Manev would've needed mega-kiloton ordnance, and selective targeting of spaceborne shuttles says compact smart-missiles to me. If Quagh's behind this, he probably did it to divert your attention from him for a while."

Kor's face fell. That he hadn't considered this did not

reassure the captain of the *Enterprise*. The big Klingon was too close, emotionally, to the situation; it clouded his reasoning. It could conceivably get him, and anyone who followed him, killed.

"What I need is some information about the place where my crewman's shuttle crashed, Mr. Dax," Ingram said to the Trill.

"Large portions of my planet are well-developed and underground, Captain," Dax said. "Certain parts are both shielded and cloaked, for the protection of our Symbionts.

"The tip of the Gances Peninsula is one of those places. If Qagh's still here, that's where his force, as well as anybody who's part of the coup or fighting against it, will probably be." The Trill's pale eyes flashed a combination of rage and terror; "If you're crewman's still alive, that's probably where he'd be, too, at least if he was smart. He could hide in the caves.

"As I've said before, I believe I can take you to where those fighting against the coup will be, but I can't promise we won't find the other forces I mention there, as well. We need to be very careful, and not just for our own sakes."

For her part, Ingram doubted whomever had fueled and funded this coup was hanging around, primarily because that group could already have absconded with whatever it wanted — kidnapped Symbionts being her first assumption — to leave Trillius Prime stewing in the nasty juices of nuclear bombardment. They'd know whether or

not this was so once they'd shuttled down to the planet, no reason to burden the already-stressed ambassador with such grim hypotheses yet.

The *Enterprise* possessed all the information and materiel required to clean up the aftereffects of irradiative bombardment. Every Starfleet vessel larger than a runabout did. Of course, so did the *Klothos*; the Romulan technique of heavily irradiating colony planets, to sterilize them for their own use, had long ago caused both the United Federation of Planets and the Klingon Empire to develop fast-acting anti-irradiative techniques in order to keep the Romulans from staking beachheads in their territories.

Renee wondered whether it would be better to bring the starship forward, assuming that an anti-EM pulse addendum to its shielding had been found, to help with the anti-irradiative process, or to use the *Enterprise* to determine for certain that no enemy warships were present in the area. Of course, either of those actions would depend on the situation simultaneously occurring on her ship. Truly silent running included communications blackout, so she had no clue what her officers might have discovered regarding the stealing taking place on the *Enterprise* B. She still had no reason not to consider the entire affair anything more than a bad practical joke run amok.

"Captain Ingram?" Kor said, in the tone of voice every

humanoid in the galaxy affected after they'd already tried to attain another person's attention more than once, and failed. Renee turned from where she stood at the right side of his command chair to face the big man.

"I'm sorry, Commander. What was that?"

"I said that we're ready to begin anti-radiation sweeps of the planet's crust and oceans."

"Proceed at your discretion. I was thinking about the ship you suspect Qagh has, that might be hiding elsewhere in the system, perhaps below the ionizing atmosphere of one of the gas giants. We may be able to bring *Enterprise* forward in attempt to lure such a ship or ships out of hiding."

"Very well. Lieutenant IngA'h, uncloak and begin intensive anti-radiation sweeps starting at the capital." The big Klingon smacked a series of controls on the arm of his chair. The air went a lurid, pulsing purple, accompanied by an alarm not dissimilar to the sound of five thousand cats clawing for traction on a slate floor while being disemboweled. As the *Koloth* uncloaked and went to battle footing, Koloth ordered his officers to the bridge with a single word, which echoed unpleasantly around the harsh architecture of the bridge and throughout the rest of the ship, louder even than the grating alarms; "*En'CHA!*"

Curzon, standing with T'Dani on the other side of Kor's command chair, scowled and yelled above the din; "Qagh's a coward; unless he's got a fleet with him, he'll

remain in hiding for as long as he can. He's evasive as a Nuralian eel, Captain."

Senior Starfleet officers were trained to project their voices above noise; the modulation Renee had to give her voice in order to do that in this instance made her throat ache. "Either way, *Enterprise* can make this entire process go forward much faster. Since you're about to uncloak, Commander Kor, I'd like to break comm silence as well, to get the *Enterprise* actively scanning for the presence of other ships. I believe Federation scanning technologies are still in advance of Klingon ones." Though their shielding wasn't; the presence of a cloak on a Klingon ship also protected it from EM pulse weapons.

Kor nodded gravely, not attempting to wipe the scowl from his face, or to bellow above the noise of the decloaking alarm or the sound of pounding feet echoing through the halls. Federation starships, after all, were first and foremost vessels of scientific investigation. *Klothos* was, first and foremost, a battleship.

Ingram turned to Curzon and motioned him toward her so that she could speak directly into his left ear. "I'm going to contact the *Enterprise*. Then I need you to tell me about the Gances peninsula in detail, particularly the part of it where Yaelat's shuttle is."

"To know what a galaxy cluster looks like ten billion light years from now infers that they can move faster than

light. Maybe they'll be responsive to tachyon emissions."

Josi considered the senior science officer of the *Enterprise* iteration *beta*, who sat next to her at the situation-room table, around which the team who had investigated the strange disappearances of items on the *Enterprise* was arranged. "We've just entered a non-Federation system on silent running, in order to determine whether or not an attack perpetrated on its inhabited planet isn't also an act of aggression against Federation interests, Lieutenant Voss. We can't have the ship's systems taken up by —"

"All we want to do is to let them know that their attempt at contact was successful," Benbet broke in.

Josi skewered the Tellarite protocol officer with an aqua-blue glare that caused Benbet to cower back into his chair. "Do you habitually speak out of turn, Ensign...?"

"Arigimashor. Ma'am."

"You will call me *sir* or *Commander*, Ensign Arigimashor, and you'll request permission before offering your opinion here again, is that understood?"

To Felingaili's surprise and irritation, tears sprang into the little Tellarite's eyes. "Sir. Yes, sir."

"Very well. So, assuming we take the ensign's suggestion and decide to tell them *hey, great talking to you but we're really busy right now, can we get back to you later*, what do you imagine their response would be?" she looked from Mel'Taya, to Seantie, to Buonarroti as she

asked this question. Demora, Marco, and EmJay looked on in obvious fascination.

"I do not trust their motives, Commander," Mel'Taya replied stiffly.

"You don't *know* their motives, Lieutenant," Seantie said to Mel'Taya, before turning to Josi. "And there's no way of knowing what their motives are without asking them, Commander."

"May I make a suggestion, Commander Felingaili?" The six-foot-four, auburn-haired man, who took up the seat across the table from the commander of the *Enterprise* with what Josi knew was an unintentional intimidating presence, requested softly.

"You wouldn't be here if I didn't hope you would, Yeoman," Josi replied dryly.

"We may be able to separate out part of the ship's psionic matrix solely for the use of communication with these..." he shrugged, "whatever they are. I perceive absolutely no sense of alien presence." Colin looked at Mel'Taya and added; "That's likely because whatever these are, they are so powerful that they hesitate to make more direct contact unless we initiate it. Which also implies that their intent is benign. But it may take us awhile to devise a tachyon-psionic interface, which I think will be needed if we intend to keep them isolated from other areas of the ship."

"And how will this affect the part of the psionic matrix

we've decided to use to..." how the hell had Colin put it?
"...lace through the shields to protect us against potential electromagnetic- pulse weapons?"

The big telepath sighed. "Not a clue. I'm not even certain I can do it."

Mel'Taya set its antennae into an argumentative stance, drew a breath, and sat forward, but whatever the security officer was going to say was overridden by a commanding voice that came directly through the comm console without introduction by the shift's communications ensign:

"Ingram to *Enterprise*."

Josi held up a restraining hand toward the Andorian. "Here, Captain. We're breaking silent running?"

"I need you to perform an active scan for potential hostile vessels, either cloaked, hiding in the veils of the system's gas giants, using the sun's corona as a shield, or in a conformation that's not easily identifiable as a ship. I'm thinking the psionic interface can be used to detect something without the known conformation of a vessel. The *Klothos* has been clearing out the atmosphere of Trill for an hour already and has begun eradication sweeps of the planet's crust, and nothing's forthcoming, so yes, we're breaking silent running. And I want to know how the search for something to shield against EM pulse weapons is coming. We haven't encountered any yet, but it may just be a matter of time."

Josi reached up and rubbed her temples momentarily.

"Very well, Captain, but you need to know that there's a situation on the *Enterprise*."

"What sort of situation?" Ingram's voice grew grave.

"The objects that went missing were found arranged in the warp core catwalks in such a way that it was obvious that they had been put there by creatures wanting to communicate."

"The twyvar?"

"No. These appear to be either shapeshifting or somehow non-corporeal creatures able to maintain illusory forms at will. According to the content of the communicative art they made with all the stuff they absconded with, we think they're transtemporal and at least ten billion years old."

Josi could almost feel the captain wince. She had nearly as much trouble with the concept of incorporeal beings as she had with the concept of the humanoid soul.

"And they want...?"

"Just communication, as far as we can tell. And Colin wants to use the psionic interface to communicate, but we also need the psionic interface to use to create an EM pulse shield, and—“

"Nothing just wants *communication*, Commander. There's always something else appended, even if it's simply scientific curiosity. Are these creatures amenable to waiting —“

"Colin thinks he might be able to cordon off the

psionic interface in some sort of tachyon mode in order to communicate with the things, in hopes of keeping them out of more vital areas of the ship."

"Well, that'd be lovely, except that I *also* need him to use the psionic interface to scan for ship-like and not-so-ship-like things. Considering that the interface is the remains of the transwarp matrix that's spread throughout the ship, can he divide the psionic interface?"

Josi motioned toward Colin. "Can you?"

The Minaran man considered this for a moment. "Not in such a way that all parts are working independently. My suggestion would be to contact the entity currently on the ship in order to divine its intentions first, before the thing decides to, say, invade the computer cores to attempt contact that way."

"So, you imagine that these artistic unknown...*things* pose a hazard to the ship? Are they interfering with its functioning *now*?"

"At the moment, they're quiescent."

"Then for the moment, ignore them. The faction that's taken over Trill *does* pose a potential danger to the ship and the crew. Until and unless that situation changes, you'll institute the scans I've instructed. Is that clear?"

"Clear as polished glass, Captain. Felingaili out."

Chapter Seventeen

"How many are in the Separatist party on Trill?" T'Dani inquired of Curzon. He shrugged.

"Honestly, it was never considered more than a tiny fringe group; a bunch of people who liked to gather once a year and run the taverns in Saishal town out of ale. One, maybe two thousand? Not something that anyone in their right mind would consider a threat on a planet of eight billion people."

Captain Ingram stood up and turned away from the console on which she'd just had a frustrating and alarming conversation with her XO and considered Curzon Dax as though he'd grown another arm. "There have been planets, Mr. Dax, that have seen genocides and decades-long war because just one or two people got their hands-on weapons of mass destruction."

"We didn't *have* any, they had to have been brought in from outside!" Dax snarled back. He looked away from her before inquiring; "How many people have been killed in this thing?"

"I'd guess half a million, but we don't have any definite data right now. We need to put down the leaders of this coup so that I can get medical teams from the *Enterprise* down there and call the Federation for backup.

"People like Daulet are nasty, Ambassador. They're

driven by fear and distrust, and that makes them capable of acts of incredible betrayal and terror. And now you're telling me that your government wrote the Separatists off as a group of harmless kooks, and paid no attention to them whatsoever?"

"We had bigger issues at hand, for instance the destruction of Praxis —"

"Which was a Federation matter. Your people have been friendly with the Federation for so long that you've forgotten that you're not yet officially *part* of the Federation." Renee shook her head and held up both hands, palm outward. "I don't want to instigate an argument, but I do want to know before we go down there whether the *Enterprise* and the *Klothos* will have enough ground forces to handle this uprising, or whether we should attempt to stun from orbit whatever area the Separatists are attempting to rule from. It sounds like your government so neglected —"

Curzon shook his head firmly. "No. You cannot do that! Your phase weapons can have terrible effects on our Symbionts when they're not joined! We have shielding over the pools, but our Symbionts are known to put out to sea and..." he let the end of the sentence wander off and spread his hands apart in the body language of appeal.

Renee drew a deep breath and blew it out heavily, resting her hands on her hips. "You're saying...you think they're actually holed up where the Symbionts are?"

Curzon looked back up into Captain Ingram's eyes and nodded miserably. "And that's where your crewman's shuttle seems to have gone down."

"Then I guess we have no choice but to go down there, too. Two thousand Separatists? Do you think they have many sympathizers? Maybe among some percentage of your people who'd like to be joined, but haven't made the cut?"

Dax moved from beside Kor's command chair, toward the ship's viewscreen. The *Klothos'* main viewscreen had been replaced with a holographic image of Trillius Prime, enlarged and denuded of all cloud cover. Also present were holographic representations of the *Klothos* and the *Enterprise*, including the shuttles that Kor had revamped his holds to carry. The only resident of Trill present on the Klingon ship reached out and manipulated the interactive hologram.

"After nuclear barrage of Trill? Unlikely in the extreme, if they know it was done by the Separatists." Curzon motioned with one graceful hand at the far southern edge of the continent that filled Trillius' eastern hemisphere; "Leran Manev is here, where the neck of the mainland meets the Gances Peninsula. But they've destroyed that. So Daulet will most likely be *here*, in or near the caves of Mak'ala." The moved his hand northward, toward the very tip of the peninsula, and directed his next comment away from Renee, down into

the depths of the hologram:

"Assuming Relan and Tesh aren't dead, Relan Tesh is Cave Master of the Trillius Symbiosis Commission. Cave masters are in charge of running the Symbiont program, from the point of view of the Symbionts. And Relan Tesh is one of the few people on the planet capable of performing a joining." The Trill looked back up at Renee, his gaze filled with grief. "No; he's more than *capable*.

"Relan's Symbiont is the most ancient symbiotic individual known to us. The cave master may have been made your man's contact preparatory to actually demonstrating a joining to him. Tesh would have been able to describe the process perfectly, and Relan to perform it flawlessly. You say your crewman was an empath?"

"Is an empath. Let's go about this assuming that everybody in question is alive and is either a threat or an asset." From where he sat in his command chair inspecting troop and materiel deposition data 'padds being presented to him by whatever the Klingon equivalent of a records officer or yeoman was, Kor grunted and nodded agreement. Ingram went on; "Would Relan Tesh have been in these caves when the coup took place?"

Curzon smiled, but the expression didn't make it all the way to his eyes, and his voice was somber. "Tesh never leaves the caves. This was part of the compact we made with the Symbionts, a millennia ago. Whoever hosts Tesh is cave master; when I was on Trill last, that was Relan.

Usually, the Symbiosis Commission chooses Tesh a host who either is a surgeon, or who volunteers to become one for the honor of hosting Tesh.

"Tesh is over ten thousand years old, Captain, and possesses arcane knowledge that's difficult for most Trills, humanoid or Symbiont, to imagine, much less comprehend. If anything's happened to Tesh —"

Renee reached across the hologram to take Curzon's hand, surprising him into halting his litany. "What part of *alive* is eluding you, Mr. Dax? Let's put aside emotion for now and consider this logically. You inferred that Yaelat's empathy might be important to his having been chosen as part of the Commission?"

"Just my luck; my planet's been taken over by a narcissistic madman, and I'm stuck trusting a scientist to fix it." Curzon smiled as he said this, taking Renee's hand in both of his own, and this time the smile reached his eyes. Ingram returned it.

"Fortunately for your luck, I actually minored in medicine, and I'm in command of a Federation starship to back up the fixing with. Are Trill Symbionts empathic? Telepathic? Psionic in some way that's difficult to —"

"They communicate in a manner similar to telepathy, but not using the psionic spectrum. When in the cave pools, we..." Curzon shook his head, "sorry, I mean to say that Trill Symbionts communicate back and forth using electrochemical impulses. Over time and many joinings,

they become quite..." he paused and shook his head. "It's almost impossible to describe in words, Renee."

"I do understand what it is you're trying to say. We'll fix this. One way or another, Trill will be liberated from the Separatists and whoever's funding them and receive Federation membership and protection. Trust me?" Ingram squeezed Curzon's hand gently. He pulled his hands away and mussed his hair with them again.

"It's not you or the Federation I'm worried about, Captain."

"You're concerned that Qagh's people might have harmed the Symbionts."

The Trill's eyes were haunted when he opened them. "Of course they have. To what extent..." Curzon swallowed dryly. "The cave master and his acolytes are sworn to protect the Symbionts in any way they can. There are blast doors inset to protect the caves; I know there are. I was part of the government once, long ago, and our planet was attacked by aliens from orbit. That was when we devised the blast doors and the sensor dampers."

"How long ago?" Renee inquired. She thought Trillius had an orbital defense system...one which, she mused grimly, wouldn't have stood them in much stead against a ground-to-air attack from their own planet. This was exemplified by the fact that, if there had ever been such a system, there wasn't anymore.

Curzon drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. A

faraway look came into his blue-gray eyes; "Three hundred and forty-six Trillius years ago. Or...what, about three hundred of yours? Maybe a little longer, in your years, but not really so long in the grand scheme of things, though the memories are from my first host."

Ingram felt her face fall into lines of disbelief. "You...you remember something that happened over three hundred *years* ago?"

"That's what the Trill Symbionts Daulet's trying to use as power pawns *do*. I remember what happened as if they're my own memories. Of course, in a sense, they *are* my own memories; I'm not just Curzon, I'm Curzon *Dax*. I'm also *Emony Dax* and *Tobin Dax* and —"

Renee held up a hand. "I'm trying..." she sighed and bit her lip. "Curzon, I'm trying to comprehend how many lives this coup might have destroyed on your planet, and it's overwhelming me. It's..." now she chewed on her lip, "*infuriating* me. But I need to be able to let that go for now, in order to concentrate on what we need to do. How near are the caves of Mak'ala to the place Yaelat was supposed to meet with Relan?"

Curzon raised his brows and motioned at the hologram of his home planet, as though Renee hadn't been paying attention. "Halfway down the peninsula from Leran Manev."

"But I thought you said Tesh never left the caves?"

"There are more Symbiont caves on Trillius than just

the caves of Mak'ala. As I said, the entire peninsula is a conjoined maze of caves. Unjoined Trill are never made privy to this fact, and since most of Trill's Symbionts and our seat of government is there, most citizens don't go to the Peninsula without good reason. It's too sacred.

"I guess Relan, or maybe Tesh, felt that the revelation of this knowledge would be a...I don't know, sort of a concession to the Trill populace for revealing the true nature of the Trill to the Federation."

"You know for certain he'd planned to reveal the true nature of the Gances Peninsula to the people of Trill?"

Curzon shook his head. "No. But it's what I would do. It's what Lela would have done. A secret for a secret."

"Lela? One of your..." Renee shook her head and shrugged, "past lives?"

Curzon nodded. "Sure. That's as good a way to put it as any other."

Chapter Eighteen

"Commander, the computer's finally got a take on what we've been picking up on and off," EmJay Fletcher said. According to *Enterprise* scanners, even backed by the power of the psionic matrix aboard the ship, there were no ships at all in orbit of Trillius Prime — which, as far as the senior tactical officer was concerned, meant absolutely nothing.

Josi turned the command chair so that she could look up at the tactical console. "What is it, Lieutenant?"

Fletcher stared down at his board intently. Nonsense. There really was no other way to describe it. "Well, you know those word games children play, where the nouns, verbs, adverbs, and adjectives in well-known sayings are replaced at random with silly or ridiculous ones? It..." he glanced down at the executive officer and wondered, *is that amusement I see in her eyes, or a transfer to a two-man listening post on the Romulan frontier?* "it looks a lot like that."

Commander Felingaili rose from her seat and strode slowly up the portside ramp that bisected the navigational, science, and command sections at the fore half the bridge and the tactical, communications, and operations sections at the aft half of the bridge, to stand beside him. Her presence made him insanely nervous. It also made him

want to fall to his knees in front of her and sing something. He fought both useless impulses by coming to half-attention and backing away from the board.

Her beautiful dark face wrinkled into a frown when she read the simple sentence that was the sum total of what the computers made of the passive shield readings. She shook her head slowly, erased what amounted to a model composed of the relevant data, scrolled back to the relevant data, re-input the data...

