

EXTINCTION

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Extinction
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Chapter One

They had been marooned in this terrible place for innumerable darkfalls. It was a dimension that their great brains could not directly control. That fact was frightening nearly to the point of the abyss.

This unresponsive place crawled with... things, from which, at first, they had hidden in disgust and fear. Very few of them had survived the wrath of the close-cousins, and those few survivors were all marooned here. They did not number even a thousandth of a proper sub-colony. Still, for whatever it was worth, they had escaped total extinction.

This place in which they found themselves now was cramped and hot, though neither of those terms adequately described the pure existential discomfort that this limited dimension, which had become their cage, offered; space composed of only four dimensions, intimately and endlessly intertwined, had at first seemed too small to hold them. Which was why they had chosen to escape to this place, while they still could, because if it could scarcely hold them, then certainly the close-cousins wouldn't be able to follow them into it at all.

As it happened, that mistake might ultimately prove

as sure an extinction as the close-cousins had attempted to enact upon them. The damage this place had caused to the bioneural mesh that composed the underpinnings of their ship...well, it was as though this dimension were one great infection, hot, cramped, and stinking of the things that crawled interminably through it.

Their already-injured ship had been attracted to this particular place, and it had died here. The many things that this place crawled with, the Elders had been certain, were the carriers of the infection that had destroyed their vessel, stranding them in a prison that was not significantly different from the mortal fate that had awaited them in the interstitial space between dimensions.

At first, they had merely set out to destroy the terminally infective things that crawled and scurried everywhere.

Now, though, those three-dimensional vectors of infection posed a conundrum. They were truly alive, it seemed. Such likelihood appeared, on the surface, to be impossible in what was, for all intents and purposes, a swirling flat plane. It was that swirling, some proposed, combined with the various irradiative effects that occurred when limited dimensions contrived to press everything flat, that had lit the fires of life that they now perceived among the various infective things inhabiting

this place.

They had great stretches of time in which to debate and muse over these theories. They were largely immortal in this place. Time here was so thin and slow that it could actually be seen to flow in one single pitiful direction, at the end of each darkfall when the terrible bloated sun peered over the abraded cliffs that they had taken refuge beneath. Time, it seemed, could move no more swiftly here than the particles that cradled and carried the electromagnetic spectrum. In this place, the quanta (which radiated through the interstitial spaces between Universes, and caused fresh clippings to root and bud away) had too much effect upon time for it to move at more standard rates or through multiple dimensions.

The thin trickle of time was the one thing that they possessed in abundance, here in this agonizing prison that they had unwittingly chosen for themselves. They had time to ponder and perceive at their leisure, and what they ultimately perceived brought them a feeling they had not known in eons, a feeling so deep and wide that its presence had caused some to turn away into the cool void of death:

The infective things that teemed in this place were frail, mute, and largely inimical to life. These tendencies, among many others, had bred a reticence

toward considering them creatures. But long study had shown that the infective things were, indeed, creatures. Furthermore, they were creatures which, if properly used (though only a few dared to imagine what that meant, in this alien place) held the key by which this prison might, over some span of time measured in the birth and death of stars, be remade into something like home.

But the requirements for such a thing to come to pass posed its own dilemma. It was a dilemma that caused yet more of them to consider retreating into the void. For if what was required of the few to obtain the items needed to fulfill the dream of the many was truly what those few imagined that it was...

Then they, in their turn, would become like the close-cousins, the merciless ones, who had mandated the extinction of the pathetic band of refugees now living beneath hot scarps of time made slow and thin by an unusually vigorous quantum field. It was not known if such a conundrum could be borne, which was why the few had volunteered to perform an experiment.

The virtual booths and stalls and living quarters, cages and aquariums and tourist hostels, paddocks and barns and aviaries had, as their back wall, one of the great cliffs that formed the planet's dramatic sunrise

backdrop.

Or was that a sunset backdrop?

Dorla couldn't remember; after all, the sun of her own planet rose and set at entirely different magnetic compass points than the sun of this planet. She was also pretty certain that her muzzy memory was due, in part, to that cursed flu those Levodian delegates had brought with them to Betazed a month ago. The local health organizations had proclaimed the virus *contained* after handing out vaccination packets. Clearly, they were mistaken. She'd dutifully used her packet, but now she had all the symptoms anyway.

All of the various impermanent constructions formed warrens of alleyways with each other and with the back wall formed by the cliffs, which curved in a shallow, niche-filled arc from the east-northeast to the west-northwest for five uninterrupted miles. The Expo's less well-funded, well-intentioned, or well-documented vendors had moved into the spaces provided by these niches, gradually taking over the general arc of the cliff as the year progressed.

It was very late at night or, depending upon one's sleep patterns, very early in the morning, meaning that much of the enormous, sprawling, years-long Pets of the Galaxy Symposia — commonly referred to as *The Pet Expo* — was closed for the night. But not all of it.

There were, after all, both pets and particular retailers which presented their finest displays and offered their finest wares only when the night was at its deepest, and these were the ones who maintained a lively, sometimes noisy and definitely distracting, presence against the cliff face at night.

Dorla blamed both her incipient illness and all of these distractions for having missed the turnoff for the hostel where her group was staying. Her head ached and swam with every step, and her blurred vision was significantly less nauseating when she closed her eyes, so it was hardly a surprise that she'd lost her way. She did wish they'd managed to acquire lodging in some better part of Expo Town, or even outside the Expo itself. She wasn't a prude by any means, but the presence of Orion brothels and Deltan bars in the sometimes-sizeable niches provided by the scarp were attractive to less-than-savory characters, more than one of whom she'd also altered her course to avoid.

A certain stripe of green stone in the scarp marked the exact location of the hostel where her group was staying, but that was only visible in daylight, or against the nighttime lights of the Expo when one was fairly far away from the cliff, and she was right up next to it at the moment. This spot was relatively quiet, a relief to her aching head. The Levodian flu caused migraine-like

brainstorms, replete with light and heat that weren't really there at all, and the eons-smoothed native stone was cool when she leaned her burning forehead against it. Even in the throes of fever she realized that, as long as she kept prowling wearily about the area of the Expo nearest the cliff, she'd eventually stumble across her hostel.

"Dorla?"

She blinked at the soft, shy voice of her dearest companion, Melia. More than once, she'd wished that they were even dearer to one another, though she was afraid to advance in that direction. Melia was, after all, so shy, and Dorla wasn't really certain that her feelings would be returned.

"What are you doing out here, sweetie? You've missed dinner a long time ago, you know."

Dorla pushed herself away from the coolness of the cliff. Her head buzzed and swam. "Oh, I'm not all that hungry anyway. I think I took a wrong turn on my way back to the hostel from looking at the glowworms."

"Well, here I am to rescue you!" Melia held out one hand to Dorla; "I know a shortcut back."

Dorla considered Melia for a moment. None of her other companions had come down with any of the symptoms of this nasty ailment; their vaccination packets, she supposed, must have worked. She was

getting terribly stuffy, and wanted nothing more than a warm bed and some Tifta tea. She took Melia's proffered hand.

The pain made her black out before she even had a chance to scream.

"Dorla? Honey, what's *wrong*?"

She woke what couldn't have been more than just a few seconds later to Melia's terrified query. Melia crouched over her worriedly, the beautiful thick curls of her raven hair reflecting blue light back at the garish scarpside bulbs of various establishments as vividly as her dark eyes reflected concern for her friend. "I think I caught that lousy flu," Dorla croaked in reply.

"Did you? Here, let me help you up, and we'll take my shortcut to get you home and take care of you."

"I wish we were *home*," Dorla muttered dourly. Malia smiled.

"We can be, if that's what you want. Anything you want, sweetie, okay? Just come with me now." She offered her hand again; this time, no intense stab of pain accompanied the enthralling touch of her fingertips. This flu was far worse than the authorities had told them, Dorla thought resentfully, and apparently the vaccine wasn't effective for everybody. She followed Malia into a dark niche in the scarp. The air there was pleasantly cool, and Dorla put herself on autopilot, giving herself

over the gentle traction of Malia's...

Hand?

No. Not any kind of humanoid hand. Certainly not the soft, carefully manicured fingers that had lately found their way into so many of Dorla's private musings. These were, rather, some hard, chitinous, needle-like...

When Dorla finally regained enough strength to scream, after the things that came scuttling out of the dark had withdrawn to a nameless place where Dorla desperately hoped she would not be compelled to follow, some endless time after violations had been visited upon her that made Orion brothels and Deltan bars seem the warmest and most innocent spots in the galaxy, nobody heard her.

Eventually, though, sometime after dawn, she was apprehended by Betelgeuse Four's Ancari authorities — bruised and naked and lacerated, gibbering mad in the Parrot Paradise aviary. Having climbed up to the larger birds' nesting boxes, she'd torn her nails nearly out of their beds trying to enter the safe, enclosed places and curl up inside them, ostensibly to escape the high fever she was suffering, and the raving terror she felt regarding rapacious insects with beautiful black curls.

Chapter Two

"These are *eggs*?" Seantie exulted, taking another bite of what Renee's mother called Bread Pudding French Toast that was so large that Renee would have been concerned about her choking on it, if she hadn't known the unique anatomy of Betazoid jaws and throats. The captain of the *Enterprise* smiled.

"And muffins. The muffins are soaked in eggs whipped into a fluff with maple syrup and either fruit juice or liqueur. It's my mother's recipe. I used banana muffins, pineapple juice, and rum for this batch. She usually uses redspice in hers, too, but I don't much care for the flavor of the stuff. You freeze the mixture, saw it into slices — or architectural shapes, if you're my mother — and crisp it on all sides, or even deep-fry it.

"According to the recipe, you want to fry it in Delvan enyak butter, but of course most people can't tolerate butter," Renee went on quickly, at Seantie's look of alarm; "so I used coconut oil instead." The captain of the *Enterprise* had a method to her madness. She rose and went to the replicator in the airy *Enterprise* conference suite where she and Seantie were meeting, pulling out another small plate.

"*These* are eggs," she said, sliding the plate in front

of Seantie. The Betazoid science officer bit her lip. Renee had used the best-tasting eggs she knew of — a combination of Terran guinea hen and quail — and seasoned them with nothing more than a dash of salt. The curly-haired woman teased off a minute portion and took a slow bite. Her eyes flew open, and she took a bigger one.

"Earth eggs are wonderful!"

Betazoids found the eating of eggs in the morning to be a vulgar, if not downright nauseating, habit. Having sampled the eggs of several Betazoid birds and one of its turtles before giving up in abject disgust, Renee could understand why. Though Betazoid omelets were considered a delicacy by both Tellarites and Klingons, as well as by several influential Zakdorn gourmands, the fact that any of these people ate the eggs of any creature native to Betazed astounded her. In Ingram's estimation, the eggs of animals from Betazed tasted like melted asphalt in a sauce of sulfur cement.

Renee had wanted Seantie to come early to this meeting (the first meal-based meeting Ingram had ever had with her senior officers), in order to get her used to the concept of eating eggs casually, so that neither she nor the rest of her guests would feel discomfort at what was Ingram's favorite meal of the day.

The captain of the *Enterprise* had undertaken a

similar venture with Mel'Taya the evening before. Until that time, she'd been blithely unaware that tomato juice cocktail was extremely popular with Andorians — as long as every eight ounces of it included two heaping tablespoonfuls of hot pepper sauce and salt.

Other than the slightly alarming fact that this horrific recipe had been programmed into the replicator by her head of security, Ingram had actually enjoyed her visit with the *chae-na* — which was good, because if she hadn't, she'd been prepared to get Mel'Taya to interact more with the rest of the crew by the grim last resort of direct order. It couldn't be good for anybody to live in solitary confinement; humanoids were social creatures. Andorians, particularly, were social creatures, eclipsed in this innate behavior only by Deltans. Renee had no idea why the *chae-na* was inflicting punishment on itself, but from everything she'd noted about her head of security's behavior, that appeared to be exactly what it was doing.

Ingram and several other officers would be taking what Starfleet called *half-shoreleave*, meaning that roughly half the officers and crewmembers would be taking shoreleave, and the other half wouldn't. Starfleet felt that this would be a fine way to increase everyone's total shoreleave time. Renee wanted to talk to all of her officers at once regarding current crew reports and subsequent crew scheduling. Having them to breakfast

was the nicest way she could think of to carry out such a semi-formal briefing.

Renee shrugged. "Some snake eggs can be horrible, and echidna and platypus eggs are altogether foul — very much like Betazoid eggs, in my opinion — but in general, you're right, Terran eggs are terrific. I learned that when I was working for Parrot Paradise, trying to figure out the best foster-parent for the Tri'Avilla."

"Oh!" Seantie interrupted through a mouthful of egg, somehow not blowing crumbs of it through the air, something Renee was certain she herself would do if she tried to talk with scrambled egg in her mouth. "You just reminded me!" the Betazoid matron swallowed her mouthful of egg before continuing:

"I'm going to the Pets of the Galaxy Symposia on Betelgeuse Four for half-shoreleave. I wanted to see if you'd come with me. Do you have a 'padd I could call it up on? Parrot Paradise will be there. You said you wanted to get a mate for Jynx, and they'll have them there, I think."

While Seantie finished her eggs and started in again on the French toast, Renee reviewed what her senior science officer had called up on the compadd. "Teacup sehlats?" the captain of the *Enterprise* inquired.

Seantie nodded enthusiastically, body language that, as far as Renee was aware, was inherent to everyone

from Betazed. "They've apparently been bred that way — no cloning or other modern techniques were used, so they're quite costly, but from what I've read, they can't keep enough of them at the Expo for the Teacup Sehlat booth to be open for more than one day a month, and when they do open, they *auction* the little things and have them delivered to the final buyer's home planet personally, so no harm will come to the creatures from would-be buyers.

"The Parrot Paradise people are selling their birds — did you see? — the same way, except they only sell in mated pairs, and insist that the buyers sign a waiver to call Parrot Paradise so that the company can pick up the first clutch the pair produces. I think they'd make an exception for Jynx, though."

Renee scrolled to the Parrot Paradise information. She had spent as much free time as was practical as a midshipman in Starfleet, helping Parrot Paradise clone and breed back the extinct Tri'avilla, the only native parrot of Tellar, which was what Jynx was. Vosmari eclecticus were used as foster-parents for the Tri'Avilla, whose breeding habits never seemed to be affected by the difference. Parrot Paradise now had a sizable Alpha colony of Tri'avilla flourishing in the pristine 'Pinga rainforest on Tellar, which was legally out-of-bounds to all humanoids except the overseers of Parrot Paradise.

The company had gone on to bring back Terra's extinct Carolina paraquets (using peach-faced lovebirds as foster parents) and reproductively modified passenger pigeons (using Indian ring-necked doves as foster parents). The captain of the *Enterprise* laughed in delight at this news; deep-space exploration often led one to lose track of other interests. "I wonder when they'll get around to dodos? The big fruit-eating ground pigeons would be the perfect foster parents!"

The door to the conference suite slid open. Benzite Turath vrr-Nnt, Chief of Operations, smiled shyly and bowed to Renee. "Good morning Captain, Seantie." His voice was nasal and muffled due to the rebreather-apparatus he wore.

Renee happened to know for a fact that vrr-Nnt had a terrible crush on the Betazoid woman. The captain of the *Enterprise* kept this little tidbit to herself, but privately thought that Seantie could do a great deal worse. The Benzite couldn't help that he smelled bad; that was simply a function of the atmosphere he needed to breathe. Ingram had a feeling that the reason they'd never developed any sort of relationship was due to Seantie's secretive, standoffish personal behavior. Though Renee knew her science officer quite well, there were things in the Betazoid woman's past that she kept hidden, largely through the act of being a hermit. Nearly

as bad as the head of security...

Ah well, it's not my concern, Renee thought. As often occurred, the thought of others' personal relationships, or lack thereof, turned her mind to Colin. Fortunately, he wasn't on the ship at the moment, and so wouldn't be pestering her about such stray thoughts, as he had been known to do; he was slated to perform psionic refits to the Starship *Cairo* for the next Terran month or so.

Ingram returned her head of operation's smile. Like Klingons, Benzites smiled without showing their teeth. To both peoples, the act of drawing the lips back from the teeth at all — as opposed to entirely, usually accompanied by a growl, a hiss, or both, as was true among nearly every other humanoid species she'd ever heard of — was a sign of aggression. To Benzites, the bow that accompanied the smile was meant to enhance the friendly overtones of the gesture.

Since becoming first officer on the *Enterprise* several years before, Renee had been compelled to learn a great deal about the cultural and biological mores, habits, and tendencies of pretty much every race in the Federation. The Starfleet flagship *Enterprise* iteration *Beta* had been slated as a type of experimental community by Starfleet, and was kept crewed by the most varied interstellar racial mix feasible.

And had gone on its first mission without protocol officers, a medical crew, or a large chunk of its defensive systems, Ingram thought to herself wryly. She covered her mouth politely with her napkin before she ended up inadvertently grinning at the memory and offending her chief of operations, who had taken a seat next to Seantie.

Mel'Taya, Josi, Rafe, EmJay, and Demora had followed him through the door. Thomas Marcus Johnson, the ship's helmsman, had been left to conn the bridge with the help of a gaggle of nervous new cadets he delighted in terrorizing. Everyone exchanged greetings and helped themselves to breakfast, with the exception of vrr-Nnt, who, Renee was relieved to see, took no offense to the open grins of the humans among her crew.

Benzites could only eat food specially formulated for their systems. Though they *did* occasionally enjoy an illicit humanoid treat every now and then — Renee was told that most humanoid foods were bubbly, pleasantly hallucinogenic, spicy, or all three of those to Benzite palates and minds — reliance on humanoid foods for long periods could damage the delicate, extensive subcutaneous organ that ran throughout Benzite bodies that acted to generate both blood and immune cells, in the same way that overconsumption of alcohol could cause organ damage in humanoids.

Benzite bones, unlike most humanoid bones, were solid constructs without marrow, a necessary adaptation that allowed them to endure the heavy atmospheric pressures of their homeworld — or of Venus, which they were currently in the process of terraforming under a series of newly-invented semi-biological osmotic domes that allowed much of that planet's native atmosphere in, but kept out the Venus' killing heat. It was hoped that ultimately, over the course of thirty or forty generations, those domes would alter the temperature and relative thickness of the atmosphere to Benzite norms. Most Terrans agreed that Benzites would make delightful neighbors.

"Shall I get you something?" Renee inquired of vrr-Nnt courteously. He shook his head at her and accompanied that with another half-bow over the table.

"Thank you, Captain, but no, I never eat this early in the day. Though I am a bit thirsty."

Renee nodded, stood, and walked to the replicator. "Methanol, Benzite grade, very cold."

While waiting for the replicator to comply, she looked over her officers serving themselves at the little buffet she had set up and wondered where T'Dani was. Probably busy with something in sickbay. They could carry on without her; if there was anything she needed to know, or needed to tell Renee, they could always get

together later. The CMO of the *Enterprise* really needed to work less.

Renee wished she'd find herself a hobby or two.

Chapter Three

"...you most certainly *did!* Furthermore, you said —"

"Exobiology experiments would be inappropriate for sickbay! There's no *way* I'd have let you —"

"Are you calling me a *liar?* *Glii'ra phokh iiphshaxa'iitir vazain'phu tezh'shoi'ialh atkii'lithor!*"

T'Dani had been paying scant attention to the animated conversation going on in the main sickbay anteroom until that irritated, deeply creative, remarkably indecent comment reached her ears. *Irritated* was the sort of adjective that one should avoid conjuncting with the natives of Fesoan unless one was of a mind to decorate various nouns in precious bodily fluids.

The *Enterprise's* CMO hurried away from the concussed Antarean engineering technician she was treating — he was unconscious, out of danger, not going anywhere soon, and the med tech also in the room with her could treat him just fine — and stormed into the anteroom. She scrutinized the arguing pair from the doorway for several seconds before stalking into the anteroom and snapping out; "Excuse me; what exactly is at issue here?"

Call an Andorian pretty much anything you liked, and they'd probably take it as an endearment, but never *ever* let one believe you'd called them a liar. It drove

them off the deep end, not least because it was nearly impossible for them to actually lie effectively to anyone even vaguely familiar with their body language. Wholly subconscious, antennae expressions were notoriously difficult to either fake or control.

T'Dani knew a potentially colossal bother when she saw one. This one had an unusually pale complexion that hinted at blue lace agate, and abundant, pearl-lustrous hair that ran from a point halfway down his abnormally smooth forehead and back in an extensive braid that spilled from the nape of his neck to the center of his spine. He had a long, lissome, heavily muscled spine; even among a people whose growth rates had shot up briskly since the inception of the Federation, this was one hefty Andorian *thaan*, several inches over six feet. He had remarkably slender and lively antennae, but half of his signals she couldn't interpret at all, even in the short period that elapsed before he answered her.

Corrigan was a student of things Andorian, but for the life of her, she could not place this *thaan* into any discrete racial or cultural *Fendsanili* group she'd ever heard of. She was absolutely certain, however, that he wasn't lying. She seemed to recall him, vaguely, as having been part of the group of psions Colin had put together when he first arrived on the *Enterprise*, but she'd been sleep-deprived and horribly busy at the time,

so she couldn't recall much at all of substance about the irate *thaan*.

The *Enterprise's* CMO found the thought of such an individual angry to be an unpleasant experience. Andorians were nearly as strong as Vulcans, and often more agile. This one could probably break her, much less Corella, in half with one arm. It occurred to her that she should probably have dismissed Corella from service until the woman's Deltan pregnancy hormones had subsided, or perhaps for the entire pregnancy, though really, she wasn't certain how long that would be for a woman whose heritage basically constituted a humanoid patchwork quilt.

T'Dani drew a slow, silent breath and stood her ground before the big, angry *thaan*, though for a very long march of minutes she found herself wishing for nothing more than to be somewhere — *anywhere* in the Milky Way Galaxy, though M31 would have also sufficed nicely — else. She heaved an aggravated sigh, set her jaw, and scowled up at him.

The thunderous expression on the vaguely violet-tinged face that turned down toward hers diminished somewhat as the startling *thaan's* ebony eyes raked over her. Dark eyes were fairly typical among Andorians, though in the *Fendsanili* they were more often midnight-blue than such an impenetrable black. The utterly

smooth arc of brow and mass of white lashes that framed them, however, had to be some kind of genetic fluke so rare that T'Dani had never encountered or even heard of it.

If the confused movement of this singular Andorian's antennae — the immobile bases of which were entirely covered by his luxuriant hair, a trait common only among Thalassans, which he very obviously wasn't — were any indication, he had little or no recollection of her, either. Of course, by the time she'd gotten to the exhausted group of telepaths and empaths, most of them had lapsed into unconsciousness.

"You're the chief medical officer here? Of course, you are," the fellow announced, asking and answering his own question in typical fashion, in a voice as vibrant as an octave violin. "Yesterday I requested and was granted leave by your *nurse*," he narrowed his eyes into cold onyx slits and flicked them at Corella even as his antennae arced away from her, as though she somehow pained him, before turning away from the woman dismissively to face T'Dani directly; "to conduct a portion of my research on Clarke's Disease in this anteroom. I explained that it was vital for this portion of the —"

"He did no such thing!" Corella broke in heatedly. The Andorian's eyes flared open until T'Dani could

clearly see the whites that surrounded every portion of the *thaan's* irises. T'Dani grabbed the nurse inelegantly by one arm and dragged her bodily toward the door.

"Go to lunch," T'Dani hissed.

"But —"

"Go. To. Lunch. *Now.*" The CMO added force to her order with a toss of her head; "Somewhere *else!*"

The nurse sighed stiffly, but relented. "Yes, doctor."

T'Dani turned to confront the irate *thaan*, only to find him staring at her with a thoughtful expression. He was aware, she thought, that he distressed her. Her response was to stride firmly to the replicator and announce; "Two iced coffees, caffeinated, black." Let certain Andorians know that they distressed you, or really just affected you at all, and they would attempt — often successfully — to maneuver you like you were a marionette.

T'Dani kept her back turned, but would have sworn that she could feel him watching her. Her shoulder blades were unable to determine whether or not this was a pleasant experience. Considering what she herself had done with what, in retrospect, was crucial research, she guessed not. "Please have a seat." She turned and handed the fellow his unrequested drink, leaving the other to melt in the replicator, and tried to put Renee into her voice with her *please*. She didn't mean it as a

suggestion.

The Andorian gazed into his coffee with the hangdog expression most humanoids reserved for funerals. "What if I wanted sugar in it?"

"You'd be out of luck; I never prescribe sugar. You also should be happy that Corella didn't get it for you, there'd probably be chocolate in it. Now sit down and drink your coffee."

Caffeine was sedative to his species. For a long time, humans thought it was poisonous to them. Caffeine wasn't, but the theobromine in chocolate was; theobromine sedated them to the point that their hearts and lungs could cease to function. These molecules were members of a family of what was known to Starfleet Medical as *paradoxical molecules*. Usually large-chain amines, such molecules had one biochemical effect on some humanoids, the opposite effect on others, and absolutely no effect whatsoever upon the rest.

T'Dani was pretty certain that he realized sedation was her intention. She was also floored. She'd never known an Andorian so angry, or so whatever this one was, that they didn't respond — at all — to a direct order from an individual of higher rank, or higher perceived social status, both of which, as a medical doctor on a starship, she possessed. Such behavior was aberrant in the extreme. Corrigan swallowed and crossed her arms

in front of herself, unsure what this *thaan's* motivations or next move might be.

The not-sitting, not-drinking *thaan* gave her a peculiar look that she couldn't decipher, and averred; "I am *not* lying."

"There's not a shadow of doubt in my mind that you're telling the truth. You see, I'm the one who tossed your research into the replicator." Forthrightness was important with Andorians; they'd — eventually, probably, usually — forgive you for almost anything, except trying to condescend to or lie to them. Hopefully, this one wasn't aberrant in that tendency, too, or she might have to call security.

His abnormally silky, delicately arched silvery eyebrows rose, and stayed there. His antennae duplicated the motion in a way that, had she not known that she was dealing with an angry person, she might have confused for amusement. "On purpose?"

T'Dani shrugged. "That would depend upon what sort of poisoning you state I must have gotten the last time I employed certain ill-advised sexual maneuvers with an ice lizard."