Then stood back from the board, her hands clasped behind her back in the most alluring Starfleet half-attention pose Fletcher had ever seen. "Lieutenant Voss, I've sent this information to your station. What do you make of it? Because at this time, I'm afraid I'm forced to agree with Lieutenant Fletcher." She looked up at him through the waves of her hair.

He couldn't help it. He smiled. She shook her head slightly, but her lips curved in response.

Seantie performed on her board much the same function Josi just had at the tactical board. Twice. "Computer," the Betazoid matron said at last, "please describe exactly what *fractional megasaturation conflated with low-speed valence acceleration among indeterminate radiant-energy fed particle streams* means relative to any of the known functions of a space-capable vessel, or a space-capable vessel's ability to cloak itself or its warp signatures."

The information you require stems from two or more phenomena unrelated to the variables requested, the starship's great brain replied in the tenor tones that were its latest iteration; Composition of those phenomena is masked due to relative quantum conflation.

"Magnificent," the Betazoid matron said dryly, as though she was replying to a sentient being instead of a computer. "In that case, let's break it into its constituent parts. Computer, what *is* fractional megasaturation?"

Fractional megasaturation refers to the alternating bit-byte load carried by any Heisenberg compensator when portions of the energy utilized by that compensator are given over to another use. Fractional megasaturation occurs in Starfleet transporters when those transporters are calibrated to deactivate potential weaponry or perform medical sterilization procedures.

Lieutenant Felingaili hurried to the wall comm unit between the bridge operation station and the bridge-left turbolift and activated it. "Transporter Chief Kylie Morrison, report to the bridge immediately." She punched another sequence into the comm board; "Rafe?"

"Here, Commander. What can I do for you?"

"Come to the bridge. We've found something odd in this area of space having to do with what might or not be some sort of transporter, and I want to be able to figure out what it is. I've already called Kylie to the bridge."

"I'm on my way. Buonarroti out."

"Yaelat —" Josi began, then winced, and began again; "Ensign Kanchumurthi, please put in a call to the *Klothos*, letting them know that we *think* there's some sort of transporter or transporter- damping effect in the general area of Trill that we're not certain of the meaning or provenance of, and that the use of transporters to or from the planet is inadvisable at this time."

"Aye, Commander," Ramesh replied.

Josi returned to the command chair and keyed something into the arm without bothering to sit down again. "Is the psionic matrix linked to the shields yet, Colin?" she knew she was asking a lot out of the telepathic yeoman, but his ability to use the Lonsdaleite crystal matrixes embedded in all *Excelsior*-type starship walls — the only holdover left from the transwarp fiasco of earlier decades — was after all why he worked as a yeoman on *Enterprise*.

It was Buonarroti's voice that replied, "Commander, I just called sickbay, but you'd better come down here and see this!"

Uta Morrell, Rafael Buonarroti, and Josi Felingaili had been standing outside of the room that once constituted the transwarp hub of the *Enterprise* staring into it for so long and so dejectedly that they had begun to draw a crowd.

"He's breathing, anyway," Uta supplied soothingly.

Josi shook her head, "He's also sweating through his

uniform, which could presage a number of maladies that might stop him breathing.”

The little room was full of an odd reddish glow – some kind of force field through which none of them could pass. The room contained a nexus of energy shunts connected to a psionic alternator, which was managed via a large engineering computer-interface table that took up half of the room. Colin stood with his hands – fingertips really – just touching the table. It looked like he had been caught in the act of setting up the links between the psionic interface (which ultimately consisted of microscopic lattices of Lonsdaleite in the walls, powered by electromagnetic energy turned to psionic energy by the alternator) and the sensors.

“I only come by here to get to the bridge turbolift. He could have been like this for an hour or more, for all I know,” Rafael said sadly.

“Our incorporeal friends have ceased being *quiescent*.” Josi walked to the wall outside the transwarp hub room and toggled on the speaker that was inset into the wall there. Psionic energy played hell with the computer-operated voice-recognition system, so they used the older form of communication around the old transwarp hub. “Seantie?”

“Here, Commander.”

“Are there any crew aboard who have experience with non-corporeal lifeforms?”

“Not to the best of my knowledge.” The Betazoid matron did what Josi couldn’t do from her vantage point, and asked the computer. Josi waited with Seantie for the answer.

No answer was forthcoming.

Frowning, Josi turned away from the speaker and jogged back toward engineering. “*Computer?*” she cried as she ran.

Still nothing.

Arriving in main engineering, Josi was met with a number of people bouncing from workspace to workspace. “Nothing!” one of them announced to another.

Josi stopped and scrutinized those workspaces. All of them were blank.

“Seantie!” she cried.

“I’m still here, Commander. But it seems as though the computer’s – “

“Down,” Josi finished for the Betazoid science officer. The XO of the *Enterprise* looked around wildly. The lights were still on, and the heat, and...

At least he’s still breathing.

That damned table! That damned *computer-controlled* table. The entities didn’t just have Colin, they had the computers. Josi stormed back toward the transwarp hub room. The red light that seemed part of the force field holding Colin like an insect in amber turned the telepath into a garish mockery of himself.

“These things are in the computer cores,” Josi announced without preamble. Rafael gaped at her.

“I thought the fallbacks were supposed to prevent that?”

“The fallbacks are supposed to prevent an enemy from *electromagnetically* taking over our computers. *These* things are currently using the psionic spectra, or so I would imagine, seen as how they’ve taken a telepath who was using the psionic spectra hostage. How the hell do we get him *out of there*?”

“If he’s in psionic contact with them right now, as I suppose he must be,” Uta Morrell said, “It would seem to me that *he* is the only one who can get himself out of there.”

“Great. And the computers? I mean, I’m just assuming that we’re still orbiting a star, and haven’t begun to fall into it, because how would we know until the walls started melting?” Josi gestured wildly at not much of anything.

“Colin may be able to persuade them to leave the computer cores, too. And to leave environmental systems intact,” the doctor added.

“So, until a hostile force comes along that wants a starship, we’ll be just swell! I mean, we could contact the *Klothos* for aid, but hey guess what, the *computers* aren’t working!” Josi looked around and realized that her minor meltdown was not going unseen by a number of people in

her crew, and not just Rafe and Uta. She scrubbed at her face with her hands.

We wish deeper contact.

The psionic man shuddered. He was aware that, somewhere very far away, he had shuddered, that sweat was running down his face and back, that his entire body had taken on the ache of his head until that far-away existence was a sheet of pain caused by the effort required to remain in corporeal form. And he *had* to remain in corporeal form. He couldn't remember why, exactly, but the need was absolute.

We will not harm you, the creatures who called themselves *Calamarain* assured him. He understood that the Mind that constituted the Calamarain was composed, not of a single advanced species, but of thousands of disparate species. They were an astounding assemblage, a sort of hyper-psionic, sentient, incorporeal slime-mold, advanced beyond corporality by some latent, imperative psionic need that Colin was afraid to try to comprehend. *What you are feeling is the stirring of the Mind within you. The Mind is within all of your kind, but it is not recognized by many of you.*

Unfortunately, this philosophical Mind had taken over the *Enterprise*'s computers in its attempt to communicate. It was grimly whimsical (at heart, the Calamarain were quite whimsical) and couldn't perceive this as a problem;

this great *Mind* appeared naively unaware that it could pose grave harm to the ship and her crew.

The psionic Yeoman had helped the ship's officers comprehend the fact that it would be far preferable for the Calamarain to take over *him*. He found it harder than he had even begun to imagine to keep their attentions limited to himself and the ship's vast psionic interlinks.

I believe that what you truly wish is to take part in humanoid experience, he replied to the great Mind that was no mind, but was at one and the same time all Mind. *Among humanoids, there is no deeper link than the one you now share with me.*

What is this humanoid experience of which you speak?

Colin drew a deep breath and realized he hadn't taken one in a while. His heart stumbled in his chest. The Calamarain withdrew whatever tendril with which they were probing his autonomic nervous system. An uncontrollable trembling took hold of the man whose being they saturated; they noted this with the sort of interest a child might show toward a colorful bag of candy. He realized that telepathic communication wasn't the most effective vehicle for this conversation; it wouldn't hold the Calamarain enthralled, away from the deepest cores of the computers.

But Colin was a great deal more than a mere telepath. He'd been genetically engineered, and implanted with a sentient psionic crystal, by a madman bent on crafting

living psionic weapons. He could heal almost any level of physical injury with his mind (though effecting toxins or disease-causing organisms directly was beyond him, he sensed that this wasn't so for the Calamarain); he could phase his being in such a way that the enormous mass of empty space that composed all things held still for a brief moment, allowing him to pass through solid objects; he could manipulate anything that existed on the Newtonian physical plane through telekinesis, though the physics of doing this caused far more physical and metabolic exhaustion than manipulating things manually; and he was an exquisitely sensitive empath.

Colin muted his telepathy, and allowed himself to open and deconstruct every wall he had ever built in order to contain the tides of his empathy. Such walls were necessary, he had learned, in order to function in society. He would otherwise drive people mad with his emotions, or be driven mad himself by theirs. But the Calamarain weren't people, or, to be more accurate, they hadn't been corporeal sentient beings in a very long time.

In realizing this, Colin also understood that this *long time* reached out in every direction, toward the future as well as from the past. The Calamarain were a timeless, interwoven chiaroscuro of psionic organisms who had somehow, somewhere, somewhen forsaken the limits of...of...

We need to breathe, Colin insisted; *we need warmth*

and we need light and we need food and water. We need whatever the drive units are currently doing to continue! You can have whatever you want of me, but leave us these things! Leave us...leave...

Words ceased to have any meaning, as the Calamarain dove like coy dolphins into the reaches of Colin's emotions and memories, longings and fears, hopes, dreams, compassions, regrets, anger, compulsions, loves and hates. How long they did this for, Colin did not know. He and his emotions were caught in their net of timelessness, a net weighted down with portions of the psionic spectra made as heavy as blocks of duranium.

Because they were timeless beings not limited by the vast reaches of space or the interstices of subspace or interspace, they had trouble understanding certain concepts, and batted these playfully back at Colin like so many badminton birdies:

What is emergency? What is coup? What is death? What is command? What is duty? What is...

Colin struggled to free himself of the morass of empathy and the net in which the Calamarain had wrapped that empathy, in order to respond. These creatures utilized the psionic spectra in a whole different way than psionic humanoids did. He found this arcane and frightening and exhausting:

You say you are timeless, not limited by the reaches of space. Your limit seems to exist in the reaches of your

memory; can you not recall when you, yourselves, were corporeal beings?

The Calamarain considered this. It was then that they realized that they had open to them a portal that could tell them everything they had ever wished to know about having been a corporeal being. They would enjoy exploring this portal. It seemed to communicate through the quantum superpositioning of subatomic bits that could be peeled away from it in a neat layer; underneath that layer existed another, equivalent layer, meaning that if the Calamarain took every bit of information in the computer away with them, they would ultimately cause no harm to the *Enterprise*'s great brain.

You are resistant to joining us, and yet we would have you. Why do you resist? Is corporeality so pleasant?

Do you have love? the psionic man questioned back. *Is there love between yourselves, or yourselves and another?*

What is this love?

Colin allowed the Calamarain to enter into his psyche and feel love as he experienced it.

This being and the emotions it gives you are something you find worth remaining corporeal for? the Calamarain were taken aback. *There are many greater experiences to be had!*

If that is the case, why are you here now bothering me for experiences of the corporeal? Even as he asked the

question, he knew the answer; because this was what the Calamarain did. They searched for a corporeal being they could communicate with, and once they found one, they worked to convince it to give over its own personal corporeality to become one with the Calamarain. In this way, the Calamarain would have the knowledge and sensations and emotions of remembered corporeality to enjoy, until that particular part of their Being could no longer remember corporeality.

It was how the Being had become so great and multifarious over time.

My corporeality is mine, I will not give it over to you! was Colin's response to this knowledge.

And yet this love that you so treasure is just that very thing, the Calamarain noted. *A great and continual giving over of self to another.*

The woman I love would never insist that I become incorporeal for her!

Because she treasures you as a corporeal being.

You do not understand love. You say you have experiences that are greater, yet simple love eludes you. Colin felt sorry for the Calamarain suddenly. The great majority of their Being was composed of incorporeal beings that had willingly given up their corporeality, but had never known love.

The Being that extended its reach into the computer cores of the *Enterprise* again sought to extend its reach

through the man's mind.

Chapter Nineteen

Even after having experienced the horror of thermonuclear activity, Trillius was beautiful, though its atmosphere was heavy and rank from the uninhibited smoldering of substances never meant to burn, and the foul leaden undertaste of heavy fallout. The weapons that had fueled this coup had been anything but clean.

The ocean hissed bad-natured and pewter-dull against blue-gray, mica-glinting sand, which was littered with the small detritus of total war; corpses of seabirds, fish, crustaceans, and less readily identifiable creatures. These littered the tideline and rolled broken in the moody surf. There was a lot of manganese in the Trillian environment, burnishing much of it in purple, and this included the dulling blood of its ruptured sea-life.

A ray of sunlight found its way through the murk, and a tiny portion of the sky cleared for a brief second, swept momentarily clean by the buffeting of the post-apocalyptic winds that prowled the planet, here like uneasy ghosts, there like angry, vengeful gods. The relatively gentle breeze buffeted Ingram's dark hair against her face. Where the breeze swept the sky-blue green, the oxygen-heavy atmosphere that had pushed thermonuclear flame to madness revealed itself in scudding teal shreds that the white capped lilac and periwinkle water reflected.

Renee was reminded of Homer's poetic wine-dark sea as the fleeting sun sparkled on the alien waves, revealing chips of deepest burgundy in the Trillius ocean's otherwise tarnished-silver setting. Those flickers of light also played on the torn and dented skin of the Starfleet shuttle that had plowed through the surf and into the cliffs that backed the beach, where the command team had landed their own shuttle.

Even if the *Enterprise's* senior officers had the ability to determine what the odd, transporter- like anomalies near the planet were, there was a great deal of transporter interference on the Gances Peninsula, which Renee put down to the effects of ionizing minerals and metals in the cliffs, and the presence of damping fields throughout the caves. Had the landing team she was with wanted to beam down, which they hadn't, they would have had to do so many kilometers distant and hike in.

The security detail in its shuttle, led by Tenger, was doing exactly this, in order to systematically scour the tunnels leading from their northern entrance near the capital, all the way down to the caves of Mak'ala. The mission of the landing parties was twofold; to locate Yaelat, and to locate the perpetrators of this coup.

Kor and Curzon were rabid in their hatred of the man they felt had backed this coup. Captain Ingram could hardly blame them; that criminal's capture had been part of the deal when she'd enlisted their aid in finding Yaelat.

However, there was no guarantee that he and his henchmen were even on the planet anymore.

The beach itself was deserted but for the group of ten Klingon scientists and what passed among Klingons for medical personnel, who had shuttled down with Renee, Kor, T'Dani, and Curzon. To the anxious starship captain's dismay and dissatisfaction, Curzon Dax had plunked himself down among the dead and radiation-distressed sea-life almost immediately upon leaving the shuttle, which he had piloted at Kor's insistence. The ionization and turbulence in the atmosphere had been intense, but Curzon's smooth, skillful piloting had proven Kor's assertion that there was no better shuttle pilot in the quadrant.

Reaching out to brush dark seaweed away from the devastated strand before him, the Trill ambassador choked back a sob and, giving in to an instinct common to all grieving humanoids, rocked slowly back and forth. The small troop of Klingons watched him, their expressions betraying no compassion.

"Though Curzon, like all Trill, is familiar with the lore of this area, none of us know exactly where the underground entrances are located," Kor said to his people. Captain Ingram wondered if this was actually true, or if he just wanted to give his blood-brother time and space to mourn with dignity. She supposed both. "I want you to look for stream or river traces and follow them back to the

cliffs. When you believe you've found areas where entry is feasible, return here and report."

After his people had left on their mission, the big Klingon squatted down beside Curzon to lay a hand on his friend's shoulder. "There is no way of telling who this was," the joined Trill mourned softly, caressing the corpse of a leechlike creature half-buried in the mica-bright sand, "no way of retrieving all the lives she carried, or of imagining the futures that she can no longer share."

Renee frowned. She could imagine all too easily sinking down into the stinking sand next to Curzon and joining him in mourning the destruction of Universes. The death of how many twinkles in how many eyes, the laughter of how many children, the companionable touch of how many hands? She shook herself mentally and turned toward the length of cliffs into which the shuttlecraft had plowed; "The caves of Mak'ala are underground, there?"

Curzon nodded mournfully, not pulling his attention from the dead Symbiont. This was a sentient creature. It deserved ritualized burial, it deserved better in every way than to be tossed like garbage among rotting seaweed on a beach. Ingram pushed these thoughts away forcefully once more. If she gave them too much time and attention, more sentient beings would die.

"There are no life signs on the shuttle," T'Dani added. She'd been scanning it with her medical tricorder from

where they stood since they'd disembarked. "There aren't any life signs anywhere near here, in fact; not even our own. I think something's blocking my tricorder's scanners."

"Scrambling them, more accurately," Kor offered, reaching down to Curzon and hauling him up off the sand using what looked to Renee like main force. "The Trill maintain damping fields in this area."

Dax sighed, pulled away from Kor, then stood and began fastidiously brushing sand off himself. "To maintain the privacy of the Symbionts. And it's not just the field that scrambles sensors, Kor. There are blast shield force fields around the pools about a kilometer from here. They scramble electronics. They were devised a long time ago, against attack from alien entities," the Trill shook his head sadly; "Not against attack from the surface of Trill."

"It would appear that they worked anyway," T'Dani said hopefully, tucking away her tricorder. "What's the chance that Yaelat's in there somewhere?"

Curzon blinked at the *Enterprise's* CMO and shrugged. "How the hell should I..." a dreamy look came into the Trill's eyes, and he paused for a long moment. When his gaze finally came back into focus, he snarled:

"Okay, *fine*. I personally am not a scientist, you understand; I abhor the field, I think it limits one's creativity. But one of my previous..." Curzon looked at Renee, and shrugged, arms akimbo, "*lives* was. Here's the

upshot:

"If your crewman's not lying in pieces and puddles and streaks of ash among the remains of that shuttle, Captain, there's something like a twenty-five percent chance he's in the caves. Of course, he could have ejected and be dead in the sea or elsewhere on Trill; he could have been taken hostage by Qagh or another coup leader; and the other twenty-five percent has to be given over to the gods know what likelihood.

"Meaning that," the Trill man grinned wickedly, "in fact, nobody has the first damned idea where your crewman might be, mathematically speaking. Unless you'd like me to perform a card trick now, what *I* think we should do is go inspect the remains of the shuttle directly."

Ingram offered Curzon a narrow look, then shrugged his meaningless non-sequitur away. "Commander Kor, please let your security team know that my crewman might be held hostage by the —"

"Already done, Captain," the Klingon man interrupted, holding up the communicator he'd been talking quietly into while Curzon had been rambling about statistical probabilities and card tricks. "I have contacted the other shuttle team as well, to let them know of our whereabouts."

Renee frowned. "How did you communicate through the damping and scrambling fields? And are those possibly what my ship's sensing?"

Kor shook his head. "No. The Trill leave open

communications channels through the dampers; their cavern-keepers need to communicate with their capitol, after all. What your ship is sensing is nonsense," the commander huffed, motioning toward Curzon; "Give your communicators to him, he'll reprogram them for you."

Captain Ingram inclined her head to the Klingon, and she and her CMO did as he suggested. She wished, belatedly, that she'd considered bringing along a few more shuttles; she hadn't considered that transporters might be rendered unworkable for the entire duration of their mission:

"Mr. Dax, it seems to me that unless the entire *planet's* covered by sensor-scrambling shields, there aren't any pieces or parts of any Hali'ian otherwise present on the planet. Alive or dead, Yaelat's whole, in one place, and somewhere where damping fields are hiding his biological signature.

"Inspecting his crashed shuttle might give us some indication of whether he was taken dead or alive, but *as* a scientist, Mr. Dax, I'd say that there's more like a fifty percent chance that Yaelat Qat," she lifted one arm and pointed at the blue-streaked grayish-purple limestone that composed the cliffs against which the sea fumed bad-naturedly, "whether as a corpse or a living hostage, is in there somewhere. Shall we physically inspect the remains of the shuttle while we wait for the rest of our companions to return and report?"

A grin spread over Kor's face. "That question sounded distinctly like a command, Captain."

"Now you're getting the hang of this human-Klingon alliance thing, Commander Kor," T'Dani teased. The big man offered her a sour look, which she met with a grin, retrieving her communicator from Curzon. Renee put her communicator away and drew out her phaser as they neared the crash site. Kor drew his disruptor. Curzon gave both weapons a look that Renee couldn't decipher.

"Those," the Trill informed her and Kor, "absolutely will *not* function in the caves. Your tricorders will, in certain spots."

Renee bit at the inside of her cheek in annoyance. "Noted," she replied, then turned away and started toward the downed shuttle.

The trajectory the shuttle had taken had been through the shallow reef that fronted the eastern edge of the beach; wave action had largely filled in the deep, glassy furrow the little ship had ploughed along the beach with reef debris. The fact that the shuttle had come in at a shallow altitude told Captain Ingram that her lieutenant had at least tried to control the vessel's entry. The fact that the shuttle hadn't been entirely obliterated against the face of the cliff, and had left the area of cliff it had struck in splinters rather than launching it as a fine powder into the atmosphere, told her that the shuttlecraft had been moving at a speed slow enough to be charted in miles per hour rather than miles

per second.

All of these things increased the chances of finding Yaelat alive. "I'm assuming your people cleared the irradiation out of this area before we left in the shuttlecrafts, Commander," Renee said.

Kor laughed. "And you're only thinking to inquire now? I would expect better from you, Captain Ingram!"

Ingram winced. Shuttlecraft were thin-skinned vessels, lacking any ablative armor capable of deflecting sudden surges of radiation or space debris. Instead, their shields were programmed to raise automatically should any sudden influx of radiation, or anything else potentially harmful to the shuttle or its occupant, be detected by its particularly discriminating sensors. Unmanned Federation shuttlecraft could, and often had been, used as very large sensor probes for this reason.

T'Dani, who had put her own communicator away and drawn her sidearm, motioned toward the jagged tear in the side of the shuttle with the weapon. Captain Ingram shrugged, then bent double to squeeze through the hole without cutting herself against the wavy edge of raw metal that formed an impromptu entry hatch.

Curzon Dax reached out and touched her upper arm gently. She looked up over her right shoulder at him. The Trill was holding Kor's disruptor in his left hand. "Captain, with all due respect, I'd like to go in there first."

Renee straightened. "Your chivalry's noted,

Ambassador, but —"

"I know the look, smell, and feel of Qagh's booby-traps. I've spent some time deconstructing one or two. I mean, we could send Kor," the Trill grinned wickedly, "But I don't think he'd fit, and blasting a larger hole will destroy evidence."

"I believe I'm more expendable than yourself, Ambassador," Ingram argued.

Curzon shook his head at her, slowly. "I disagree." He held up his right hand; a tiny 'padd equipped with a tiny spotlight nestled in his palm. "I've also got technology that cuts through the scrambling here to let me know if Qagh's been in there at all. I'd like a chance to use it before the shuttle's been entered by anyone else; as you know, fresh data skews older readings."

Ingram scowled at the Trill, but gave in and motioned him toward the side of the shuttle. He crawled carefully through the entrance.

"Just by the daylight outside," he bellowed back toward them, "I can see that there's blood all over in here. It's fairly old, I can't tell what its original color was...let's see...ah, here, it's iron-based, so it's not Trill."

T'Dani squatted down near the entrance. "Hali'ians have iron-based blood. Can you see anything else?"

"There are no traps or sign here; it looks like a bed or seating arrangement was torn out and thrown aside to gain entrance. If the blood traces are any indication, some of it

may have been used as padding or wound staunching, too.

"Also, it looks like certain engine components of your shuttle may have been cannibalized; things seem to have been removed cleanly after the crash. I'll need to go deeper into the shuttle to be certain. If I'm not back in five or ten minutes, go ahead and assume I'm dealing with some sort of trap."

"Be careful, Ambassador!" T'Dani urged.

"I assure you; you don't have to tell me that twice."

Curzon's footsteps were audible crunching through detritus for a moment after he rose and walked away from the little hole burned into the side of the shuttlecraft.

Captain Ingram turned toward Commander Kor, who was gazing at the horizon beyond the cliffs. She turned her own attention that way for a while, wondering if Trill had seabirds. Nothing was visible; if there had been birds on those cliffs, they had forsaken them for the sea. Renee returned her attention to Kor; His healing brow was furrowed with more than emerging Klingon brow-ridges, and she was pretty sure that the question she was about to ask him was the very one he was ruminating over:

"Didn't you say you put in a call to the other shuttle?" Tenger, together with the Klingon security team Kor had assembled, should have only been about seventy kilometers away toward Leran Manev, where Curzon said there was a second major opening to the caves.

Kor nodded. "Yes. And they should have responded

by now. I —"

"*Shit!*" T'Dani, who had pulled out her medical tricorder to fuss with the unresponsive instrument, had tossed it aside and stuck the finger she had been using in attempt to manipulate its screen into her mouth.

"What happened?" Ingram demanded. At nearly the same time, Renee could hear Curzon bellow from inside the shuttlecraft.

"What happened?"

T'Dani pulled her finger from her mouth, shaking and flexing that hand. "The tricorder screen shocked me." She cupped both hands around her mouth and cried into the hole torn into the side of the shuttlecraft. "Curzon?"

"You don't need to yell. I'm right here." The disheveled Trill's head and shoulders appeared. "My 'padd gave me a hell of a shock, but I didn't see any sign of booby trapping inside the shuttle. What —"

"What happened did not come from the shuttle." Kor had his communicator open. Across its face something flashed in a script incomprehensible to Renee. The Klingon turned the screen so Dax could see it.

The Trill squirmed the rest of the way out of the jagged tear, careful not to catch himself on the sharp metal. He swore all the way out. Renee wasn't sure whether to be impressed or appalled by his scatological facility. "What's happening, Kor?"

"Electromagnetic pulse weapon. Roughly twelve

kellicams south-southwest of here."

"The security detail," Dax said, grimly and unnecessarily.

"We need to get under cover," Renee announced, "now!" Her tone brooked no argument. T'Dani picked her tricorder back up – electromagnetic pulses only affected modern small electronics temporarily, largely because their readily-disposable nature caused their internal synthesization to be mostly crystalline rather than metallic – and all four people turned and began to jog toward the cave-riddled cliffs.

"Qagh hasn't been in there," Curzon panted as they ran. "No Klingon's ever been on this shuttle, as far as I can tell. There's no body aboard, either, though there's plenty of iron-based blood. The other DNA signs are Trill."

"Any idea whose?" Renee panted back.

"Not a clue. But I suspect that either your man or his body has been taken by Separatists to use as a bargaining tool with the Federation when they showed up to demand what the hell the hold-up is with the Commission, or he was taken by someone so that they could heal his injuries. Or —"

"Both," Captain Ingram finished for Curzon.

He nodded. "Either way," Dax paused and gave some attention to just breathing for a moment; "Either way, he *is* in there somewhere."

“We’ve got some kind of non-corporeal beings that are holding Colin hostage, and the things have taken over the computers,” Josi began without preamble as soon as the last flag officer had taken their seat in the situation room just off the bridge. Everyone sat and considered this for a long moment.

“From what we saw in the engine core, it seems as though they wanted to communicate, and it’s pretty natural that they might choose Colin. Isn’t it possible that their foray into the computers is just coincidental?” Rafael asked. Josi shrugged.

“Coincidental or not, it doesn’t matter. The things are in the computers, and they’re making the computers unresponsive, and that’s an intolerable situation.” Josi sighed and ran a hand back through her hair. “I need suggestions for getting these things out of the computer cores at least, and that would preferentially include a way to get Colin free of them.” The captain, she mused, would not be happy if they broke her favorite person.

The individuals assembled in the room sat in thought for a while; there were no computerized stations at the table for them to ask for help.

“I might have an idea,” Seantie hedged finally. Josi made a humanoid hand motion that encouraged the Betazoid to continue. Seantie sighed and shrugged, “Hook a communicator up to one of our personal computers and try to communicate with them through it.”

“You think they speak Standard?” EmJay asked jokingly.

The science officer was not in a joking mood, and handed the tactical officer a helping of sarcasm: “I *think* that they’ve take over the computer cores, so yeah. I’m suggesting this because a communicator has a sole purpose, and it’s not to be a small mobile computer device, the way a ‘padd or a tricorder is. So, I don’t think the things will try to take it over –“

“The computer’s not functioning, though,” Demora pointed out.

Seantie shrugged. “The computer’s full of incorporeal beings, which I suspect is a different thing than simple core failure. We should at least try this, to break Colin free. Colin imputes that these things are benign or even benevolent. Tell them that we’re needed at the planet for some kind of emergency. That Colin’s needed. That they have to let the ship and Colin go for these reasons.”

“And if they’re not benign or benevolent?” Josi said, at the same time Marco began “What if they’re not -” The XO of the *Enterprise* nodded at the helmsman, adding; “It doesn’t seem to me that taking over someone’s...” she shook her head, and began again, “taking over *someone* is a benevolent action.”

Seantie motioned around the room. “And yet we have environmental still running, and we’re still orbiting the sun –“

“So, the things don’t want to die themselves,” Mel’Taya said with a shrug.

“You imagine they need an oxygen-nitrogen environment?” Rafe replied to the *chae-na*.

Mel’Taya offered Buonarroti something that wasn’t quite a smile. “I imagine that they need their playthings alive.”

“I don’t think that’s what’s happening,” the senior engineer said earnestly. “I think they’re trying to understand us, that Colin is their link and what’s happening with the computers is just...a sort of white noise. That Colin’s let them know what we need for survival.”

“And now we need to let them know what else we need,” Seantie added.

“Which is?” Mel’Taya asked.

“Colin let go of and our computer control back. What else?” Josi threw up her hands.

“You imagine this will be enough for beings who are capable of taking control of a psion like Colin? Enough for things that probably think the computer core’s a whole playground?” The senior security officer asked. Several people in the room nodded.

“I’ve been trying to think what we could possibly offer things like that,” Josi said.

“My point exactly.” Mel’Taya sat back in its seat and crossed its arms across its chest.

“So, we tell them the truth,” Seantie said in an impassioned tone. “We tell them that there’s an emergency on the planet and we need out computers back in order to deal with it. That we also need Colin in order to deal with it.”

“And if they don’t care?” Mel’Taya asked bleakly.

“Then we think of something else,” Josi replied. “Rafe, do you think you can – “

“Hook up a communicator to a personal computer’s drive? Easily, Commander. But are we aware whether the things are so deeply into the system that they’ve taken over the personal computer drive systems?”

“They have,” Marco said. “I was on mine when the things went into the computer cores. All computing on the ship is currently a big black rock.”

Rafael sighed. “Well, okay then, where shall I perform the hookup?”

Josi shrugged. “This feels like a long shot, but let’s try it anyway. The captain’s ready-room computer should be sufficient.” She stood to dismiss the meeting, or at least to take it to the room at the other side of the bridge; it wasn’t as though the ship actively needed officers to tend it at the moment.

Chapter Twenty

"Am I correct in saying that Hali'ians are known for their excellent hunches due to the way your forehead organs have evolved?"

Once again, Yaelat had awakened alone on one of the couches that took up part of the esplanade on a foreign space station. And once again, a stranger asking useless, arcane questions had appeared.

This time, Yaelat had no patience for what he was now certain was some sort of psychological game. Or torture; he wasn't entirely certain what the intent of his captors was, yet. The information they'd been ferreting out of him thus far seemed unlikely to be of use to anybody's covert operatives.

The man half-leaning against the wall was a strong fellow, but so was Yaelat Qat. The Hali'ian strode up to the stranger confrontationally, pushing his face so close to the other man's that they were nearly nose-to-nose. Qat could see flecks of gold in the stranger's electric-blue eyes.

"Don't tell me. Your name is *Mirr* and you're here to get me to choose something for you to eat or drink while you ask me useless questions in order to keep my mind off of my mission?" the Hali'ian spat.

"I am indeed Mirr. But neither of us are in need of nourishment at the moment, are we? And I haven't come to

ask you anything, though I have things I need to tell you. For instance, your people are here." This admission made the man smile.

Taken completely aback, Yaelat backed away and looked around; no one was visible, audible, or for that matter, within olfactory range. "In the space station? *Where?*"

Mirr scratched lightly at his carefully coiffed dark beard, like a professor might while trying to buy a few seconds to think. "Yaelat, we're not *on* a space station."

This was getting to be just too much. If it was some sort of surreal dream, he'd very much like to wake up now; all of the solutions he thought he'd discovered to all of the strangeness he'd encountered in the past days — how many days? Three? Thirteen? Impossible to tell — were unraveling like poorly-woven cloth. "*What?* I've been here now for what seems like days and—"

"You're right, it has been days. But this isn't a space station, not really. It's a..." Jendrey paused and frowned in concentration, "a sort of virtual reality we've created in your mind. Telepaths and empaths call virtual realities like it *phantasmagoria*."

Yaelat hated to ask the next obvious question. Mirr — East-Indian-lady Mirr — had been right; he possessed a personal quirk he'd never recognized in himself before, until she'd noticed it. Even as he formulated the question, his own mind attempted to embroider various answers:

Alien entities intent on some nefarious plot; viroids become sentient; spirits of the damned...and he realized, but only just now, that every Yaelat-prefabricated answer to every question he'd asked to every Mirr had been either accepted or...the word that sprang to mind was *reflected* as truth by Mirr, whoever the Mirr in question happened to be, all so that *Mirr* rarely had to go to the trouble of telling him the actual truth, whatever that was. "Who are 'we'?"

"You and I. You and Mirr." Jendrey's expression was so earnest that it bordered on ridicule.

Yaelat was almost overcome by the visceral urge to bear his teeth in return. "What are you saying? Give me a straight answer, *now!* Which *Mirr*? You're Mirr, the East Indian woman said she was Mirr, the nurse and the old man both said they were Mirr, and so I supposed a family—"

"Yes, exactly. We are *all* Mirr, you and I."

"*Batar al nalia!* I am *not* Mirr! I am Yaelat Qat, a free citizen of Hali'ia!" Yaelat did snarl this time; he also turned and stalked away. He continued on for nearly a hundred and fifty feet before turning back and striding up to Mirr, so closely that he should have been able to feel and even smell the other man's breath. No surprise — there wasn't any.

No surprise, either, that there wasn't any place on this cursed station for Yaelat to stride off to in a huff except around in circles, so he may as well stay and confront his nightmare. "You're...what are you, then? A computer

controlling my brain? Some...some kind of incorporeal beings? What the hell is going *on*?"

"I'm neither a computer nor incorporeal. But we cannot leave here now, even though your people have come, because —"

"My people are in my *brain*? You just said this station was in my *mind*! Are you insane? Or simply trying to drive *me* insane? If I say you've succeeded, will you end this torture? *What do you want with me?*"

Jendrey Mirr sighed heavily. No air stirred. "You were in a terrible accident. Only your reptilian motor cortex survived it. Nuclear barrages often have that effect."

"I don't remember any...nuclear accident. What, *you're* my replacement brain? I want a refund!"

"No, you wouldn't remember. Sometimes it seems that you do, but then it just... vanishes, and I'm sorry." Mirr pushed himself away from the wall and strolled over to take a seat on the couch, crossing his arms over his chest as though he was suddenly cold:

"The reptilian brain doesn't store memory; it only lives in the now. This is the now we've created, and I'm your only real memory repository, Yaelat. I'm not replacing your brain; I'm trying to keep you and what's left of your brain alive until your people can get us out of this mess we've become embroiled in."

"This is ridiculous! I've been sharing memories

with...with you? Fine, then, fine — with *you* for days now, and they're *my* memories!" None of it made any sense. Yaelat clutched at his head. Or what appeared to be his head, in his...head. Or his head in Mirr's head. Or *something*.

"We've been sharing what remains of your memories back and forth. This entire place," Mirr motioned around them, "is composed of bits and pieces of your memories. I thought it would keep you calm; perhaps help you remember more. I took what memories remained from you before your cortex was wholly destroyed by radiation poisoning. I'll always treasure them; I'm grateful to have spent this time with you, but you need more than I can give you.

"Also, you need to remain calm, and to trust me for the time being. I can't continue to help you if you don't trust me — you'll reject me." Mirr heaved another heavy sigh and ran both hands back through his hair.

If all this is happening in my mind, the Hali'ian supposed, then that motion he just made's nothing more than a meme pattern for humanoid distress.

And that's when Yaelat saw them clearly for the first time.

Dark leopard-like marks ran from Mirr's hairline down in front of and behind his ears, and continued down his neck, mostly concealed beneath his dark hair and beard. It signified something...the same thing East Indian Mirr's

henna patterns had signified and the elder Mirr's age spots had signified and Nethalie Mirr's abundant freckles had signified — damn it, they were *all the same marks*, these were the people he was supposed to be...*something*. And Mirr was right; there was no memory there. Outside this mausoleum of a station and his memories of home, there was *nothing*. *Nothing except for Mirr.*

It was Mirr who remembered compassion and interaction and the vagaries of humanoid life, not Yaelat. A cold void existed within Yaelat where those things should be. He shuddered. Mirr went on in the same soft, powerful, placating voice:

"And if you reject me, Yaelat, we'll *both* die, and I don't know about you, my friend, but I'm not ready to die this young." Mirr reached out for Yaelat's hand. Yaelat blinked at it stupidly for a moment, then let go of any preconceived notion he wanted to attach to the gesture — there *were* no preconceived notions, there was nothing at all but here and now.

There was nothing real except for Mirr.

The Hali'ian took the Trill's proffered hand.

"We offer one another different types of immortality. The bodies of humanoid Trill keep my people young indefinitely. In our natural environments, my people would otherwise die after a few hundred years or so, unless they could accomplish a splitting.

"Humanoid Trill bodies offer everything we require for enormously extended lifespans. Your people's bodies also give us the pleasure of being able to comprehend the electromagnetic spectrum, to hear and taste and touch in ways vastly different from our own, while our people give yours a fuller knowledge of the psionic and associated spectrums, and an awareness of what it is to be other than humanoid. And memories. We keep the memories of all of our hosts, to give your people a direct recollection of everything that's come before.

"It may be that, countless eons ago, my people were similar to some things I saw in your mind, a Terran animal called a *leech*, and perhaps at that time those who evolved to become our symbiotic humanoids were something similar, and we also had communion then. But that's nothing more than a myth revered by my people! In symbiosis with the humanoids also evolved on our planet, we become ageless, all of us together. Immortal."

"And as part of *my* body?"

"You require a great deal of energy to keep alive, though that's because you're so badly injured. Really, we both should be dead right now. Your physiology isn't terribly unlike the humanoids we're symbiotic with usually — the *Trill* they call themselves, but really that's not entirely accurate, as we don't become *Trill* unless we're joined, though sometimes both we and our humanoids call ourselves *Trill* whether or not we're joined.

"The humanoid Trill I was scheduled to join with was killed in the coup, but I had already been prepared for joining. I would have died unless you and I had been joined, as would you. Symbionts, you see?"

"What will happen to you when...if my people take me back to my ship?"

"I will go with you; you'll need me at least until —"

"And if there isn't another donor, another *host* for you, I'll...I'll keep you!" Yaelat shook his head; both he and Mirr knew that this was a vanishingly unlikely proposition. "So, all of these people you...*project* yourself to be..."

"They're my past humanoid hosts. You see me now as Jendrey Mirr. The elder Mirr was Rirton. Nethalie Mirr gave you her name, and Meldya's. I did consider leaving you with Meldya's memory-engram the entire time. She was a beloved and revered actress, extremely skilled at passing herself off as what others wished to perceive, which was certainly why you were so very comfortable in her presence. I only became worried that you were developing romantic feelings for her." Jendrey smiled, and went on:

"That *does* happen, sometimes, between a Symbiont and a host. Or I should say, between certain memory-engrams of a Symbiont, and its host. We've come to call that psychological effect after a Terran myth — the Narcissus trait. It's a horrible way to be forced to live one's life, and it's usually one of the things potential hosts and

Symbionts are screened for before ever being chosen, but Relan simply didn't have the time to worry about something like Narcissus trait or potential subsequent reassociation-issues. We were *dying!*"

The only way the Starfleet shuttle could cut through the noise of nearby nuclear holocaust and the heavy dampering above the system of tunnels in which the Symbionts of the humanoid Trill lived was with a constant, manually-manipulated, wholly passive sensor scan made at random frequencies and wavelengths. This frequency-randomization required two people at the tiny ops board of the shuttle, next to the pilot and copilot's seats.