"Wonders never cease. A Vulcan who speaks *graalen* and throws away scientific research wholesale. And here I thought a Tellarite protocol officer was the giddy apex of Starfleet irony," the *thaan* interjected, with

the barest hint of a smile.

"It *looked* like a mass of swabs used to wipe up the residue left behind by potentially infective agents." T'Dani's voice went stiff — not because she felt any compelling requirement to stand on dignity while attempting to justify her error, but because she was suddenly overtaken by a nearly irresistible and altogether inappropriate urge to giggle. Was the *thaan's* comment a complaint, followed by a threatening smile, as might be expected from an irritated Andorian? How could that be, if her own body and mind told her that it was a... a... *joke*? It was dry and deadpan enough to be an Andorian joke, but...

"Mmmm. That would be because it was a mass of swabs used to wipe up the residue left behind by potentially infective agents." He turned to set his untouched drink back into the replicator, and T'Dani allowed herself a nervous, silent, unutterably bizarre two-second chortle.

He assumed a lecture pose as he turned back to face her, hands on hips with a wide stance. T'Dani instinctively fell back away from him a step.

He didn't seem to notice. "This residue is...okay, it *was* the metabolic deposit left after that agent metamorphosed into its spore state. It's an effective vaccine against Clarke's Syndrome, but its matrix is

sensitive, and I wanted to see how well it could hold up against...oh, *never mind*," he shook his head forlornly, a fairly simple emotion to decipher in an Andorian thanks to the vaguely histrionic droopy antennae. "I told your nurse all of this, but apparently she not only neglected to tell anybody else about it, but she forgot that I told her altogether."

"I don't know how to apologize deeply enough for this. Corella's one-sixteenth Deltan. Apparently great-somebody-to-the-Nth's Gestational Syndrome genes have kicked in with a vengeance — you know, how they forget things for the first four months? It's not her fault, it's entirely mine. Perhaps I could offer you equipment or personnel that would make up for your lost time and effort?"

He shrugged halfheartedly. "Equipment I've got in profusion. The time-consuming part would require personnel trained in pre-Federation methods of transcriptase replication; this organism can't abide the fields put out by modern equipment. I wouldn't suppose..."

"You should suppose. When and where do you want your personnel, Mr. ...?"

"Vraeth'uutr'Shrev Th'raess'Aen. And you are?"

"Entirely incapable of pronouncing whatever it was you just said. My name's T'Dani Corrigan," she replied,

deadpan, and held out her hand in greeting. Of course, he already knew that she understood Lesser Andorian, so that took the wind out of the halfhearted joke. This peculiar Andorian possessed one of the most peculiar names she'd ever heard. Its meaning was; *this unique mixture-like-person has journeyed here to convey sensitive understanding*. The woman who'd trashed his research hoped it was applicable, anyway.

His smile reached the depths of his sable eyes, an unusual thing for an Andorian; they rarely smiled, and almost never for the same reason a human might. "I'm Shrev." He accepted her proffered hand. Either it was a lot colder than T'Dani thought it was in the main sickbay anteroom, or this fellow had a high fever. He went on:

"And since your name sounds so much like *I want to hide in graalen*, I suppose that the capacity to destroy the end-product of a year's research all at once explains *why* you might want to do that." He *was* joking this time; his antennae proclaimed this quite clearly.

Nevertheless, T'Dani was taken aback by this comment. She *did* want to hide — and suddenly, to her utter horror, she found that she couldn't. *What* had he just done? The part-Vulcan doctor couldn't pin a description on it. She could feel the blood fall from her face, and for a long second, she thought she might pass out. She tried, nevertheless, to extract her hand from his

own, which had become unpleasantly warm, without either falling over or appearing rude.

The *Enterprise's* CMO shook her head violently, and took a hold on herself. It was a simple trick of conflating sound with meaning, something beloved by Andorians and the basis of their entire vocabulary, and absolutely nothing more — the same sort of linguistic caper that had ultimately left the *Ghalar Fendsani* stuck with the absurd Federation moniker *Andorian* which, roughly translated into graalen, meant *pretty much everything*. What this *thaan* had said to her had no meaning, except for what she chose to give it. She took the entire unpleasant bolus of this unwelcome phenomenon, and tucked it away somewhere deep in her psyche where, she hoped, it would never peer forth again.

"And you're never going to let me forget about it, are you?" her voice was slightly hoarse. He didn't seem to notice.

"Not for a second."

Chapter Four

For the entire five-year span of the Expo, the Ancari authorities were not allowing ships larger than a pleasure barge, or anything heavily armed or shielded at all, into their system, including Federation vessels, unless the most dire of planetary emergency situations arose.

For this reason, Renee and Seantie took one of the *Enterprise's* shuttles to Betelgeuse Four — *h'Nca*, to its native residents — from the outskirts of that system, and the *Enterprise* took the opportunity to scan the red giant. Betelgeuse was one of the largest red giants in this sector of the Milky Way Galaxy, and it was one that had exhibited various textbook signs of going full-nova for the last seventy-thousand years.

Nevertheless, Betelgeuse had been mostly quiescent for the last two centuries, and remained quiescent as the *Enterprise* took its readings. The Ancari, themselves, had outposts that took readings of the bloated star on an hourly basis. The explosion of such an enormous star could conceivably impact systems as far away as three thousand light years. Such a catastrophe would affect every planet in the Federation, bombarding systems in the path of its far-flung rays with deadly gamma radiation that could, at its worst, instantaneously

incinerate all life or, at its most benign, cause a century of acid rain that would kill more slowly.

The defensive installations on Betelgeuse Four, as well as at the outermost reaches of the Ancari's home system were, therefore, no joke. They had been set up in 2213 when h'Nca joined the Federation, and improved upon every few Terran Standard years since, in order to keep enemies of the Federation from ever being able to nudge the sleeping giant into a wakeful and ruinous outburst.

It took two and a half days to traverse the system by shuttle. On the second morning, Renee let herself wake slowly while admiring the hypergiant through computer-enhanced windows that allowed her to look directly at it. Its planets orbited quite far from it, so there was no way to see its roiling, oscillating surface from the shuttle, but even from this distance, it was obvious that Betelgeuse was not literally red, as a majority of stars in the Milky Way truly were, but a deep, pulsating scarlet-orange.

Seantie, her porcelain Betazoid skin flushed with the light of the hypergiant whose system they were traversing and her hair a froth of tight silver-shot roan-colored curls cascading over her shoulders, was busy preparing them something she called Tifta tea for breakfast, which she'd begun the night before. The milk of the little doglike Betazoid *yarmil* which, Renee's

science officer explained, was kept as a pet in a manner similar to the way humans occasionally still kept fowl for eggs, was required to brew this drink.

It was necessary to leave the milk out overnight so that it could be colonized by airborne molds, of which there were none on the shuttle; Seantie had wrappages of them sent regularly from Betazoid in order to make Tifta. Certain enzymes in the milk itself would break down the molds into flavoring agents, even as the molds consumed and altered the sugars in the milk, rendering it digestible. Humans were one of only two or three humanoid races known to the Federation who had evolved to be able to digest the sugars in milk as adults, and not even every single member of those few races could.

The tea was said to be highly nutritious. Renee had her doubts about it, but kept them to herself; it sounded, to her mind, like the human concoction *kombucha*, which she disliked. When Seantie set a steaming cupful in front of her, she smiled at the Betazoid woman, toasted her with the cup, and sipped. It most assuredly wasn't a tea; it was thick and foamy, with a fruity, buttery flavor Renee's mind sought to describe but couldn't, adequately. She settled on chamomile spiked with cardamom in soy milk, and called it good.

"This is delicious, thank you!" Renee enthused. She

always enjoyed trying new foods. Her adoptive parents had endowed her with a very broad palate, and it wasn't often that she came across something so bad she couldn't at least bring herself to swallow it. Most of the time, like now, she was delightfully surprised. Humanoids reigned supreme in the Milky Way Galaxy. The nutritional requirements and taste preferences of humanoids were, by and large, similar everywhere.

Seantie sat down across from her and took a long, slow drink of her Tifta, with a sigh of pleasure. "This makes me imagine the sun coming up through the mists. My family lives on the outskirts of Vestesi Forest; have you ever been there?"

"I haven't, but I understand it's gorgeous. Something like Terra's Yucatan Peninsula rainforest. A lot of the planet where I come from fits that description, too — only colder, temperate."

Seantie nodded. "There are trees in Vestesi that are eight thousand years old, and depending on how high you are in their canopy, they host up to a hundred different discrete ecosystems. You need to watch out for the borma ticks, though; I got bitten on the finger by one of those once, and for a month, it felt like my hand was broken. Nobody's figured out what chemical effect causes that yet, and the Betazoid Science Center said it's had the Federation set aside a Zee Magnees prize for

whoever does. The borma carry Poman Fever in the winter, but so many people are studying them now, they've become something of a rare species."

Renee laughed. "I think that's called having a method to your madness. The things might be extinct before anybody works out their method of self-defense."

"Computer, what is the latest, most popular news story on the Betelgeuse Four Pet Expo?" Seantie inquired casually. The response the computer supplied was far from casual, and it had absolutely nothing to do with pets of any kind. By the end of the first sentence — *The body of a thirty-four-year-old Terran woman has been found outside the exhibit Beloved Companions; A Two-Quadrant Showcase, in what appears to some authorities to be the sixth in a string of murders* — Renee and Seantie were staring at one another in horror.

The computer droned on:

Others find too many disparities between the deaths to consider them linked with one another, much less with this latest case, in which Ancari forensics have uncovered several clues that appear to stand at variance with one another, allowing little headway to be made in the case.

Skin and hair DNA evidence suggests that the woman seemed to have crawled to her position outside the exhibit where she was found, from somewhere within

or near the cliffs that compose one wall of the sprawling Expo grounds, the night before she was found dead. The corpse was discovered in a condition which has been variously described as 'chewed open', 'organless', and 'eaten from the inside-out'. The Ancari official who stated this is not available for comment, and has since resigned her post.

No extraneous bodily fluids or tissue matter from the corpse were present anywhere outside a three-inch radius on all sides of where the body itself was found. Furthermore, the corpse has never displayed any signs of rigor mortis — which, some experts aver, makes perfect sense since, in their estimation, the woman had already been dead for some days prior to the time her body was found, though the disembowelment marks themselves were less than three hours old at the time the corpse was discovered.

No suspect has been named in this case, and the identity of the deceased has been withheld pending further investigation.

Renee pushed her teacup away and sat silent for a moment. "Well," she announced finally; "I'm thinking it's definitely better that we don't go anywhere on this planet alone. *That* qualifies as the strangest murder case I've ever heard of. Computer, the news story said that there had been five other people killed, but that most

authorities don't consider the deaths linked. What information do you have on the five other deaths?"

Working, the instrument replied. It didn't work very long. *A documentary has been compiled on those deaths*, it announced. *Would you like to hear the documentary?*

"Summarize it for me, please."

"*'Eaten from the inside out'*?" Seantie shuddered. "Wouldn't that be messy?"

"You'd think — and for more than three inches all around. Unless it was something that cleaned up after itself obsessively well, and at a molecular level."

"*Itself?*" the Betazoid woman asked in a repulsed tone. Renee shrugged.

"That story just didn't seem to have any of the hallmarks of a humanoid —"

The first ostensible murder that occurred during the third month of the Betelgeuse Four Pet Expo, the computer interrupted, was a high-profile affair, since it involved the death of the fifty-four-year-old Tamarian wife of Jaran Goor, the Tellarite First Councilor of the Federation.

However, no apparent signs of foul play were found on the body apart from minor contusions and lacerations, which Ancari forensics tied to the fact that male Deltan reproductive DNA was found within the

tissues of the deceased. Joran hotly denies the implications of this, and states that because his wife's body was already in an advanced state of decay when found, to the point of harboring insect larvae, that what was considered to be Deltan DNA was, in fact, poorly-transcribed and half-rotten insect matter.

"Which would pretty much sum up how a Tellarite like Joran would say 'hello' to a Deltan, I'm thinking," Renee offered. She shook a finger at Seantie, "Now *that* death contains some serious humanoid murder motivation."

Seantie t'sked softly and shook her head. "What an awful shock that would be; *sir, your wife's dead, and furthermore, she's been —*"

The computer overrode whatever it was Seantie had been about to say. *No Deltans were ever implicated in this death. However, the second death involved a twenty-six-year-old photosynthetic Orion female, one of the green dancers from a club located in one of the well-lit and opulently-decorated caves frequented by —*

"Computer, please remove all putative assumptions, innuendoes, and extraneous adverbs from this footage, and begin again at the point at which I requested these removals," Renee said. Seantie frowned at her.

"Well, what fun is *that?*" the science officer chortled.

"Murder should not be considered a form of entertainment. And how old are you, again? You *still* don't know what sort of clientele is drawn by Orion dancing girls? Seriously; I'm just not one of those people who likes their news handed to them in garish emotive fashion, particularly by a computer, and I absolutely despise information being digested for me — I *know* you know what pre-digested matter is called, Lieutenant!"

Seantie chuckled throatily. The computer resumed:

The body of the Orion female was also found without marks that would indicate a level of injury resulting in death. Torture may have taken place, since her fingernails had been torn out; however, Ancari forensics notes that the same might occur if a person with long nails fought an attacker vigorously. This body was also found in a semi-infested state.

A forty-one-year-old Bolian female was the third victim; this attack occurred approximately four Ancari months after the death of the first victim, and approximately two Ancari months after the death of the second. This body showed minor contusions and lacerations, as well, but no major signs of infestation. Ancari researchers claim that the heavily infested states of the first two victims appeared to have taken place prior to the deaths of the victims. However, this has

largely been dismissed as a shortcoming of Ancari forensic techniques, or poor training on the part of the researchers making such claims.

"I wouldn't be so sure of that at this point. Didn't the forensics performed on the poor disemboweled human woman also imply that she was crawling along the Expo grounds *after* she'd died?" Seantie argued with the computer, which came back with *not enough information to compile an extrapolation.*

Renee nodded. "I'm apt to agree with you, but there's something here that's...well, I can't quite put my finger on it. And so far, all the victims have been adult females. Computer, continue from the point at which Seantie asked her last question."

The fourth victim was found on the Expo grounds one and one-half Ancari months later; a sixty-three-year-old Klingon female. The state of her body was unknown, as Klingon law forbids the desecration of the dead in any way, including medical autopsy. However, a small Klingon force remains on Betelgeuse Four, swearing retribution upon whomever killed her.

Renee winced. "Oh, *that* must make investigating these deaths an absolute delight. And the Orion who's running that cave full of dancing girls must be thrilled. Between you, me, and the shuttlecraft computer, Seantie, I've often wondered if this particular Klingon sensitivity

toward desecration of the dead doesn't simply exist in order to prevent assassination from being verified or refuted. Those were *not* questions, computer; please continue."

The final victim was a Bajoran female. She was found disemboweled approximately one Ancari month ago, in the house she had rented for the duration of her stay at the Pets of the Galaxy Symposium on Betelgeuse Four.

The Bajoran year spanned precisely half of a Terran year; their orange primary star was smaller than Sol, and the orbit of their planet was nearer to it than Terra's orbit was to Sol. It must have taken the woman half a Bajoran year to get to Betelgeuse, on a standard transport or freighter. "Damn, but that's a long way to travel just to adopt a goldfish. Computer, I thought the news story regarding the human woman said that she was also disemboweled, but that authorities saw no similarities in the five previous cases and the human case?" the captain of the *Enterprise* inquired.

The Bajoran disembowelment was extremely messy, and is considered by Ancari authorities to have been an animal attack. The twenty-two-year-old Bajoran woman was found in the house she had rented for herself for the time she planned to stay at the Expo, and hemoglobin-stained, unknown animal tracks covered all parts of this

residence, including floors, walls, and some portions of the ceiling. The animals in question ostensibly escaped through an open window. It is theorized that these animals had entered the residence via the same open window, attacked the woman as a food source, and dispersed.

"That, or they're learning not to leave evidence behind. Computer, what other similarities between the Bajoran case and the human case are there, besides the disembowelment?"

An apparent aromatic-ring hallucinogenic substance was encountered in the body tissues of all victims, but this substance has been determined to pose little immediate deadly hazard to humanoids. Bajorans and humans share a large number of similar physiological traits, including dual adrenal kidneys, heme molecules as the nucleus of their globulin cells, and dual-vascularized placental tissue, as well as two hundred fifty-one other less systemically vital biological similarities. Aside from these factors, there is no similarity between the Bajoran and the human murders, as far as Ancari authorities are concerned.

Renee frowned. "Could the nature of that aromatic molecule be hiding something else? Say, some sort of poison carrier, and the poison is highly volatile once it enters the victim's system, in order to have dispersed

completely by the time a body is found?"

Potentially, but such a poison has not been found.

"Does one exist?"

Working. This time, the computer was silent for a long run of minutes.

"Now I'm wondering if maybe these women weren't getting a little too friendly with an unsavory Deltan or Orion faction, and got injected with some quick-acting poison that leaves no trace," Renee confided to Seantie; "Joran's wife, for instance, would have been pretty well-set-up —"

"What about the Orion dancer?"

"Maybe she got wind of what was happening, and tried to cut herself in for a piece of the action."

Seantie shrugged. "I understand that the most likely answer is also apt to be the simplest. If it's poison, why the various disembowelments?"

"A ruse? And *I've* learned to never underestimate any answer, no matter how wild. Of which, really, we have none, except for the fact that we go nowhere alone. Agreed?"

Seantie nodded and opened her mouth to add something, when the computer kicked in:

There are no known poisons that are so fast-acting and volatile that they leave absolutely no trace.

"Cobalt cyanide? Potassium —" Seantie began, in a

belligerent tone.

Elevated levels of apparent vitamin-like elements or organo-mineral compounds were not present in unusual concentration in any of the victims' bodies, the computer came back blandly.

"Unless the aromatic-ring hallucinogen is the trace they leave," Renee muttered softly. "Thank you, computer. Wholly novel poisons, wholly novel murder methods, wholly unknown humanoid-devouring animals, or all three. Gee, Seantie, when you invited me to this thing, you didn't mention it'd potentially be so *interesting!*"

Chapter Five

T'Dani came in through the office-side of *Enterprise's* Exobiological Laboratory Fifteen. A human ensign the hue of well-tempered baking chocolate was taking down notes on a compadd...from the walls. T'Dani stared around herself in amazement. The walls were covered in shiny white board — not exactly floor to ceiling, since lying on the floor while writing on a vertical surface would surely pull vital musculature in any humanoid anatomy, but close, very close. It was divided into grids crammed with calculations and delicate, flowing Terran Standard script, all of which was color-coded in some way that Corrigan couldn't immediately decipher.

The ensign was laboriously copying parts of it over prior to erasing them. "Good morning, doctor! How can I help you?"

"Actually, I'm here to help you. Or Shrev. Or someone. I talked to Shrev last week, and he told me he required someone capable of performing transcriptase functions in very old style. That would be me."

"*Oh*, yeah. Some idiot threw out what he'd been working on. I'm copying down the last —"

"I know that, too. I'm the idiot."

He turned and gazed at her with an interesting mixture of admiration and horror in his decidedly attractive eyes. "On *purpose*?"

T'Dani chuckled, and the ensign blinked.

"You...? I thought you were Vulcan...why..." the bewildered young man began.

"Don't ask her *why*, Mark. I don't even want to know." Shrev announced as he came in through the other, double-airlocked door that led from the office into the lab itself; despite his words, he was grinning. "Don't tell me — *you* are the research assistant you promised me?"

The doctor sighed. "If you think you can trust me not to...ah...throw things away." She returned his grin sheepishly while attempting to avoid his sharp obsidian eyes.

"I can't do that, doctor. Really." He picked up a clean-room cap and began to bundle his abundant hair into it.

Now she blinked up earnestly into his eyes. "Not trust me to throw things away? *Honestly*, it was just an —"

He interrupted her earnest explanation with a dry chuckle. She'd never known an Andorian who laughed or smiled quite so much. They tended to be fairly staid folk. Those not acquainted with the habits of other

humanoids usually never laughed or smiled at all; such body language was often interpreted as a signal of aggression among them. "No, no; I can't take you away from your duties like this. I'd be remiss. Thanks for the offer, but —"

"The only other person who learned how to do this when Ghee P'Trell demonstrated the technique was the captain. Shall I send *her* in here? She'd come, if you'd rather, but you'll have to wait until she gets back from shoreleave. Either way, I made you a promise, sir, and I intend to keep it."

T'Dani drew herself up with all the wounded pride she could muster and, for the second time in a week, stood her ground in front of the imposing exobiologist. It appeared to be getting easier. Discounting, of course, the fact that it had taken her four days to work herself up to venturing into this office. She nonchalantly picked up a second clean-room cap and tucked her own hair up into it. The *thaan* expressed unspoken interest in her ears, and she forced herself not to blush; she'd learned how to control the autonomic responses of her circulatory system at a very young age, and was largely successful at it.

As she'd expected, he understood her line of reasoning just fine. Andorians tended to maintain a transactional sort of interpersonal relationship with

pretty much everybody. "Oh, all right. But if you're needed for more urgent matters — anything, a hangnail, I don't care what — you go. And no more throwing away spores. You destroyed their entire world when you put them into that replicator, you realize?"

She blinked at him owlishly, nonplussed. "He's joking, you know," Mark offered, still transposing and carefully erasing notes from the wall boards as he went. "I nearly clocked him before I realized he *wasn't* serious three-quarters of the time."

T'Dani smiled wanly. It sounded as though the boy was referring to Renee. Andorians often teased people they liked, sometimes unmercifully, but they almost never made outright jokes — they preferred their humor exquisitely subtle and dry, and couldn't tolerate...

A wildly unlikely theory about Shrev's peculiar jocularly, unconventional demeanor, and unheard-of physiological aspect sprouted fully formed into T'Dani's mind. She decided to test it, tentatively, by making a joke back, though really, the only way she'd be able to prove it was either to look closely at his medical files — which she absolutely could do — or ask him, which could be a much trickier endeavor.

"I love your walls," she announced, apropos of nothing. "Why not just transport in some enormous soapstone blocks, and chisel everything there? It'd last

longer, wouldn't smear, and you could just have fresh ones delivered when your notes reached the floor."

"Too difficult to color-code, but should I run out of other menial tasks for the chief medical officer of the *Enterprise* to perform, I'll keep it in mind, Lieutenant Commander Corrigan. Or we can let Mark do it, while he recovers in sickbay for a couple of months after trying to take a swing at me."

Mark looked askance at T'Dani, then shook his head while erasing an entire column of script and an associated row of calculations. "Man, I need to request a transfer — I don't know if I'll be able to handle this in stereo. Mind if I go far, far away, say to Rec Deck, and transcribe this for you, Sahib?"

Shrev smiled. "Sure. Come on, Doctor; I'll introduce you to a laboratory the likes of which few have seen for about three hundred years."

He wasn't joking this time. "And it's going to take you about three hundred years to come up with anything significant working with *this*, I'm thinking."

"Not at all; we've put the serum I finally end up with all the way through process several times. It's finding methods by which to either preserve the stuff adequately, or synthesize it entirely, that's the question now. To do that, you need *enough* of it, in different —"

"So, what you're saying is that the grief you spewed

all over my sickbay a few days ago —"

"Was largely done just for the fun of it, aye," he smiled at her. "I mean, I got to meet you, didn't I? But you still destroyed those little archaeobacteria's whole world. Heart-breaking!"

Now that was *definitely* teasing. T'Dani shook her head at him forbiddingly. "I see. So how long is it before people start referring to me behind my back as Destroyer of Worlds?"

"I'll see to it that it's never done behind your back. We'll only call you that to your face."

"How Andorian of you. You're not *entirely* Andorian, though, are you?" it was still nothing more than an educated guess, and she hoped the *thaan* wouldn't take it the wrong way. T'Dani picked up one of the thumb-operated pipettes and shook her head. Beakers. Flasks. Steel loops and Petri dishes. Vacuum filters. Hotplates. Fume hoods. "Seriously, you have to perform the entire *process* at this level of...?"

"*Abysmally tedious and occasionally irreproducible drudgery* is the phrase you're looking for. The fields put out by modern instrumentation, or really any sort of electronic devices, absolutely fry the little buggers *in vitro*. You need to be careful using the hotplate and the hood, even. It was almost like learning a new language. And I'm a hybrid, like you."

T'Dani raised an eyebrow. Shrev grinned. "I looked you up. I'm deeply hurt if you didn't return the favor, particularly since you might have to patch me back together someday. Half of my patches are human. Well, sort of kind of half," he shrugged; "or some variation on one-quarter. Anyway, I *try* and express all the enate, the innate, and the epigenetic without resorting to calculus."

She shook her head at the unique Andorian and his unique lab, and brusquely changed the subject. "My mother's a xenobiologist. I can't believe that there's not some kind of damping field that —"

"Oh, sure there is. This entire ship is a big damping field, and they do make damping-field labs, as you're surely aware. Unfortunately, the field I'd need would have to be at the molecular level, something that would work to protect the microbes without making the equipment itself fail, and they don't make anything that..." he shrugged, searching for the term; "itsy. Generally, its expense would outweigh —"

"For a real vaccine for *Clarke's Syndrome*? You're on a starship full of engineers! I'll bet I could convince one of them to spend spare time devising an itsy damper. We could even patent it under that name, though you'll have to give me some sort of specifications a bit more comprehensive than *itsy*. Also, there are semi-sol solutions that might help the archaeobacteria resist the

effects of electromagnetism."

"I *might* be able to give you an itsy bit of comprehensive specification for such a thing, but you'll need to give me an itsy bit of time; I'm an exobiologist, not an engineer. And I've tried six different semi-sol solutions, but I'm afraid that drowning the microbes prior to frying them doesn't hasten the process."

"Where did you *find* these touchy creatures in the first place?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"No, go ahead and tell me. I won't infer that you're lying, I promise. You're scary when you're...ah, pretending to be angry."

"Floating atop the muck-cap on a Staff Sergeant's forgotten week-old cup of *katheka*. Please don't be scared of me; it might disturb the archaeobacteria."