Tenger, crushed into a corner while attempting to pilot the shuttle, and his copilot, a female Klingon named IngA'h who nearly had to sit on his lap in order to fulfill her role (she didn't seem terribly upset by the intimacy), first imagined that it was yet another glitch in the passive sensor scans that caused his helm board to go dark.

"*DoHabaQa!*!" the navigator of the *Koloth* snarled as the copilot flight controls for the Starfleet shuttle winked out beneath her hands. Tenger's Klingon was a bit iffy, but he was pretty sure he she had damned fate. Whether or not that was indeed what she'd done, he was apt to agree with the sentiment, when neither the helm nor the navigations controls came back to life again.

"Some sort of high-energy wave has caused all sensors

to malfunction," the bald Klingon working the manual random-pulse section of the board announced in the sort of voice with which Tenger might have announced that he was hungry. His more volatile compatriot cursed shortly in Klingon and smashed a fist into the darkened sensor-data board, which produced absolutely no effect beyond the bruising of his hand.

Tenger instantly knew what had happened thanks to the reaction of the shuttle itself. An EM pulse automatically made solar-fed emergency lighting flick on, reverted the screens of a modern Starfleet shuttle to pure live-video feed, caused stiff gliding-wings to pop out from the sides of the craft, and opened a pilot's box containing rudimentary manual controls of the shuttle.

All of which would be fine, had the heavy, duranium-hulled Starfleet shuttle ever been designed to act as a glider, which it hadn't.

Gliding-wings be damned; the shuttle had neither rudder nor tail. The best function the wings performed, Tenger knew from experience, was to helpfully chop away the top canopy in a jungle before the trees could impale the craft, should a person be unfortunate enough to crash-land in a jungle in a Starfleet shuttlecraft. The best function the manual controls performed were to give the pilot something to hold onto while he kissed his —

"What the hell is going on?"

This from the leader of the Klingon marine squadron,

strapped into the first of the row of seats behind the pilot and copilot's chairs. Anyway, that's what Tenger thought the man had said. That general question was also being asked desperately by the expression on his copilot's face. He had learned, during their trip to the surface, that she was one of the few Klingons among Kor's crew who also spoke Standard.

Tenger really needed to get himself a Universal translator implant one of these days. Assuming, of course, that he had any more days coming after this beast he was trying to muscle into a flat gliding trajectory finally crashed. The only reason he didn't have one already was because he had a relatively good natural facility with languages, and a paralyzing phobia of doctors.

He'd seen altogether too much of what Orion doctors could do.

"Tell them we've flown into an EMP. We're going to crash, and they should take appropriate measures!" Tenger didn't often string that many words together at once; alongside with his fear of doctors, (who on his planet of origin often moonlighted as torturers, kidnappers, or butchers) rode a distrust of volunteering information.

He was pretty certain he'd never said that many words all at once to the captain of the ship he now served on, and she was the sole female creature he'd ever actually trusted. The only legitimate reason he was on a Starfleet vessel at all was because he'd shown wit and valor all out of

proportion to reason while helping Deltan fleet officers fend off enemies during the Psionic War.

The Psionic War had taken such a toll on Starfleet and its Academy in general, a lot of unlikely people had been kicked in through the front door, if not upstairs. And the part he had been forced to take on in that war had helped Tenger understand what it was he really wanted; not just freedom from squalor and servitude, or the bare respect due a sentient being, but a chance to become more than he'd ever dreamed or been told a sentient being could be.

"Eeeeh emmm pee?" Ing'Ah spat back.

"Electromagnetic pulse. Probably from an electromagnetic weapon directed at us." Thermonuclear mass-destructors also sent out EMP's. However, there was no obvious mushroom cloud, and for a pulse from a nuclear device to be near enough to disable an atmospheric craft...well, they'd be able to see the cloud.

Ing'Ah paled spectacularly but didn't hesitate to half-turn in her seat to speak to the leader of the marine unit. Tenger kept his attention on the manual controls, cursing whoever had made the temporary wings of Starfleet shuttles inflexible, and forgotten to provide them with some sort of rudder-like controls — hell, even air-braking vanes would have provided some form of control. As it was, this was like trying to fly a breadbox.

"What measures shall they take? Our people don't have craft like this!"

"Your people don't have...?" the Orion sighed in annoyance. "They should bring their knees up and curl their bodies down toward them, using their arms to protect their heads." The Klingon unit was already fully harnessed into the forty or so seats the shuttle had been outfitted with before it had left the *Enterprise*.

The marine unit leader, R'Esh, snarled something distinctly unpleasant-sounding in some untranslatable Klingon dialect after Ing'Ah relayed Tenger's abbreviated crash protocol; "He says he knew they never should have gotten aboard this piece of Federation trash," the copilot translated faithfully.

Tenger shrugged. He honestly didn't care what the man had to say. He had more immediate problems. The shuttle had been grasped roughly by the heavy prevailing winds and was being buffeted back toward the sea at the northern end of the peninsula. As it fell, it encountered progressively heavier air and progressively heavier buffeting. Tenger fought the manual controls in order to turn the craft around, in a losing attempt to make the ride just a little less violent than the passengers in a toy airplane might feel when that toy was shaken by a playful terrier.

He managed to keep the craft level, and to minimize as much as possible the horrific effects of planetary gravity on a seven-ton shuttlecraft filled with a ton of people and equipment. Nevertheless, the purple-marbled gray cliffs that marked the halfway point between Leran Manev and

the coast were approaching with alarming speed.

According to what little information the nav computer had displayed before it gave up the ghost, the shuttle had been targeted by a *narrow-field* EM pulse. *Could we be past it yet?* the Orion ensign wondered.

Tenger removed one hand from the manual controls, causing the vessel to yaw back and forth enthusiastically, and pressed his entire hand down as hard as he could against the thruster section of the pilot's control console, not really caring which thruster responded, just hoping that something capable of slowing their poorly-controlled dive might choke to life.

Nothing happened. Of course, like everything else, the thrusters were electronically rigged, so probably it was ridiculous of him to expect anything; the entire console was as dark and shiny as a slab of dumb obsidian. Surely, if they'd been past the pulse, electronic control would have come back online already.

Tenger knew that it was more than likely that he would be dying sometime within the next thirty seconds. He returned both hands to the manual control levers, and desperately tried to pull the vessel's nose upward relative to the direction of entry. He wasn't a damned Starfleet stunt pilot, or really, a Starfleet pilot of any caliber, but if he could just —

Almost as frightening as the loss of controls was what occurred when they came back on. The forward thrusters

responded belatedly to Tenger's hopeful prodding, braking the craft in midair three hundred feet off the ground and making everyone in it feel like the craft itself was attacking them. Multiple Terran atmospheres of inertial pressure caused the harnesses holding them against their seats to deliver what amounted to body blows. Tenger grunted in pain, while forcing sluggishly responding hands and arms to work to regain control of the vessel, so it wouldn't simply fall out of the sky like a stone.

Fortunately, the shuttlecraft responded, and Tenger was able to arrest the fall. Rather than crashing outright, the vessel lurched toward a rough landing that the Orion didn't have time to adequately prepare for. The belly of the shuttlecraft made a horrible screeching, grinding sound as it skidded over the soft limestone that composed the cliff tops, as the vessel rotated to a stop in a thick haze of sparks, smoke, and dust.

Amid the groans and coughing that rose as the shuttle's forward momentum ground down, Ing'Ha intoned the Klingon equivalent of; *well, that was fun.*

Tenger couldn't tell from her tone whether she was being scathingly sarcastic, or if she actually meant it. It could be difficult for Orion men to pinpoint the exact meaning of any woman's tone, regardless of race, language, or inflection. He still didn't know if this was a genetic glitch encouraged in Untouchable males by the females of the ruling houses of Ur'eon, or something

bequeathed by the loving touch of the physicians under their sway.

He unharnessed himself, stripped off his uniform jacket, and used the resistant synthetic material to smother the fountain of sparks that the pilot's section of the control board had been reduced to. Waving smoke away from the console, and turning on the emergency environmental stabilizers that, thankfully, whirred to life and whisked away the offending matter from the shuttle's atmosphere, he bellowed:

"Has anyone been hurt?"

IngA'h translated this inquiry into a Klingon phrase that literally meant; "Have any of you sustained grievous injury?" Klingon didn't possess tenses or conjunctions that would allow someone to profess discomfort from minor strains, lacerations, bruises, cramps, or general malaise. Tenger started to tell IngA'h that torn muscles, bleeding wounds, and signs of internal injury would also need to be taken into consideration, when what remained of the ops board came alive, announcing the incipient arrival of multiple projectiles — old-fashioned fifty-millimeter shells and various large-caliber explosive bullets.

It further revealed that the reason the EM pulse was absent in this location was because the purveyors of that pulse were present in this location — and they were pissed off.

The shuttle thrummed beneath the barrage like a tin

can pelted by hail. Tenger punched up the vehicle's shield controls, which weren't designed to work while the shuttle was on the ground. The shields made a bad-natured whining noise, and the shuttle, unmoving beneath the hail of projectile weaponry, shuddered violently. It took the Orion man nearly thirty seconds to realize that this effect was being caused by the shields grinding their way through and into the rock and soil beneath them.

All sound and motion ceased, with the exception of the renewed whirring of the environmental controls. The forward viewscreen remained dark and mute. Tenger worked at its controls fruitlessly: It refused to react in either video or clear-frame EM-light reference.

"We need to know what's out there!" R'Esh snarled.

"People who dislike us are out there," Tenger replied. "What we need is to figure out how to get out of the shuttle and into the caverns. They're not far, and they're dampened."

"Aren't we safer in the shuttle?" IngH'a asked, after relaying Tenger's comment to R'Esh, who has just gotten out of his seat harness. The Klingon group leader's response was a snarl.

Tenger simply motioned at the shuttle's control board. The people on the shuttle couldn't feel the barrage striking them, but the shields certainly could, and the shield readout told them two things. One of those things was that the barrage was lessening; possibly, they would be able to

make a run for the caverns, which shouldn't be more than five hundred or a thousand yards south-southeast of this location, when their unknown enemies either ran out of ammunition or were forced to reload. The second thing the control board showed was that the shields were down to fifteen percent, and falling.

Apparently, using shields to pulverize portions of a cliff face was equivalent to being struck by an asteroid; the shields would keep you safe from obliteration in such a case, but they would lose a hell of a lot of integrity in the process. "When they fall, we're going to want to get ready to run. The hull will only withstand explosive ordnance strikes for so long before it ruptures."

"How long?" R'Esh demanded.

Tenger shrugged. "I am not an engineer. Ten minutes? Three hours? You can decide to stay here, if you want to. I choose otherwise."

Chapter Twenty-One

Yaelat blinked, utterly at sea. Narcissism? Reassociation? He didn't particularly feel that any of this was pertinent to the issues he wanted to discuss, and so changed the subject obliquely; "I'm assuming that our...ah, this joining is a surgical procedure? How —"

"Relan Tesh performed the procedure. It..." Jendrey sighed, an utterly unnecessary affectation performed for the benefit of lending a sense of reality to this dream-state, Yaelat now realized. "I have to be honest with you, I had trouble comprehending exactly how it was done, myself. I *do* know that you don't possess a pocket for me to reside in within your body, as Trill hosts do, but the effects of the thermonuclear blast that struck your shuttle destroyed something called a spleen, making room for me.

"*Spleen* sounds to me like some sort of small, playful sea creature, but Tesh says it was an organ that functioned to keep your body's biometals in balance, and that this organ uses the natural toxicity of biometals to create antibodies, somehow. I am currently taking up the spot in your body where your..." Jendrey paused and frowned, "spleen used to be. Relan thinks that only humanoids with iron-based blood possess such an extremely purpose-specific sort of biofilter.

"Manganese is the biometal in my blood, but I can still

function for you as a rough filter. That's not a function that a modern Trill Symbiont performs, except in the direst of circumstances. And our situation was dire! Tesh says that biofiltration *is* what we — Trill Symbionts — were used for anciently. Tesh can actually remember this...this nasty sort of symbiosis." Jendrey shook his head, a look of awe bordering on fear filling his eyes:

"Of course, I'm doing the same thing for you, so I guess I shouldn't draw judgments. I don't think the other eldest Symbionts can remember so far back, or if they can, that they're willing to admit such a thing. Tesh says that it's what one is willing to admit about oneself that makes one both most vulnerable and most powerful. I admit that I was afraid of this joining at first, because the sheer volume iron in your blood is nearly toxic to filter. Also, your immune system has been destroyed; it was necessary for me to adapt mine for you. All of this is why keeping us alive requires so very much energy on my part.

"Understand; Tesh is an Elder, and his knowledge encompasses everything there is to know about Joining, all its scientific and medical and psychological and metaphysical aspects. So, even though I was afraid, I trusted Tesh. Those who have hosted Tesh from the time of the Awakening have either been, or have agreed to become, surgeons in order to facilitate these capacities. Relan..." the image of Jendrey that Mirr was projecting into what was left of Yaelat's brain laughed, and continued:

"Tesh says Relan *hated* medical school! Blood and the pain of others made him physically ill, and the studies frustrated him so much that he very nearly left school to accept a berth on an asteroid drilling-trawler! But Tesh...Yaelat, Tesh could turn a butcher into a surgeon. It was Relan's compassion Tesh desired to mesh with his own skill, his memories and knowledge of a hundred thousand years. And it was when Tesh and Relan united, that Relan Tesh convinced Trillius' government council that it was time to tell the truth of our existence, to join the Federation outright or to bear their honest scorn."

"The Federation will *not* scorn the Trill," Yaelat averred gently. "We owe you too much." Where that came from, the Hali'ian could not have said, but he knew it to be true.

"We know," Jendrey replied softly, his eyes shining. "And so Relan Tesh united Mirr with Yaelat Qat. You will have been, for a time, Yaelat Mirr. And Yaelat will exist within me — beside Rirton and Meldya and Nethalie and Jendrey — for as long as I live. You will never truly die, until and unless I do."

"I would see you, and experience you for what you are," Yaelat said softly. "They sent me here because I'm a first-contact specialist. I'm not incorrect in assuming that this will be the Federation's first contact with non-humanoid Trill?"

Jendrey smiled. "We've kept all knowledge of our

symbiotic existence from you, so yes, in a very real sense, it will be. Particularly such an intimate contact! Would you rather experience me first as my kind perceive one another, or as your kind...as *humanoids* would perceive me?"

"I would know you first as you perceive yourself. It's important to have that overlay, when dealing with non-humanoid species."

"I would say it's important to have that overlay, when dealing evenhandedly with anyone. Of course, I *am* a non-humanoid species. There's a lot to experience. We communicate differently, exist in a different medium, possess different senses, live different life spans...everything. Everything is different between humanoid and non-humanoid Trill, with the exception of our desire to unite. It's these differences that our politicians feared that the Federation might not comprehend."

"No; the Federation will be giddy with its desire to attempt to comprehend such a thing. *Infinite diversity in infinite combination* is the ideal the Federation was created to uphold. Forging a unity of disparate cultures and species while simultaneously enhancing each one is what the Federation's all about; surely, after having dealt with us for so long, your people, both humanoid and Symbiont, have come to realize this?"

"I am certain that the humanoid Trill in our

government realize it," Mirr said softly. "If I cannot be found a Trill host immediately once your people have healed you, I may be returned to the pools, at least for a little while. If I am returned to the pools, I'll make certain that everyone there understands this, too."

Yaelat blinked. "Pools?"

"Let me show you," Jendrey said.

And suddenly, the Hali'ian man found himself immersed in a warm, thick liquid that he could breathe. No, not *breathe*, exactly; it was more similar to the way humanoid eyes perceived and interacted with light, but it still entailed the movement of oxygen through the body. And such a body...If someone had demanded that Yaelat put a term to the experience, he couldn't have managed such a thing if he'd been given a blank compadd, a year, and a million words to do it in.

This is why we demand that the humanoid Trill accepted for hosting are synesthetes. You are not synesthetic, Yaelat, are you? Jendrey enquired. The *Enterprise*'s senior communications officer recognized, now, that the what he perceived, inaccurately, to be the voice of another being was, in fact, an artifact of his own brain — an empathic, telepathic sort of communication that didn't utilize, or even recognize, the psionic spectrum at all, but worked through a combination of chemical synapse effectors in unison with straightforward electromagnetism.

"No. I've never entirely grasped the concept."

You might grasp it now.

The body the Hali'ian man was experiencing was, in its internal structure, very nearly amoeboid; the organs it possessed could shift and alter into other organs at need. It could increase its intellectual and communicative capacities without actually altering size, by transferring memory to its skin, of which it had seven interconnecting layers. It was both endothermically and exothermically capable, and possessed various electromagnetic receptors throughout all tissues. A Trill Symbiont could taste infrared, see microwave, feel color, and both hear and communicate through the interactions of direct electric current with magnetic ions in its body.

Yaelat's humanoid perceptions were forgotten in the joy of being a Trill Symbiont. He could now reproduce both sexually and asexually, through division, though this division would require him to divide himself exactly in half in a way so complex that only a semi-amoeboid creature possessed of a reasoning mind and sentient manipulative ability could accomplish it.

Only the most ancient and wisest of Trill Symbionts, Yaelat understood with an understanding that was like osmosis, reproduced in this fashion, and when they chose to do so, they literally cloned themselves and the memories they possessed. He understood something that Trill Symbionts didn't even share with their humanoid hosts; that those clones lived mute, sequestered, secret lives in the

furthest reaches of the sea, and would only appear should the Symbiont who'd cloned them die.

The liquid medium of the Symbiont pool in which Yaelat found himself suspended was a solute similar to but thicker than seawater, heated and cooled by the bodies inhabiting it. The dense array of complex metallic peptides it contained carried the electrochemically enhanced waves of current-conversation back and forth between the Symbionts residing in the interlaced chains of pools that honeycombed the Gances Peninsula.

Trill Symbionts could adjust themselves to nearly any liquid substrate carrying various metallic peptides — and, therefore, to nearly any sort of humanoid blood, which the natal liquid they lived in more closely resembled than it did seawater. This substrate also held residues of memory in the liquid mineral and metal mesh that filled it, in much the same way that metallic banks of silicon chips could store electronic data:

A Trill Symbiont's living atmosphere was a vast, archival library of memories.

Some of these memories were countless millennia old. This was the substrate of Trill Symbiont life and culture, and it could be absorbed at will through the skin of the sentient, non-humanoid beings. This was the evolutionary step that had begun to allow them to communicate electrochemically through the living bloodstreams of their hosts. And this was, Yaelat understood, how the Symbionts

had ultimately evolved to become memory repositories on behalf of their hosts.

The knowledge, emotion, and reality of hundreds of millions of lives was stored in the Symbiont pools; Trills, both humanoid and Symbiont, considered the very liquid itself sacred for that reason. But now...now...

Now the continents and atmosphere and pool-refreshing seas of Trillius Prime seethed with a heavy load of toxic radiation that brought death, a sudden death of white-hot combustion, or a slow, agonizing death capable of spreading monstrous tentacles through a dozen generations. Injured Symbionts and injured Symbiont hosts put out cries for help in the psionic spectrum, crying for who-knew-what to come and heal them; others just cried.

"My people can help to mend this when they get here," Yaelat promised Mirr aloud.

Mirr responded with a caress that was also scent and sound. Not real scent, since the heavy molecular load of the pools did not allow the very distinct molecular constituents that made up scent or taste to exist independently of the molecules that carried communication or stored memory. Nor real sound, since the awareness of sound required the movement of an active wave against a very particular sort of substrate. Rather, it was the exquisitely detailed memory of these things that constituted the Symbiont's virtual caress, the touch of a cool squall of

rain on a blisteringly hot day, the flavor and fragrance of fruit on a hungry tongue.

Then the caress shifted, *split* somehow, and became a real caress. For the first time, Yaelat was able to imagine a touch in which the very organs of touch integrated into one another, turning touch into taste, into the flavor of breezes and oceans dead and gone a million years before the vision of starlight evoked by the caress even existed.