"What...made you *look* for such a thing? And *keep* looking? And —"

"Pure, unalleviated boredom that makes the methods I'm currently using to farm microbes for their waste seem exciting. Also, I'm told I'm so importunate when I get my mind set on something that people occasionally consider cutting off my head to get rid of the mind."

"Thanks for the warning. They may, however, have also considered cutting off your head for using words like 'importunate'."

Shrev smiled. "Speaking of *katheka*, I was so concerned about getting here this morning to greet the individual you were sending me, I didn't have any yet. I don't usually get here this early; I usually let Mark escape first. Would you like to join me for some?"

"Sure. I wish I'd known that; I was so concerned about getting here on time, I didn't have breakfast, either."

"Nice to know we're both overly enthusiastic."

T'Dani couldn't help herself; she grinned.

The Ancari were an avianoid people, humanoid only in appearance and not in fact. As was customary, Federation biologists gave this bipedal race a species-classification based on whatever descriptor a people used to refer to themselves, in this case, *h'Ncanoid*. Such descriptors served to box off whatever features a given race possessed that weren't common to all humanoids. The more factors there were which congregated in this box, the less truly humanoid a species was.

Among true humanoids, common factors almost always outweighed uncommon ones by a substantial margin. It was these factors, which linked humanoids, and not specific species-distinguishing traits, that Federation sciences — biological or historical — could

supply no concrete reason for, beyond the supposition, largely mythical but widely accepted as commonsense fact nonetheless, that all of the galaxy's humanoids and part-humanoids hailed from some unknown, and staggeringly well-traveled, common ancestor. Some humanoids, particularly those with blood molecules based on the galactically commonplace iron atom, which lent their skin various pink or red-tinged hues, so closely resembled one another that they were largely indistinguishable.

The Ancari were not one of these races. On average seven feet tall, the Ancari were slender, with finely scaled skin in vivid, patterned hues of blue, violet, and mauve among the males, or orange, tan, and gold among the females. Their beaks had evolved into lipless, horn-lined mouths, but their legs remained avian. Fully proto-feathered from the ankles down — these were at the same level as most humanoid knees, giving a false impression of jointed hips and backward-bending knees — the Ancari possessed three taloned, raptor-like toes as well as three taloned, raptor-like fingers.

They were also entirely resistant to the effects of psionic energy. Incongruously, they were also the Federation race who most effectively and blatantly utilized psionic energy — not for communication, as they were entirely mind-blind, but as a form of

weaponry and as an architectural tool. They possessed psionic auto-regenerative bioneural force field technology, a sort of highly-advanced, solid psionic holography which, in unison with basic gravimetric field technology, allowed them to create any sort of space in which to live and work that they liked. In this way, they could stretch the laws of construction physics enormously, without resorting to advanced engineering skills or the mining of rare earths, which would otherwise be required. Even their spaceborne craft were constructed using this technology, at least in part.

Despite having been a Federation member for over seventy years, the Ancari had no current representatives in Starfleet that Renee knew of. Of course, admission to the Federation didn't mean a race would wish to join the Federation's Star Fleet. Conversely, admission to Starfleet was not based on Federation membership; Renee, for example, had two officers who were Orion.

None of this kept the Ancari Flock Guard who met their shuttle from wishing herself and Seantie a happy Federation Day.

Due to the warped nature of space in general, not to mention the warping effects of space travel and subspace communications, that particular day was a different day on nearly every Federation planet. Also, most planets celebrated two distinct Federation Days — the day the

original Charter went into effect, and the day that the particular planet in question actually joined the Federation. Only six planets and their colonies celebrated both events on the same day.

It's Federation Day Somewhere had long since become a metaphor on all Federation worlds for, *Any Excuse for a Party*.

Of course, this Pet Expo seemed to Renee to be plenty of excuse all on its own.

T'laxo, the Ancari guard assigned to them for the duration of their visit, also offered perplexingly:

"All First Federation peoples will receive a fifty percent discount of this day."

Seantie cast Renee a bemused glance.

Ingram couldn't smother a smile. *First Federation* was a term commonly used by Federation xenoarchaeologists. It described the largely unknown race or races that had created advanced, often technologically incomprehensible civilizations, many billions of years ago. The ruins of those civilizations could be found strewn throughout at least the alpha and beta quadrants of the Milky Way, if not beyond those quadrants. Surmised to have begun their long evolution not long after the formation of the Universe itself, they had left the Milky Way for elsewhere or elsewhen a billion years before the stellar clouds that would

ultimately condense to form an unremarkable little star called *Sol* had existed.

Not even a starship captain or lieutenant, who had some idea of the alarming and apparently endless variety of possibilities that the Universe was capable of serving up, could bring themselves to believe that such beings would be present at a Pet Expo. Of course, neither of them actually thought that this was what T'laxo had meant.

Seventy-plus years' Federation membership notwithstanding, Starfleet translators still found the Ancari language a tough slog. Not only did the guard certainly not mean to say what he'd said (that a discount on sterilized tribbles would be offered to a semi-mythical union of indescribable beings as far advanced beyond the United Federation of planets as that honorable association was advanced beyond a colony of carpenter ants), but he almost certainly had no idea that anybody's Universal translator had rendered it the way it had.

The innately socialistic Ancari simply had no term that equated with the concept *executors of an association*.

Renee had requested a formal guard to whom she and Seantie might turn at need due to the murders that had transpired on Betelgeuse Four, and that request had

been honored. She smiled at T'laxo, half-bowing and blinking exaggeratedly at the male Ancari. Avianoid body language was similar everywhere, and Renee spoke fluent Bird.

"You're buying today, in that case, Captain," Seantie announced cheerfully.

"Humans, of course, will have provenance requirements," T'laxo added hurriedly, returning Renee's greeting. The proportion of bland-aspect humanoids with iron-based blood ran high in the Milky Way Galaxy; iron was a remarkably common element, and such accoutrements as crests, horns, and supernumerary sensory organs were expensive, evolutionarily speaking.

Ingram chuckled. "Vendors might lose some sales over that. They'd lose all of their sales if they pulled such a move on Vulcans!"

"If they tried it with the Tellarites or Andorians, they'd probably want a hospital nearby," the Betazoid science officer added.

"Why would they need do it with those races? Bolians with electronic antennae-wigs, *maybe* that I could believe. Beyond that, who in their right mind would paint themselves blue and don remote-controlled antennae all for a little remuneration? Surely you could *smell* that much body paint! Or just scratch through it. And you'd need...what, surgery to pull off looking like a

Tellarite? *Not* worth half the price of a drathan puppy lig. Of course, most Tellarites would probably consider the DNA request a friendly overture on the part of the salespeople."

Seantie laughed. "And only a starship captain would consider a comment like I just made seriously!"

The Ancari guard offered a sound that Ingram's translator interpreted as laughter. "Should you wish that I always accompany you, or prefer you to remain alone lest you call?"

Renee cast a glance around the busy, crowded ground port. "It looks like the Ancari authorities may have their hands more full than I imagined. May we call you at need?"

T'laxo gave a friendly, affirmative avianoid bob of his upper body. "Or at whim. Please, do enjoy!" he motioned with a garrulous, utterly humanoid sweep of his left arm toward the busy, happy mass of humanoids that went about the business of the Pet Expo below the equally-busy promenade of the transporter terminal building where they stood. Renee smiled at him, and bowed in return.

Chapter Six

T'Dani blinked at Shrev in disbelief. "*Milk?*"

Adult Andorians just didn't drink milk. This part-Andorian had brought to the table a carafe of *katheka* steamed into a frothy mass with it.

He nodded and poured them both some. "Sure. It's great this way! Oh, wait; I guess I should ask you if *you* can drink milk first, shouldn't I? And of course, you don't know my love-cow story."

You had to hand one thing to this inimitable *thaan*; he gave excellent entertainment value. One never knew what he might come up with next. She took one of the cups and sipped from it, thereby answering his first question silently. "You have a... ahm, *love cow* story?"

He smiled, dropped with unstudied grace into a chair, took a sip of his *katheka* latte, and nodded. "Mmmm. You understand, when my uncle's family took me in, they didn't have any way to feed me. So, they bought a... what do you call them? Dwarfs? Yes, a *dwarf* cow."

"Who learned to milk it?" Andorian infants failed to thrive on synthetic formulas, but they were amenable to the natural nursing secretions of almost any other animal, mammal or otherwise. The same was true, if to

lesser extent, of any number of humanoid and semi-humanoid races, and so all Starfleet medical kits contained lactation-triggering drugs, on the off chance that any such infant was found abandoned anywhere. Such drugs could be used by any adult humanoid — all full humanoids and semi-humanoids possessed latent lactation tissues — although they were a serious health risk when used for extended periods.

The practice of including them in medkits had saved a total of fifty-seven lives that T'Dani had heard of. It occurred to her, suddenly, that Shrev might be one of them. She really ought to look up his files, as he'd suggested.

"I'm not clear on that yet. Nobody really wants the credit. They'd keep the cow for about a year, then eat it, then get another. This ended when I was about three, and figured out what they were doing with the cow. Now, I still needed milk," — Andorians typically nursed until they were about five — "but there was no way I was going to let them hurt my *love* cow!"

"You were *three*! What were you going to do about it?"

"As I suspected; you've never seen me throw an *actual* fit. For future reference, you might want to note that I throw them both hard and accurately. Anyway, I was the one who had to take care of the cow from this

point on. She lived until I was ten. It wasn't like I could stop milking her, right?" he toasted T'Dani with his cup and took a sip. His eyes went soft; "Her name was *Bofu-bouf'shola'eeh*."

T'Dani had been drinking her own *katheka* latte. It was delicious, but she had to control the urge to double up laughing — it probably would not be anywhere near as delicious coming out of her nose. *This lovable pink beef-creature just sort of happened. Or, deep feelings for this dysfunctional milk-beast suddenly appeared.* The name was funny on at least those two levels. Three, if you imagined a toddler saying it, which was just plain adorable. Of course, Andorians came out with stuff like this in all earnestness. Which just made some situations even funnier — it was one of the things she adored about them.

The doctor had seen Mel'Taya come into the lounge over Shrev's shoulder. The *chae-na* passed their table just as the part-Andorian came out with the name of his childhood pet. The *Enterprise's* head of security paused mid-stride and fixed Shrev with a bemused look.

"I am so sorry," the *chae-na* murmured; "please forgive my rudeness, but did you...did I just hear you say...ah, the words," the head of security heaved a deep breath and chose the least expressive and most socially-acceptable term for Shrev's childhood pet; "*pink love*

cow?" Mel'Taya didn't laugh. T'Dani had not once, ever, even seen Mel'Taya *smile*. Indeed, the *chae-na* looked vaguely alarmed.

Shrev half-bowed in his seat. "*Thiptho laph aazhcreevil, ce'e. Amor'aanjaeth ov Vraeth'uutr'Shrev Th'raess'Aen-kethKojithi. Imtalas iiphvair amor'neszhuu?*"

Mel'Taya returned the gesture, stiffly. "*Thiptho laph uzhcreeviil, th'aa. Amor'aanjaeth ov...*" Enterprise's Head of Security paused and swallowed, then sighed; "*Shra'tohles'Mel'Taya Ce'na'Levrrix-kethIdrani.*"

The Andorian and the part-Andorian considered one another for several long seconds. T'Dani wondered if perhaps this was a name Mel'Taya had given itself. However, personal experience had taught her that someone saddled with a quadronymic like (*this cold chae-na*) is a hidden fighting waterfall might, in fact, be forced to turn into that very item, even if the nature of the *chae-na* wasn't usually either martial or aloof; they were usually priests and poets, or wandering minstrels, or all three. This one held a post on a starship that wasn't generally occupied by minstrels and priests.

"*Iitizh iiphenen'gair aazhzhuu?*" the friendly exobiologist offered finally.

Mel'Taya replied with a wan smile that made

T'Dani's eyebrows rise; "Certainly." The head of security pulled out a chair and sat down. "I'm sorry that you lost your *zhavey* so young, and there were no others available to nurse you. Assuming, of course, that's why you kept a cow?"

Shrev sighed. "No, my uncle's family never had any children of their own. My birth family was killed when I was less than a month old. I might have been sent into fosterage on Earth if I'd had fewer Andorian features. I was active and noisy like a human baby, or I might not have been found. I could see and hear and move — my *zhev'a* says they didn't know what to make of me half the time! There's a *kelth'liaa* in my uncle's bondgroup regarding how fascinated they were the first time they saw my ears, and how startled they were the first time they changed my diaper."

"Do I want to enquire exactly what about that was startling?" the *chae-na* inquired dryly, confused. Andorian infants were born without genitalia, melanocytes, functional retinas, outer ears, or antennae. These matured as they grew. Andorian babies were utterly helpless until their retinas, ears, and antennae had developed, usually sometime around their first birthday, meaning that they couldn't so much as turn themselves over until they were nearly a year old.

Andorians often said that other humanoids

resembled babies to them because of their lack of antennae — which, like the soubriquet *pinkskin* which they freely applied to pale-skinned, iron-blooded humanoids, could be either a statement of affection or one of derision, depending upon the Andorian in question, considering that ‘pink’ and ‘defective’ were the same word in Andorian; the way one pronounced the word gave the meaning.

Shrev frowned and shook his head at both of them. "They had been expecting a *laath*, I think, not a boy. The story ends *he didn't seem concerned about it, so we weren't, either*. Of course, *that* family story doesn't take into account the sheer volume of grief I gave them fifteen years later. They *did* send me to Earth then, at which point I gave my paternal grandmother grief. Or as my *cha'chi* would call it, *spreading the Shrev around*."

Mel'Taya blinked at Shrev. "Wait. I'm...are you saying you're part *human*?" T'Dani was grateful that the *chae-na* had voiced that question. The exclamation she'd wanted to make would have been far less socially acceptable, even for a doctor. A *laath* was a pre-pubescent *thaan*. A *boy*...definitely, she was going to have to look up Shrev's medical files.

Shrev nodded silently. Mel'Taya's brows and antennae rose — a sign of interest. "I'm being rude, I should get you some *katheka*," Shrev announced,

standing and walking to the replicator.

"How is that possible, doctor?" Mel'Taya inquired softly, then flushed a brilliant sapphire. It was considered impertinent, in Andorian culture, to talk about someone behind their back. If you had a question to ask, or something to say about somebody, it should be said face-to-face. And if people had secrets, that was their affair, not yours — although a favorite pastime among Andorians was trying to figure out somebody's secrets without discussing it with anybody else; then they became your secrets, too.

"It's...well, quite possible using standard trans-humanoid DNA adaptation serum, with...ah, other humanoid inseminators in the group who can provide a chromosome portion. Not all humanoids are able provide the right set, and then you need to use more advanced fertilization techniques. Humans can, Vulcans can — I have a half-Andorian stepsister myself! Of course, she's a *zhen*, but..." T'Dani shook her head. Every half-Andorian the CMO of the *Enterprise* had ever heard of came out to be one of the four primary Andorian sexes. Andorian DNA was exceptionally dominant in expression. A fully male or female hybrid Andorian, as other humanoids understood those terms, seemed as unlikely to the doctor as a half-Andorian *chae-na*. She shrugged off her own skepticism, and

continued; "There are probably others who could, as well —"

"Yes," Shrev himself added, setting down Mel'Taya's milkless *katheka*, apparently not at all concerned that they were talking about him, "there are. I lived with my *cha-chi's* bondgroup because my parents' group was killed by Gorn after they emigrated to Cestus Three. I've wanted a Gorn hide for my altar ever since I was old enough to realize what they'd taken from me."

T'Dani threw him a startled glance. Mel'Taya simply nodded and raised the cup of *katheka* in a toast. "May the day be blessed when you acquire one. So, calling you *thaan* is not —"

"Not anatomically correct, no, but in Andorian there's no closer alternative. My friend Theron faces a similar...mmmm, let's call it a language barrier."

T'Dani frowned and shook her head at Shrev, and Mel'Taya gave a startled bark of laughter. Attempting to express what Shrev had said in any Andorian language would have been both scathingly funny and inexpressibly lewd.

"He is also part human?" Mel'Taya took a careful drink of *katheka*; it was steaming hot.

"Part Tellarite, actually."

Both the *chae-na* and the part-Vulcan doctor winced. Shrev shrugged. "Love is blind, they say."

"Uliiph'maelza'aa uubdo'nyrish vraya
ovdejaath'pouf," Mel'Taya muttered. Literal translation
of the Lesser Andorian; *it also, sadly, possesses a sense
of smell that is defective.*

Shrev and T'Dani both laughed. The head of
security watched the pair with interest.

"So," Shrev said to the *chae-na*, once he'd finished
rubbing the tears of mirth out of his eyes; "I have no
problem with you asking me questions, or talking about
me when I'm not around. And I never will, simply
because I *don't*. If you have a question about me, ask
me; guess-my-secret drives me nuts. May I request
some portion of the same latitude, or shall we end our
association now?"

T'Dani blinked at the half-Andorian's...the word
humans would use was *chutzpah*. Vulcans would call it
z-hich, and they would frown while saying it; it wouldn't
be considered a compliment. The equivalent in
Andorian was a word that spoke of someone both
admirably bold and frighteningly foolhardy — a
noteworthy sort of person to be, in a culture that all but
worshipped boldness and largely refused to believe in
the concept of fear.

Mel'Taya sat back and considered the question for
nearly a minute, while sipping at the *katheka* Shrev had
brought.

"I can leave, if you'd rather, Mel'Taya," T'Dani offered, her eyes on her cup. The *chae-na* regarded the *Enterprise's* CMO with much the same careful thought it had given Shrev's question.

"Not necessary, Doctor. *You*," the head of security focused its lashless, liquid-silver eyes on the half-Andorian, "want to know how it is that a *chae-na* should be in Starfleet?"

"You're very perceptive. I'd imagine it makes you a highly efficient security officer. Yes, I would know how a fecund *chae-na* —"

"Managed to leave Andoria in the first place? You are perceptive as well, Vraeth'uutr'Shrev Th'raess'Aen. As you might recall, there came a time that certain nasty psionic creatures turned their attention toward *Fesoan*. It offered an opportunity. But nobody is particularly happy with me. Having determined to leave, I'm told I won't be welcomed back." Obviously, that was the shortest and sweetest version of Mel'Taya's Adventures in Starfleet. Though affecting a tone of bravado, Mel'Taya's voice had taken on a hollow ring. The *chae-na* turned its eyes and antennae away from its table companions.

"Assuming that you aided *Fesoan* through the period of the Psionic War, I have to say that I consider that reaction unjust on *Fesoan's* part," Shrev offered.

T'Dani remained determinedly silent. It wasn't her place to comment on this; indeed, in most Andorian circles, it wouldn't have been her place to listen. She kept her gaze firmly on her *katheka* cup and pondered the nature of the hybrid man sitting beside her.

Mel'Taya held up one hand, palm outward. "This really isn't a subject I'm comfortable...*debating*, th'...ah..." the *chae-na* offered Shrev an awkward, pained expression; "and I'm not at all certain what to *call* you."

"You can call me *Shrev*," the half-Andorian replied gently. Both he and his antennae leaned toward the head of security, and he smiled; "and regardless of what you or anyone else considers you, Mel'Taya, you can call me *friend*."

I need to just get up and leave, T'Dani thought grimly. *Get up and leave right now*.

It wasn't the first time she'd heard that cold, self-protective voice ring like a bell through her mind. But it was the first time that the voice, and its cagey inspiration, appeared untenable to her, as though she was suddenly saying to herself; *I need to stop breathing*.

The same odd emotion that had struck her when Shrev noted the similarity of her Vulcan name to the *graalen* word *m'danu* laid itself over her sternum like a lead apron. From all indications, neither she, nor it, would be getting up and leaving anytime soon. T'Dani

drained her cup and frowned at the dregs.

Chapter Seven

"If we buy something now, how in the world do we get it back to the ship?" Seantie worried aloud, for the second time.

Renee shrugged. "If the vendors in question don't deliver, I'm thinking we'll just have to purchase aquariums or cages or other habitats for them, and take them back with us in the shuttle," she responded breezily. Her science officer, she'd noticed more than once, had a tendency to agonize over simple or inconsequential things, while facing everything else with typical Betazoid aplomb. She also had a tendency to be so very concerned about what others thought or felt about her that...well; none of it was really Renee's business, and it didn't particularly affect her job performance.

Nevertheless, the captain of the *Enterprise* was certain that some part of Seantie's past hounded her present more than she would admit to anybody, causing the Betazoid to refuse to extend to herself the same leniency she typically bestowed upon everybody else.

It was late afternoon. They'd spent the day touring the Parrot Paradise aviary displays and chatting with Renee's old friends. They would be spending the

evening looking at a number of creatures in which Seantie was interested, as several of them were bioluminescent, and therefore more striking in the dark. It was nearing suppertime; Ingram was trying various forms of Ancari food, and not having much luck.

In a display of just how persistent the individuals preferred for officer status by Starfleet could be, so far she'd tried an Ancarian pudding that tasted to both herself and Seantie like a particularly vile combination of dill pickles, porcini mushrooms, and peanut butter, an Ancari pretzel that she'd realized immediately she'd never be able to chew without requiring extensive dental surgery afterward, and she was now attempting an Ancari apple upon the assumption (an overoptimistic assumption, according to Seantie), that perhaps wholly unprocessed Ancarian food might be more to human taste.

"I guess you're right. I didn't think much about it before booking the cottage. I hope it's okay with the landlord. How's the apple?"

Renee shook her head slowly and forced herself to swallow. "Potato-ey. Raw potato-ey. I think I'll concede defeat now, and we can go to just about any other food booth or restaurant anywhere else and get something to actually eat."

"Klingon?" Seantie teased. Renee raised her

eyebrows at her friend.

"Are you kidding? Their seafood is fabulous, ever try it?"

"Ah. I forgot that you wax poetic about raw fish. Do they serve it while it's still alive?"

"No, you're thinking of the Treva'kney. If they were humanoid and tortured food like that, I doubt they'd have been allowed into the Federation, but apparently the electrochemical balance caused by pain is something they require in their food in order to maintain good health; their religion centers around it. How about some Bolian pasta? Their pestos are incredible. They're one of only three known races in the galaxy who developed the art of cheese making, you know."

As was also true with Betazoid Tifta, most humanoids could digest milk once it had been fermented into cheese, assuming, of course, that the humanoid in question could get their head around the concept of just exactly what cheese was without becoming queasy. The Bolians also excelled in the production of fermented meat products, an equivalently quease-producing concept among many humanoids, though humans rarely had issues with the thought of salami and cheese Panini, which was basically what one would receive if one requested Bolian fermented milk-and-meat *en crouete*.

The Bolian pesto restaurant wasn't terribly busy,

which was a plus. As was usual in Bolian establishments, orders were placed outside the restaurant before the patrons were seated. Renee had never worked out exactly why Bolians did that, but that was one of the interesting things about Bolians in general; it could be puzzling why they did half of what they did in the ways they chose to do it.

A slender young Bolian man with a pug nose and friendly gray-green eyes brought their meal, a trio of pestos: Tamorian sage with Bolian blue cheese, Terran parmesan and basil with garlic, and Denobulan curry leaf with Vulcan redspice and the Bolian equivalent of Gruyere, served alongside various Bolian nut pastas in interesting shapes and colors. Renee helped herself to some soft, puffy pasta pillows and the Tamorian pesto. Seantie filled her dish with long noodles and basil pesto, and they ate in companionable silence for a while. When the chewing and blissful noises at the table began to abate, the science officer resumed conversation:

"I'm interested in Neethian cradlefish, gorzari, and Oorhn. I understand that cradlefish can entirely overwhelm an aquatic environment unless there's a predator that likes cradlefish around, and the Oorhn is a semi-aquatic...oh, sort of like a really tiny newt-alligator, and they eat fish. I'd like to see how those do together. Oorhn can also be kind of cuddly."

Renee tried to imagine a cuddly alligator, a mental challenge that she imagined could only be good for a starship captain and finished her sparkling Rigellian ice wine. It was as sweetly aromatic as the ice wines of Terra, less smoky than the ice wines of Andoria, but with something slightly pungent in the undertone that she couldn't identify, kind of like a spumante with a little habanero kick. "Do you think it's dark enough out to go looking for gorzari yet?"

Betelgeuse had set while the women were eating. The enormous picture windows of the restaurant, a common architectural feature of establishments on this planet, were made out of some transparent-to-translucent substance that didn't seem to Renee to be either glass or transparent aluminum, but was probably composed entirely of bioneural mesh. The great bloated sun sank in pyrotechnic splendor, painting the sky in tones of umber, russet, sienna, bronze, and teal green.

A brooding black mass of splintered cliffs, where lights had flickered on as Betelgeuse set, marked the bustling mass of mostly-humanoid vendors that locals called Expo Town, and it was these that the Starfleet officers headed toward once their meal was finished, at a comfortable strolling pace.

The air became soft with moisture as the first stars appeared, and flying creatures that Renee first mistook

as bats came winging out of crevices in the cliffs to hawk for gnat-like night insects. They weren't bats. Seantie and Renee saw, as they walked through the Expo, that they were great white beetles, somewhere between six inches and a foot long, mottled and spotted with earth tones and possessed of odd neon-yellow, non-compound eyes that one wouldn't expect insects to possess. They must, Renee mused, be attracted to and confused by the lights of Expo Town.

The Expo possessed numerous attractions, which conspired to pull Ingram's attention away from the confused beetles. Nonetheless, her thoughts kept returning to them. She seemed to recall that this planet hosted no insects; it had been the ultimate extinction of insect prey, according to what she'd read about Ancari evolution during the two-week traverse of the Betelgeuse system, that had spurred both the bipedal stance of the non-humanoid Ancari and the development of their sentience.

Renee mentioned this to Seantie as they strolled through the mazelike alleyways formed by the booths and cages and tanks of Expo Town. The Betazoid matron shrugged. "Well, like you say, they're awfully intriguing insects. I'll bet they're part of a display here and managed to work their way loose."

The gorzari booth was located at the southwestern

most inner edge of the Expo, near the brooding cliffs. The booth itself was inside a great black tent. Upon entering, Renee and Seantie found themselves confronted by a glowing, floor-to-ceiling signboard that appeared to be suspended in midair. It took a moment for their eyes to adjust enough to realize that it was a hologram. Once a potential customer they had read it, they would need to walk through it, in order to enter the room whose tank emitted a sweet-sour, only vaguely ocean-like scent that had wafted past Renee and Seantie even before they entered the tent.

Renee read the vividly lettered sign aloud:

"Those who put their hands or other vital appendages into this tank to find out which pet loves them most also risk being stung multiple times. Please remember that not everyone is going to like you, and don't complain to us about it." She turned to Seantie and grinned as they walked through the sign and into a cavernous room that appeared, at first, to be filled with millions of multicolored fireflies. "So, you *can* put an appendage into the tank, so long as it's not vital?"

The Betazoid science officer shook her head. Probably, the captain of the *Enterprise* mused whimsically, she'd also rolled her eyes, but Renee's own eyes hadn't developed clear enough night-vision yet for her to determine that for certain.

The Kemanite Lady manning the gorzari booth apparently got this question a lot. By the time they reached the booth that fronted the tank, they could define the dimensions of the tank itself, and also the fact that the Kemanite was scowling at the cheeky captain of the *Enterprise*.

Kemanites were interesting humanoids, the only ones Ingram knew of who spent half their life female, and the other half male. She smiled at him in a friendly fashion, wondering how long the Kemanite was from Lordship. Possibly not very, the Change did tend to make them cranky, and this Lady was obviously cranky. Probably, it would be kindest not to annoy him, but Renee was in a friendly, teasing mood — whether from the recent Rigellian ice wine, or the less-recent Ancarian potato-apple, she wasn't sure.

The gorzari themselves were tiny creatures, sort of a cross between a cuttlefish and a jellyfish, ranging in length from one centimeter to two inches. They bioluminesced in every color known to humans — and, in those sections of the tank specially-fitted with psionic and long or short-range electromagnetic-enhancement crystals, in colors no human, or most other humanoids, had ever seen or imagined.

"How will I ever decide which to choose?" Seantie agonized, watching the mystically colored aquatic

creatures do whatever it was that mystically colored aquatic creatures did when ensconced in a tank styled by humanoid minds and hands.

"My question would be," Renee replied, "if you do choose some, how will the Lady ever fish them out of the general mass of gorzari for you?"

"Each gorzari has been given reproduction inhibitors." Renee hadn't heard the Kemanite glide up behind them; the gravelly sound of the Lady's voice made her start. "The creatures are relatively long-lived, and the inhibitor will wear off in a year or so. Each injection of inhibitor carries a discrete electromagnetic tag. When you choose your gorzari — or, when *it* chooses *you*, rather — it can be isolated in the tank for removal."

Which really didn't answer Renee's question, but at least the Lady had stopped scowling. "These are beautiful. Can their age be determined by their size?" Seantie asked hem.

The Lady shook hir head. "Indeed not. The gorzari are considered semi-sentient; the differences in their size and color are indicative of different hive-lines in their lineage. If they were determined to be more sentient than they are, I believe we could not trade in them. If you are patient, you will see that each time you come to the tent, certain gorzari will be drawn to you. It is these

gorzari you should choose as companions; they will live happier lives, that way."

Renee drew away from the tank, nearer to the Kemanite.

"How long do they live, generally?" Seantie inquired, moving nearer to the tank. A half-inch long, neon-blue and lilac-pink gorzari with seven tentacles swam approximately level with her nose and appeared to perform a striptease. The Betazoid smiled and tentatively touched her forefinger to the tank. The little creature flared pale aquagreen for a moment, then continued its mesmerizing dance.

"These are all between ten and twenty years old — adolescents, in the main. Their life spans approximate humanoid life spans. I need to tell you that, if you wish to purchase gorzari, you will also need to purchase a specialized tank. PinkBluegreen is the one visiting you. We call them of the clan pink, of various iterations of hives blue, with green- luminescing tendencies that show emotion. It seems to like you."

"How can you tell males from females?" Seantie quizzed, drawing her finger down the tank diagonally. PinkBluegreen followed.

"Not all creatures are dual-gendered, lady."

Renee tapped the curly-haired Betazoid gently on the shoulder, and Seantie turned to face her. "This

sounds like a process that ought to take a while, particularly if these creatures are semi-sentient. You don't want to cause them harm. Oh, and," she turned to the Kemanite Lady, "I'm not certain I want to purchase, much less bond with, any of these creatures. Were I to come with my friend and visit, and inadvertently attract their attentions, would it cause them pain or injury if I didn't subsequently take them with me?"

The Lady blinked. "It is not often that people show sensitivity toward the gorzari." Hir tone implied that shehe was touched by this show of basic consideration.

Renee shrugged and frowned. "Well, you did say they were semi-sentient."

"That does not make them like we," the Kemanite hedged. "If that was so, as I said, we could not possibly sell them. Federation law forbids this."

"Just because a creature's not like you or me doesn't mean it hasn't got feelings. I'd have the same concern when dealing with certain birds. In any case, I don't want to cause the gorzari grief."

"Some believe that the creatures do grieve, but it causes them no lasting harm. Indeed, I have known grief as well," the Kemanite smiled, showing hir teeth — delicately carved and decorated, in Kemanite style, "and have come to no lasting harm, but have gained knowledge."

Renee smiled in return. "Good point."

"Also, I thought we weren't going to go anywhere alone," Seantie added. She was squatting down, so close to the tank that her nose nearly touched it, partly cross-eyed watching PinkBluegreen. A chartreuse and scarlet gorzari, no bigger than the tip of Renee's little finger, had joined PinkBluegreen. This one (Renee wondered what its name was — RedPurpleorange, perhaps) didn't dance, but darted about at random, like a flamboyantly-colored electron. "Are the gorzari attracted to humanoids by the way they look, or does something else attract them?"

The Lady shook hir head. "They do not perceive any part of the electromagnetic spectrum —"

Renee frowned. "Then why do they bioluminesce?"

"Ah. We do not possess the proper equipment here, as it would be an expense that would not be borne by those only wishing pretty pets, but the bioluminescence is truly a byproduct. These creatures are..." the Kemanites brow furrowed spectacularly, "what are the terms I need? They are in some process of evolving higher brain processes that may someday communicate outside the color spectrum."

"You're saying that the bioluminescence they produce is a sign of primitive emergent psionic capacity?" Renee replied, astounded. "Seantie, we

should have some of these on the ship to study."

Voss smiled. "I thought you'd be interested in them. Do you think Colin could communicate with them?"

A draft passed through the tent. Instinctively, all three humanoids turned to look at the entrance. The flap didn't move. The Kemanite frowned and tilted his head back slightly, scenting the air, whose fragrance had changed, spiked with a metallic scent that lingered.

A chill slid up Renee's spine, and she shivered. "Is there another entrance to the tent?"

"Indeed no. We took this spot that we might attach the barrier directly to the fabric of the rock. It is very finely-woven black-polarized tritanium mesh; it is not necessary even to leave it guarded."

Ingram offered Seantie a narrow look. "I take it these creatures are expensive?"

Voss sighed. "More than the teacup sehlat, actually."

The captain of the *Enterprise* shrugged. "I'm thinking you might want to have them guarded tonight," Renee suggested to the Lady. "And I still definitely think we should take some to study, although," Renee smiled thinly, "depending on what we find out about their level of emergent sentience, you might not be able to sell them anymore."

"Many people have studied these on their planet of

origin," the Kemanite averred. Again, Renee shrugged.

"I'll bet they didn't do it using Starfleet technology and the best telepath in the Federation. I should explain; I'm Renee Ingram, Captain of the Starship *Enterprise*."

The Kemanite regarded her expressionlessly. "We do reserve the right to refuse transactions."

"Of course you do. I should also explain; I can shut you down. I really don't want to do that, but let me ask you; if these things could be considered people, would you really want to continue selling them?"

The Kemanite cast a disbelieving look at the gorzari in the tank. "How could something like those be considered *people*?"

"It's a matter of sentience, not of arms and legs, Lady. Tell me; what instrumentation have the people who've studied these used, in order to determine sentience or non-sentience?"

"I do not know. I only know that some consider them..." s/he frowned, "what is the term? Emergent?"

"Emergent *is* sentience, Lady. An emergent creature behaves intelligently, and may even have a culture, though it may not communicate in any way we're aware of. Most large primates on most planets are considered emergent and are given sentient protections. Sentience doesn't have a level, at least not as far as the Federation's Star Fleet is concerned. That's way too slippery a slope,

since it tends to relegate the weak, the brain damaged, the old, and the young into the realm of..." Renee smiled; she did not mean it as a friendly expression, "*pets*."

Of course, there were also those who went so far with this line of thought that they relegated the concept of possessing any animal of any kind as a companion to be an unethical act. Such easily redrawn boundaries formed one of the great conundrums native to ethics. Renee and Seantie took their leave of the poor flustered Lady before the Kemanite physically tossed them out of the gorzari tent; probably, by the time Seantie returned to claim her tiny tentacled companions along with some test subjects for the *Enterprise*, the Lady would have reached Lordship, and be far less touchy.

Chapter Eight

"Look!" Renee announced in delight as she and Seantie strolled through the Expo, taking a long and winding route through the fascinating place, back toward the cottage they had rented for their half-shoreleave. "A Circassian cat!"

Circassia was the homeworld of the Caitians, and the creature to which Renee was referring only superficially resembled a cat. It was, in fact, a very small, flesh-eating mughatoid lemur, with wide eyes in a delicate face that sported pointed simian ears which, had they not been tufted with fur like a lynx's, would have shouted out the relationship between mughatoid lemurs and Vulcanoid people, to which Caitians themselves were considered to be distantly related.

The non-felinoid 'cat' was a remarkably furry creature, having evolved in an environment colder than most primates could tolerate. Highly social, the beautiful animals possessed thick, silky, white to off-white fur brindled and spotted in various colors. Like their sentient Caitian cousins, Circassian cats required snow-and-ice baths to keep their coats in condition.

Commonly kept as pets on Circassia, Rigel Ten, and Andor, Circassian cats were elsewhere found only as the

heavily pampered pets of those able to afford the proper resources to care for them. Highly social and high-strung, they required either groups of others of their kind, nearly constant interaction with other domesticated animals, or the constant presence of whatever sentient individual kept them. They required fresh, live food that met very particular nutritional standards, and access to a true glacial environment for at least six Terran hours every day — more, if they were to breed. Like true felinoids, Circassian mughatoids possessed retractable claws, although, unlike most mughatoids, they lacked all traces of both flexible-carapace biology, and poison sacs beneath their jaws and claws.

This one was obviously humanoid raised. Seantie had been gaping at the garishly costumed woman pushing an exquisite antique stroller composed of actual neon-pink plastic and what was almost certainly retooled black aluminum for at least eight seconds before Renee brought her attention to the creature in the stroller.

The woman's pet wore a miniature version of the same outfit its owner sported, a glimmering black bodysuit parti-colored bright pink, the black side heavily studded with what appeared to be perfectly-replicated Vegan iron-oxide diamonds, the pink side studded with Terran coal-black ones. Heavily faceted, all the diamonds glittered and sparked in the nighttime lighting

of Expo Town.

Over the woman's bodysuit flounced a fluffy black tutu studded with flashing pink lights. Atop her head, a hot-pink porkpie hat, also studded with black diamonds, was tilted at a jaunty angle. Gleaming six-inch stiletto heels tooled in pink and black diamond patterns clicked and squeaked against the rocky ground, as though their soles had been designed for tap-dancing.

Mercifully, those shoes hadn't been replicated for the animal. Renee wondered aloud how it was that the woman had trained her pet to remain in the stroller. In general, Circassian cats liked to lounge on the shoulders of their keepers.

"A getup like that, and what you notice is the cat?" Seantie inquired dryly, pulling out her tricorder. Renee laughed and took the other woman's free arm as they strolled past a Melvanian glowworm exhibit set artistically into a natural nook of the cliff face, below and slightly behind the gorzari exhibit.

These fascinating little creatures were relatively large, fuzzy caterpillars. The tips of each filament of fuzz they possessed glowed a different color. According to the signs that surrounded the exhibit, the glowworms lived as caterpillars for approximately three Terran years, before making themselves cocoons from bits of bark, twigs, leaves, and their own fuzz, which turned

into a sticky, plaster-like substance as the creature constructed its cocoon. Three Terran years later, they would hatch into dragonfly-like insects, whose wing veins glowed in many colors. The adult forms lived for thirty Terran years, and in the right conditions, bred many generations of other glowworms, one caterpillar at a time.

"I had a friend, when I was on the *Victory*, who had a Circassian cat. His name was Yakov Mellison. He was the protocol officer. I guess he'd be about fifty-eight now, a striking man with dark bronze skin and green eyes, who —"

"Like Yaelat?"

"Not exactly. Yaelat's a relatively big guy; Yakov was slender and not quite as tall as me. And he's human. Anyway, he constantly expected a Circassian cat to *act* like a cat, and —"

"They're not?" Seantie looked up from her tricorder. Even at night, the Expo was so crowded that the logical way to wend through it was using the mapping system of one of the handy Starfleet multi-purpose tools, which could perform any computer capacity available on a 'padd, could fulfill the same functions as a communicator, and had the ability to analyze environmental conditions, including the chemical structures of items directly in contact with its screen.

"Not at all; they're little apes. So, one-time Yakov's pet got into my quarters, and started playing with my birds. When Yakov learned it had gotten into my quarters, he was beside himself; he came to get me before checking to see what the creature was doing. He was certain we were going to come into a room full of feathers and blood, and he had me convinced of it, too. We go running in, and what do we see? It had let all the birds out of their cages, and was ruffling their feathers with the tips of its fingers when they landed on its head, like a child might.

"Yakov was a good friend," Ingram finished, with a smile; "I miss him. I can't find anybody else who likes to play three-dimensional chess as much as he did." She'd tried to interest John Harriman in it, once, enough to help him determine that he didn't like it.

"I thought you played with Colin?"

Renee laughed. "Sure; and with telepathic dampers on both of us, he *still* knows my moves before I do! Of course," she added, "I could also simply assume that I'm just not that skilled a player. I never could win against Yakov, either."

Chapter Nine

"We need specialized tanks for gorzari," Seantie explained to the cage maker.

Hairless, with exquisitely pale skin and a gnarled intercranial ridge that showcased every emotion through blanching or flushing with iron/manganese-covalent blood, the female Algolian entered that requirement into the specialized 'padd she held. The result it gave her caused her temples and jaw line to blush slightly. She projected the specs required onto a holographic emitter set into the wall behind her. The sort of cage Seantie would need popped up in midair between them. A number of its constituents flashed in red, and the cage maker motioned at these.

"This is a form of containment system that requires psionic or neurogenic modifications," the Algolian explained. She was wearing a frilly fucschia headband and blouse that almost exactly matched the delicate tracery of arteries in the skin of her face and complimented the pale blue of her eyes. Seantie smiled at her.

She responded with the wide-eyed stare that was common to Algolians in a friendly or neutral mood. Squinting would have suggested that she was either

upset or excited. To determine anything further about what an Algolian was feeling necessitated asking them outright; in general, only other Algolians were capable of interpreting the flushing and blanching of various areas of Algolian heads and faces that signified specific emotional states.

"Is that something you're capable of doing here?" the Betazoid quizzed.

Now the Algolian woman's intercranial ridge blanched. "Indeed not. We can, of course, build the basic cage, including filters and emitters, but for the psionic or neurogenic interfaces required, you'll need to find an Ancari cage maker."

"I see. And where would they be located?"

"They don't advertise. If you are acquainted with any Ancari, that would be the person to ask regarding —"

The Betazoid woman shook her head and held up one hand. "Wait. I'm confused. Surely you've had requests for gorzari cages before this?"

The Algolian nodded serenely. "Over a hundred. Also, we have had many requests for specialized tribble cages, for keeping the reproductively modified hybrids. Though the Ancari also specialize in tribble cages, you need to understand that the Ancari don't like offworlders to know how their..." she paused and actually frowned;

Seantie had never seen that particular expression on an Algolian face before. She flushed a deep mauve pink, but her intercranial ridge flushed even paler. "What do they call them? Oh, yes; their psionic and neurogenic multiphasic building methods.

"What I meant to say was; the Ancari don't like to share this technology with anyone else. An offworlder has to demonstrate a real need for it, and in the Ancari mindset, such a message needs to be carried by another Ancari, since an offworlder can't really comprehend what it is that they're asking for." The Algolian returned her attention to the 'padd, to prepare a cage-specification chip for Seantie to present to whatever Ancari individual she approached to request the aid of.

Seantie forced herself not to roll her eyes at the woman. It wasn't the cage maker's fault that the Ancari maintained such a parochial attitude. That sentient beings maintained such thoughts about one another — *unless they're like us, they certainly can't comprehend why we do what we do!* — irritated her more than a little. She knew just how often such attitudes bred intolerance and bigotry, or worse, and stood in the way of progress and unity.

"Would you, at least, have a list of Ancari individuals who'd be willing to help me either find or create what it is I'm looking for?" the Betazoid asked

hopefully.

"Certainly; I've appended that information." The Algolian handed Voss the tiny drive chip. Seantie unholstered her tricorder and scanned the minute data storage device; the tricorder responded by helpfully reformatting its temporary drive into a style that could interface with the chip.

Renee strolled toward the outdoor cafe where she, Seantie, and T'laxo had planned an early breakfast. Mist wove veils around the delicately sculpted blue-green algae lanterns that lit the way through the cafe's extensive, shadowy courtyard; it was close to the cliff-face, and wouldn't be sunlit until sometime after the noon meal. All of the blue and green glass-topped tables and filigreed chairs were empty, save for one.

Renee gaped, then closed her mouth and shook her head hard, as though to banish a fever dream. What was that old saying? *Speak of the Devil...*

And he shall appear. "*Yakov? Yakov Mellison?*"

He stood and blinked back at her with the same look on his face that she imagined must be on hers. "Why, it's Renee Ingram!"

She laughed and hugged him. He seemed more surprised than she was, which was probably to be expected; she had, after all, been talking about him not

twelve hours earlier. "Did you just get here?" she asked, releasing him before she squeezed the breath out of him. A strong woman, she hugged (more than one person had admitted to her) like a bear. Colin was the sole appreciator of that fact.

"I've been here for quite some time." He resumed his seat, and Renee sat down next to him.

"Are you enjoying the Expo?" the captain of the *Enterprise* motioned at the Tamarian waitress inside the building, without success; the inner area was better lit than the courtyard. The waitress wouldn't notice they were there until some sensor or other let her know.

"It's getting better all the time. Are you enjoying the Expo?"

"Quite a lot, so far. You changed the color of your hair!"

"Did I? What color should it be?" he asked earnestly, a slightly alarmed expression on his face.

Renee laughed. "Are you still on the *Victory*?"

He returned her smile. "No. I'm here." He looked into her eyes intently, and for a moment, she thought she felt his mind brush hers.

The sensation was nothing like the presence of Colin's psionic signature; in fact, the experience was so odd that she was disoriented for a moment. She reached out to try and ground herself using her psionic lover's

mind — neither the *Cairo* nor the *Enterprise* were all that far away from the Betelgeuse system — but he was asleep, his consciousness tucked away from hers within whatever phantasmagoria his dreams had fashioned for him. She swayed in her chair, lifting a hand to her face.

Yakov reached out to take Ingram's other hand.

"Renee! Have you seen T'laxo yet this morning?"

Seantie's voice resonating through the otherwise-deserted courtyard pulled Renee out of the strange reverie she'd fallen into, and Yakov withdrew his hand. Ingram drew a deep breath of the cool, foggy air and attempted to summon the waitress again; obviously, she was a great deal hungrier than she'd first thought this morning. This time, the woman responded, picking up a variety of compadds to take to the table. "T'laxo? No. No, not yet. But remember the conversation we were having about my old friend Yakov last night? *This* is Yakov! Yakov Mellison, this is Seantie Voss, senior science officer on the *Enterprise*."

The Betazoid reached out to shake Yakov's hand, but the waitress and her menus interrupted the motion. "It's good to meet you, Yakov." Seantie sat down and spread the napkin the waitress proffered along with the menus over her lap. "I'm going to need T'laxo's help in getting these gorzari cages made. Apparently, making them requires some sort of top-secret Ancari technology."

Yakov nodded at Seantie and returned her smile, then applied himself to his menu. Renee offered the Betazoid matron a pawky look.

"Top secret technology, huh?"

The left side of Seantie's mouth quirked upward in a gesture of annoyance. "Something that can only be obtained from an Ancari cagemaker by reference from another Ancari. What a bother!" Seantie sighed and switched on her menu. Renee did the same, not sure quite what to make of Seantie's irritation.

This was a restaurant in which one could order anything that was wanted; if the request was beyond the restaurant's stock or ability, the compadd would tell the diner so, and encourage the diner to make another choice. On a planet, that was the sign of a restaurant whose food was wholly fresh, and usually locally obtained from an abundant, or at least consistent, source.

When aboard ship or in a space station, the same was the sign of a restaurant whose food was wholly replicated. In space, fresh food was usually anything but abundant. When fresh food was available on a ship or space station, it was always prepared by professional chefs and offered as the only fresh dish of the day, usually at a captain or commander's table to visiting dignitaries. Renee was something of an expert in that field; she'd spent a few years at her mother's side as a

teenager, serving Sheryl Ingram's incomparable food to alien dignitaries.

Again, the odd dizziness filled Renee's head. She rubbed quickly at her eyes, hoping she wasn't coming down with something. When she looked up, Yakov was gazing at her intently. "I'm all right," she offered, "just hungry." Though, to be honest, she suddenly felt as though she'd contracted the flu. She excused herself and went to the ladies' room, where from the Starfleet mini-medkit she carried, she dosed herself with a broad-spectrum antigen. Taken within about seventy Terran Standard hours of contracting pretty much anything, that antigen should take care of the problem.

By the time she'd returned to the table, T'laxo had arrived. "Good morning, Captain," the Ancari guard chirped, standing to greet her. "I see you have met a friend here."

"Yes. This is Yakov Mellison, an old crewmate of mine." Renee resumed her seat and smiled at Yakov fondly; "It's the oddest thing, because I was just telling Seantie yesterday evening about the Circassian cat you owned years ago. Whatever was her name, Yakov? I can't remember, for some reason."

"Mipidu," Yakov replied, smiling himself. "Her name *is* Mipidu. Circassian cats live for an average of fifty years, you'll recall. And I am *not* so old."

Renee chuckled. "Oh, yes, that's right." *Mipidu* was Denobulan for *you must be kidding*, which had been Yakov's reaction when he'd first learned what sorts of complex living requirements the new 'kitten' he'd acquired would need. Yakov'd had a Denobulan lover then. "Do you have Mipi here with you?"

"No, I'd need the room and power outlay of a much bigger ship than a civilian transport in order to bring her habitat with me, but I did come in order to see if I couldn't find her a companion. It's important, don't you think? A companion?"

"Oh, that's right," Seantie interjected. "Speaking of habitats, T'laxo, can I ask you a favor?"

"You may ask." The avianoid guard bowed to Seantie from his seat and offered her a series of nods. The Betazoid woman threw Renee a startled glance.

Ingram nodded to the guard in return. She was feeling better, but the odd, drifty feeling that was, she assumed, the aftereffects of the antigen remained. She determined to ignore it. "Thank you, T'laxo. Why don't you go with him after breakfast, Seantie? You can show him what you need, and even visit your gorzari."

"I thought...you didn't want us to go anywhere alone?"

Renee smiled at Seantie. "T'laxo, you just said you're willing to help Seantie, yes?"

Again, the guard bowed and nodded. "Yes, I did that. Whatever it is that you may need, if I can, I will help you. There have been no..." if the Ancari could, Renee thought, he would have frowned; "no sorts of emergencies. Lately. We are at the disposal of visitors and vendors, so."

"You won't be alone, Lieutenant," Renee turned to Yakov and laid a friendly hand on his forearm. "And neither will I. We can meet back at the cabin when you're finished. Yakov," Ingram turned to her friend, who smiled at her, "do you think there's a chess set in this Expo somewhere?"

Yakov smiled and was about to reply just as the waitress appeared. "What may I get for you?" the Tamarian asked, courteously. Seantie began to reply, but Renee raised a restraining hand.

"First, tell me; this cafe doesn't include Ancari foodstuffs among its comestibles, does it?"

T'laxo made a clucking sound that Ingram's Universal translator turned into a sardonic laugh. Apparently, Renee wasn't the only person currently visiting the Expo unable to either stomach or chew his people's victuals.

Chapter Ten

Renee and Yakov had toured parts of the Expo grounds, then retired to the cozy little cabin that the two Starfleet officers had booked for their shoreleave, to eat a leisurely late lunch and engage in a game of three-dimensional chess. Partway through the game, Ingram shook her head at the board, and announced:

"I now know that I need to simply accept the conclusion that I'm *lousy* at this game." She reached out and hesitantly blocked his prime queen with her sub-knight. As she did so, he reached through the board and took her fingers in his own tenderly. Assuming that he was just trying to be friendly or kind — she was pretty damned sure Yakov had never had much inherent interest in women — she tried hard not to flinch away or fix him with a shocked look.

"I think you're perfect just the way you are. It's difficult for me to express how very much I've missed our friendship," he said softly.

Renee smoothly extracted her hand and tried to pretend that she couldn't hear the almost subliminal tone underlying his words. Though she couldn't have defined that tone if someone had held a phaser rifle to her head, it was a tone that no female in the galaxy could mistake,

when used by an interested, capable male either toward them, or toward another female. Words notwithstanding, if that tone was missing, the interest (and the ability to act on it) was feigned.

Coming from Yakov Mellison, it was an abrupt surprise. "It's definitely nice to have a chess partner who doesn't know your next moves before you make them," she replied, hearing in her own voice the subliminal female responding tone of *no, I'm not interested, thanks*.

"I would like it *very* much if my time with you this evening didn't have to end," he pressed more than a little suggestively, with an accompanying gaze that was distinctly heterosexual — and to which she gave free rein to both the flinch and the shocked look. She was going to have to lie, but she refused to wedge either the word *sorry* or the word *afraid* into the flat sentence she uttered next.