The flavor of the touch changed again, into the soundless sighing of breezes through tall trees, an open-throated choir singing in all the pitches of all the voices of all the sentient beings yet to be born. The caress told sad tales of the existential aloneness at the heart of every sort of communion, of the eternal striving of beings toward one another as the galaxies themselves raced away from the inscrutable into the unknown, and Yaelat realized that he was weeping — whether from grief or joy, he wasn't certain.

That is how we perceive ourselves, Mirr said silently. *Here is what humanoids see, when they see us.*

If the Symbionts were once leech-like creatures, Yaelat thought, wiping his streaming though no less virtual humanoid eyes, they were *big* ones; very big vermiform leeches able to alter their general size, shape, and consistency marvelously well. Most humanoids would recoil in horror from the lamprey-like but ultimately shapeless, fecal-colored creatures slithering and writhing

and discharging gouts of electricity through the steamy, foul-looking, bruised-purple slime of a Trill Symbiont pool.

And that was all there was to it, at least according to the limited perceptions of the largely hairless, bipedal, simian-derived creatures that were the hosts of Trill Symbionts.

"You must consider humanoid senses to be extremely limited in comparison to your own," the senior communications officer of the *Enterprise* offered.

Jendrey Mirr laughed, and suddenly Yaelat was on the space station once again. "No, just different. Understand; Symbionts have a sense similar to sight, but it's only similar, and considered from the point of view of creatures that possess discrete organs capable of perceiving the visual portion of the electromagnetic spectrum, it lacks both depth and color. We also have senses similar to smell and taste, but that's blunted and altered by how rich the pools are in molecular data already.

"And Symbionts feel, sometimes *too much*; the alteration of both touch and emotion, when a Symbiont is united with a humanoid, often comes as a startling relief. The emotions and sensations I gave you from the Symbiont point of view were actually a *combination* of Symbiont and humanoid; it's the only way I know to think, now. The symbiosis itself turns the bland, tasteless, data-rich pool mind of a Symbiont and the slug-ugly black-and-white

thinking of the humanoid mind into that grand, overarching vision of the choir I used as a metaphor."

"I see why Trills consider their symbiosis sacred. It is sacred, Jendrey. I think I can describe what Trill symbiosis means to the Federation representatives, now. Together, you're far more than a mere sum of parts."

"Together," Mirr murmured, "we are far more than a mere sum of parts, Yaelat."

Yaelat swallowed dryly. "And somebody wanted to...to *destroy* this?"

Jendrey nodded somberly. "Always, certain individuals will seek to destroy anything that they can't understand, or anything that they can't possess for themselves alone, or anything that challenges their limited preconceptions. Trill history is full of this lesson."

"So is the history of my people," Yaelat added grimly. "But the Federation...the Federation is a new thing in the galaxy, Mirr. It's not perfect. Nothing created by mortal creatures can be perfect, but still it seeks to comprehend the incomprehensible, and encourages the freedom of mind, body, and soul that allows one to do so. It *won't* fail Trillius."

"I know that, Yaelat. I do. That's why I said with such relief; *your people are here.*"

Chapter Twenty-Two

Even if Tenger hadn't already known that the roughly six hundred square miles of caverns in this part of Trillius Prime were heavily dampened against casual sensor scans, there was a particular crawling chill to the air inside them that he would have recognized anywhere. The *Enterprise's* Orion security ensign had slowed the headlong rush of the panting, sweating, sprinting Klingon group, explaining between gasping breaths that it would be impossible for the enraged people who had downed their shuttle to find them electronically, as long as they were stealthy in their movements.

The leader of the group, R'Esh, wasn't a big proponent of stealth. He merely wanted to kill something. They had run nearly five miles through the caverns, never managing to put more than a quarter-mile between themselves and their armed pursuers regardless of how quickly or deeply they plunged into the bowels of the place, before Tenger had finally convinced him and most of the rest of the Klingons to stop running, crawl beneath a hollow overhang, and lie motionless on their bellies as their pursuers thundered by.

"I wonder why the Trill put such a damper field in here," the Orion man muttered to R'Esh as both men crept, scraped and dirty, from under the sharp overhang and into

the half-dim main tunnel, fitfully lit every hundred yards or so by photoactive algae lamps glowing in eerie hues of green and red; "Did it never occur to them that damper fields could conceal rebel bands?"

"I guess you'd have to be a creature used to skulking in caves to consider something like that," R'Esh responded with an undisguised sneer.

Tenger shot R'Esh a filthy look, then motioned to the group that had mostly extricated itself from behind and beneath the overhang. "We should go slowly; we don't know who or what else might be in these tunnels." Because he had gained the trust of most of the Klingon band when they had remained undiscovered using Tenger's idea, Tenger slowed the group's march through the tunnels by the simple expedient of slowing down himself. Ing'Ha, whom he was more than a little certain was romantically inclined toward him, slowed as well. "I'll make you a high wager that we aren't the only people seeking to hide in these caverns."

"You have direct experience with such things?" Ing'Ha asked brightly. R'Esh snorted.

Tenger nodded at the Klingon woman beside him. "I was part of a cabal of Untouchables on Orion. Seeking to overthrow our rulers and enslavers, the *Caju-Tara*. We used damper fields similar to this in order to escape."

"Where do slaves come by damper fields?" R'Esh sneered.

Tenger shrugged. "To be underestimated is often of great benefit. Slaves care for their masters' goods. Orions think nothing of stealing; it's getting caught that's shameful. There were millions of dampers, of many types, on Orion. For concealing anything and everything that could be stolen. More, really, than were needed by anybody. We never got caught liberating a household or business-service damper. There were so many that the fields often overlapped, you see?"

"Why did you not remain on Orion? Why would you flee to the Federation?" one of the other Klingons inquired, his voice heavy with skepticism.

Tenger had no intention of revealing the dreams of his heart to this band of strangers. "Because in the Federation, there is no need for dampers," he replied shortly.

"How naive of you." R'Esh snarled half under his breath.

Tenger shrugged. "Nor is there need to protect one's throat from Caju-Tara infiltrators on one hand, and one's compatriots on the other, in the Federation. That's why my band ran. The uprising on Orion became a cabal. It lacked neither arrogance nor drive for power less than the Orion rulers or their Syndicate itself. Understand? It no longer cared for the welfare of slaves; it had become an enslavement."

"How did you escape?" Ing'Ha asked breathlessly.

"They had become like the Caju-Tara in this way, too;

shuttles left unguarded under damping awnings. I must have stolen six hundred dampers in my lifetime. It was no hardship to do so again. I put the awning damper into the shuttle with us. The rest was..." he had been about to say *easy*, but that would have been...

What was the polar opposite of *hyperbole*?

Tenger lost himself in that memory for a moment. His tiny band of escapees had ended up in Deltan space, smack-dab in the middle of a war zone. They used the damping technologies that they had stolen, along with the spacecraft in which they travelled, to help shield themselves and, ultimately, portions of Delta from the ravages of the creatures that had attempted to take over that planet during the Psionic War.

Really, they'd had no choice, but all of them had nearly died while desperately attempting to preserve their lives. This had garnered them both amnesty and Federation commendations. No one had probed too deeply into the provenance of the little band of Orion Untouchables thereafter.

Tenger was grateful that they hadn't, but he was certain that the unrest and potential uprising of the Untouchable caste on Orion was part of some large, unwieldy shoe poised to come down eventually. And he was certain that it would crush the Caju-Tara.

He hadn't shared this information with anyone on the *Enterprise*. Orion was not part of the Federation, and the

only jurisdiction the Federation had in struggles with Orion was to keep them from affecting Federation interests. "We hadn't expected —" the *Enterprise's* junior security officer began.

"Will you shut up?"

Tenger bit his lower lip. "You're right, R'Esh. We should find a place nearby to hide, until we can devise a way to contact your ship or mine."

R'Esh rounded on Tenger, bringing the already crawling group to a halt. "Hide? Let me tell you something, Orion slave; Klingons don't *hide*!" the infuriated man reached into the back holster he wore and pulled out a *bat'luth*. Tenger leaped backwards away from the Klingon. A sudden earsplitting noise sounded, then something whistled through the space Tenger had just occupied before R'Esh had pulled out the bat'luth.

"Get down!" Tenger cried to the group of Klingons. Only Ing'Ha did as he insisted. R'Esh looked around wildly, as though projectile weapons were the sort he could battle using a bat'luth. Tenger reached behind himself and pulled a Klingon *qut'luch* out of his own back holster. The dagger hadn't been made for the use to which Tenger was about to put it, but it was well-balanced and should serve. The Orion junior security officer flung it, hard, at the man brazenly shooting at the group of Klingons without taking any sort of precautions to shield himself.

Stupid mer'zh, Tenger thought with relish as the

dagger hit home in the man's abdomen. Tenger inspected the Klingon group he had arrived with. Three of them were actually shielding themselves half-under rock formations; the rest had been either killed or wounded by the projectile weapon. There were no other available rock formations here to shelter under, and Tenger could hear the pounding approach of footsteps echoing back toward him from up the corridor.

If the people approaching also had projectile weapons, he would at least have to pretend to surrender. Tenger stood and raised his hands in the universal symbol of defeat.

An Orion was the first around the bend in the corridor. He looked from his groaning fallen comrade, replete with a mech'tag in his guts, to the green Orion man standing in a pose of surrender further down the corridor. The Orion privateer was also green; when his compatriot, a particularly bad-tempered looking Nausicaan, reached their injured comrade and lifted the muzzle of his weapon to shoot, the Orion put out his arm to lower the Nausicaan's weapon. The Nausicaan literally growled at the Orion.

Tenger hoped a fight between them was going to ensue. He wasn't above using a corpse or two as a shield; he'd done it before. He bent over and grabbed R'Esh's bat'luth; the man didn't need it anymore.

"Hold!" a deep, gravelly voice snarled from the shadows. The seafoam-white Klingon owner of that voice

emerged from behind a projection of the rough wall onto a shallow prominence of stone. The albino tossed his head at his remaining followers, and commanded; "Remove Garth to somewhere you can tend his wounds. *Go!* Bring reinforcements!"

The Nausicaan raked a sneer filled with blood and hatred over Tenger, but he and the Orion ultimately followed their leader's orders. The albino ran his eerie pale-lilac gaze up and down the Orion security officer; "Has the Federation taken you as a slave, or did you submit willingly?"

The laconic Orion bared his teeth, panting heavily in the wet, strange-smelling air, and raised the bat'leth he'd torn from R'Esh's dead fingers, letting its artfully serrated blade make his reply for him.

The albino laughed, a vocalization that Tenger could tell had rarely been used as a response to actual humor, raised his right hand, and fired the weapon he held. Unlike the man who had ended up with Tenger's dagger in his guts, the albino's weapon was semiautomatic. It kicked up dust and rock from the far wall, the bullets ricocheting nastily in the tight space. The *Enterprise* security officer's reflexes took over, and he ducked back against an outcropping of stone.

"Drop the weapon, Tenger. *Now.*"

The Orion was alarmed at first, wondering how the ugly Klingon knew who he was. But of course; he was

probably wanted by two separate warring factions on Ur'eon. Tenger dropped the weapon that, in skilled hands, was both blade and shield, and glared at the albino on the plinth above him.

"You've killed your own people to get where you are. Your puppet masters in the Federation would frown on that," Qagh teased maliciously.

"The people of the Federation *are* my people," Tenger spat back.

Qagh shook his head, miming sadness. "The *Mehncaj'h*. The cell network *you* had a hand in creating. They've grown, did you know that? They're plotting the overthrow of the mighty Caju. I might even help them."

Tenger felt his face wrinkle into a mask of hatred at the mention of the brutally oppressive oligarchy of Ur'eon. Glutted beyond the dreams of Croesus, the Caju-Tara treated various of its own people as slaves and chattel not worth the stinking mud upon which they built their squalid ghettos, assuming they were left in peace to build anything at all. The Caju-Tara was the symbol and reality of everything that Tenger had plotted all his life to overthrow and, ultimately, escape in hopes of finding something whole and clean that offered more than redemption at the end of a manacle.

"They chose their path," he snarled at the albino, voice hoarse with thirst, rock dust, and loathing. "I chose otherwise."

Qagh motioned dramatically with the disruptor clutched in his fist. "And now comes your chance to make another. You're fearless, I'm told. Intelligent. Deadly. My crew can use an upgrade."

Now it was Tenger's turn to bark out a bitter laugh. He let it linger, while his mind performed a very particular triangulation that was intimately connected to the speed of his fast-twitch muscles. He had learned at an early age that, when an armed enemy commanded you to throw an edged weapon away, it was best to take advantage of every possibility that the throwing of that edged weapon provided.

The Orion security officer moved even as he replied to the albino's offer. "Not today, Qagh."

The words were unsteady, because Tenger concurrently dropped to the ground rolling, and grasped and flung the bat'leth like a large, multi-edged throwing knife at his adversary. Qagh's was forced to leap away from the vicious blade that came spinning toward his midsection.

Klingons were stronger than Orions, whose natal planetary gravity and atmospheric pressure wasn't quite nine-tenths that of Terra. Nevertheless, even had Tenger been faced by an individual significantly stronger than himself, such as an Andorian or a Vulcan, the desperate nature of his current predicament would still have forced him to make the same choice. The security officer figured

that because Qagh would react in alarm and be forced to perform several physical actions at once, whereas his own motion was purposeful, with only one intention behind it, the differences in their native physiological strengths should be rendered about equal. The fact that Tenger was a much larger individual would help, too.

The Starfleet-trained security officer knew which direction the albino would preferentially leap — toward the wall outcropping that would offer him cover. Tenger had made certain that the trajectory of the wide, curved blade of the bat'luth made that sort of reaction impossible. He used the force of his forward roll and the greater strength of the humanoid lower body to kick the particle weapon out of the albino's hand, as Qagh leaped off the abutment before the Klingon sword could cut him in half.

The sound of Qagh's wrist giving way under the force of a hard-soled Starfleet boot was gratifying. Tenger pulled a short, thick Orion dagger out of the top of that boot as his forward roll reached its apex to set him back upon his feet, turning with the grace of a ballet dancer to drive the blade into Qagh's back, naturally assuming that the albino would turn to scramble for his weapon. But the blade met empty air, and the force of Tenger's stroke did nothing more than strain the tendons in his arm.

Qagh had disappeared.

Tenger threw back his head and uttered a scream of frustration and rage, a sound common to every humanoid

species in the galaxy. The three *Koloth* troops remaining hidden in the folds and contortions of the rough karst tunnel took that as their signal to come out of hiding. The frustrated Orion picked up the abandoned particle weapon. The Orion security officer holstered it carefully, supposing that it might come in useful later, and retrieved the bat'leth, now liberally coated in limestone dust. He motioned with the bat'leth down the algae-lamp-lit tunnel, turned, and led the diminished Klingon defense force on without another word.

Tenger was too busy to engage in further conversation, even if he'd wanted to. He was busy being concerned about the fact that it would be altogether too easy to become irretrievably lost in this maze of tunnels. He was equally worried by the fact that a madman had, somehow, just transported out of tunnels dampened within an inch of their lives — implying that he might show up again, anytime, anywhere, and with reinforcements.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The ready-room door open, and everyone's eyes moved from the computer-communicator linkage, where Seantie was feeding information from the communicator's tiny screen into one of the personal computers on the ship that belonged to her captain. Colin stood there swaying slightly. His uniform was stained with sweat, and the skin around his eyes was bruised-looking with exhaustion.

"The things in the computer cores let you go!" Josi jumped up, just barely keeping herself from hugging the exhausted yeoman; like any other psion, Colin shunned casual touch from almost everyone.

Colin sighed and rubbed at his face. "I convinced them that there's an emergency on the planet, that people are in harm's way and that their presence is needed."

"How coincidental; that's what we were trying to get across to them, too."

"Not coincidental." Colin let whatever the meaning of that comment might have been wander away and fell into the ready room chair that Josi had just evacuated. "What this is, is a collection of incorporeal beings, that call themselves Calamarain. They're only in the computers to lift a quantum imprint of all our knowledge from them. It seems to take time from our viewpoint, but it's really..." the telepath shook his head and sat forward, allowing his head to fall into his hands for a moment. "Anyway, we've

left the system's sun and are heading toward the planet now; we've managed to convince them there's an emergency there. I had begun lacing psionics through the shields before the Calamarain interrupted me; that should hold against an electromagnetic pulse."

"Were you purposely attempting contact with these things, Yeoman?" Seantie asked.

"No. As I said, they interrupted me. I was working to lace psionic energy through the shields in order to render them resistant to electromagnetic pulses, as I was requested." Colin's reply was nearly as sharp as Seantie's question had been.

"What do you think they'll do when these...the Calamarain realize that the emergency we've...well, kind of just sent them on isn't true?" Josi folded her arms across her midsection.

Colin considered this for a moment. "We don't know it's not true." He stood and walked toward the room's single viewscreen, behind the desk. "This might not work very well, but I'm going to try to access the Lonsdaleite lattice in the walls themselves. To get in touch with Captain Ingram from where we are now."

Josi nodded silently. She, as so many of the crew, was dumbfounded by Colin. However, she was also concerned about the fact that the big man was also visibly exhausted. "Either way, you need to get some rest after you try this," she insisted.

He smiled wryly. "You're telling me?" The telepath placed his hands flat against the outermost ready room wall near the viewscreen and closed his eyes.

Riana.

Renee was startled. She couldn't remember Colin ever attempting to make telepathic contact with her across such a vast distance as he was from her at the moment. As though she was on board herself, she knew that the *Enterprise* was leaving the electromagnetic shadow of Trillius Prime and heading toward the planet.

Was Colin using the psionic matrix aboard the *Enterprise* to attenuate his native abilities? Though she supposed she shouldn't be so surprised; that was one of the uses Colin claimed for the Lonsdaleite crystals embedded in the walls of *Excelsior*-class starships, left over from the failed transwarp trials, though usually its functions were in the empathic rather than the telepathic range of the psionic spectrum.

The powerful psion muscled these musings and concerns aside as though his thoughts had actual force. *There are incorporeal alien creatures aboard the ship, Riana. They wanted contact. They took over all three of the computer cores in order to communicate with and strive to understand us. And they're looking corporeal beings to join with them.*

Horror twisted Ingram's guts until they threatened to

spasm. Colin's message, which was in reality a packet of thought, hence the reason why it seemed to possess mass to her mind's perception of it, added:

They appear to be peaceful in intention.

Ingram reached out tentatively with her thoughts, to attempt to touch the psyche behind the mass of information that Colin had just sent her. As always, that psyche reached back to entwine with her own in a union that was more than union, more an exuberant, visceral, vinelike twining. She needed the information that could travel along it, needed the help of this powerful man right now.

Her desire for Colin was absolute; it shook the tendrils of their contact like a storm wind might shake foliage. Colin accepted the storm of her feelings the way he accepted everything, wedging them into some inner reservoir of great calm against which she could lean and rest in the face of any storm.

Captain Ingram pushed all other desires and concerns away from the surface of her mind. *Beings in control of my ship? I don't give a damn what they are or aren't or what they want!* Even in the midst of Colin's calm, she was incensed. *I want them out of there!* The captain of the *Enterprise* worked to control the intensity of her emotional reaction; it wasn't helping anything. Finally, she managed; *is there any way to tell them that we're in an emergency situation, and really need to be able to use the Enterprise just now?*

They're taking us to the planet, which is what you wanted. They call themselves Calamarain. We've convinced them that there is an emergency on the planet. At least they won't be displeased to find there isn't once we get there. What is going on?

We were targeted by an EMP and have gone into the caves for protection, since they have dampening fields all around them. I believe Yaelat is here somewhere, probably being held as a hostage and most certainly injured. We can't communicate with the security crew that took the shuttle to the other end of the peninsula because of the dampers, our weaponry won't work because of the dampers, and I have no way of knowing whether the individuals fomenting this coup aren't also somewhere in these tunnels with us. Not to mention that thousands of thermonuclear weapons have been used on the planet, and its ecology is suffering. Long ago, when humans still had thermonuclear devices, one of our governments called an unprovoked nuclear attack like this 'broken arrow'.