"I'm in a committed relationship, Yakov," she said, not wanting to use a conciliatory tone, which might simply encourage him.

The manifestation of Colin — the soft golden glow that sometimes sat at the back of her mind, which occasionally would cause her to look behind herself, expecting to see a light shining there — expanded into a full mental presence when he felt the sudden sharpness of her surprise and dismay. An almost nauseating

admixture of alarm, jealousy, and anger swept in to join her own distress.

Who *is this person?*

The *Cairo* was about two parsecs away, close enough that the powerful psion could interact, but otherwise so impossibly far away that Colin's experience of the situation was like that of someone watching a horror movie on an ancient television — separated from the source of his own consternation by a medium through which he could never literally reach.

Yakov was still talking and smiling his sweet smile. Renee shook herself mentally and brought her attention back to what it was he was saying, "...and was afraid you would say that. I thought..." he shook his head sadly; "I thought that, maybe, a woman married to a starship might like company with a heartbeat, now and then."

Renee stood up and backed away slightly. Yakov stood and walked toward her. Instinctively, the captain of the *Enterprise* analyzed his stance and conformation. Mellison possessed neither the carriage nor the requisite bulk in his shoulders and upper back that would have meant that the little man was more powerful and more agile than a very strong woman, which Renee Ingram was. Nonetheless, some nameless horror warned her away (probably Colin's, she thought wryly).

Again, she had to mentally keep herself from

beginning her sentence with *sorry* or *afraid*; was that nasty female urge genetic, or learned? She'd have to find that out, and soon. "I've never had any intention of turning our friendship into any sort of romantic relationship, Yakov. I was having a very nice time, but I'm not interested in anything more than friendship with you. Is that satisfactory, or would you rather leave now?" the words were clipped, and colder than she might have made them once.

Mellison moved closer, hesitantly. "I *do* want to be your friend. Forgive me?" he reached tentatively for her hand again. The same almost irresistible impetus that made her want to say — or maybe to *be* — *sorry* and *afraid* to his propositions made her reach back before she could control the impulse.

Don't let him touch you! Colin snarled, far away and in her head all at once — a command born of pure jealousy, Renee imagined, which made her blink out of the odd reverie that Yakov's soothing voice had seemed to put her into, and realize that he'd already taken her hand.

He did not release it when she tried to draw it back; instead, a sensation like the multiple stings of an enraged wasp shot through her hand where he had grasped her, flowing up her arm and seemingly straight into her heart. She tried to jerk away, but it was as though some strong

thread had sewn their hands together. Ingram drew a gasping breath in preparation for a scream, but the outrage and terror — the *afraid* and the *sorry* — died somewhere between her lungs and her throat.

Colin's warning, she realized as her consciousness narrowed to a pinprick, hadn't been jealousy after all. The artificially bred and force-grown man had only been alive for a handful of years, but he possessed an ancient and powerful psionic crystal in his body, and this being had intuited to him that something about Mellison was odd. Colin had merely been unable to pin descriptive terms on the sensation of foreboding he had felt.

Whatever chemical the deep, painful stings had injected into her flesh numbed her mind, seeming to tear the psionic spectrum out of the very air. The empathic presence of Colin was altogether erased from her perception, followed by part of the electromagnetic spectrum, to which the psionic spectrum was indeterminately linked. For a moment, the light of the fire burning in the decorative grate at the rear of the room seemed to writhe and twist around her, losing all its color and snapping sparks in black and white, remaking the dimensions of the room.

Still she tried to pull away; still she was attached, and with her next fruitless pull he came toward her, ripping his hand free of her own. The raw pain of it

made the whirling of the room worse, darkness and a hot buzzing in her ears bringing momentary unconsciousness in their wake, and she forgot entirely where she was and who she was with.

When she came to her senses, more or less, she was lying near the fire in Colin's arms. Utterly confused, she opened her mouth to frame a question — for some odd reason, he couldn't hear what she was thinking or feeling even though they were touching, as if maybe he had some kind of telepathic flu that had stuffed his head up.

The thought made her giggle involuntarily. She felt as if she'd just downed several bottles of wine very quickly, though trying to remember exactly when she might have done that confused her as badly as trying to work out how it was that Colin had suddenly appeared. She smiled up at him. She shouldn't be in this sort of position with him at the moment, but she couldn't for the life of her remember why. It really didn't matter. She reached up to touch his face and twine a lock of his wavy auburn hair around a fingertip.

"Everything will be just fine now," he smiled back at her, stroking her face gently. His voice...something about his voice was wrong. He leaned down to kiss her. She didn't attempt to break the kiss, but became more and more baffled as it went on.

Colin didn't kiss her this way — it was almost as if

he was miming the way he'd been told a kiss should be carried out, and was performing the mime on an inanimate object, as though she wasn't really there at all. Or, more accurately, it was the way most humanoids who kissed performed the function, since most humanoids were neither telepaths nor empaths. Empathic touch should have run in both directions between them, making them able to feel both the other person's kiss, and their own simultaneously. This effect caused intimate psionic touch to be a perfect ecstasy, but this...this wasn't it.

Whatever it was that sang like drunkenness in her blood, it was trying to mesh her memory of the way Colin had once kissed her with the way he was kissing her now — and much like trying to mesh gold with plastic, it wasn't working particularly well. His mind... (trying to reason was like trying to swim through molasses) ...she could not feel the touch...the knowledge...the *reality* of his mind. *Her lover was not actually there.*

This wasn't Colin. This was some sort of...Colin mannequin. The thought made her giggle against his usually sensuous mouth. *What did I drink to cause this?* she wondered muzzily. Yet another horrid female instinct/urge; *if something is wrong in an intimate situation, it must be my fault.*

She got neither a response nor any form of telepathic signature from the man sloppily kissing his way down her neck, unbuttoning her blouse as he went. His touch gave her chills, but not pleasant ones. She shrugged him away and put a hand against his chest to keep him away so she could look up into his face. A combination of impatience and literal hunger crossed his features, and for the briefest of moments, the play of firelight across his face made him seem predatory, his narrowed eyes flashing a shade back at the flames that no human eye had ever possessed. She shook her head, trying to clear it.

"I can't feel what I feel...I mean...what you feel I feel..." she swallowed the rest of what was stumbling out of her mouth, too many pronouns crowding into her mind at once.

"What the hell are you talking —" he began.

"*Captain!*" The cry was muffled almost to nothing against the thick door. The sound of pounding was not. Colin jerked a look at the door, then lifted Renee bodily from the floor by the belt around her waist with a single jerk of one wrist — a horrible show of careless strength several magnitudes beyond what even a Vulcan man of Colin's size might possess, accompanied by an icy indifference to her cry of surprise and pain.

She struggled against him fruitlessly, and he slapped

his hand over her forehead. Now she remembered the agonizing stinging sensation, because it occurred again — seemed to occur, this time, directly into her brain. The sound of multiphasic weaponry dismantling the multiphasic room was the last thing she heard before lapsing into unconsciousness.

Chapter Eleven

Before the part-force field, part medical-analyzer gave up its information on the hexagonal silvery screen that was somehow part of it — Seantie didn't fully understand how the Ancari produced their psionic architecture, only that its production made her feel anxious and gave her a headache — the Starfleet science officer and the Ancari flock guard stood outside the detention cell that the impromptu force field-analyzer produced, and argued.

"You could have killed Captain Ingram!" this had been Seantie's rallying cry ever since the Ancari had swept the living room of the little cabin she and Renee had booked for the time they'd be on Betelgeuse four with its weapon. The memory of the sound that weapon produced still screamed and grated in the Betazoid's head, like some enormous rusty hinge.

T'laxo drew a deep breath and whistled it out melodically. If the whistle was language, Voss' Universal Translator did not deign to interpret it for her. "This thing is not humanoid. The setting on my weapon would have turned a humanoid to protoplasm —"

"Exactly my point!" Renee was currently in the

hospital to which this impromptu prison had been appended. She hadn't been hospitalized, however, because of T'laxo's weapon. Whoever or whatever the person in the bizarre Ancari analysis-cell turned out to be, something that person had done before Seantie had received Colin's terrified, enraged call for help — sent not via Starfleet subspace channels, but directly into the empathic Betazoid's mind, something that the intimidating psion had only ever done once before — had driven the captain of the *Enterprise* mad.

It had been nearly seven hours since Seantie had admitted her to the psychological ward of the Ancari hospital, and T'laxo had begun assembling a cell out of thin air around the now-comatose person who had attacked her. Ingram's schizophrenic symptoms showed no sign of abating anytime soon. It had seemed to Seantie that the Ancari hospital had an unusually broad mixture of humanoids in it, but worry and fear caused her to dismiss the thought out of hand; of course it had lots of different humanoid races in it, lots of different sentient species were here for the Pet Expo.

T'laxo replied to Seantie's shrill accusation with the exquisite patience of Ancari-kind. "But no, this weapon I used tracks an attacker's biometrics. Not a victim's, you see? It locked on very vigorous; I would be guessing that there's some sort of *n'gyet avarrilly...*" it

took Seantie's translator several seconds to come up with *biological psychoprojective sphere* "...around it. So thus, it appears human, and I'm not sure how to make the field be not there — to kill it, probably, would do."

Seantie blinked at the avianoid policeman, nonplussed. "It seems to me that you make a great number of assumptions." The Ancari people unsettled her; unable to read the emotional states of the mind-blind avianoids, their monotone, and decidedly trying, conversational style left her stymied as to the veracity of what the brightly-plumaged male was saying.

The guard considered the Betazoid woman impassively from behind the bony, immobile, finely scaled carapace that constituted the majority of its face. "My belief respecting the psychoprojection comes truly, from awareness that the field now containing the creature is a thing similar to what the creature itself carries.

"This is secret, Lieutenant; Ancari weapons calibrate to detect psychoprojection, and they become formidable in its presence, because to stun any creature that psychoprotects itself is challenging, and to kill one near to unachievable. Ionic and positronic psychoprojective force fields are the basis of all Ancari equipment. They and bioneural mesh engineering constitute much of what you perceive as architecture on my world.

"Would you think it to be postulation if I say that this thing we have captured is what has slain offworlders on my planet, to be also an assumption? I would not, but my people reason in different ways than humanoids, as language translation depicts."

Seantie sighed and held up her hands, palm outward. Apparently, what the Ancari was getting at was that its weapon couldn't have hurt Renee. "Okay, fine; I apologize. I wasn't aware of the basis of your technologies, or the way your weapons work."

The Ancari shrugged again. "It is no bother. We are different, you and I. That thing, though," he motioned with one taloned hand toward the comatose man splayed on the unusual force field's floor, "is, I think, so much different that we both will have a difficulty comprehending it, should its shield prove penetrable. And Ancari share information about our technologies with no one — the fact that you observe it now proves circumstance severity. Your Section 31 has studied this, but that is all very secret from Federation eyes, and so we are told it shall remain, far and long."

The Betazoid opened her mouth to reply, when the analyzer-wall finally announced the production of non-invasive analytical results with a soft chirp. As she was standing closest to the screen, she peered at it, noted that the script that it was scrolling through its findings in was

utterly incomprehensible, and motioned T'laxo toward it instead. "What does it say?"

The Ancari peered at the screen himself for a march of seconds, manipulating the data by stroking the screen, and making soft cooing noises that Seantie's translator rendered into sounds of combined astonishment and dismay:

"This says of which I knew I feared. The thing is no humanoid. Its blood analysis gives back a nucleoid-hexavalent, lanthanide-bound dual chromium-titanium example. The DNA within its body cells is partially bonded with several different subtypes of RNA, producing a semi-octagonal helix with powerful antigen capability.

"What should pass in other creatures as immune cells is a complex protein peptide, encased by multiple aromatic ring-molecules. Or this says..." T'laxo shook his head and snapped his beak, his eyes flashing; "some sort of hallucinogenic venom. This is sequestered in chambered chitin sacs in the unknown body over which the creature psychoprojects. What it appears is not at all what it is, you see?"

Seantie listened to the Ancari's translation of the data on the wall screen with a mounting horror that made her skin clammy. "What *is* it?" she breathed huskily.

Her words were all but overridden by Colin's. His

approach had been otherwise largely silent, and both the Betazoid and the Ancari started when he snarled:

"*Nobody* can tell me what's happened to Riana. Now I *demand* to know who did this!" The captain of the *Cairo* had believed Colin's claims that the captain of the *Enterprise* was in proximate mortal danger, and the Ancari authorities had seen fit to allow starships into the system because of this; Colin could never have gotten here so swiftly, otherwise. Seantie winced. The *Cairo* must have pushed its engines to maximum warp capacity in a solar system, a dangerous proposition.

The Betazoid matron could feel that Colin was in an emotional state that had him prepared to kill, and he wasn't wearing a telepathic damper — not that such a thing would have made a difference; they didn't particularly effect a Betazoid's psionic abilities. What the Betazoid realized, however, was that this impetus came from fear. He was terrified of losing Renee. This had caused him to draft at least one request to Starfleet that she knew of; to keep Starship captains from taking part in away missions, because their presence was too integral to the running of the ship and its crew. This, however, was no away mission.

Renee was on half-shoreleave. Seantie supposed that, in the future, Colin would insist to her that he accompany Renee on all her shoreleaves, a request that

would be easy enough for Seantie to accede to – she was his direct manager.

The bioneural technology that the Ancari used must act as a psionic damper for Betazoid empathy to some extent, though, because Seantie should definitely have felt Colin's presence long before, the way he was projecting his rage. "You need to try to calm down, Colin. The situation's not at all as it appears, and we're all going to need the ability to reason out what's really happening here."

Colin offered her a look that would have frozen the southern suburbs of hell over, and strode around her and T'laxo to glare at the still form of the man lying prone on the padded floor of the Ancari cell. "*He* did this?"

"Not a *he*," T'laxo replied, motioning with one taloned hand at the medical data board in front of him. Colin peered at the alien script narrowly, then turned his piercing, enraged gaze on the Ancari guard. Seantie sighed.

"I think it's projecting the same sort of shield as the Ancari use in their architecture, Colin. It only appears to be humanoid. The scanners say it's some sort of armored, heavy-metal blooded, venomous creature with tetraploid genes."

"Also," T'laxo added, scanning the monitor, "it is no longer unconscious."

Colin turned his disbelieving gaze from the *Enterprise's* science officer and the Ancari civic guard back to the seemingly helpless man lying in the cage.

Chapter Twelve

"We can tell you're no longer unconscious. We also know you aren't human, or even humanoid, and that you're putting out some kind of a psychogenic mirage. What we don't know is exactly what you are, or why you've done what you've done." Colin made his tone cold and hard.

The creature that was projecting itself in the form of a slight, effeminate man did not stir. Colin shook his head, frustration filling him to overflowing. "Put me in there with it," he insisted. Both Seantie and T'laxo looked at him as though he was mad; "I think I can make it drop its shield, but not through this multiphasic cage you've got set up — there's too much psionic noise for me to break through. If we disperse the cage, everyone's potentially in danger, not just me. Your weapons work on this thing?"

T'laxo's tone of voice said that he would be scowling, if he could. "There is no telling what such a creature might —"

"That's *not* what I asked! Listen, this thing did something to the captain of the *Enterprise*, and I want to find out *what* even if I have to break open this cage with

my bare hands in order to get in there to do it. Do your weapons affect this thing enough that it can't immediately kill me if I go in there?"

"Immediately. Yes, that would be the operative word," the Ancari snarled. "I cannot be held accountable —"

"I can," Seantie cut in coldly. "Do you have any idea what Renee would do to me if I let you go in there?"

Colin threw up his hands. "*What?* What *can* she do, except huddle in a corner and rock back and forth and whimper if I so much as show my face at the window of the cage they've got *her* locked up in right now? You're worrying about being yelled at? Reduced in rank? This is the life of your *captain* we're talking about here, don't forget.

"If I can get through to this thing, figure out what's going on and how to correct the problem, and you forbid it, I swear to any god you want to name, Seantie, I'll have you brought up on charges before the Federation Council if it takes me the rest of my life to get a hearing. Now imagine what *they* might do to you if you allow your captain to come to harm, because you're worried she might scold you for putting a yeoman otherwise capable of performing the emergency duty at hand in danger."

She could still forbid it. Colin was a free yeoman commissioned to carry out psionic studies aboard the *Enterprise*, and the Betazoid was his direct supervisor. Yeomen were not officers of Starfleet; they were individuals granted the use of the technologies found on starships or starbases to further the study of important work, or to equip those starships or starbases with the results of important work.

Yeomen might also hold duties on a starship such as clerk or cook, necessary duties but ones which the lower-ranking, non-commissioned officers aboard a starship or on a starbase had no desire to hold. In any case, yeomen were only held accountable to officers' orders during times of emergency, or should they interfere with official duties during a time of emergency. At all other times they were subject to oversight by an individual chosen to manage them, much as they would be while performing a standard job planetside.

Seantie narrowed her eyes at him. "There's no proof you could get through to whatever *that* is even if you did go in there. And that would stand up before any hearing. I won't be threatened, Colin."

Colin glared silently at the science officer for a long march of seconds, then pulled out his communicator, half-turning away from his supervisor as he did so. "Colin to *Enterprise*. Josi, are you in range yet?"

The executive officer's voice was bemused. "Communications range, yeah. What's going on, Yeoman?"

Seantie pursed her lips. She hadn't recently checked to see whether or not the *Enterprise* was within subspace communications range; she'd been too busy. And surely, she knew she'd just lost her grip on this situation.

"An emergency. Renee's been attacked by an unknown entity that's using a psychoprojective shield of some kind to make itself appear human. The Ancari have it in containment, but it won't or can't communicate through the neurogenic field they've got it behind. It possesses a venom that causes its victims to lose their minds. Seantie is here with me; I'll let her tell you what I propose." He held out the communicator to the Betazoid woman. She shook her head at him forbiddingly but took the communicator.

"Colin seems to think that if we let him into containment with this thing, he'll be able to penetrate the shield it's projecting to make itself seem human."

"How do you know it's not a human being with a syringe full of poison?"

"It has dual RNA and DNA tetraploid chromosomes, with chromium and titanium as carrier metals in lanthanide-based blood, or anyway in whatever it's got that's equivalent to blood. Considering what sort of

specific gravity lanthanides would produce, whatever sera it contains would probably be more of a colloid than a liquid. Renee doesn't even appear to know who she is since it attacked her. She's in an Ancari psychiatric ward with something that looks like a combination of dementia, schizophrenia, and amnesia. She's horrified of Colin for reasons nobody can comprehend. Naturally, he's distraught, but..." Seantie paused for breath.

"*But* you think it would put him at mortal risk if he went in there to communicate with this entity. Understood, Lieutenant. How does he know he *can* communicate with it?"

Seantie looked askance at Colin. He held out a hand for the communicator, and she gave it back, rather more forcefully than necessary.

"I can form a psionic bond with anything at an evolutionary level above a bony fish, Commander," he replied crisply. "And the capacity to project a psychogenic shield is a definite sign of telepathic ability. Granted, most of the creatures who use them aren't sentient, but there's no reason to think this one isn't; I was in telepathic contact with..." he bit off the name by which he usually called the woman he cared for; "Captain Ingram when this whole thing started, and whatever this is was trying to pass itself off as a human man, trying to..." he paused for a moment and licked his

lips; he felt his face flame, "initiate intimate contact with her. She refused. I think that's when the thing injected its venom; her hand and her face are still bruised and swollen. If it's sentient, and I try to penetrate its shield, there's a likelihood it might be willing to —"

"Not inject *you* with poison, too?" the XO of the *Enterprise* cut him off coolly. "I take it you're calling me because Seantie doesn't want you to go in there, and you're hoping I'll overrule her as her superior officer?"

"You've got it."

"That's exceptionally —"

"*I don't care.* This is an emergency, and in an emergency, I can be commanded to perform duties by the ranking officer apprised of a situation. If you both refuse this, I'll take it to the Ancari authorities; *they* might like to know what it is that's been killing tourists to their planet, and why. The Ancari guard here says their weapons will protect me, at least for long enough to attempt to communicate with the thing. Dammit, forget about who I am for a minute, will you *please*? Your captain's sanity, her life, are at stake here!" Colin begged.

Josi sighed. "Look, even if you can talk to it, that doesn't mean it'll answer."

"I did *not* say I was going to sit down to have tea and biscuits with the damned thing. If the word

'communication' implies that to you in this instance, perhaps I should have chosen the term *interrogation*; I can do *that* to any creature above the level of a bony fish, too. *It* knows what it is, where the hell it came from, what its motives are, and whether or not there are any more like it prowling around the Expo. And if it *is* sentient, we can't simply kill it to use forensic information from its corpse to try and solve this dilemma — I *know* that much, even if I couldn't remember which General Order gives that direction with a knife to my throat. Or shall we sit around waiting for more attacks?"

Josi made a distressed sound. "There have been other attacks?"

Colin handed the communicator back to Seantie again. "There have been six other...ah, murders on this planet since the Expo opened a year ago. The corpses were found with bruising and lacerations not dissimilar to what Renee has on her hand and forehead. When you get here, I'd like to have T'Dani down to perform intensive postmortems on the corpses the Ancari officials still have in their keeping; there are a lot of odd things about these deaths."

"What is *not* odd about this situation is the question. And it's a question I'm afraid has to be answered. Beam Colin into the thing's cage, but make certain he's well armed. And Colin?"

Seantie handed the communicator back.

"If you ever, *ever* go over Seantie's head like this again, or anyone else's for that matter, I will personally see to it that you're banned from the *Enterprise*, if I have to turn it into a lifelong hobby. Understood?"

"Understood, Commander." He flipped the communicator shut without bothering to sign off, put the instrument away, and held out a hand to T'laxo; "Give me a weapon, and beam me in there. *Now!*"

Chapter Thirteen

The *zhin-ga-Morrah* waited, with the cold-blooded patience of its kind, as the obviously psionic creature that called itself *Colin* attempted to make itself feel less trepidation about having entered the infuriating cage. The *Morrah* could easily perceive the creature's psychogenic field, though it was just as obvious that the creature didn't have much capacity to manipulate that field.

These creatures were limited in their capacities. Had the *Morrah* wished, it could have used psionic resonances to dissolve the cage it had been deposited in.

But the *Morrah* had been hurt by the *Ancari* weapon. This fact made it upset, and also bewildered it — it was not accustomed to being hurt in this fragile, alien home it had so unwillingly made for itself. It had also been bewildered upon interacting with the creature that had called itself *Renee*; interaction was not its usual technique, not for reproduction, not with the creatures that housed its eggs. In its natural environment, its egg-cases were enormous, warm fungal labyrinths, discernible from the other fungi that constituted the bulk of interstitial flora by their sweet fragrance and their lovely scarlet and maroon flesh patterns.

This, however, was far from the natural environment of the zhin-ga-Morrah tribe. And these *things* it found itself among appeared to be somewhat more than unfeeling intergalactic supra-fungi in need of spore dispersal.

Never had any Morrah considered calling creatures like the one that now stood inside its cell (so alien, so easily broken) anything at all. The once-vast array of families and sub-families that called themselves *zhin-ga* rarely bothered with the classification of non-sentient beings, since having evolved to the point of being able to create their own non- and semi -sentient beings at will. But now it realized that the alien creatures in this fragile place called *themselves* by names, as sentient beings did, and by this the Morrah was dismayed.

That the Morrah should feel hurt, bewildered, and dismayed all at once was an unpleasant, largely intolerable emotional state for one of its kind. That, in combination with the knowledge of what pain the weapon that this *humanoid* carried could cause (variations on this term, the Morrah had learned, was their colony-name, which meant *looks a lot like me*) kept the Morrah from considering attack as a viable option. Morrah, wholly capable of tunneling through layer upon layer of ore-filled volcanic stone, were unused to experiencing pain of any kind, or being trapped in any

environment they didn't wish to remain in.

Weaklings, the close-cousins had called the Morrah, and *impure-of-race*. That the Morrah found itself so fearful of the horrid sensations bestowed by the alien weapon caused it to wonder if its close-cousins, the *zhin-ga-Charrah*, who had driven the Morrah out of interstitial space, hadn't been correct in this assessment.

To wonder such a thing brought on yet more distress, and the Morrah squirmed with the discomfort of anxiety. The Charrah had set out to exterminate all close-cousins of *zhin-ga* lineage long ago. What Morrah remained had fled as far as a single stolen ship could carry them, to this sterile land beneath the grim eye of an enormous red giant, and now, beneath the eyes of the *humanoids*.

The Morrah considered the creature that had been introduced into the cage. It was among the larger specimens of *humanoid*, which flustered the Morrah somewhat. It was also one of the creatures whose likenesses the Morrah had most recently taken upon itself to project, the one to which the mind of the *Renee* creature had appeared linked and the one to which the *Renee* creature gave the most latitude.

At first the Morrah thought that was why this one had been sent. But upon watching it (its body, too, contained the liquid that was wanted for eggs to develop

into sub-larvae; the zhin-ga-Morrah could smell it), the Morrah saw that the creature recoiled when it dropped the psychogenic illusion that had been constructed from the memories of the one that called itself *Renee*. The *humanoid* in the cage recoiled no less than the *humanoids* outside the cage recoiled — but this creature...*this* creature...was interactive.

What are you? the *humanoid* that called itself *Colin* demanded. The zhin-ga-Morrah could clearly see the *humanoid's* interpretation of the events that had brought both of them to this confinement, could *see* that this was a sentient being, that they had all been so, and the Morrah itself recoiled; this creature, unlike the others, could communicate.

And this creature *Colin* — all of the *humanoids*, if what was in the *Colin* mind could be trusted — were angry with a hot-blooded rage altogether foreign to the zhin-ga-Morrah's sensibility. Did they feel *everything* so intently? Did they *all* feel the so-many-things the Morrah could not even comprehend? It reached out to probe the *humanoid* mind...and it saw itself as such creatures perceived it.

Little wonder the *humanoids* had recoiled. Fascinated, the Morrah studied this distorted, alien representation of itself, and did not respond to the creature's question at once. Not much larger than an

adolescent *humanoid*, the zhin-ga-Morrah saw that it had no features to redeem itself in the *humanoid* mind. Like what the *Colin* had learned to call *insect*, the Morrah possessed a triple-tiered body with thick exoskeletal struts as hard as diamond. Like that jewel, its body, marbled and mottled in hues of ochre and adobe, glittered in the virtual light of its prison.

The *insect* similarity continued in the number and positioning of its appendages, of which it had nine. Its lower three, on its thorax and abdomen, acted as both legs and as powerful tunneling organs, so jointed that they would be both immensely strong, and also possess the speed and maneuverability of some animal this *humanoid* called *horse*. The appendages on its upper abdomen were long, graceful, flexible tools similar to something the *Colin* called *needles* or *syringes*.

What these actually were was the Morrah's genitals, one possessed of eggs, the other of sperm that swam in an hallucinogenic venom which, in the environment of interstitial space, acted to spur the fungus that hosted its eggs into forming mature spores, which the precious Morrah hatchlings would spread with symbiotic grace upon emerging. The Morrah's upper appendages, just beneath its head, were precise manipulative and sensory organs, not entirely unlike the forelegs of a Terran praying mantis.

Unlike *insects*, it did not possess compound eyes, but rather a scleraless expanse of brilliant yellow-orange iris tissue on either side of a bullet-shaped, heavily armored head. Each of its eyes boasted nearly one hundred and eighty degrees of visual acuity, and they possessed asterisk-shaped pupils able to expand and contract in various patterns that could make up for nearly any lack or abundance of light — or other portions of the electromagnetic spectrum.

It was in their eyes that the Morrah most resembled the Charrah. Also like their close-cousins, the Morrah's feeding apparatus was a combination of tubules and pincers that did not allow for speech; when any among what remained of the once-great families and subfamilies of *zhin-ga* wished to communicate, they did so through the complex knots of psionic ganglia found at the triangular bases of their enormous brains. They were wholly telepathic creatures.

Colin was inexpressibly horrified when the alien's psychogenic field came down — horrified not just by the sight of it, but horrified by the colossal power of its mind, by the way it perceived him, by its relative deficiency of emotion.

What are you? he demanded. The alien, clearly as repulsed by Colin as Colin was by it, did not respond

immediately. When it finally did respond, the touch of its mind was so *other* that Colin shivered involuntarily.

You appear precisely as revolting and unlikely to us, humanoid. It can be no wonder we thought you all walking-pods of fungal tissue, with your gangling delicacy, all the unlikely hues and contours of your soft, ripe flesh. I am of the zhin-ga-Morrah. I come from otherspace, fleeing strife.

You have brought strife, Colin responded coldly. *You have murdered. We are sentient beings — why are you torturing and killing us? We pose no threat to you!*

The Morrah digested this for over a minute, its fine, pincer-like upper digits rubbing at its face, putting Colin in mind of a housefly. It was literally trying to decide what to *feel* about the telepath's statement. *This means a great deal to you humanoids — sentience. Why?*

Colin realized that it was confused by what it perceived as an avalanche of sudden anger emanating from him. It was terribly startled by the abruptness and intensity of humanoid emotions. He chewed at the inside of his cheeks, trying to moderate what he felt. To find some kind of common ground with this unutterably alien creature. *You are a sentient being. Does your existence not mean a great deal to you?*

We are zhin-ga, the creature replied complacently, as

though that explained everything.

And we are humanoids. Because of what you've done to us, more than a few of us feel entitled to make the zhin-ga depart this life in ways similar to those you've used on us. You say we — there are more of your kind here?

We must breed, the creature offered reasonably. It handed Colin a phantasmagoria of its usual breeding habits and habitats, which existed nowhere here for the thousand some-odd creatures hiding on this planet.

The Morrah flinched again — which was what the action of rubbing at its face signified — when another great wave of emotion flowed from the man's psyche into its own. Rage and sadness and pity in combination, this time, and Colin felt it attempt to raise some sort of empathic shield against what it could neither entirely fathom nor bear to experience. *We do not understand your...*

At first, Colin thought perhaps the empathic shield the creature was struggling to erect had interrupted its thoughts, but as the moments ticked by, he realized that the zhin-ga-Morrah literally had no way of describing what it wanted to say in a conversational format. It was reticent to lower its empathic shields to invite him into its phantasmagoria again, in order to explain itself empathically or pictorially. The intensity and assortment

of humanoid emotions were just too excruciatingly alien for it to tolerate without psychological distress.

Colin didn't particularly care what the Morrah found stressful. He reached out psionically and tore its empathic shield away, leveling the Ancari weapon at it simultaneously. The action hurt him nearly as much as it did the zhin-ga-Morrah, but as he'd told Josi and Seantie, he wasn't here for idle chitchat. The alien made a dreadful noise — nearly subsonic, a reverberating roar like the sound of an approaching sandstorm, which was something Colin was familiar with. He could feel the anguished noise in his bones.

This was an utterly involuntary distress-response on the part of the pseudo-insectile alien, and Colin responded to it in kind. His lips drew back from his teeth in the silent snarl of dread, fury, disgust, and pain common to every humanoid of every size, shape, and color in the galaxy.

Why should we not destroy you, if you will treat us so? the Morrah droned.

Why should we not treat you so, if you will destroy us? Colin snapped back telepathically. *Does this two-sided reciprocation of misery not demonstrate that our people are equivalent in aptitude and adversity? Can we not find a more mutually satisfactory solution?*

The zhin-ga-Morrah had never once seriously

considered anything in those terms before. It wasn't that the Morrah couldn't grasp the concepts; it could understand what Colin meant perfectly well. It was that such concepts were anathema to its cultural sensibilities. They constituted what humanoids might consider weakness or moral transgression, or both.

To us, it is a moral transgression that you kill and maim us rather than requesting our help, which we would give you, Colin chided the creature. Again, it flinched, and gave off an unpleasant metallic odor that made him recoil. It was aware, since it was touching his psyche, that it smelled bad to him.

The zhin-ga-Morrah did not comprehend humor. Nevertheless, in a less dire situation, Colin might have considered laughing at its response — whether in amusement or horror, he wasn't certain. *You stink, as well, humanoid. Such inadequacy as you would have us exhibit in the face of creatures as soft and helpless as yourselves is putrid.*

There was, it seemed, no sympathy, pity, or compassion in the Zhin-ga-Morrah psyche. *You would rather die? Because that's your option, as I thought I made clear. You apparently don't have a good feel for how many of us there are, or how very angry we are with you.* It had taken Colin, himself, quite a while to come to terms with just how many humanoids probably

inhabited the Milky Way Galaxy. Assuming that roughly ten percent of all humanoids in the Alpha and Beta Quadrants had so far been accounted for — a liberal figure, and on the high side — the number of humanoids in actual existence in the galaxy itself made a googol of googolplexes seem like a conservative estimation, on the low side.

The Morrah's response to this phantasmagoria teeming with *humanoids* was both swift and shocking:
It killed itself.

Chapter Fourteen

The combined medical crews of the *Enterprise* and the *Cairo* had determined very early, in dealing with the alien's body, that the effects of the Ancari's psychogenic fields hastened the decomposition of the corpse. The Ancari authorities had, therefore, appropriated portions of the Expo dealer's businesses with which to jury-rig a sort of morgue for the Morrah in the evacuated Expo grounds.

T'Dani Corrigan, the CMO of the *Enterprise-B*, had come down to inspect the alien while this was going on. She was a skilled pan-humanoid anatomist, and had taught dissection to more than one class of Starfleet medical trainees. *This*, though...

"Anyway, if the rest of them choose death as an option, it'll take care of the problem for us," Seantie said to the *Enterprise's* CMO darkly. The part-Vulcan scowled at the Betazoid, then down at the creature, blackening, malodorous, and strapped awkwardly to a metal gurney. Why a Pet Expo should require the use of a rolling steel table possessing built-in, steel-reinforced restraints, T'Dani didn't care to imagine.

"How many more of the damned things *are* there?" Corrigan inquired with displeasure. Here before her,

slowly putrefying in its own bodily fluids, was the paradox inherent to the tolerance for diversity that her mother's people vaunted; how, exactly, did one go about tolerating that which was intolerable?

"Colin thinks something over a thousand. What they're trying to do with us is..." the science officer shook her head and grimaced; "brood their eggs in us. What they usually use is some sort of interstellar iron-rich fungus."

"That would explain their confusion," T'Dani offered. She shook her head and stepped back from the corpse, having done — as far as either Seantie or T'laxo could tell — absolutely nothing. "I'm not the person you want for this. In much the same way that mushrooms are like people, this thing's like —"

"Mushrooms are *not* like people," Seantie shot back. She was tired, hungry, and more than a little disgusted already. T'Dani offered her an alarmed look.

"Of course they are! Or I guess I should say, more broadly, like animals. Their cell walls are chitinous or collagen-containing, both proteins found only in animals. Their digestive secretions are similar to various enzymes produced in the guts and brains of animals. Their flesh is non-chloroplastic, which makes them nothing like plants, but it's capable of synthesizing vitamin-D directly from sunlight, like animal flesh does.

The flesh of mushrooms is also high in its relative proportion of fluid, like animal flesh, and when this is removed, what remains is largely protein.

"Nonetheless," the CMO tossed her head at the zhinga-Morra's corpse, "this thing's anatomy's more like a beetle, or even a crustacean, than a humanoid, and I'm *not* qualified to dissect it. Is there a xenoentomologist on the *Cairo*, maybe? I'm pretty sure there's none on the *Enterprise*."

"Where do you learn all of this..." Seantie bit off the last word that question was obviously meant to contain. T'Dani grinned; she figured it probably had to do with universal humanoid excretory processes.

"I've spent a lot of my time hanging around with Renee. And it's her I want to go see. Find an insect specialist for this thing — and soon, because the one thing I *can* tell you about insects is that some of them autolyse very quickly after death."

The xenoentomologist they finally located was a Benzite who had come to the planet for the Expo. Her name was rrr-TRth, and her hobby was the collection and keeping of insects in the natural environments of their home planet. She had come, she said, hoping to obtain either a fire-ant nest or a colony of ice-borers.

What she'd found herself confronting in the Pet

Expo's pseudo-morgue was, she admitted, a great deal more fire and ice than she'd ever imagined.

The meeting regarding rrr-TRth's findings was convened in one of the larger conference rooms of the Starship *Cairo*. The captain of that ship was a hard-faced, dark-skinned Vulcan man with hair and eyes the color of new gunmetal. He had convened the meeting in a tastefully paneled conference room which, unlike the majority of conference rooms on the *Enterprise*, was in the windowless engineering section of the ship, rather than the more exposed saucer section.

The Vulcan captain had mandated that the most senior officers of both starships, as well as their security, medical, and tactical personnel, be personally present to hear the Benzite xenoentomologist's findings. His own tactical officer was a Kazar'ian, as highly unusual and unlikely a state of affairs as was the provenance of the *Enterprise's* head of security, who sat directly across from the *Cairo's* XO, next to Josi, Demora, and EmJay. Mel'Taya's second, a morose yellow-eyed Orion youth called Tenger, who spoke so rarely that there were individuals on the *Enterprise* who erroneously believed he was mute, sat further down the table among the *Cairo's* junior security officers, next to Colin, who of course was there because he was the only person to ever have communicated with one of these insectile horrors.

The *Cairo's* head of security and executive officer was also a Vulcan, the sort of woman who could easily be overlooked among a roomful of other people, which suggested to the *Enterprise's* head of security that she had been probably been hand-picked from among members of the Vulcan secret service, the *Vharkhenn*, by the captain of the *Cairo*.

Mel'Taya admired the *Cairo* captain's choice; members of the *Vharkhenn* were, as a matter of course, formidable of both intellect and physical prowess. It was this woman who posed the first question:

"We have been apprised of all the information which the Ancari authorities and certain of the *Enterprise* crew currently possess regarding these evasive and injurious sentient aliens, Lady rrr-TRth." The *Cairo's* XO, her voice soft but as inflexible as a yuridium bulkhead, nodded briefly at Colin at the other end of the conference table. "Of the one that apparently committed suicide, what can you offer that might shed light on the abilities, intents, or fallibilities of the creatures?"

The golden-puce, hairless woman fitted with a breathing apparatus that fed from an enzyme-fueled pocket implanted just beneath her left clavicle and directly into her bronchial passages — the current preferred method by which Benzites maintained a permanent atmospheric supply, regardless of the

atmosphere in which they found themselves — held out her hands palm-upward, and shrugged.

"Of intents and fallibilities I cannot speak, Commander, only of abilities, and many of those via conjecture only. Please understand, this creature is not, precisely, an insect. It is...other."

"Please describe what you mean," Storn, the Vulcan captain of the *Cairo*, shot back tersely, the only sign of the great anxiety he was undoubtedly beset by.

The Benzite xenoentomologist took a protracted moment to decide exactly where to start. Her audience waited patiently. "Its exoskeleton is not composed of standard insectoid chitin. Rather, it is composed of molecularly fused struts of collagen mesh buttressed by a variety of heavy metals, which provides its exoskeleton both remarkable tensile strength and almost limitless flexibility. Furthermore, the creature possesses discrete internal diaphragmatic sacs that act as a form of endoskeleton, in this case buttressed with lanthanides, to cushion and protect its internal organs."

Mel'Taya stirred, feeling as though the plush conference room chair had suddenly rendered itself hostile. The *chae-na's* own people possessed a similar internal arrangement of cobalt-reinforced diaphragmatic sacs. That didn't make them akin to these monstrosities, which Mel'Taya had glimpsed while the Benzite had

been performing her dissection, any more than they were akin to the heart of a flame because it burned blue.

Nevertheless, Mel'Taya did not miss the fact that everyone present flicked a glance up the table toward the senior *Enterprise* officers. The *chae-na* subsided into its seat with a scowl and lowered antennae. The xenoentomologist went on, undeterred:

"Its breathing apparati are remarkable in their diversity, Captain. It possesses layers of feather-gills in its face, I would have to say like Terran eurypteroi or Vulcan carvenedoi — both of which are extinct insectile forms, by the way. These feather-gills can be manipulated, through maneuvering the diaphragmatic sacs in the alien creature's face, into book-lungs. The diaphragmatic layers in the alien's head are enormously motile, another feature never found in insects, or in any other life form of which I am aware."

The Benzite woman took this opportunity to tear her gaze away from Mel'Taya, perhaps because she realized that it was making the Andorian uncomfortable. She drew a deep breath of the fluorine atmosphere produced by her rebreather, which would render any other individual present in the room quite dead were they exposed to it, and continued:

"Its brain consists of a series of sub-ganglial cysts distributed throughout the diaphragmatic layers of its

entire body, and it appears — though I am not certain of this; please understand, the body had undergone a certain amount of autolysis before I was able to..." she shook her head and smiled, wanly. "I am forgetting my subject. What I am trying to say is that it seems as though the creature can shift its brain — these sub-ganglial cysts — about its body at will. Why it should need to perform such a feat, I cannot imagine.

"The alien also possesses the short, narrow tubules common to orthopteroi on all planets that have ground-dwelling arthropod insects. In this way it resembles known entomological forms, but everywhere on its body where these tubules exist, they are backed by an almost indescribable filter. As far as I can ascertain, Captain, this filter was capable of rendering almost any atmosphere amenable to the alien's use. It was difficult to perceive, at first, that this was a biological construct and not some sort of highly technological artifact," she touched the exposed portion of her rebreather. The table at large remained silent, waiting for her to continue.

After a moment, she did. "Also, the lateral portions of the creature's central thorax possess gas-storage organs, though whether they are also used for breathing, or as some sort of swim-bladder, I honestly cannot say, though portions of the creature's anatomy reveal that the environment in which it evolved were, in some ways,

fluid."

Storn steeped his hands before him on the table, a common Vulcan body language that bespoke deep thought. "From what you have learned of these aliens, Lady, can you draw any broad physiological conclusions?"

"It strikes me that these aliens are immensely powerful, evolved to exceptionally challenging environments, not necessarily including planetary ones. The breathing methods alone..." she shook her head and frowned. "I would imagine that such creatures would be able to withstand the rigors of naked interstellar space. Their exoskeletons and digits, also, are immensely strong. When I utilized electrochemical methods in attempt to determine the rate of the alien's fast-twitch reflexes, the creature literally tore the steel gurney to which it was strapped in half, using the single claw of one leg."

Every humanoid at the table had, by this time, adopted some attitude of discomfort, either upon their countenance or in their body language.

"Have they any weaknesses, doctor?" the *Cairo's* Kazar'ian tactical officer inquired gently — which, as far as Mel'Taya was aware, was the only way a Kazar'ian ever inquired anything. The Benzite shrugged again, and again turned her hands palm-upward, a pan-

humanoid gesture of uncertainty.

"Physical ones? Not that I could determine, beyond their inability to breed successfully."

"Is there any indication why this one self-immolated?" Mel'Taya snapped, not at the Benzite xenoentomologist, but at Colin. The xenoentomologist nevertheless appended that question:

"Yes, I was wondering that myself. These are, according to reports, sentient creatures. Why would a sentient creature perform such an act?"

Colin shrugged. "Why do sentient creatures do anything, really? Humanoid emotions overwhelm these creatures. The knowledge..." the big telepath closed his eyes and ran one hand through his hair, nervously. "It appeared to me that the knowledge that we are sentient creatures it had slaughtered, and that these acts of slaughter bothered us so much —"

Now Captain Storn sat forward in his chair. "Are you saying that the alien felt regret? Compunction?"

"Not as we would feel it, Captain, no. It was more of a sense of distaste that it had become so intimately embroiled with sentient aliens capable of feeling and reacting with such intensity." Colin smiled, a mirthless, bitter expression, "They *don't* want us for our minds."

Chapter Fifteen

“Commander's Log, Stardate 9928.6:

T'Dani's been busy going over the preserved remains of the murder victims. There are fewer of the zhin-ga-Morrah-made corpses available for study than she'd hoped. Not all humanoids allow their dead to be either preserved or autopsied, and not all of those who did allow it immediately after the murders were willing to leave them available for further study. This applies to Klingons, in particular. And it means that not even half of the corpses of all of the people who've been attacked by these aliens are available for study.

Colin's visiting those poor souls declared mentally incapacitated by the residents of Betelgeuse Four, in an attempt to communicate with them psionically. This hasn't been productive, and seems to have worn Colin out faster than if he'd been digging latrine trenches all week. I'm certain he's still at it partly

in hopes that Renee will recover while he's present, but the captain's reactions are so intense and violent that, frankly, nobody who's not in protective armor can approach her at all. They've put her into solitary confinement to keep from shredding the other patients to pieces.

From what the Ancari psychiatrists are able to tell, over a tenth of the forty-odd people currently incapacitated in any mental-health facility on Betelgeuse Four don't have any known sort of definable mental illness. Captain Storn had the CMO of the Cairo analyze the blood of everyone whose mental illness doesn't follow a predictable pattern. All these individuals are women, and all are from humanoid races with iron-based blood. The blood tests showed that every one of them carries the same unknown molecule that's in Captain Ingram's blood.

T'laxo's been helping us recover all available information on any Ancari murder investigations that've been done in the past two years, including any

information that'd been ignored, hidden, or reviled because it didn't seem to make sense. Using the computers on the Enterprise and the Cairo, we've cross-referenced this data with what little new information that T'Dani and Colin have uncovered. The computers advised us to scan every individual in any health facility on Betelgeuse Four at all for the presence of that mystery-molecule.

When those analyses were performed, three male humanoids were found with what we now know is an hallucination-causing venom in their blood. All of these men are in comas; one of them has been in a coma for nearly a year.

As far as we've been able to determine from this particular combination of data, it seems as though the aliens have attacked individuals systematically; not too many at once, nor so often that the effects of the attacks would become immediately discernible, but one individual for roughly every Ancari month of the last Betelgeusian

year, which is how long the Pets of the Galaxy Symposia has been on the planet. And these aliens will almost certainly continue their attacks, unless some plan can be devised for either detente with them, or extermination of them."

It was lunchtime, and Colin had retired to the hospital refectory for a meal that he didn't particularly want. What he *wanted* was to resolve this situation, in order to find some way to help the woman he loved. To keep from having to face the horrible prospect of eating — or maybe not eating — alone, he called both Josi and T'laxo to join him, so that they could discuss any new discoveries or theories.

"Has the computer uncovered any pattern to these attacks — spatially, I mean?" Colin inquired of the *Enterprise's* XO when she arrived. He prodded halfheartedly at the pastrami sandwich in front of him. Tlaxo had gone off to procure his own meal, but Josi had come directly to the table. She helped herself to half of Colin's sandwich, sat down in the booth across from him, and nodded.

"Four-fifths of them took place north-northeast of the plain where the Pet Expo stands are erected," she replied after she'd chewed and swallowed an enormous

bite of the sandwich. "A couple occurred in neighborhoods just at the edges of the Expo, but still to the north. None have occurred anywhere else on the planet, that we've found so far."

"Ah; near those mesas and hoodoos —" Colin began. T'laxo, who had joined them and was setting his plate on the table near Colin's, offered:

"Our people say the caves there are haunted. No light will remain lit in them; no fire can warm them; spirits haunt them, and if one ever emerges from them again, that person is fortunate indeed."

Colin and Josi shared a significant glance. "Does any tricorder or other sort of data exist to prove or give reasons for these sorts of...occurrences?" the telepath inquired. T'laxo shook his head and sat down.

"These were mountains of great stature, perhaps ten thousands of years ago. My people mined them for rare earths, jewels, and precious ores for hundreds of generations. They stopped when the caves — many of those being in possession of mining shafts, you understand? — became mortally dangerous, perhaps four hundreds of years ago. They are still rich in diamagnetic metals and ores that serve to skew sensor readings. The fear of spirits of darkness that can exist in mines is the very reason why my people developed architecture and advanced technologies not dependent

upon rare earths."

"So, you're saying that the zhin-ga-Morrah might have been hiding in caves in what's left of those mountains for the last few hundred years?" Josi asked, around a mouthful of pastrami.

T'laxo shrugged and took a bite of his own lunch. "Who can know? But if that is so, why is it that they have never attacked prior to this time?"

All three people started when a compadd dropped onto the table in front of them.

"Oh! I'm sorry; I thought you realized I was here." T'Dani slid into the booth next to Josi. "Colin, I've never known you to get startled the way you just did. You look exhausted. You know, Renee and Josi can't order you around, but I can. I want you to get some rest, before your health suffers."

Colin was too tired to argue. Josi started in on the rest of his sandwich.

The blonde doctor turned her attention to the Ancari. "The answer to your question, T'laxo, is actually fairly obvious. Those lost people your forebears attributed to cave-spirits? Those *were* attacks. Ancari blood and body metabolism wouldn't suit what these things seem to require in order to...well, to gestate effectively. The aliens never left the caves seeking Ancari victims, but I'm sure they'd attack if they thought their territory was

being invaded, the way any animal would.

"But now, this Pet Expo has drawn people from all over the galaxy — this is the...*what* did you call them?" T'Dani inquired. Colin shrugged.

"What they call themselves, or anyway the only way I can pronounce what they call themselves; zhin-ga-Morrah."

"Thanks. The first large-scale opportunity the zhin-ga-Morrah have had to try out other..." she raised her eyebrows at Colin again.

"*Walking pods*," he offered, with a wince. "They never grabbed anyone and tried to communicate until very recently, either. They had no idea that humanoids are sentient. There's no telling if they'd have stopped even if they'd have known, though. Their ideologies are..." he sighed and rubbed his eyes, as though trying to rub away an image in his mind, "singularly cold-blooded."

T'Dani nodded at the compadd she'd set down. "Some of the corpses I analyzed contained zhin-ga-Morrah eggs that never developed any further; generally, those that had been laid in people with low-molecular-weight metals in their blood-cell matrices, relatively low body temperature, or both of those together. Others contained weak larvae that hadn't developed past the stage of rudimentary eye development. Those had been

implanted in people with high-molecular-weight metals in their blood-cell matrices."

Josi set down what remained of the sandwich in disgust and glared at the doctor. "And the *point* of this luscious lunchtime repast is that these things prefer iron-based blood. Regular friendly little vampires."

T'Dani nodded at the XO. "Absolutely. Also, the zhin-ga-Morrah prefer body temperatures between about ninety-four and a hundred degrees Fahrenheit. That Betazoid girl in the sanitarium with Renee —"

"That's right! She had the Levodian flu —" Josi began.

"And a fever of a hundred and three when they found her raving around the bird exhibits," Colin finished. "So, the fever...what, drove off the zhin-ga-Morrah?"

T'Dani shook her head. "The high temperature killed the eggs. They were still in her interstitial uterine tissue when I debrided it all out. And she's full of the same aromatic-ring venom as Renee."

Colin folded his arms on the table in front of him and let his head fall into them with a moan. Josi reached across the table to rub one of his shoulders sympathetically. "We need to find the rest of the zhin-ga-Morrah, obtain their...gods, at least their *understanding* of us as sentient beings who aren't going

to stand for being raped and murdered, if we can," his words were muffled by his arms and the tabletop; he sat back up and rubbed his eyes again, "though what I'd prefer is some sort of mutual-aid agreement. I would bet the *Enterprise* that they're holed up right under those cliffs."

"The caves of the cliffs are a mortal danger," T'laxo interjected.

Colin shrugged and shook his head. "No, the *zhin-ga-Morra* are a mortal danger, and they'll continue to be one until we either reach an agreement with them, or kill them." "They're sentient beings," Josi cut in. "We *can't* just kill them out of hand, regardless of what they've done or how generally repulsive they are to us. But in order to reach any sort of agreement, we'd need a telepath or empath strong enough to communicate with them directly."

"And to tolerate their alienness for a protracted period of time," Colin mumbled.

"You have such individuals who also can see in underground darkness and navigate trackless tunnels? None of you possess sensory whiskers, that I have noticed," T'laxo offered in dry tone. He'd have gone on, but now Josi took up the thread:

"One who *doesn't* have iron-based blood, and whose body temp's either below ninety-four or above about a

hundred? I'd go —"

"You're not a *telepath* —" T'Dani began.

"Or a star-nosed mole," Colin finished, "though I'm told we might be able to get some of those at the Expo. I should be the one to do this."

"No *way*!" T'Dani hissed; "Have you a clue what Renee'd do to us if we lost you to these horrors?"