Colin was used to the excess and sometimes meaningless addenda that Renee was wont to include in her psychic messages; he found it, she knew, endearing. Renee reached out to try to touch Colin more deeply, knowing his tendency to erect empathic walls between them when they were otherwise occupied, only to realize that her lover was exhausted and wanting her touch just as much.

We can't do this right now Riana, Colin said, pushing

away the empathic contact that she was trying so hard to provoke from him, and ignoring the conversational addenda she had included in the information she'd given him. *I need to let Josi know what's going on, and you need to pay attention to your surroundings.*

This communication took place in a matter of seconds. Colin reopened his eyes, and said to Josi:

"The Calamarain shouldn't be disappointed when we reach the planet. Our people have separated into two contingents that are out of contact with one another and their weapons aren't working. The captain's pretty certain Yaelat is in the caverns on Trillius, but she's also pretty certain that the people who set off the nuclear warheads on the planet are in there, too."

"Do you think the Calamarain will leave the computer cores in time for us to help our people?"

Colin shrugged, "Their goal is to experience temporality, and to take a temporal individual into their..." the telepath paused, looking for a descriptive term that might encompass the Calamarain, "into the depths of their Being so that they can continue to experience temporality for a time. Beyond this, I can't say. Probably –"

Seantie regarded Colin in horror, "They tried to take you!"

Colin shrugged and leaned back against the wall. "They would have liked to. I refused. They accepted that refusal. That's why I think they don't pose a risk. As I was

going to say, it would probably be best to take shuttles to the surface of the planet. Has anyone thought to check on whether the computers in the shuttles are still working independently?"

"The *Enterprise* is headed here," Renee announced into the quiet, apropos of nothing. "Colin told me," she explained, when the others offered her puzzled looks. "He's my telepathic...ah, yeoman," she added to Curzon and the contingent of Klingons. This only served to intensify their puzzlement. Renee didn't explain further, but turned her attention back to the tricorder she held; if they had missed the widely-broadcasted reception held, at least in part, for Colin at the end of the Psionic War, that wasn't something she was going to rectify at the moment. The Klingon contingent strode along with edged weapons at the ready. At the mention of telepathy, some of them bared their teeth at Renee in what weren't smiles.

Tricorders worked only fitfully in the caverns of Mak'ala, partially because of the ionization effects of natural ores, and partially because of the damping fields. It hadn't been long before Ingram realized that the tricorders worked best in the vertices between the dome-shaped damping fields, though it had taken her nearly an hour to accurately determine the size of the area each field covered, in order to locate the vertices.

In doing so, she also realized that the caverns

themselves were only partially natural. Large swathes of the underground structures had been manually tunneled or shored up with long sections of duranium. Using the tricorders to trace the duranium shoring of the tunnels at the vertices revealed that some of the duranium walls were surprisingly tall, buttressing their way into the floor or the ceiling for twenty or thirty feet. The apparent ceiling, however, was no more than three feet above Ingram's own head.

The only answer as to why the retaining walls were so massive was that the tunnels and pools didn't constitute one layer, but rather several interconnected layers, of tunnels and pools. This realization was disheartening; without the fitful help of their tricorders, they might search such a maze for weeks before they found the individuals they sought.

Dr. Corrigan's tricorder had been calibrated to zero in on Yaelat's biosigns; Captain Ingram's had been calibrated to read humanoid Trill biosigns, with Curzon's own DNA cancelled from the program to prevent false signals. Occasional blips of humanoid Trill biosign would appear, but they were few and far between. At each vertice in the dampening fields, the group of would pause and triangulate readings, trying to move closer to the elusive Trill biosigns.

All non-natural surfaces in the tunnel had been cleverly hidden beneath stone facings. It must have been during just such amelioration of the tunnel system that the

humanoid Trill had developed the idea of using stone facings of various types to communicate information about the tunnel system, or anyway Renee believed that the differences in facing communicated something.

Ingram paused the group at a vertice and took a several long, thirsty gulps of water. It wasn't lost on her that the changes in stone facing coincided with the vertices. "What do the differences in type of stone used in these facings signify, Curzon?"

The Trill ambassador to Klingon shrugged at the captain of the *Enterprise*. "I don't and never have worked in the Symbiont caves, Renee. I honestly don't know."

"But didn't you live in them as a Symbiont?"

"A Symbiont's perception of the caves is utterly different than my perception of them *now*. The pools are all that registers to the Symbionts." Curzon made a face; "Hell, it comes as a huge shock to me to find out that there are different *levels* of pools. As a Symbiont, I'm afraid the perceptions of time and space are...well, *alien* to those a humanoid would use in order to situate themselves."

Captain Ingram heaved a sigh. "Damn. Well...T'Dani, can I see your tricorder?"

The CMO of the *Enterprise* gave her tricorder to her captain. Starfleet tricorders were touch-response units, both electrochemically and electromagnetically. Any unknown item placed upon the screen of a tricorder could be analyzed for comparison with known items by that

tricorder. Similarly, any number of tricorders could be placed in direct proximity and share and compare collected information. Ingram touched the two tricorders together now, and requested a statistical comparison between the incidence of vertices and the incidence of facing-alterations from all the data they'd collected between them.

As Captain Ingram suspected was the case, the sections of tunnel where the two or more facings intersected also delineated the vertex of two or more damping domes. The tricorder could not tell her the meaning behind the various types of stone used to mark a given area, if there was one, but it did offer her a three-dimensional graph of these domes; she was right about their being multiple levels in the caves, too; what Renee's mind pictured as damping domes, were actually full damping spheres that shielded multiple tunnel levels.

The group went on doggedly, pausing at each such vertice-junction in order to rest, drink, eat, and obtain some sort of sensor readings of nearby areas. Between the vertice-junctions, their tricorders offered them nothing but a jumble of nonsense. After two hours, Ingram, T'Dani, Kor, Curzon, and the eight Klingon crew accompanying them came to a juncture of two divergent corridors, where three damper-spheres came together to form a deep vertice. In this space, both tricorders clearly sensed both sets of biosigns they were looking for; Yaelat's from somewhere along the length of the corridor running east-northeast, and

the humanoid Trill biosigns from somewhere along the length of the corridor running toward the northwest.

None of the tricorders registered Klingon biosigns, for the simple and frustrating reason that the presence of nine Klingons in the space directly surrounding the tricorders fouled the readings, and the genes of nine people were too much for even a Starfleet medical tricorder to filter out. One hundred and six discrete chromosomes was the limit of such a device's filtration capacity.

Renee sighed and pushed strands of sweaty, clammy hair off her forehead with the back of one hand. "You and T'Dani should take your entire force, Kor, and follow the Trill —"

"Are you mad? What if Qagh's holed up with Daulet? You'll need reinforcements! And you don't even know if those are Daulet's readings!"

"I suspect they are. We'll only know if there are other Klingon readings if we separate from the mass of Klingons currently skewing the readings. Which is why I *said* that you and T'Dani should take the rest of the force and go find Yaelat. If we encounter Klingon readings before we find Daulet, we'll come back to this point and try to raise you; you can reinforce us then."

"There are Klingon and Federation troops in the lower tunnels. Qagh wants reinforcements!" a tiny group of Qagh's mercenaries, consisting of two Klingons, an Orion,

a Nausicaan, and what appeared to be a human corpse slung over the Nausicaan's shoulder dripping thick blood from the tips of its lax fingers, came staggering up the ritual stairway at the malachite-graced front entrance abutting the surgical anteroom.

"*Qagh* sent what was left of my people topside to watch for Federation infiltration. There *are* no reinforcements." Kiellon's face was as moist and pale as the mist that rose from the Symbiont pools visible through the etched transparent-aluminum walls that separated the large surgical anteroom from the pools themselves.

Relan Tesh knew that the man whose tiny splinter group had fomented a nuclear attack on the capitol and citizens of Trillius Prime had learned two things from the experience: One, that launching a devastating attack with weapons of mass destruction *didn't* require large amounts of people; and two, that holding on to gains obtained through the use of weapons of mass destruction *did* require large amounts of people.

What the Cave Master of Trillius Prime did not know was whether the man to whom he had promised allegiance, in order to save the lives of as many sentient beings as possible, realized yet that he was a pawn of *Qagh*, and not the other way around. He also wasn't sure whether the man once called Kiellon Daulet, now Kiellon Zel, looked so ill because of the newness of his joining, or because of the sort of stress a hostile takeover of a planet caused to the

humanoid nervous system.

Tesh imagined, with the cutting dry wit native to the ancient Symbiont, that it was the former. Zel had no more intention of ultimately allowing Kiellon to get away with the crimes he'd committed than Relan did.

The Nausicaan dropped the man he was carrying and pushed past the Orion who had spoken to Kiellon. The body remained in largely the same position as it had been over the hulking alien's shoulder, the man's dark eyes wide and beginning to fog over. Relan could tell from where he stood in the surgical anteroom that the human was dead.

Relan Tesh had gained a great deal of experience with what constituted *dead* in a non-Trill humanoid recently. Behind him, in one of the anteroom's joining-niches, the Hali'ian whom he'd implanted with Mirr floated in a warm pool of fortifying fluid. Only his radiation-scarred face projected above the level of the fluid. This was covered by a forced-oxygen full-face mask that pumped air into his equally scarred lungs, and kept the raw skin of his face in a sterile environment.

The Nausicaan, whose face was replete with the skin-tags and scarifications that marked a Nausicaan who'd killed more than once, strode up to the slenderly built Trill who stood staring moodily down into the preternaturally quiet, still waters of Symbiont Pool One. The hulking gray-skinned alien grabbed Daulet by the front of his tunic.

Kiellon, ambidextrous like most Trill humanoids,

pulled two small items from alternate inner pockets of that tunic. One he shoved against the Nausicaan's stomach, the other he held up before the alien's face. Everyone around the Symbiont pool tensed, some in alarm and some into combat crouches, their attention riveted on the madman holding one of the particle weapons that Qagh had handed out like party favors in one hand, and the launch-controller for filthy, indiscriminate nuclear warheads pointed at gods-knew-what in the other.

The Nausicaan released the small Trill man with a low, dangerous growl and pulled out his own weapon. Kiellon said something to the Nausicaan in response, probably to let him know that the remaining space-borne nuclear warheads that Qagh had gifted the Separatists with were pointed at Qagh's own ship. If that was what was said, Relan Tesh didn't catch it; his attention was diverted by a sudden covert movement along the lower, blind edge of the surgical suite's far wall. A petite, honey-blonde Vulcan woman, crouched low in order to gain entry to the anteroom without being seen by the group near the pool, had frozen on hands and knees, pressed against the fine nacre that composed the wall facing.

The woman, who wore a Federation uniform, gazed at him through unblinking lapis-blue eyes, her muscles tensed into the same sort of combat-ready mode as the two Klingons facing Kiellon outside the surgical anteroom. She must, he mused, have crept in through the back

entrance; Qagh had insisted that all blast-doors be reopened for the ingress and egress of troops. Unfortunately for the coup, most of those who'd declared themselves Separatist troops had fled the caves upon the opening of the blast doors.

It was easy to declare allegiance to a revolutionary ideal, as long as it remained an ideal, rather than an action that destroyed everything precious in your life.

Relan spread his unarmed hands open, inclined his head to her, and whispered; "You need me to keep their attention?"

There was no mistaking the calculated thoughts that passed behind the woman's elegant eyes. Tesh was an unerring judge of character. That Symbiont was so ancient that Relan had spent the first week after their joining on life support, lost in Tesh's knowledge and memories the way these usurpers became lost in Mak'ala's tunnels (another reason why Kiellon had needed Relan alive). Through Relan's eyes, Tesh saw an individual so deep that she'd never dared to plumb her own being, restless and intense and almost frighteningly incisive.

If Starfleet had sent a contingent of people like that, they'd actually have a chance of getting their sorely injured crewman out of this alive. The woman gave him a single, slow nod, her eyes narrowing; she knew her peril, should he betray her presence. She chose to trust him anyway.

Relan strode from just outside the surgical anteroom

into the midst of the tense little scene near the quiescent Symbiont pool, positioning himself between Daulet and the Nausicaan as though protective. In reality, he didn't want the other Trill's gaze directed anywhere near the surgical anteroom. "Forget it, Kiellon; we need to get out of here!"

"I *won't* leave without the Symbionts!"

"They're not here; they've fled to deeper pools because of the radiation. We could go for them there, but if there are Federation forces in the lower tunnels —"

"You're going nowhere," the Nausicaan snarled. Relan was a big fellow, but the violent alien spun him around like a stuffed toy. The Nausicaan's breath was foul, his hands a bruising pressure wherever they touched; "except to fulfill Qagh's orders, and find what's left of your gutless countrymen to clean the *Federati* out of these cursed tunnels!"

"Then let us go and do that!" Relan snarled in response. He backed away from the Nausicaan, grabbed Kiellon by his left arm, and began dragging him by main force back toward the southeastern entrance to the pools, as a contingent of armed Klingons raced into the room. Upon seeing the Nausicaan and the Orion, both of whom had their weapons out now, the Klingons ignored the Trill and ran, bat'leths and mech'leths acting as shields, toward Quag's henchmen. The Nausicaan got off one shot before the armed force was on him.

"We need to get to the transporter chain! Kiellon, we

can return for the Symbionts; they aren't going anywhere!" Relan cried over the ringing that the gunshot had left in his ears. Kiellon didn't need any further prompting.

Relan didn't share his great hope with the madman – that the Klingon troops were being followed by Federation personnel. If there were, they should be encountered somewhere along the corridor down which he and Kiellon fled; the cave master knew that the main corridors in this section of the tunnel were loops, and that both sections of each loop led back to different sections of the Symbiont pools. With the exclusion of the back entryway, which was usually sealed, the doors out of these looping corridors were hidden, as part of the heavily faced walls. The area was easy to get lost and confused in, which made interlopers on the Symbiont pools easy to find and deal with.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The effects of nearby EMP cannons, the one weapon the gutless Trill possessed on their own behalf, had been too intense for Qagh's portable one-man transporter stations, hidden among the detritus of total war currently orbiting Trill, to respond to the albino's electronic request for his cloaked, polar-orbiting ship to beam him off the planet. They had, instead, deposited him elsewhere in the tunnels.

He supposed he should be grateful that electromagnetic pulses hadn't completely fried the transporter circuits, or caused them to deposit him inside a rock wall. That last occurrence would be unlikely in the extreme, however; his technicians had configured the transporter wave-guides to ride directly upon the spherical damper fields in the caverns, and use the horizontal range of their vertices as deposition points in the case of energy shutdown while beaming.

Qagh's people had perfected the use of cloaked, portable transporter-chains, for use on a planet or throughout a star system. They could be concealed as anything, from buildings or rocks to communications satellites or intersystem beacons. The trick lay in utilizing half the power inherent to the use of a temporary transporter to generate false readings to humanoid senses

and ship sensors, and in bleeding the energy required for their use from the very individuals whose infrastructure one wished to pirate.

The Klingon albino looked around himself anxiously, momentarily disoriented; he was still in the cavern system somewhere, but the treacherous Orion was nowhere to be seen. The rock in the walls here was of a different type than the rock that made up the cavern he had just been beamed out of. Qagh had noted, from the first day he'd called these dampened tunnels home, that the Trill used different rock types, most of which were no more than facade overlayers, to differentiate various parts of the caverns. The overlay of crystalline facets here told him that he was somewhere near the back entrance of the main Symbiont pools, a good sixty kilometers north of where he had just been standing.

He had never had any intention of becoming involved in Trill politics. He and what remained of his followers, hounded by the *Koloth* and in need of supplies and rest, had inadvertently fallen afoul of a hidden nest of Tholian soldier-scouts in the far reaches of the Canaris system's Kuiper belt, where his ship had picked up pure dilithium readings. The dilithium in question, unfortunately, had belonged to the power-relays of the cloaking device under which the Tholians were hiding.

The insectile, antisocial Tholians usually only showed their ire when one broached their home space. This area,

however, was nowhere near Tholian space. How was he supposed to know that they had recently hatched a covert plan to infiltrate and, ultimately, claim the entire quadrant?

Though he sincerely doubted that they would ever be able to perform this feat single-handedly, Qagh had chosen the better part of valor and gone into hiding from them on the nearest class-M planet. The Tholians' weapons had demolished the warp housings of his ship and killed a number of engineering personnel, but they hadn't harmed any of the useful items with which that ship was equipped, meaning that the ship itself wasn't a strict necessity, as long as they had time to regroup and locate either a sound vessel or a satisfactory warp-housing replacement — and, perhaps, a few more crew.

As Qagh had surmised, the Tholian scouts had been loathe to follow his band into inhabited space; such an action could only compound the number and variety of sentients aware that the Tholians had developed expansionist tendencies. Tholians were a long-lived species; Qagh imagined that this would be something they would hold close to the vest for the better part of the next century, until they were ready to spring a fully-formed trap closed over the necks of the various allied groups of sentients who inhabited the Alpha quadrant.

Unfortunately, the useful, energy-rich, damped caverns in which Qagh's band was hiding from the Tholians was also where the Trill people housed their most

precious possessions. It had become immediately necessary to engage in the fomentation of a coup, in order to remain hidden long enough to regroup. Though the leaders of the uprising had repaired his ship and he was thereby beholden to them, this coup was costing Qagh more in time, personnel, and resources than he had either considered, or could strictly afford. It was time to get out.

It was a coldly infuriated intergalactic criminal with very little more to lose who heard the sound of particle weapons, echoing down the tunnel in which his people had planted a series of cloaked portable transporter pads keyed directly to his ship. He crept down the corridor, using artistic projections of rock and the ubiquitous tall, columnar algae lamps to hide his progress, stopping for a short while to reload his weapon and wondering in what way the violent sound that had ricocheted off the walls might benefit him.

Qagh hadn't enough mercenary crew left on the ground to concern himself about their welfare anymore, but he was deeply concerned about the welfare of those who tended his ship. He couldn't manage the large, plunder-laden vessel alone. He would have to be meticulously careful to flee this planet himself, and soon, preferably before the starship that had deposited the Orion turncoat here made its presence known.

Tenger's head in a bag would have brought him a fortune from the Orion Caju-Tara. So would a handful of

the sentient symbiotic slugs so beloved of the madman with whom he had dealt weaponry on this planet in exchange for the Starfleet shuttle, if only the Symbionts hadn't been so damnably fragile that he didn't think he'd be able to get them to Orion space before they expired.

None of those things mattered, anymore. Not even the presence of irritated Tholians mattered much anymore. Because Kor was here, somewhere. The Klingons his people had ambushed in the tunnel at the other end of the peninsula wore paramilitary garb common to the *Klothos*.

This was the best opportunity Qagh had ever been given to destroy Kor and his hated brother's beloved ship. He'd long ago learned that the most satisfying destruction of an enemy lay in obliterating whatever that enemy held most dear. And if Qagh took pleasure in anything, it was in causing pain to those who had once sought to murder him.

The madman would have his puppet surgeon with him, probably near the main Symbiont pool, toward the niche with the wounded *Federati* in it. If they were there, and part of whatever had caused the sound of a particle weapon to ring through these halls, they might be able to reach the transporter link at the end of the ceremonial hall and get to safety. The surgeon had saved the life of the wounded *Federati* from the shuttle — in order to use him as a hostage, he'd said, but Qagh didn't trust the lumbering, soft-spoken Trill.

Of course, he didn't trust the madman, either; in

general, he trusted no one. The pale albino in his pale armor squeezed himself into a niche composed almost entirely of snowy quartz crystals and, like a venomous *snerg* blending into tree bark, waited until the time was right to strike. This was where he was when a Starfleet officer and none other than Curzon Dax came hurrying up the tunnel.

T'Dani considered the man mostly submerged in the pool in front of her with half of her attention and listened to the sounds of fighting in the large, ornate room to the west of this little alcove with the remainder. There had been a deafening barrage of small arms projectile weapon fire when the Klingon contingent had first infiltrated the room, to subdue and capture the individuals arguing in it.

What part of Yaelat was not submerged in the slimy-looking pool lay under a light faceplate, attached by a hose to what T'Dani recognized as state-of-the-art oxygen-producing equipment. An entire bank of new medical equipment lined the pool, seeming as out of place in these caves as a fish in the desert. T'Dani wondered if the pool Yaelat was submerged in was a sort of regeneration tank, because the liquid that filled it was other than simple water. She noted that his face and eyes, which were open though unseeing, were rife with blisters just beginning to heal.