"Your blood's full of iron, and —" Josi announced, in chorus:

"And *you* aren't a star-nosed mole, either..." T'Dani chorused along with Josi, then paused; a light seemed to snap on behind her eyes, and she pulled her communicator out of her hip pocket.

"What now?" Colin inquired shortly, tiredly, and warily.

"I think I know just the person who can help us with this mess! Doctor Corrigan to Yeoman Shrev Th'raess'Aen, please."

"Doctor? Are you still planetside? What's happening down there?"

"I'm at the refectory of the hospital nearest to the Pet Expo. I need to ask you a personal question, if you don't mind. I can tell by your name and your skin color that you're part Aenar. Could you tell me if you've inherited an ability to see in darkness, or any telepathic ability?"

"Both. I helped Colin when the *Enterprise* —"

"That's right!" Colin interjected. "I'd almost forgotten."

"Well, there you have it. I'm eminently forgettable, too. *Seeing* in the dark...well, it's not really the same sense as sight at all. More similar to but not exactly like what a pit-viper does."

"I need your help. I want to contact the things that attacked Renee. They're sentient and were trying to use people as brood sacs."

"Mmmm. That sounds...really, really unpleasant. I'm delighted you thought of me. I'm also horrified. So, I guess, all things considered, that I'm delorrified, and I'll be there as soon as I can. Do the transporter rooms have your coordinates?"

"Transporter Room One does. Thanks, Shrev!" T'Dani snapped her communicator closed.

Josi eyed her inquiringly, "What's this 'I want to contact the things that attacked Renee' business?"

"You don't think I'm going to let him go in there without a doctor?"

"If these things attack him, I don't think a doctor would make a great deal of difference," Colin opined. Now he really wasn't hungry; he pushed the plate containing what little remained of his uneaten lunch away.

"I'm also a telepath. I could help him," T'Dani replied. "I don't have a blood chemistry or metabolism they'd be interested in, either — and I think I'm too small for them to perceive as any sort of threat. Colin, you *did* say that your size intimidated the one that killed itself." She purposely neglected to mention Shrev's size.

"But that wasn't why it killed itself. It killed itself for feeling compassion and sadness. These things see such emotions as aberrations or as some kind of alien-caused disease."

"The more people we send tromping into those tunnels, the more these creatures are apt to see us as a threat to their existence. And they're sentient; supposedly they can unlearn —"

Josi half-choked on her final bite of sandwich; T'laxo helpfully offered her his own glass of water for her to wash it down with.

"Thanks," the *Enterprise's* exec gasped at the avianoid guard. "Yeah? And what was the last thing you *unlearned*, Doctor? Sentience is not at all a determinant of..." she shook her head sadly; "good sense, as you're obviously trying to demonstrate."

"We are *not* sending him into those caves alone."

"I should go," Colin averred again. T'Dani glared at him.

"I have this interesting status on the *Enterprise*,

Colin. Perhaps Renee explained? I can command anybody on the ship. *Anybody* — Yeoman, Admiral, Captain, bloody visiting Klingon Ambassador — when their own health is in jeopardy. These things would put your health in distinct jeopardy. I also trained under a Chirurgeon on Andor. And I owe this guy. He is not going alone, and *you*, Colin, are not going *at all*."

"Is she always this stubborn?" T'laxo inquired.

Josi sighed and finished the sandwich. "Oy vey, brother, you've no idea," she began, just as Shrev entered the refectory and began walking toward their table. After offering him much the same look she'd been directing toward Colin's lunch earlier, she announced, *sotto voce*; "Oh, this poor thing hasn't got a *chance*."

Chapter Sixteen

"You're certain these weapons are effective against the things?" Shrev inquired nervously. T'Dani nodded.

"The Ancari say so, and so does Colin."

"Effective against many of them at once?"

The *Enterprise's* CMO winced. "How many of them do you sense?"

He shrugged. "None, frankly, but...well, somehow I don't think we'd be able to fight even one of these aliens hand-to-hand, or whatever the hell it is they have that act as hands, if it came to that."

T'Dani made a wry face. "Yes, it occurred to me that *tal-shaya* wouldn't be terribly effective on a creature without a single central nervous system, or a spine."

The half-Andorian man shook his head. "Thanks. I hope you take comfort in knowing you just increased my base anxiety by a factor of about nine hundred. I really would like to learn *tal-shaya*. What's involved?"

T'Dani sighed. "Quite a lot, actually; my parents started me when I was four, and it took me six years to master."

Shrev grinned. "You could kill people when you were ten?"

She grinned back, as they began a careful descent

through a portion of tunnel lined with slabs and blocks that caught and reflected the lantern light in patches, like a poorly cleaned crystalline staircase. "You mean you *couldn't*?"

"The desire did arise upon occasion. I was made fun of a lot as a child, doctor; I'm what is known in professional circles as a *freak*. It's bemusing to imagine that someone so delicate as yourself is able to actually kill somebody else barehanded."

"Ah, Mr. Big Man, that just makes it more devastating. I'll teach you tal-shaya if you want, but you need to teach me second-level *karakom* in return. *And* you will absolutely stop calling yourself a freak, and you will never, *ever* again refer to me using a term like 'delicate'." Shrev had told her he was a fifth level *karakom* master, which, he'd explained, only strictly existed in his chosen clan.

Shrev blinked at T'Dani in surprise. She wasn't looking in his direction — she needed to keep her eyes on what she was doing to avoid tripping down the unevenly-floored tunnel, and in any case, she wouldn't have been able to see him without shining her electric torch directly at him. He took this opportunity to study her. "You *know* first-level *karakom*?"

"It's not so much different from *sus manha*. Actually, I'm probably exceedingly rusty, and you'll most

likely laugh at me, but not as rusty as you'll be at tal-shaya. Both are similar, though, in that they stress the still point and the apex. Tal-shaya makes you study humanoid anatomy, however. It was what make me first consider going into medicine instead of something else."

"Learning a method of assassination made you decide to go into medicine. You've been hanging around my *cha'chi's* people too much, doctor!"

She stopped picking her way down the uneven stone stairway in order to laugh without toppling over. "Did the black-and-white way Andorians tend to see things drive you nuts as a child, the way the Cult of Top-heavy Logic made me want to run screaming?"

Shrev shrugged. "My aunts and uncles always avoided reprimanding me too much for the way my mind worked. They were afraid, when I was very little, that I might be brain damaged, and as I grew older, they could see what a difficult time I sometimes had accepting certain things.

"I had this wonderful teacher in elementary school; intermediate algebra, and she gave extra points if you could think of alternate ways of either stating or solving formulas. It became something of a hobby of mine, and I'd apply it to problems in other classes, too, and ultimately, to life. It's not a methodology widely approved of on Andoria outside of higher mathematics,

unfortunately; too many people confuse alternatives with ambivalence, and *that* can make Andorians downright hostile."

T'Dani nodded. She'd experienced that when she had lived on Andoria. It was one thing about Andorians that could make her uncomfortable. Though an intolerance of ambiguity was a normal state of being among Andorians, such a polarized attitude hinted at personality disorder in most other varieties of humanoids.

They had reached the end of the gently descending corridor, and she shone her dimming lantern around carefully. A drop loomed to their left; Shrev was peering unconcernedly over the edge. To their right, a broad ledge led progressively downward, toward the sound of dripping water and very little else. They followed this path gingerly, flipping their lanterns onto the highest settings, which still produced far less light than the mechanisms were calibrated for. T'Dani remained near the wall and used it to aid her descent.

"I dealt with some of the same issues," she offered finally; the conversation kept her mind off the fact that the caves were uncomfortably cold to her, and off of the progressive dimming of their lights. Shrev was here because the Ancari had warned them of the second eventuality; his *shreya*, *zhavey*, and *charan's* people had

evolved organs capable of "seeing" in the absence of the visible-light portion of the electromagnetic spectra. Where he walked close beside her, his unusually high body temperature seemed to keep the cold from driving fingers directly into the marrow of her bones. T'Dani also kept talking to keep her mind off of the closeness of Shrev's body:

"Fortunately, though, I had my father there to explain my..." she licked her lips, biting the bottom one, trying to find the most accurate description, and trying to keep from giving in to the urge to walk closer to the warm man next to her. Caves were spooky as hell to the CMO of the *Enterprise*, even had she not known that there were innumerable alien presences haunting them.

Shrev chuckled softly. "Human tendency to have too many irons in the fire — isn't that the human aphorism?"

T'Dani smiled. "That's exactly it. And you know, I was never happier than when I met Renee and her parents. They didn't just have multiple irons, they had multiple *fires*. Or, as Renee declares; *specialization is for insects.*"

"That'd lose her some vital portion of anatomy, if she said it to the wrong person where I come from! So, how is it that you know you've mastered tal-shaya without killing someone to prove it?"

T'Dani scowled. They had reached the level of the pools, only to find that they were heavily scummed with some kind of whitish-orange, sickly luminescent algae that gave off a vaguely petro-chemical odor. The fact that she'd inherited her father's sense of smell rather than her mother's notwithstanding, the reek was so intense that it made the part-Vulcan woman's eyes smart. Shrev made a sound of disgust. They both paused and frowned at the squelching mass of apparently shallow, crusty pools, more like an underground fen than anything T'Dani imagined would exist two kilometers underground in a series of crystalline caverns.

"It's a process, really. You know you can perform the killing technique properly if you can knock someone unconscious with it. It's really just *taroon-ifla*, performed at a different pressure and in a slightly different —"

"You're telling me that Vulcan legal assassination and the trapezius nerve block are really just forms of *massage*?" Shrev interrupted, in a tone of disbelief.

"Highly altered —" T'Dani began.

Both lanterns died. Now T'Dani did shrink against Shrev. He patted her shoulder reassuringly. "Give me your hand, doctor; I should be able to get us out of here."

The CMO of the *Enterprise* shuddered. The cold, dank, reeking cavern was now darker than black ice.

Her shivering increased as she reached out blindly, and he took her cold right hand in his hot right one, and gently reached his left arm around her shoulders. Her hybrid biology gave her a natural body temperature slightly below human normal, which would have qualified as a dangerously high fever for a Vulcan; nonetheless, she couldn't tolerate cold temperatures for very long. The hybrid Andorian, to the contrary, had a body temperature a few degrees above Andorian standard, which would have qualified as a dangerously high fever in a human. She clutched at his hand with both of hers, welcoming the flood of warmth that it and his arm offered.

"I'm assuming, of course, that you're still alive?" he slowly, gently urged her through the unrelieved blackness. Horror of abysses filled with freezing filthy water, of creatures whose indifferent alien observation she could, suddenly, feel pressing against her body like feelers of cold metal...

How he could make a *joke* at a time like this...

"*Don't!*" she insisted, not entirely certain what she was complaining about.

That was as far as she got before Shrev reached down, whipped her Ancari weapon out of the sheath on her hips, turned, and pressed her back against a sharp projection of stone, shielding her with his body as he

pulled his own weapon into his other hand, facing something in the pitch blackness that T'Dani could not see. The hybrid woman pressed her forehead lightly against his warm back, and felt an awareness to which she could give absolutely no name flood her mind as her inborn touch-telepathy reached out to find some sort of comfort amidst her innate dread of this place.

A squat, insectile creature squatted before them over the glistening, ice-rimed surface of one slime-filled sinkhole. T'Dani grasped unconsciously at Shrev's upper arms as she felt her consciousness spiral toward it, but it wasn't his body that was moving. She shuddered as the creature's formidable mind engulfed theirs without compunction, and a Vulcan horror-mythos slithered up from her subconscious:

Eater of Souls.

T'Dani couldn't really comprehend the scenes that tumbled through the alien being's mind as Shrev sought some level of understanding with the zhin-ga-Morrah, but she did understand that there were more of them in the deep shadows of this black place, troops of them listening, more than she and Shrev could possibly run from, more than they could hope to fight if they had every crewmember from both starships currently in orbit around Betelgeuse Four at their backs.

Shrev had known from the first that communication

was his only real option.

A place where space was so cold and ancient that it had a thick heft, where war had been the only reality for generations uncounted, and the voices of slaughtered offspring caused an interstellar space that was no void to ring with agony.

Escape to a thin place of limited dimensionality and overwhelming sensation, and hiding in hot, cramped grottoes where glowing fungus and lichen spawned from the dying guts of a biological creature used as a space vessel provided food, but no system-spanning fungal pods existed for the purpose of reproduction. Living death, the only end again, the only choice, until the little moist, horribly infective walking-pods had been discovered...

What thou call'st walking-pods are sentient beings whose never-to-be-realized cry out in agony at their rupture, not simple floral shells for thine offspring to fertilize.

This last presented itself as a thought and, concurrently, came out through Shrev's versatile, delicate dual-larynx in a strangled-sounding bellow of language so vast and terrible that it made T'Dani want to beat her head open on the wet stone behind her, though Shrev somehow maintained the presence of mind enough to use the *thou* mode of speech and thought — a Vulcan

language convention which insisted, by its very nature, that individuals recognize and accept one another's equality as sentient, conscious, feeling beings, rather than as useful tools.

Her mind wandered unhinged for a while, away from the atavistic terror of what was happening and into some indescribably secure, appealing space that she only indistinctly acknowledged as Shrev's mind. He was using the strength of their combined psionic signatures in order to communicate with this thing without breaking his own psyche open on madness, and she let him, something she would never have imagined herself doing in a less dire, intolerably bizarre situation.

The monstrosity across the abyss from them roared in response; T'Dani didn't catch the gist, she didn't want to. Shrev responded by requesting its aid, admitting to it, to her dismay, that its only other option was annihilation — though if it rendered aid, its people would then be aided in turn.

The thing asked an apparently universal and trans-dimensional question; *why should we place our trust in... thee?*

Shrev gave the creature a silent lesson in the history and reality of the Federation and its peoples, some of whom the very creature squatting before them had attempted to utilize as egg-cases. *Misunderstandings*

can be smoothed over; it has always been so among us, the part-human man wheedled.

What the creature spat back was terrible — anathema to everything the Federation upheld and stood for. *Thou dost not know that to help, assist, or care for others is a flaw in moral reasoning? Thou wouldst have us show weakness! A moral failing, it would be, to depend upon such depravity. Better to commit suicide than request forgiveness!*

So, the close-cousins taught thee, and in accepting their dogma as fact, thou hast found thyself here, Shrev roared back. T'Dani was aware that, even in the iciness of the cave, the man who stood before her was sweating, and beginning to tremble with effort. She leaned into his strong back and let her mind drift off again, handing her consciousness to him like a well-wrapped gift, knowing that if she did not, they would probably never emerge alive again from these catacombs.

Chapter Seventeen

Josi'd had all of them transported up to *Enterprise* immediately when Shrev at last reappeared, carrying their unconscious CMO in his arms like a child. T'Dani was still in sickbay. The part-Vulcan physician had kept Shrev from collapsing beneath the sheer alien weight of the zhin-ga-Morra's merciless despair, having actually experienced worse in her life.

The awareness of this laced the half-Andorian exobiologist's heart with needles; he was in her debt. The way T'Dani clung to the terror she'd experienced in her youth reminded Shrev of the Buddhist story about the man who, mistakenly believing that his only son had died in a fire, became so attached to his grief and collection of ashes that he refused to believe it when his child was found alive and unharmed, choosing instead to cling more firmly to the ashes.

Shrev and Colin took the time available to them, while the XO of the *Enterprise* was busy looking after T'Dani like a flustered hen, to talk privately about what had happened.

"I'm amazed she was willing to go in there at all. I don't dare take her again — you wouldn't *believe* some of the things she's..." Shrev stopped and shook his head,

swallowing the rest of whatever it was he'd been about to say. It was considered the height of disrespect to an Andorian to gossip behind others' backs, even if the gossip contained only truth, and even if the gossip might lead to a way to help the person being gossiped about. He sighed instead. "But I'm certain that I need a better telepath than I am alone in order to communicate with these...*things*."

The zhin-ga-Morrah appalled the hybrid man to such an extent that Colin was surprised that Shrev was willing to enter the caves again himself — but enter they would have to, in order to hear what the insectile group of outcasts from some other dimension had to say about ending the killing of the sentient humanoids in their midst, and accepting their aid instead. Or to keep them otherwise occupied while...

Colin's lips thinned. "Josi and T'Dani might never forgive me for going in there with you, but we do need to know what, if anything, has been decided by the Morrah."

"And if they've decided against the offer of aid? If I managed to somehow..." Shrev grimaced, "bias them against us?"

"I've talked to T'laxo about this. We're still not certain regarding the ultimate strength of these creatures, what they can withstand. T'laxo wants to send a large

armed contingent with the next group that goes into the caves, but I'm not convinced that would be the best method of expressing the peaceful intentions we claim to have.

"The caves themselves are inaccessible by scanner or transporter, but between us," Colin nodded toward the large, arching panoramic window that took up the entire forward wall of the private room he and Shrev had retreated to; the *Cairo* sat at ease there like some great mythical silver swan, "we *can* beam out a five-square-mile area through the depth of the planetary crust, and deposit the remains of the range and its associated caves into the center of Betelgeuse.

"It'd cause extreme tectonic shifts, but the Ancari say their architecture is designed to protect people from such effects. I *don't* think the zhin-ga-Morrah are vigorous enough to survive the fusion furnace at the heart of a star that's the circumference of Jupiter's orbit around Sol." The Expo and the towns around the mountains had all been evacuated to another part of the planet while Shrev and T'Dani were in the caverns, pending this circumstance.

Shrev nodded and bent his head, apparently considering the depthless blackness of the quiescent computerized table between them. "And if their decision is *no*, it's unlikely we'd be allowed out of their tunnels in

the first place." It wasn't a question, but his next comment was. "What would you guess their response is likely to be?"

Colin sighed. "I think I could go in without you, actually. They'd know I'd be –"

"The fact that there's no way I'd let you go in there alone aside, they know me now. They don't know you, unless the one you spoke to that...mmmm, *exterminated* itself communicated its knowledge of you to them, which is doubtful if it was stuck in a bioneural cage. They might not recognize you as an envoy at all, and just kill you out of hand — you have all that lovely iron-based blood and the right sort of body temperature, after all. As I've been informed for much of my life, *I'm* too hot and dense for use. I'm more than happy to let you do all the negotiating. Just consider me your own personal ambulatory night-vision cobalt shield.

"From what T'Dani told me about the people in comas due to these things attempting to..." Shrev made a disgusted face; "the aliens don't seem to differentiate all that well between males and females, or one humanoid race and another, do they?"

The red-haired telepath shook his head. "You're right about the fact that I'll probably need your help to even get to the caverns where these things are, but it's definitely a lot to ask of a person, that they enter into a

situation that yields a high potential for becoming part of a star. I'm not sure..." he shook his head again, and plowed on:

"I think the thing that killed itself *did* communicate with the rest. And considering the fact that they were willing to slay sentient lifeforms at random in order to propagate themselves, they *might* not all be so very enamored of death as an option."

Neither Shrev nor Colin held any sort of actual authority on either *Enterprise* or *Cairo*. The two yeomen were planning on acting without the knowledge of any of the higher officers, having given the ensigns in charge of transporter maintenance on both the *Enterprise* and the *Cairo* authorization papers only from the government of Betelgeuse Four, which merely *inferred* authority from the flag officers of both starships. The authorization papers informed those ensigns that it would be T'laxo who'd let them know if the beam-out of a sizeable chunk of Ancari real estate would be wanted. To Colin's great relief, neither transporter maintenance ensign had requested further details, and neither yeoman had volunteered any further details for the simple reason that there weren't any.

"Anyway," Colin went on, "it's best that we get down there and do this fast; T'laxo will be expecting either our report or our lack of one in six hours, and I'd

like to get to it before Josi's finished in sickbay, or before the transporter ensigns wise up and decide to ask us for Josi's authorization papers."

"I agree we need to do this soonest. But we need more than just a way to kill these things if they don't cooperate," Shrev added. Colin looked askance at him.

"What we *need*," Shrev continued, somberly, "is equipment capable of rendering spoken speech into psionic conversation, and vice versa. Unless you want to spend the rest of...mmmm, whatever it is that remains of our lives being spokespersons for these things. Listen; when T'Dani and I were down there, I noticed that the psionic patterns of the Morrah had a strange effect on my brain, and that when I spoke to them psionically, I'd make noises aloud. I couldn't control it, and I don't know if it was some sort of vocal rendering of their language or not, but..." he shrugged.

"Gods, you're *right*! If you do speak whatever their language is, we can upload it to a tricorder, and maybe develop something later using the psionic arrays on the *Enterprise*. Assuming the Morrah will let us record them, or even allow our equipment to function in their presence."

Shrev made a face somewhat wryer than Colin's own, an act facilitated by the presence of expressive supernumerary facial organs. "I suppose, if they allow us

to *live*, we could just ask them."

Both yeomen already owned tricorders; these came as standard equipment for those who pursued scientific work on any starship. This was good, since having to requisition them now would draw questions from senior officers.

Shrev and Colin walked quietly and quickly together toward Transporter Room Three, the one furthest from the *Enterprise's* main sickbay. T'laxo had been told that Colin would contact him a maximum of six hours from the time that he and Shrev beamed from the *Enterprise* to the Morrah-teeming heart of the Expo grounds. The Ancari was scanning for the transporter signature that would let him know exactly when that countdown would begin.

Neither Shrev nor Colin tried to delude themselves with the belief that, should reaching an understanding with the concrete-minded zhin-ga-Morraah require more than six Terran Standard hours, they'd ever reappear on the surface of the planet again.

The Pets of the Galaxy Symposia had been temporarily shut down.

Ancari authorities had helpfully provided temporary holding pens of safe, secure psychogenic shielding and bioneural mesh for the animals, and housing of the same

for the keepers and vendors, all on the other side of the planet where, as far as anyone could determine, no zhin-ga-Morra had ever come. Nothing that had been erected on the original site had been moved, in order to avoid alarming or arousing the potentially deadly aliens present in the hollow core of the ancient mountain, outside one of the entrances to which Shrev and Colin stood in the cool gray mist of predawn.

Colin considered the forlorn neon sign that blinked on and off above the entrance to the business, alternating seven languages and twenty-two colors: *Exotic Dancers*. The telepath shook his head, bemused. "There's an entrance into the tunnels in *there*?"

Shrev's eyes were closed, but his antennae were tilted forward toward the cheap pebble-glass front of the impromptu Orion building. His head moved with a vague, unconscious swaying similar to that sometimes seen in the blind when they were concentrating intently. "Mmmm. And it's a more direct route than the one T'Dani and I took from the top of the scarp. It's cool in the caves, and there's quite a garden of fluorescent alien algae in them. You can perceive differentials between this neon sign and the electrochemical effects of the cave air from here."

Colin half-turned to consider his hybrid compatriot. Unable to resist the pull of his own curiosity, he reached

out and touched the fingertips of his left hand to the top of Shrev's head.

The telepathic human's brain responded with the only reaction it could to a sense that was neither vision, sound, smell, taste, or touch, and treated him to a blast of squealing color that smelled like citrus, tasted indescribable, and felt cold, which was obviously a cerebral reaction to what Shrev recalled the cave air feeling like. Both men flinched away from one another. Shrev opened his eyes and offered Colin a dirty look.

"I take it *that* wasn't what you were perceiving?" Colin gasped, squeezing his eyes shut and rubbing at his nose and his left ear, through which the indescribable Andorian antennae perceptions now appeared to be attempting to crawl. To his great relief, that sensation lasted no more than a second.

"You don't have the brain structures to..." Shrev shook his head and rubbed, first, at his own temples, then at the back of his neck. To his *eadilium*, the fully Andorian topmost portion of his brain, the powerful psion's gentle probing had felt like an attack. "*Don't* try to get into that part of my head again. Let's just say it's something like night vision. That's what it'll appear to be to you when we're in the tunnels, and as long as you give me enough damn forewarning to redirect the sensation into my ocular nerves. Out here, there are too

many other portions of the electromagnetic spectrum for you to comprehend it at all, because it is *not* vision. It's *ghelar'iinar*, which roughly translated means *Differential particle-wave sense*."

"So that...the, ah, what I perceived when I touched your head?" Colin hedged. Again, Shrev offered him a dirty look, still trying to work the lingering ache out of the back of his neck.

"Pretty much the equivalent of swallowing a child's papier-mâché reproductions of food and calling it dinner. No, what you experienced was a nasty hallucination caused by the *ghelar'iinar* bouncing around inside your brain with no neuronal path to attach itself to."

"Great. How come *that* didn't happen when I used you in a matrix circle that time?"

"Basic psionics go through some portion of the brain we share receptors for. Most humanoids have those, though they're not always active. *You* didn't know that?"

Colin shook his head and returned his attention to the doorway in front of them. "What's the theory behind inactive humanoid psionic receptors?" he inquired, tested the sliding glass door that fronted the establishment. As he suspected, it was locked. He pulled out his tricorder and began programming it to unlock the door.

"There are several, actually. You're telling me you

can't unlock this thing with your mind? I'm starting to lose faith in you, here."

"Telekinetically? Sure, but the energy it'd require is all out of proportion to the effect we're seeking. Seems to me we will want to save our energy for dealing with the zhin-ga-Morrah."

"Point. Anyway, they say that humanoid psionic receptors either evolved independently on each planet where humanoids exist, in order to facilitate some kind of antediluvian communication, or that they're a vestigial trait from an ancestor that all humanoids in the galaxy share. Mostly, the people espousing these theories gather in academic flocks, where they poke fun at and attempt to disprove one another's hypotheses. Unsuccessfully, of course."

"Of course," Colin grinned, opening the now-unlocked door. Shrev fell back. The telepath followed suit; if a person with a sense he didn't possess sensed something that he couldn't...

"They're here," the part-Andorian whispered.

A shiver threaded its way down Colin's spine. He saw nothing, heard nothing, felt nothing. He reached out psionically...and, to his utter confusion, he *smelled* something. He looked at Shrev, who looked back, frowning.

"Me first," Shrev murmured, walking past Colin

toward the doorway. Colin followed the part-Andorian through the musty-smelling little room littered with tables, chairs, stages, dancer's poles, what looked like various pieces of gymnastic equipment, and less-identifiable objects that he was entirely too anxious to give any attention to.