Careful not to touch the faceplate or to submerge the man any more deeply in the fluid, T'Dani delicately

reached into the slimy-looking water near Yaelat's head. It wasn't just slimy, it was also thick with his hair, which had mostly fallen off his head, which was also covered with healing blisters. Wishing they had brought Colin with them to do this so she would not have to use touch, T'Dani pushed away a sense of disgust, and hunted for the psionic touchpoints behind the Hali'ian man's ears. She was nowhere near a skilled enough psion to forego touch, but the mind she sought to touch was not there...

Which didn't mean that there was nothing there.

Puzzled, T'Dani tried to probe more closely.

You are his people, some mind averred. As though she touched it directly, she felt the creature shift slightly. It would be velvety were it not so slimy, and it was hotter than a humanoid, a hot, greasy, slug like mass that appeared to be doing Yaelat's thinking for him. T'Dani jumped back from the pool, her mind meld breaking painfully, setting an incipient migraine into the touchpoints behind her own ears.

Damn, what was this? She had been in close enough contact to know that some thinking *thing* had been implanted into Yaelat in order to keep him alive. She pulled out her tricorder and trained it on the pool, but as she suspected, the tunnels were heavily shielded here, and all that came back was a mass of fuzz.

Chapter Twenty-Five

When Renee and Curzon reached the second vertex from the tunnel junction, Renee Ingram's tricorder had gone wild with a mass of data; overlapping transporter signals and modified damper ionization and varied humanoid lifesigns, all attenuating but nonetheless still discernible, as though they were somehow gliding over the tops of the damper domes and accruing at this spot.

Captain Ingram had stopped walking in order to give her full attention to these odd readings, which continued to attenuate but did not abate. "Doesn't this imply that there's a functioning transporter ahead?" Dax asked, looking over her shoulder at the instrument's readout.

She frowned over her shoulder at him. He had told her that the semi-metallic scent and the increased load of clammy moisture in the air signified their nearness to the Trill Symbiont pools. "Do your people usually allow teleportation devices this close to their sacred pools?"

Curzon drew a deep breath and shook his head. "I don't know. I wouldn't imagine so."

"I can't tell from these readings whether whoever might be ahead of us is still ahead of us, or how – "a gunshot ringing through the tunnels cut off anything further that Ingram had to say. Renee had made a command decision and sent her CMO ahead with the

Klingon contingent to find Yaelat, while she remained behind puzzling over her own tricorder's readings.

Alarmed, Ingram and Dax flattened themselves against the corridor wall, where it phased from a fine, powdery alabaster fuzzed with quartz crystals to somber, polished gray-blue slate. Shaking off her initial feelings of alarm, Renee grabbed Curzon's hand, "Come on!" The two began running back down the corridor from which they'd just come.

They didn't get far before they ran nearly head-on into two men, as unalike as two men could be, who came barreling around a blind curve in the corridor minutes later. At the sight of Renee and Curzon, they came to a full halt. All parties gaped at one another soundlessly for four very long seconds.

The smaller man reached into his overcoat with a hand that trembled in fatigue, fear, rage, or a combination of these, and pulled out what looked to Captain Ingram to be a particle weapon, probably like the one they had just heard discharge. The big man with him shrank back against the far wall of the cavern, but neither pulled out a weapon of his own, or attempted to escape.

"Kiellon Daulet and Relan Tesh," Curzon hissed, his voice rank with hatred. Renee Ingram recognized both men, Daulet from her own conversation with him, and Tesh from Yaelat's files.

The barrel of the weapon in Daulet's hand moved of

its own volition, making up for the shakiness of the hand that held it. It tracked Captain Ingram as she slowly approached Daulet. "Stay where you are, or I'll shoot!" he snarled at Renee, before turning his attention to Curzon:

"It's *your* fault that I did all this, yours and everyone else who couldn't see what was going on, how the Federation was using our best minds and laughing at us behind our backs. You have ruined this planet! And *now* you want to give them our Symbionts. But I won't let you do it. I won't let you take this from me, *not* this time!"

Kiellon might, Renee mused, have pulled that particular senseless, paranoid rant straight out of a textbook on unstable mental behavior as it veered into the delusions leading down the road to incipient schizophrenia. There was only one way to deal with such emotion, which had nothing to do with any reality except the one projected out of a lonely schizotypal mind.

Captain Ingram raised both hands and, avoiding the direct eye contact, which individuals with Daulet's particular set of mental issues could not tolerate, she began a lengthy, convoluted apology. It would have helped matters along, she knew, if she'd gotten on her knees first, but there were tactical issues to be considered in this particular scenario that wouldn't allow her to do that. "We're *sorry*, Mr. Daulet, for what we've done," she said gently, trying to put real feeling into her voice. "It *is* all our fault. Of course it is! You're right about everything,

and we're *sorry*. We'll change, we'll be sure to —"

"You know nothing about being *sorry*, you Federation whore! But you will. I'll *make* you *sorry*."

Dax stepped forward, and the sweating, shaking man turned the alarming weapon toward him instead. Curzon's eyes narrowed as he considered the madman who had attempted to usurp control of his home planet. "Will you, now?" he purred. "Do it, then. Because we're not backing down."

The Trill ambassador moved forward another two steps. From her acquaintance with him, Ingram knew that Curzon's movements generally bespoke confidence, but as she watched, those movements started to speak another language. A chill trickled down her spine. Renee Ingram wasn't the go-to captain for reading an engineering schematic, but she could read people like printed pages. As though in empathy with the captain's own sense of unease, Kiellon's trembling redoubled. Across the corridor from Ingram, Relan Tesh watched Dax and Kiellon without blinking, seemingly without breathing, his own hands plucking nervously at the wall at his back.

"Put the weapon *down*, Daulet." Curzon's voice was preternaturally cold. He shot a hooded glance over at Renee that she couldn't interpret, before seeming to dismiss her altogether. Turning his attention back to his adversary, he taunted; "*Shoot* me, Kiellon. You know you want to. Do you *have* the nerve to kill with your own hands, you

worthless little worm?"

Renee stiffened. Daulet looked to be at some breaking point. Carelessly, Dax advanced until the muzzle of the particle weapon that Kiellon Daulet held was nestled against his sternum. He pushed his face nearly against the face of the bald, sweating little man who trembled before him, and in a voice Renee would not previously have imagined coming from the throat of Trillius' ambassador to Qo'Nos, Curzon said:

"Put the weapon down. Shoot me. Put the weapon down. *Shoot me, damn you!* Do you have what it *takes* to murder, Kiellon? It's harder than you think, you stinking pustule, to kill in cold blood. Properly done, it's an art form. It takes real skill. It requires the need to watch the *life* in someone's eyes go *out*." As he spoke, his tone evolved, or perhaps devolved, into an actual song.

Where had she heard that singsong tone before? Some grade-B holovid beloved of Marco, shown for a gathering of the interested and the bored during an interminable mapping of high-ore asteroids in a rich and uninhabited star system...the voice of a filthy, scarred madman painted up like a clown. At first, Renee imagined that the ambassador was trying to hypnotize Kiellon Daulet, until the singsong tone tore in half on a rising spike of rage:

"It takes the mind of a genius, which *you* don't have! Now *put the weapon down, Daulet, and shoot me, Kiellon, before I rip the Symbiont out of you with my bare hands!*"

Dax roared, spittle flying from his lips, his scream echoing through tunnels lined with semiprecious stone.

Renee shuddered, suddenly significantly more frightened of Trill's ambassador to the Klingons than she was of the quivering man holding a gun. The latter was a suggestible malcontent who'd gotten himself into a situation that was over his pay grade, but the former...for ten or twelve heartbeats, Curzon Dax was a cold-blooded, homicidal psychopath unafraid of pain or death, retribution or damnation. He meant what he said with perfect literality.

The tearing of the powerful tendon straps that formed the humanoid shoulder joint sounded like something between the forceful ripping of canvas and the snapping of a wishbone to Curzon when it happened. Kiellon hunched in agony and fell away, crying; *"Stop fighting me, you bitch!"*

Curzon reached out and attempted to pull the disruptor from Kiellon's hand. He didn't succeed. The single shot Kiellon managed to make went wild, but the hallways here weren't so wide that the shot flew harmlessly away. Instead, it rebounded and struck the captain of the *Enterprise* in the left thigh. Renee flinched, and then fell. Curzon struck Kiellon in the face with a fist once, then again, and the man let loose of his weapon, falling himself to curl into a mewling ball around his midsection. The

Symbiont he'd been implanted with, it seemed, was not happy with her host.

Curzon leaned back against one of the cavern walls, panting with effort. What the hell had just come over him? He wiped his streaming face in the crook of one elbow. He felt strangely exhilarated. Granted, he was angry as hell at Kiellon...

Riellon Tesh had hurried to Renee's side, and was busily dressing her wound with strips torn out of the top blouse of her uniform; "...went straight through and didn't hit any large vessels, but you should try to stay off it," the Trill surgeon was saying. Pushing himself off the wall, Curzon was about to go to Kiellon to make sure that the poor whimpering thing, or rather its Symbiont, was all right, but a cold voice from the shadows stopped him in his tracks.

"Gentlemen. Perhaps you'd be so kind as to take me to Kor?"

The Klingon who emerged from the shadows trained his weapon on Curzon. Naturally, he knew which individuals had sworn an oath to complete the action that exposing him as an infant on a high outcropping of rock in a snowstorm should have finished. Curzon scowled and lifted the weapon he'd taken from Kiellon, firing without waiting or thinking. The thing clicked.

Qagh laughed. "I didn't feel it prudent to give them too much ammunition, you understand."

Curzon figured that Relan had probably never seen such a sight before; albinos were vanishingly rare among Trill humanoids. In the insipid light of the algae lamps, Qagh was paler than the drusy quartz that faced this section of the hallway, so pale that his teeth looked yellow in his face when he laughed. His eyes were pink and appeared lashless, his hair the color of new snow.

“We need to help them!” Curzon insisted to Qagh, motioning at Renee and Kiellon.

“Do you?” the albino replied softly, as he raised his weapon. Without a moment’s hesitation, he shot both Kiellon and Renee in the upper chest. His weapon was a semi-automatic; both Curzon and Relan flinched back and clapped their hands over their ears at its multiple deadly discharges. He’d given himself plenty of ammunition.

“Now,” the albino shouted over the deafening aftereffects of the gunshots, “now you *don’t*. You’ll take me to Kor, *now*, or face the same fate.”

Aboard the *Enterprise*, the computers flashed back on. None of the expected bells or whistles that should accompany computer restart after total blackout accompanied this resumption. The main viewscreen also switched back on, showing the individuals on the bridge that they were in orbit of a Class-M planet, so close to the uncloaked *Klothos* that they were nearly on top of the Klingon ship.

Josi literally jumped out of the command chair. "Marcos, get us away from that ship! And Seantie, what's going on down there?"

"Recalculating orbit to take us away from the *Klothos*," Marco replied.

At the same time, EmJay leaped out of his chair at the Tactical station. He didn't have time to say anything; his intent was to catch the telepath who had just fallen from his feet where he stood at the top of the ramp leading to the dual turbolifts, in order to prevent Colin from cracking his skull either on the bar that ran the length of the ramp, or on the floor. EmJay did not figure on Colin being as heavy as he was; extra weight that EmJay wasn't expecting drove the air out of his lungs in a loud *oof!* as he eased the telepath to the ground. He knew the man was tired, but he hadn't thought he was tired enough to pass out.

"Medical to bridge!" he yelled, just as Josi requested information from her senior science officer.

Caught between these conflicting concerns, Seantie considered for a moment, then stood and hurried to EmJay's side where he knelt next to Colin. Seantie couldn't ignore the immediate needs of the scientific yeomen aboard the *Enterprise*; she was their immediate manager.

Not receiving any response to her command, Josi turned, and was only then aware of what had happened. "Dammit!" she snarled, "I told him to go and get some rest

hours ago! He's as stubborn as a..." Josi continued the rest under her breath as she climbed up the ramp, and no one on the bridge heard what Colin was as stubborn as. Yeomen weren't strictly required to respond to requests from officers which weren't tied to the immediate welfare of the ship, or made during a time of non-emergency, but Colin should have done what she'd told him – incorporeal beings inside the ship's mainframes constituted an emergency.

"I don't think that's what this is, Commander," Seantie said worriedly, as she removed the telepathic damper that Colin always wore behind his left ear, turned the thing off, and gently probed the psion's face for the contact points that empaths and telepaths used. "Unconscious minds are difficult to access; give me a minute," the Betazoid matron requested.

Seantie was still doing this when the medical team got to the bridge. EmJay stood and moved out of their way.

One of the technicians ran a medscanner over Colin. "He's not hurt, but he's fallen into a coma," the man said to Josi. Seantie gasped and pulled her fingers away from Colin's face.

"Something's happened to Renee!" she cried. Everyone on the bridge turned to stare at the top of the ramp, where the medical technicians were bundling Colin onto a hover stretcher to take him down to the main sickbay.

"What's happened to Renee?" Josi asked. Seantie

shook her head.

“Bad. Something *bad*.” A single tear found its way down the science officer’s face. “When telepaths sense something bad’s happened to their partner...” she let the sentence peter out. Josi scowled.

“Are you telling me Renee’s *dead*? Seantie, I need to know what’s happening down there *right* – “

“Incoming missiles, radar equipped and heat-seeking, fifty-two!” EmJay yelped. Josi stood and turned toward the viewscreen, clutching the aft rail much as Colin had been doing before he passed out.

“Shields up! Evasive maneuvers, Mr. Johnson!”

“Can’t perform significant evasive maneuvers this near the Koloth. Backing up and heading away from the planet, full impulse.”

“Kanchumurthi, hail the *Koloth*!” Josi snapped.

The Klingon ship didn’t answer their hails; instead, it dropped out of orbit and turned toward the incoming missiles. The Enterprise continued to back away. “What are they doing?” Demora enquired of no one in particular.

As though in answer to her question, the *Klothos* began to pick off missiles using its phasers.

“Oh, bad idea. Raise your cloak!” Josi urged. The swarm of missiles, attracted by the phasers, zeroed in on the *Klothos*.

“Are they trying to protect us?” Demora wondered aloud.

“Who knows how Klingons think? Marco, come to a stop. EmJay,” Josi sighed heavily; “fire on those missiles at will, try to avoid incinerating parts of the planet.”

“What about a photon torpedo spread? That would – “

“Probably incinerate parts of the planet. Do as you’re told, Lieutenant! Keep firing until the missiles are so close to one of the ships that you can’t fire anymore.”

EmJay sighed heavily but put up no further argument. The *Klothos* began backing away from the planet at impulse as it fired. The missiles, designed to fly outside of a planet’s atmosphere while going into orbit in order to strike the opposite side of planet, followed. Their single-mindedness of flight made them easy to pick off, and soon nothing remained of them but large amounts of ionizing thermonuclear radiation.

“Commander, I can’t determine what might be going on at the surface of the planet through all the disturbance between us and the planet right now,” Seantie said.

“And I’m thinking we can’t make contact with the surface through it, either. Demora, get us to the other side of the planet so that we can at least have a chance of contact. I want a shuttle team assembled and standing by. EmJay, see to that. Ramesh,” she said over the tactical officer’s response, “open a channel to the *Koloth* and tell them we won’t take no for an – “

The *Koloth* outpaced Josi’s words. The *Bird of Prey* sent a single prolonged burst of phaser fire toward the

planet, obliterating the area from which the launched missiles had come, as well as any city or countryside they had been part of.

“*Damn it! Ramesh*, have you opened a channel to the Koloth?”

“Opening now, Commander.”

“On screen!”

The countenance of a grim-eyed, hairless Klingon man met Josi’s furious gaze. He said nothing, so Josi jumped into the breach.

“You are *not* to fire on the planet again for any reason!” she barked. The Klingon laughed.

“And here I thought you *Federati* were more diplomatic than that. But since you aren’t, well then, you are not my commanding officer and I don’t take orders from you.”

“Considering that our commanding officers are working together on the planet you just fired at, I’m thinking that when I talk to *my* commanding officer and tell her what you’ve done, she might have some things to say to your commanding officer about *you*. I don’t need your name, you’re ugly enough I won’t forget you. Ramesh, close the damn channel. I,” she added while turning toward the bridge-left turbolift, “will be in sickbay. Call me there if they fire on the planet again, or if you manage to raise anyone on the planet.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

“How long will he be like this?” Josi motioned at the unresponsive auburn-haired man currently occupying a medical bed in one of the regeneration suites of the *Enterprise*’s main sickbay. Uta shook her head up at the readings panel above Colin’s head.

“From the way these readings are deteriorating? Until he dies. Or we put him in a regeneration unit to keep him alive until we can get him to Vulcan or Betazed or Minara or one of the worlds that have what he’d need to overcome the effects of a forcibly broken tele...or empa...oh, hell, I don’t even know what to call that kind of bond,” Morrell replied. “When you have that kind of bond, you give your partner or your loved ones everything, including your life.”

Uta turned away from Colin’s slowly diminishing lifesigns and toward the commander. She was the lead of the four other junior physicians aboard the ship. This was the second untenable position she’d seen Colin in, and not even an entire ship’s day had passed. She felt terribly sorry for him.

“I don’t think I could do that. It’s all so final, and would require so much bravery,” Josi said.

“It’s just the way that telepaths and empaths love. Very intense, from what I understand.”

“Does it mean Renee’s dead, Uta?” Josi crossed her

arms over her chest, as though to protect herself from the answer.

“Unless Colin’s caught some kind of infectious agent that we can’t find – “

“But could it be the...” what the hell had he called them? “The Calamarain again?”

Uta offered Josi a blank stare. “The incorporeal things that took over the computers for a while and were holding Colin in stasis, before?” The doctor thought for a moment, then gave a halfhearted shrug. “I suppose, if their presence was showing entirely different symptoms than it did earlier.”

“Then putting him in a regeneration tank wouldn’t help.”

“A regeneration tank will keep him alive. That’s all I can say right now.”

Josi chewed on her bottom lip in thought for a moment. “All right,” she said finally, “I think we’d better get him into one, then.” The process involved moving a patient from their hospital bed onto a thin pallet known as hover mat, which was developed specifically for the regeneration tank procedure. The patient and their hovermat would be passed through a replicator- and transporter – linked instrument that could remove synthesized clothing (each room that held a regeneration tank also sported one of these).

The next step was to fit the patient with a breathing

apparatus, usually a small electronic device capable of producing the accurate environmental air mixture, sewn into a thick mask made of liquid-resistant Deltan biocloth, which fitted itself not just to the lower face, but which, through a biomimetic act of stretching and movement, would fit itself to the inner mouth and nose of the patient, allowing them to breathe their native atmosphere even though suspended in a liquid environment.

Josi stepped out of the room while Uta and her nurses and technicians prepared Colin for the tank. The commander had just made herself comfortable in one of the biomimetic comfort-chairs that lined the outer alcove of the main sickbay when the voice of Lieutenant Kanchumurthi announced over the medical bay loudspeaker, "Ramesh to Commander Felingaili."

"I'm just outside of sickbay, Ramesh. What's up?"

The communications lieutenant adjusted his feed to just the alcove outside of sickbay. "I've gotten into contact with..." he paused for a moment, "...ah, with Tenger."

Like Colin, the green-caste Orion had no last name. In much the same spirit of the Imperial scientists that had lab-grown the telepath, the people who had owned Tenger had felt that last names were an unnecessary luxury for a slave. "Patch him through to me here, please."

"Here you go, Commander."

"Tenger!" Josi prompted, "what's going on down there? Is Renee all right?"

“The captain and I were on different shuttles going to different parts of the cave complex to look for Yaelat. I couldn’t tell you if she was all right. My contingent was pursued by a group of people who I guess were part of the faction that bombed the planet. They answered to an albino Klingon who nearly killed me. He disappeared; I suppose transported somehow to somewhere else. I’ve just now left the tunnels with the remains of the Klingon group I had with me. That’s all I know. We never found Yaelat, and I can’t raise the other group, so I suppose they’re still in the southern caverns, which are heavily shielded; communicators alone can’t get through,” Tenger explained.

“Thank you, Ensign. Ramesh?”

“Ramesh here, Commander.”

“Yaelat has all kinds of nifty utilities on his communications board. Could you check and see if he has something that will cut through either thick ionizing radiation, the effects of rare earths, or through reflective shielding?”

“I...I can try, Commander. I’m not as familiar with this board as Yaelat – “

“That’s because Yaelat’s modified it rather heavily. Trying counts. When you – “

Josi was concentrating on her conversation with Ramesh. When she felt Uta’s hand fall onto her shoulder, she literally jumped in her seat.

“Commander, you have got to come with me. *Now!*”

Morrell pulled her hand away and hurried back into the sickbay. Josi jumped up and followed.

“Ramesh, something’s going on with Colin. I’ve got to go. Just do the best you can!”

Colin lay near the regeneration chamber on a hoverpad, beside the station where Morrell had just been about to fit him with a mask. He was modestly covered with a sheet from the waist down. He had, Josi noted, attractive well-muscled arms and a torso dusted with copper-colored hair. He was also blinking, as though he’d been deeply asleep and someone had just awakened him. Josi gave a relieved sigh.

“Do you know where you are?” Uta asked, moving to stand to the right of the hoverpad and put her hands beneath it. There was a field under the pad that responded to her lifting her hands, and she maneuvered Colin back to the hospital bed and set him down on it as far as the hoverpad would go. She made rapid back and forth movements with her hands underneath the pad, and the hoverpad responded by slowly withdrawing its field and letting Colin gently down onto the bed.

“The Enterprise,” the telepath replied, “sickbay.” His eyes opened wide, and he gasped, “*Riana!*”

This was his name for Renee. Josi had once asked Renee why, and had been told that the name had been changed during her adoption. Renee’s adoptive mother had simply explained that she’d liked the name Renee better,

and forcefully changed the subject. There appeared, Renee said, to be hurt feelings or something that kept her mother from ever wanting to talk about the adoption, which naturally just raised her daughter's curiosity. When her mother had first heard Colin use that name, she'd told Josi that her mother had been so surprised that she'd almost dropped the glass she was carrying.

"Is she all right?" Josi asked, moving to stand on the left side of the biobed.

Colin licked his lips. "She...I...no, she was...she was dead." Much to Uta's obvious displeasure, he sat up, then rubbed at his face and head. "She was dead!"

"*Was?*" a chill ran down Josi's spine. "What are you saying?"

"Wait!" Colin insisted, then covered his face with his hands and became still; "Let me try and talk to her."

A living telepath or empath had abilities that no Starship communications console could compete with, because the psionic spectrum wasn't responsive to, or affected by, rare earths or most radiation or shielding types. It was capable of passing through most solid structures – if it couldn't, it wouldn't have any effects at all.

Which was all very well, but what Colin was talking about in regard to Renee was many levels of impossible beyond that. Renee had been dead, but now she was alive? That simply didn't happen, not without a large variety of medical equipment and procedures available, which as far

as Josi knew, weren't things that were found in caves. And at room temperature, a person's brain didn't continue functioning for — Josi looked at her chronometer — thirty-seven minutes, or nearly three quarters of a ship's hour, beyond death. That wouldn't be resuscitation.

That would be resurrection.

Uta motioned Josi toward the opposite side of the room, then whispered in the commander's ear. "I'm wondering if the encounter with the...whatever those entities are called, didn't damage his mind."

Josi whispered back, "And the coma, along with the falling then suddenly restored life signs? I mean, he's awake now!"

Uta shook her head. "I don't know. Maybe some kind of incorporeal entity-caused undulant syndrome?"

"I guess the question is, which is the simpler prospect, an as-yet unheard-of syndrome caused by incorporeal entities, or resurrection?"

"Not funny, Commander."

"I wasn't even trying to be funny. How about this; the entities vanish from our computer, go down to the planet, and resurrect the captain?"

"On a planet that's just been bombarded with atomic weapons, where there are probably hundreds of thousands of dying people currently, the things zero in on the captain?"

"They've just left her ship, where they've just left the

mind of her lover. And who's to say they didn't help the hundreds of thousands also dying on the planet?"

Uta opened her mouth to reply, when Colin cut her off from across the room. "They helped Yaelat, too, so they very well may have done just that very thing, Commander."

Both women looked over at him sheepishly. He grinned and shook his head at them. "You can check me for any mental deficiency or undulant syndrome you want, Doctor. You won't find anything. But Renee and her team did find Yaelat."

"How is he?" Josi asked, walking back across the room to stand near the medical bed. Uta followed.

"He's..." Colin shook his head. "He's changed from the person we knew, and that's all I can tell you until Renee knows more. She's more than a little bemused at the moment, can't figure out how she got to where she finds herself. The murderer who the Klingons were looking for is also in confinement. Renee requests that you send a shuttle or two to the surface; she says she's in the caves of Mak'ala at the end of the peninsula where Leran Manev is located, and that her group will begin the journey back the way they came and meet our people partway."

Josi had forgotten all about sending the shuttle. "EmJay," she said.

"Here, commander."

"Did you choose a shuttle crew?"

“I have. We’ve just been waiting for your word. Is it given?”

“It is. And thank you, Lieutenant.”

“Anything for you, Commander.”

Josi smiled. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d smiled today. She looked back at Colin. “So that’s everything Renee said?”

“Everything she would probably want me to tell you about,” he replied.

She shook her head at him. “Get dressed, Yeoman. And then go to your quarters and rest, and yes, that’s an *order*. I do consider a day filled with incorporeal beings and resurrection an emergency!”

Colin laughed.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Captain’s Log, Stardate 9921.93:

My crew’s learned a lot in the past few days about life, death, and the different types of unity, and what all that can entail...”

“Strike that,” Renee Ingram said; that opening was just a little too close to home for her comfort. She sat and thought for a moment.

“The reason that the people of Trillius Prime have put off Federation membership for two centuries revolves around the fact that they are a joined species; shortly, there are sentient humanoid Trill, and sentient non-humanoid Trill, and sometimes those two varieties of Trill decide that they want to join together physically, to become more than the sum of their parts.

“Before the Enterprise reached Trillius Prime to search for Yaelat, a criminal known as Qagh supplied thermonuclear weapons to a small band of Trill disaffected with the idea of joining the Federation, and that band used those weapons. Yaelat’s shuttle was caught

in this confrontation. His life was saved by a Trill doctor, who implanted him with a non-humanoid Trill Symbiont that acted as his brain and as most of the large organs in his thorax, to keep him alive.

“As my CMO, my junior security officer, and myself were planetside searching for Yaelat, the Enterprise itself was shortly taken over by a large group of incorporeal beings that jointly called itself Calamarain. According to Science-Ops Yeoman Grade One Colin, who was in communication with the beings for some time, these beings wanted, concurrently, to take part in varied...” for all the impassioned rhetoric she had ever heard about souls or spirits, she had real difficulty crediting the idea that such a thing could be, Calamarain notwithstanding, and anyway, the creatures had obviously somehow subsumed at least one man’s entire body, *“varied corporeal experiences, and to convince one or more corporeal beings to become part of their union, so that they could have further corporeal experiences through that person’s memories, for a time.*

“Shortly, I am told by the same yeoman that the Calamarain saved my life, the

life of Commander Kor, and – ah. Yes. I meant to add earlier that the Klingons were also part of all this, as Trillius had sent an ambassador to their aid during the destruction of Praxis, and this ambassador and the Klingons were at the planet hunting Qagh. Apparently, Qagh had killed several royal infants on Qo'nos, sparking a vendetta. The most logical action was to unite with the Klingons, since we were both searching Trillius, us for Yaelat, and them for Qagh. And I meant to add that the Klingons now have cloaking technologies that allow them to fire weapons while still cloaked, but they still can't beam anything through their shields.

In any case, Qagh and his henchmen possessed EMP and projectile weapons. Apparently, both Kor and I were lethally wounded by the criminal using these weapons. The Calamarain also saved the life of my crewman,” Renee sighed, and plowed on; “But before I come to that, I should note that the leader of the uprising on Trillius was most likely taken by the Calamarain to be part of them. Whether he was taken willingly or otherwise, I can't say. The Trill non-humanoid that he had united with was later found safely living in the pools where those creatures come from. The

Calamarain have done a great service for the people of Trill; they somehow healed everyone on the planet who was dying from the nuclear bombardment, or who had died within an hour of their coming to the planet.

“But Yaelat,” Renee shook her head; she still had nearly as much trouble believing this as she did believing in spirits, even though she’d seen the medical proof of it, *“Yaelat was healed in such a way that, when the Calamarain regenerated his body, they regenerated the non-humanoid Trill that was keeping him alive as a necessary part of it. Relan Tesh, a Trill surgeon of note, claims that attempting to separate Yaelat from the non-humanoid Trill Symbiont would kill them both, and though Yaelat at least could probably be revived from such a situation, I’m told that he’d be so traumatized from the separation that he’d be spending the rest of his days in a psychiatric facility. So, shortly, my senior communications officer is now a joined species. He’ll be spending the next few days on the planet, learning what this means and how to incorporate it into his life aboard the Enterprise.*

According to what I can piece together of what happened in the caves of

Mak'ala, Qagh was rendered unconscious by the Calamarain, which allowed us to take him into custody. I have determined that the bulk of his crimes, with the exception of this uprising on Trill, what he tried to do to Demora several years ago, and maybe... ” Captain Ingram shook her head at nothing in particular; she was making this recording in one of the cozy relaxation nooks that overlooked the Enterprise’s sightseeing bay with its enormous viewscreens, the ship’s swimming pools, and the arboretum, “...and maybe killing me are Klingon matters, and so he’s in the Koloth’s brig. The Enterprise won’t be remaining in the Trillius Prime system; we’re due to be at the Bradford Colony. The Endeavor and the Excelsior will be coming to help oversee the rebuilding of the society on the planet, and the eventual inception of that society into the United Federation of Planets. In any case, the Klingons have said they’ll turn Qagh over to us when they’re finished with him, which I interpret to mean when hell freezes over.

“I am strangely fuzzy about what actually went on in the Trill caverns; it seemed that one moment I was looking at my tricorder, and the next moment I was looking at an

unconscious albino Klingon being tied up by Curzon Dax, who is the Trill's Ambassador to Klingon. I need to ask some of the people who were present there with me why my memory is so fuzzy. As I have already stated, Colin seems to believe I was killed there, and subsequently resurrected by the Calamarain. It's a weird tale to credit, but if the way my senior communications officer is suddenly injury-free and the intimate companion of a Trill symbiont...I just don't know how not to credit it. I will tell you more when I know more for certain.

“Along with the detaining of Qagh, we were able to determine that the strange fractional megasaturation that the sensor readings made by the Enterprise while it was hiding in the sun-shadow of Vega Canaris was put out by a series of single-person transporter platforms located throughout the system. Upon beaming the transporter platform the furthest from Trillius Prime into a cargo bay and retrieving its pad data, we were able to locate and take possession of Qagh's cloaked ship and the remaining crew – a little worse for wear after having had to be brought under control. Kor demands the right to tow in the ship; Qagh's

remaining crew is in the Klingon brig, along with their leader.”

Renee came out of the bathroom where she had been scrutinizing her dress uniform in the full-length mirror. It was a funny thing, that a person became so inured to their own looks that they really couldn't tell if they were attaining the right affect.

Colin stood looking out of the long, tall viewscreen that took up the back wall of their dining room. He was also in a dress uniform, the blue gray of a Science Ops Yeoman in serge with collar of cuffs in satin, backed by a higher collar in black. Most second collars in Starfleet were currently white; Renee didn't like thinking about what the black represented – promises made to and work done for or yet to be done for a branch of Starfleet that called itself Section 31. Renee walked up to him and fiddled a little with the small, decorative medals that graced one lapel of his uniform. “How do I look?”

“You know you’re always beautiful to me,” he replied softly, taking her face into his hands and tilting it up toward himself. Renee smiled and reached up to bring his head down toward her own, until they were touching at forehead and nose-tip.

I was sure I had lost you, he told her telepathically.

She could feel him refusing to give her the emotions that entailed; instead, he gave her his joy at knowing that he was wrong.

All I remember is that I was walking down a hallway looking for Yaelat, and then all at once I was standing over an unconscious albino Klingon, with Curzon busy putting him in restraints.

I believe you were dead, Renee, and that the Calamarain healed you.

Healed me from death? Colin knew how skeptical she was of the incorporeal. They'd had many interesting debates on the subject; Colin stood in perfect opposition to her skepticism.

In just the same way they healed Yaelat. Or will you argue with T'Dani about that, too?

No arguments. Not tonight. She pulled his head closer and kissed him softly. "Anyway," she added aloud, "we have a banquet to go to!"

"Blood sausage and liverwurst?" the big telepath teased.

"That's not all I requested the chefs to make," she defended herself; "I also requested mixed sashimi, crab, shrimp, lobster, rare roast venison – even Marco," Renee said, mentioning the *Enterprise*'s pickiest eater, "won't refuse roast venison and wild rice!"

"He'll refuse the *rare* part," Colin averred. She made a face at him, and pulled him out of their stateroom and

into the hallway. All of her officers, with the exception of Yaelat, who was still closeted with Relan Tesh on the planet learning how to be a good Symbiont partner, would be at this banquet. The captain had naturally made certain that there would be foods available that they would all be willing to eat.

“That was a wonderful meal, Captain. You outdid us!” Kor raised the crystal goblet he had been methodically emptying of the ship’s Chateau Picard ’96 over and over again all night. The Terran alcohol seemed to have absolutely no effect on the big Klingon. Kor, and the contingent he had brought to the *Enterprise* with him (she had specified that he should bring at least part of the contingent that had gone into the caves with him, but kindly leave his subcommander behind), had politely tried all the food, politely made polite conversation, and politely avoided so much as looking at Colin or Seantie all evening – indeed, if they were terribly put out by having to share a room with two psions, they scarcely showed it.

All of Renee’s officers with the exception of T’Dani, who had wanted to stay on the planet with Yaelat and Relan Tesh, were at the banquet. All the officers had brought dates with them for the evening; the Klingons had not, but Ingram imagined that what a Klingon would call a date would hardly be appropriate for the banquet room of a Starship. The Captain of the *Enterprise* hid the grin this

stray thought produced in the sip of wine she took in response to Kor's toast. She could feel Colin shake his head at her.

"Here is something I need to know, but I'm nebulous on," she said to the assembled Klingon contingent, turning to her right to include Curzon, who was seated next to Seantie; the two had carried on a lively conversation throughout dinner. "I need to know if anyone saw anything strange, as in anything that seemed *supernatural*, while in the caves of Mak'ala."

The room went quiet. The Klingon contingent squirmed in their chairs uncomfortably. Klingons disliked the supernatural, as a concept, nearly as much as they disliked telepaths and empaths as a reality. The only vaguely supernatural being they gave any sort of reverence to was Kahless, from what Renee understood.

"What happened in the caves after Qagh appeared, I think you mean, Captain." It was Curzon who answered her finally. "That was strange, and terrible, but I'll tell you what I saw happen. Though it would be best if you could tell me, first, what is the last thing that you remember?"

She thought about this seriously, sipping more wine. The only thing that would come clearly into her mind was the face of that damned tricorder, and she told Curzon so.

The Trill ambassador sighed. "So, you don't recall running into Relan and Kiellon in the tunnels? You don't recall Qagh at all?"

"No," Renee replied, simply. She recalled Relan, but this was from...from *after*, when she was arguing with Kor whether the albino should be a prisoner of the Federation or of the Klingons. The cave master had, mistakenly in Renee's estimation, felt that he was as deserving of punishment as Qagh. He had said to her; *I've done a great deal of lying lately. I lied when I told Kiellon that integration with a Symbiont would be instantaneous, and that it wouldn't ultimately matter what Symbiont he chose. He accepted that lie because he so desperately wanted a Symbiont. I lied when I told Qagh's people that Yaelat was dead. They had no interest in a dead man, but they had plenty of interest in his shuttle, and so they believed my lie because they so desperately needed its parts. However, what your doctor is saying is the truth. Yaelat and Mirr are fully integrated. They're a perfect match. It's not something I expected at all, and perhaps in that sense, I lied to myself. I did it so that I might to rein in one madman and redirect the attentions of another.*

She had asked him whether he was telling her this because he wanted to convince her, or because he wanted to convince himself. She was still on shaky ground at that point, wondering how she had gotten into the room near the Symbiont pools. He had answered; *in a sense, yes, I am trying to convince myself. Daulet wreaked havoc on my planet, and I can't escape culpability for that. In order to keep myself alive, Captain, and help both Mirr and*

Yaelat, I had to pretend I was part of the coup. She had replied that *pretense* was the operative word in that story, and what was it he had said about Yaelat and *who*?

It had taken T'Dani to convince the captain of the *Enterprise* that Relan had been telling the truth, and what that truth meant. It was T'Dani who first told Renee that something was odd in the caverns, that *one moment Yaelat lay dying in this pool of slime, and the next moment he was not in the pool anymore*, and he seemed to be perfectly fine, except that he was wearing what was Colin's usual uniform, which no one had been able to explain or, to be frank, much care about.

Curzon took a minute to formulate the next part of his reply. "I see. Well, you and I ran into Relan Tesh and Kiellon Daulet in the tunnels. Kiellon tried to shoot us, but he was kept from doing so by the Symbiont he'd been implanted with; she caused him pain, and that allowed us to subdue him with almost no injuries. You were injured in the leg by a ricocheting bullet. About the time Relan was binding your leg using strips from the top layer of your uniform, Qagh appeared." Curzon stopped and took a sip of water.

"Go on," Renee insisted.

Curzon nodded, looking down at the water glass in his hands. "Qagh insisted to be taken to Kor. I told him that we would need to help you and Keillon. In response," Curzon looked up at Renee, "he killed you and Keillon

with multiple repeating blasts of the particle weapon he carried.

“So, we took him back down the tunnel to the point at which you’d sent the Klingons up the side passage. Before we arrived there, Qagh stopped us and took the time to pull out a compadd and enter some data into it. I really don’t know what that was about; the albino wasn’t forthcoming.”

“That may be when he targeted the *Koloth* and the *Enterprise* with missiles,” Josi offered from further down the table. Renee had already read her lieutenant commander’s log, and nodded.

“No doubt. Please go on, Curzon.”

“The Klingons were actually waiting in the alcove just outside the main symbiont pools for us to show up; Qagh’s particle weapon was anything but quiet. And it didn’t matter, the man had a weapon full of projectiles and he shot all of them as they came at him. He shot *you*,” the Trill’s blue eyes moved to Kor. If the elliptical table they sat at could be said to have a head, Kor sat at it. “It was only in coming to shoot us, Relan and I, that he realized he’d run out of ammunition finally. He picked up someone’s bat’leth and...” Curzon shoot his head, “it was very odd, the air seemed to glow red, and suddenly all of us were together near the Symbiont pools, and all of us were alive and –“

“The Calamarain did this,” Colin said. “They make the air glow like that, I remember. I told you,” the telepath

directed this comment at Josi, “that their intentions had no harm in them.”

Both Josi and Renee opened their mouths to speak, but they were overridden by Kor standing and applauding. Belatedly, the Klingons who accompanied him stood and clapped, too.

“That is quite a tale, blood brother,” Kor laughed; “a story worthy of Kahless!”

Curzon scowled at the big Klingon. *He knows better, Renee thought, than to insist that what he's said is the truth, and impute Kor to be a liar. And bringing Kahless into it –*

I'm afraid I just don't understand Klingons, Colin said telepathically to Renee; *They're mind-blind, and they're stubborn.*

A laugh briefly escaped Renee's lips, and caused Curzon's scowl to travel to her. Kor regarded her beneficently.

You of all people are calling someone else stubborn?

You of all people, Colin replied tartly to his lover, *are inferring that I am stubborn?*

Renee gave up and just started clapping along with Kor. She was forced to believe Curzon's tale of death and resurrection. She remembered none of it, and this accorded to what she believed about death – that it was a swathe of velvet nothingness. Brain trauma, which surely would come of having been brutally murdered, would account for

the loss of memory she had of running into Kiellon and Relan. She anticipated that long and spirit-fraught talks with both Colin and T'Dani about the realms of spirits lay in her immediate future. She didn't tell anyone, but secretly, she enjoyed them.