Together, he and Shrev parted the stiff, heavy heat-curtains that were all that shielded the back corner of the room from the tunnels that opened into the mountain. They flicked on the Starfleet searchlights they carried to help guide them through the darkness — more a psychological comfort than anything else, really, because both searchlights ceased to function before they'd taken more than thirty steps into the heart of the ancient, eroded mountain.

Chapter Eighteen

They were being herded.

No Morrah made itself known, but Shrev could sense them; he tried to avoid them, only belatedly realizing that the fact that they melted away in one direction, and that the direction where the fewest of them were was the direction he preferentially went, was a form of herding. Once he realized this, he began to preferentially walk toward them to confront them, but this ultimately caused the same herding effect.

It was horribly alarming to walk through the pitch blackness for so long, even for Shrev, who guided Colin through the suffocating darkness, knowing that they possessed a mere six-hour survival window. Finally, their long dark march ended on a floor so smooth, cold, and highly reflective that both men at first mistook it for a sheet of ice stretching over some underground lake.

When power was suddenly returned to their searchlights, causing both of them to cringe and cower, they saw that they were mistaken. What they stood on was a floor composed of ametrine and Herkimer diamond burnished to a jeweler's luster.

They stood at the heart of a great geode the size of the main audience hall of Terra's Federation Building, a

massive crystalline cave, whose walls sparkled with polished gems to such an extent that both humanoids had to significantly dim and diffuse the lights they carried (Shrev finally turned his off altogether) in order to tolerate the reflection and refraction of that light from tens of millions of obsessively-polished facets, the edges of some of them as sharp as razors.

Power had also been returned to their tricorders, Colin noted when he pulled his out with shaking fingers. Shrev simply snapped his on without pulling it out of the net-sheath on his hip. Colin was fully aware that the hybrid man didn't want to turn any of his appalled, terrified senses away from the tableau around them; Shrev could feel the feather-light touch of the psion's mind against his own, and was grateful for it..

They were surrounded by zhin-ga-Morra — there must have been over a thousand crowding into adjoining tunnels that opened into the geode from above and below, pushing into the crystal cavern, vying for place by some arcane social scale incomprehensible to humanoid minds. Others took up places on large, sharp outcrops of ametrine that projected from the walls in bridges and buttresses, arranged in a pattern entirely random to the humanoid eyes that watched the large number of enormously powerful aliens with trepidation as they took up more and more space within the

chamber.

The massed creatures exuded a bitter metallic odor that both men found repellent. Incomprehensible alien vistas formed by the zhin-ga-Morra's combined telepathic signatures made Colin's head reel. Shrev reached out and caught him before he could fall.

Colin was grateful, this time, for Shrev's psionic touch. The mind of the hybrid human raised on Andoria was a bastion of intelligible veracity in the face of incomprehensibly alien phantasmagoria, and he fled into it for refuge — *beds and chairs and clothes and walls and songs and love and conversation and ships that did not breathe.*

The powerful telepath clung to Shrev's consciousness the way a small child might cling to a parent's legs, until the overwhelming dizziness and nausea, caused by the sudden influx of an unfathomable reality that the humanoid brain required time to order into something comprehensible, began to abate. Colin had been told time and again that the humanoid mind wasn't a particularly well-suited vehicle for dealing with the psionic spectrum. Oddly, though the part-Andorian's was far more well-suited to handle the telepathic bombardment, Shrev's actual psionic capacity was significantly less than Colin's own. Shrev used both of those facts to help shield Colin from the concentrated —

the word that occurred to Shrev was *cruel* — mind-links of the zhin-ga-Morrah.

One of you at a time, or I can't understand any of you, Colin insisted. Shrev translated it verbally, into a language that made the inside of Colin's skull itch maddeningly. The silencing of the zhin-ga-Morrah, in both the physical and the psionic planes, had roughly the same effect on Shrev that the heavy influx of alien telepathy had had on Colin an instant before; this time, Colin reached out to catch Shrev before the hybrid man collapsed into a heap on the slick, icy-cold, glittering floor.

I may want a shore leave when we're done here, Shrev thought acidly.

What we may get when we're done here is incarcerated, Colin replied in the same psionic tone.

Close enough. To Colin's surprise, Shrev laughed when he thought those words, provoking the same response from the man with whom he was in psionic contact.

What is that sound you make?

The question took Colin by surprise, but he supposed non-humanoids didn't...

It is called laughter. Shrev continued to translate verbally for Colin so that the human wouldn't get attacked by all the zhin-ga-Morrah's minds in tandem

again — at least, that was what they hoped.

What is it for?

It is a response to humor.

What is humor?

Humor is the juxtaposition of apparently unrelated or conflicting ideas presented as a single theme, or held up in contrast to one another in answer to a previously unconsidered or wholly unlikely question.

That is...incomprehensible to us.

Many of your ways are equally incomprehensible to us. Perhaps it would be better to focus upon those things which we both find comprehensible first.

That would be wise. Why have you sought us out?

We seek common ground. There are life requirements you seek that are difficult for you to fulfill without causing mortal harm to us. We hold you blameless for the harm that has occurred in the past, since you had no knowledge of us as sentient beings. However, this harm cannot be allowed to continue. We understand that the reason behind the harm is the need to reproduce; we are sympathetic to this urge. We believe that we may be able to create viable breeding pods for you using our technologies. This would be of benefit to both of us.

There are other options.

A horrible scene unfolded in the men's linked

minds:

Entire planets turned into slave-camps, where the Morrah kept Terrans, Betazoids, Hali'ians, Tellarites, Bajorans, Deltans, Chalnar, Antareans, and any other iron-blooded species that they could lay their claws and pincers on. That there were hundreds of these, part of or apart from the Federation, who also possessed warmth requirements adequate for the zhin-ga-Morrah's needs, was known to the great horde of aliens that had accessed the minds of the two humanoids at their mercy in these chambers. The Morrah also realized that they could not, of course, do such a thing with impunity; they lacked the requisite technological capacity to achieve that goal in this dimension.

Indeed, there are other options, Colin agreed coldly, and imagined as well as he was able exactly what the *Cairo* and the *Enterprise* could do to this substantial chunk of zhin-ga-Morrah-infested rock. The creatures around them shifted uneasily, and Colin and Shrev shared a flash of mortal fear before Colin overrode it commandingly with the force of his mind, and asked:

Why should it be that destruction should be preferable to mutual understanding? We realize that you are more physically and psionically powerful than us by far; but do you realize how many more of us there are than you, how technologically advanced we are, and

how deeply we loathe captivity, how unwilling we are to accept it?

And the red bloods wouldn't be the only ones you'd have to fight, Shrev added hotly. The vast group of aliens considered this for quite a while.

Why should we trust you? the Morrah spat back, finally.

"They asked me that very question," Shrev whispered in Standard.

That thing I imagined doing, using this planet's star? We could have performed that task and called it finished. But rather than seeking to destroy you, we've come with offers to aid you. We treasure life in all its forms, but are uncertain what your species will accept, or show in return, as a sign of trustworthiness. Among ourselves, there are treaties —

Promises can be broken. There was nothing so bitter known to either man as this thought was bitter.

Another horror unfolded in Colin's mind; he met the *zhin-ga-Charrah*.

Three times the size of the *zhin-ga-Morrah*, three times more powerful, far more heavily armored, the *zhin-ga-Charrah*, like the *zhin-ga-Morrah*, had taught themselves the secret of upright locomotion eons before, freeing their forelegs to evolve into terrible hands, and their eyes to take up the place on their skulls that marked

them for what they were, the top predator on a slender ladder where there was no room for mercy. They cared nothing for *the other*, and they commanded living ships that sailed the tight coils of chaos the way ancient Earth schooners had sailed the waves of Terra's oceans.

One of these ships we stole — it was dying, it died, we mourned it...

In the face of the zhin-ga-Charrah, the zhin-ga-Morrah suddenly appeared as innocuous as so many Terran crickets huddled under a leaf against the onset of rain. The Charrah had made promises to the Morrah, to share dominion. Instead, the close-cousins had attempted, and very nearly succeeded, in inflicting extinction on the zhin-ga-Morrah.

Colin latched onto and expanded on the single concept *we mourned it*. It was the first spark of anything like compassion he had experienced with these creatures.

Our kind also know mourning, and should we have to destroy you for our own survival, still we would mourn that destruction. Alternatively, we could find entire worlds for you to inhabit, and as was noted before, find ways for you to reproduce using our technologies. In return, it would merely be necessary for you to enter into agreements with us, that you will not cause harm to the other sentient races of the galaxy.

You speak for the galaxy?

So, you do comprehend humor. Let me answer with a question; how would your people respond to being treated like disposable egg-cases for an alien race's offspring?

The zhin-ga-Morrah had the good grace to actually think this over. *Understood. But how can we know our needs will be fulfilled?*

Your people and ours will have to work together, in order to develop a viable breeding chamber for you. It will take time. It may not work at first, and the development may be frustrating for all concerned. However, our races are in general not as long-lived as your own, and so it may only seem a little time to you.

Of what benefit is fulfilling our needs to you?

It is of benefit to not be slaughtered to provide a breeding ground for your young. We consider it of benefit to help preserve and defend other sentient races simply for their own sake. And both the new technologies developed through helping you, and your tunneling abilities, could be of great benefit to us, should you choose to work alongside us in any endeavor.

You will be the ones to aid us in this? the zhin-ga-Morrah meant Colin and Shrev. Both humanoids shook their heads in tandem — a meaningless thing to the Morrah.

Others of our people will aid you in this. We are

required elsewhere. We must also devise some way to communicate with you using our technologies, rather than our minds. It is difficult for us to communicate in this manner.

What you call technology confuses us. How can others be trusted?

We are one people, a... a great colony.

Ah, but that is a lie! We have seen that you are different, that some of you can host our eggs and young, while others —

Differences are greatly prized among us.

Why? Is difference not a sign of weakness?

You are different from us. You have strengths we do not. We have strengths you do not. To disparage difference merely for its existence is a folly of the highest degree. True strengths may be discarded along with perceived weaknesses, and should such strengths be necessary later, they will have vanished.

Again, the zhin-ga-Morrah stopped and considered this. It was a new idea to them, and many of them had trouble with the complexity of the thought. They were not emotionally complex creatures, and as much emotion as logic was required to encompass an ideology based not merely upon use, or even symbiosis, but upon tolerance and compassion.

Infinite diversity in infinite combination.

Both men present represented that overarching Federation ideal well. This was one minor thing that convinced the Morrah to seriously consider agreeing to their proposal — and to let them leave the rambling confines of the underground cave complex alive. And yet, when the majority of the Morrah dispersed and Colin turned to Shrev, lost in the enormous cavern-complex without the aid of the other man's unerring sense of direction, some Morrah remained, dead on the glistening geode surfaces, unable, as the first Morrah Colin had mind-melded with had been, to accept what the erstwhile Federation representatives presented to them as a viable option for existence.

Hence, they were unable to continue existing.

Both men shook their heads at the corpses in sorrow. And the other Morrah, a race that communicated only psionically, took note of how the *humanoids* behaved and felt when they believed they were no longer being observed. To some of the Morrah, this mattered.

Chapter Nineteen

"They'd prefer an ice-planet's caves," Colin said, pushing his plate away at last. Between them, the two men had polished off a seven-pound Betazoid fowl, four pounds of mashed potatoes with butter and chives, an equivalent amount of beets and tuber roots braised in coconut oil and spices, a three-gallon tossed salad containing various greens, carrots, peppers, olives, radishes, and garbanzo beans, and an entire *srjula-merengue* pie.

Shrev cast an alarmed glance at his dinner companion. "I don't have one to offer, and I wouldn't if I did," the half-Andorian replied, pulling his tricorder out of its case on his hip, "but that doesn't mean there isn't one they *could* use. I suppose it doesn't much matter to these things what the atmosphere is, does it? We just need to find them somewhere otherwise uninhabited." He began entering information into the little instrument.

Colin shrugged. "Not much. I mean, I'm assuming they'd require a terrestrial planet, but if the space they originally come from is any indication —"

"Here," Shrev interrupted; "Exo Three. Type-P planet with a marginally Class-K atmosphere and little geothermal activity, which is probably why its original

inhabitants died off and nobody else has settled it. Colder than Clorisev Glacier during the Midwinter Climbing Competition, and let me tell you, that's *cold*. Exo already has caves that were dug by the last surviving android inhabitants of the place. In Federation space, too — better and better. We could keep an eye on the creepy-crawlies."

"These things are going to have to somehow convince the Federation that not only will they stay put, but that they'll refuse to be used as weapons against us." Colin shook his head; he was getting ahead of what they were doing here. The two men were still lightly connected psionically; Shrev could feel the tiredness that made Colin's mind want to wander. "They would need to be transported in very small groups, unless they'd agree to put themselves into suspended animation for transport." Colin reached out and ran a forefinger around the inside of the pie tin.

"We can order another one of those, you know. And you also know that the Morrah wouldn't agree to be used as a weapon any more than they'll agree to suspended animation. It's hard to blame them. Surely, they realize that if we could get them into a position to be manipulated like things, or into something like suspended animation, we wouldn't be trying to make concessions with them.

"There are," Shrev consulted his tricorder again, and shook his head at it; "Fifteen hundred and thirty-six living zhin-ga-Morra. If they were taken four at a time, in..." the hybrid man looked up and frowned at the space over Colin's right shoulder for a march of seconds, his antennae twitching slightly, "two separate batches, using Conjunction Ships retrofitted with psychogenic cages to carry them, that would mean we'd need a minimum of *sixteen* separate Federation planets to agree to put up with the horrors for the period of transport. And considering what fascinating horrors these are, and how curious humanoids are in general, I'll bet you we could convince more than just sixteen —"

"Two batches?" Colin cut into the hybrid man's rambling. He realized that if he didn't keep Shrev and himself focused after exhausting physical and mental labor followed by a heavy meal, this conversation might end up anywhere.

"I'm going by how many ships Andor would probably be able to spare; that'd make twelve ships from each Federation planet. Did you want another pie, or will you be satisfied with just eating the baking dish?"

Colin smiled. "I don't think I could manage another entire pie, unless you help me."

Shrev smiled back, then turned in his seat to order one. As he did so, he found himself confronted by a

metal sash of rank belonging to the race whom the people of his homeworld had nicknamed *kinzaa'snai*, rough translation; *bloodthirsty snowbank-weasel*.

The part-Andorian turned precipitously back to his dinner companion. Both Shrev and Colin were now aware that there were, in fact, four Klingons in the room — indeed, standing so close that they were very nearly in the booth.

Even a Klingon knew better than to give an Andorian leg room or vertical advantage. Shrev turned back to Colin, and announced:

"You know the philosophies of deep listening and deep understanding? I like to call this *deep ignoring*."

"You will *not* ignore us, grHT'kOH!" — rough translation; *gutless grasshopper*. "You will tell us if these creatures of which you speak are the ones that we seek!"

Shrev shrugged, and added to Colin, as though the Klingons really weren't there at all; "Or, as my uncle's people would say, *igrilan atlolla*." Rough translation; *talk to the hand*.

Colin lifted a startled eyebrow at his newfound friend. He'd been living in this particular time, in this particular part of the galaxy, long enough to know that there were certain things you didn't put into the same general area without expecting somebody to get badly

torn up. Matter and antimatter, say.

Andorians and Klingons, say.

These Klingons were not in any mood for the Andorian default mode that they called *K'Jun'Pahkt*. The one looming over the table reached down and tried to drag Shrev out of the booth in which the half-Andorian was sitting. The alarmed waitresses, Colin was pleased to note, were busy sending out a call for Ancari law enforcement.

The periwinkle-colored, antennae-sporting hybrid had confided to Colin, earlier, that he'd learned at the age of eight that allowing someone to drag you out of a chair — or out of anything or to anywhere, for that matter — was a very bad idea. Now, Shrev half-rose and sprang in the general direction in which the Klingon was pulling, surprising the man and throwing off his equilibrium.

Colin heard Shrev reflect, in wry Shakespearian silence before the part-Andorian pushed away their psionic link, in order to concentrate on the physical requirements of fighting a brace of Klingons:

What fools these Klingons be.

The moment that he felt his adversary's balance waver, Shrev grabbed the Klingon's sash and helped his precarious balance along immensely by half-crouching, pivoting like a dancer, and letting go. Another thing

Shrev knew was that, when this particular maneuver was used, invariably the person who'd originally laid hands on you let you go, too — either in an instinctive attempt to keep their balance, or expecting, maybe, to be able to stop their fall, neither of which they ever could.

Shrev straightened up and dusted off his hands. The Klingon bowled over a row of four tables and several chairs before coming to rest, head-first, against a stone pillar.

The icy touch of a blade against the left side of the hybrid Andorian's neck kept him from announcing that he'd been hoping for a strike rather than a spare. The now-unconscious Klingon's compatriot moved around to glare at Shrev. Apparently, there was something in the Klingon code of honor that required you face a person whom you intended to kill.

Shrev was obviously unarmed. He was also reasonably sure that he was probably as strong, and certainly more agile, than this particular *qut'luch*-wielding lump of lard. He pulled his head back slightly, so that he didn't have to look at the blade from the bottom of his eyes, then lifted his right hand slowly and flicked a finger off the flat of it, hard.

The delicately tempered steel rang like fine crystal. He didn't seem to be aware that it nicked the skin of his neck as he flicked it away, prompting a trickle of violet-

blue blood from the heavy double-ply of tiny vessels just below the dermis, which gave his skin its unique hue. Shrev had inherited thick, tough Andorian skin; the force and angle the Klingon had used with the blade might have slit a human's carotid artery.

This fact did little to improve the normally congenial man's temper. His voice went as cold and soft as a midwinter snowfall. "Look, friend; unless you want to make this formal, meaning your companions can take your corpse back to Qo'Nos once they've severed the cable I'll make you wear — I won't say around *what* — I suggest you step back and put away your manicure kit."

"Big words for a bladeless *gewmey*," the Klingon spat, pulling the *qut'luch* back and reversing it in his fist in a distinctly unfriendly fashion. The Klingon epithet meant *bug*. Descriptive of slimy blue bloodsucking beetles with long antennae, it was as unflattering a Klingon epithet for *Andorian* as the Andorian epithet for *Klingon* was unflattering.

Klingons had the fortunate habit of telegraphing their unfriendly intentions in blazing neon patterns. Shrev set himself in a position to jump back and catch his opponent's arm, to lock and break the elbow joint. He was, the anxious telepathic and telekinetic man watching these proceedings knew, pretty sure that even a Klingon would let go of a knife right smartly once his

arm was made to bend the wrong way.

Colin had been watching the movement of the knife in the burly man's hand with a concentration that put Shrev in mind of a cat watching a wounded bird. As the half-Andorian expected might happen, before the enraged Klingon could attempt to perform impromptu cardiac surgery on him, the man from Qo'Nos gave a guttural yelp and dropped the blade as though it burned — which, judging by the blisters forming on his palm, it did.

"What did you *do*?" he howled. Klingons Number Three and Four drew their own weapons, including, Colin noted with mounting horror, a shiny-new *mek'leth*.

"*Magic*," Shrev snarled, stepping backwards into a half-crouch and scooping the still-toasty metal hilt of the dropped *qut'luch* into his own more or less blister-resistant palm. Fighting three-on-one with bladed weapons could be a quick trip to hell, but it wouldn't be the first time that the big hybrid Andorian had made, and survived, that particular visit. The Klingons were not unaware of this; they circled the now-armed Andorian wary for their lives. *I guess I'll get ready to heat up more metal*, Colin projected insistently into the part-Aenar's mind. Shrev smiled.

The law enforcement the wait staff had summoned chose that moment to show up. The Ancari guards

possessed both long-and short-range psychogenic manacles. Shrev surrendered the hot knife and raised his hands placidly before they used them on him. Ancari skin was also largely blister-resistant, but the guard Shrev handed the knife to regarded it wide-eyed for a long moment nonetheless, before sliding the blade into his belt.

The Ancari hadn't hesitated to use the psychogenic manacles on the Klingons. "We have told you that it is unacceptable to cause conflict on our planet," the leader of the Ancari guards offered in a mild tone that belied the slow purple flushing of the now-immobile Klingons' faces, which might have been either a sign of mounting rage or of slow asphyxiation. "You are most assuredly not permitted to threaten Federation citizens here. You have left us no option except to incarcerate you."

While frog-marching the conscious Klingons out of the refectory, and calling for a hoverstretcher to carry the unconscious one, Shrev heard one of the Ancari mutter to the Klingon whose hand Colin had wounded, "You are humanoid? Odd; I thought all humanoids possessed a neck."

Shrev laughed and dropped back into his booth in relief, while motioning at the waiter who had come to right the tables; "Triple espresso, heavy sugar, *please*," the hybrid man begged, adding to Colin *sotto voce*, "To

hell with Exo Three, let's just take the Morrah to Rura Penthe." Colin, who had not moved from his own seat, threw Shrev a pawky look.

"Odd," the powerful psion offered his friend, "I thought that being humanoid inferred that one possessed a *brain*. You know, you came awfully close to being an irreparably gory bladeless bug back there."

The garrulous anthropoid sitting across from him, whose forbears had evolved features that occasionally put other humanoid races in mind of arthropods — a convergent evolution that had come into being in order to help them withstand the darkness, heat, and internal planetary pressures which were the only thing that could preserve them from the killing cold of their ice-locked moon's surface — chuckled, but didn't respond immediately.

The waiter returned with the espresso and Shrev drank it down in a long gulp, then sighed and dabbed at his neck with a napkin.

"I just came from a conference with about a thousand ore-crushing aliens whose purpose is to use people as larval sacks, and who are really only stopped from doing that by a severe lack of transportation, and I should suddenly become squeamish because a guy pulls a knife on me? Besides, now the misplaced-vengeance-spitting irritants won't be able to keep us from doing

what needs to be done. Or would you rather be caught between the Klingons and the zhin-ga-Morrah?" Shrev pulled the tricorder toward him and entered data with quivering fingers. He cast a longing glance at the empty espresso cup.

"I think I need another one of those to help calm my nerves. Here, look; there are a good *ninety* races in the Federation who have neither the body temperature nor the blood-metal base the zhin-ga-Morrah prefer in their larval sacks. Surely we could convince sixteen of them to help us?"

Colin grimaced at Shrev. "Why didn't you just tell the Klingons where to find the zhin-ga-Morrah? At the very least, it would have solved our Klingon problem!"

The hybrid man turned in his booth to wave the waiter back over. "Uh-uh," he replied, turning back around. "I couldn't do something like that even to a Klingon, and I'm not at all certain that the zhin-ga-Morrah would be able to tell us apart well enough to not come after *us* in force later. But thank you for the thought. It should exponentially increase the number of nightmares I'm going to have tonight!"

Colin shrugged and smiled. "Isn't that what friends are for?"

Chapter Twenty

The meeting had been scheduled as a casual hour for the senior officers to discuss staff requests in one of the many cozy conference nooks available on an *Excelsior*-class starship.

Seantie's demeanor had assured the rest of them that it wasn't the moment they walked through the door. "What are we going to do about this state of affairs?" the Betazoid laid fanned-out batches of flimsies in front of Josi, Demora, Marco, Rafael, Yaelat, and T'Dani. Should one wish to have unofficially official proof of anything potentially damning, flimsies were the way to go. The other six senior officers bent their heads over the printouts.

The senior science officer poured herself a coffee from the large French press carafe in the middle of the table and ignored the selection of Terran pastries that accompanied it. She was irritated by the entire situation, and so was in no mood to either eat or to engage in pleasantries.

She took a seat and watched thought and emotion flicker over the faces of her fellow officers as they perused the flimsies, which included complex relocation plans, summaries of unofficial meetings with murderous

aliens, Ancari official documents, an outrageous transport-request form whose recipients included nearly a hundred Federation governments, a list of grievances from the ruling council of Qo'Nos that was almost as long as the rest of the document put together, and Seantie's own substantial list of grievances.

Voss didn't attempt to access the emotions of the senior officers gathered around the table. She was certain that they'd be letting her know in short order.

T'Dani paused partway through reading the flimsies and rubbed her eyes. Leaving her face in her hands, she said:

"They could have been killed while doing this."

"It's occurred to me that I'd like to kill them now," Seantie replied acidly. Marco snorted what sounded like laughter, but the senior navigator wasn't smiling; he was paging through the flimsies with a look that might have been either jealousy or disbelief. T'Dani pulled her face out of her hands.

"Tell me that the official documents and the plan for spiriting off large chunks of Betelgeuse Four, at least, were your idea?" the CMO begged. Seantie shook her head slowly and at length.

"Oh, no. This entire scenario's been cooked up by a pair of yeomen under my ostensible management. I only learned about it two hours ago. I'm..." she took a long

swig of coffee. "I'm not certain if I'm more humiliated or angry. I've put in for them to be transferred, preferably away from each other since they're *way* too creative together — if not off the *Enterprise*, then at least the hell out of my hair, because together they constitute about a quarter-ton of grief that I just do *not* need in my life."

"It's a good plan," Josi said dryly, brushing bearclaw pastry fragments off of her hands and her flimsies.

"Transferring the yeomen, or this package they've put together for Starfleet Command?" Demora quizzed.

"The answer to that question is *yes*. This was handed to us for our blessing, I take it. Or have they actually sent the..." Josi bit her lower lip and paused. Seantie let the XO's empathic trace enter her consciousness, and realized that the woman was struggling against roughly twenty different obscene phrases involving humanoid reproduction, elimination, and various combinations of the two.

The XO finally gave up hunting for euphemisms, and rephrased her intended comment instead; "*Please* tell me they haven't sent this thing to Command, and that we're not going to be including a conference-call from some Fleet Admiral or Commodore in this meeting?"

"I chose this room to meet in purposely for its lack of computer access. And they called it a *proposal* when

they dropped it off. *And* they told me in no uncertain terms that the zhin-ga-Morrah and the Ancari both know about it, and both agree to it."

Everyone at the table looked askance at the Betazoid science officer. "They dropped this thing off in *person*?" Yaelat asked. He sounded impressed.

"I suppose dealing with a ticked-off Starfleet officer isn't very much of a much after dealing with about a thousand desperate, toxic aliens and a handful of goaded knife-wielding Klingons," Seantie said, frowning meaningfully at her coffee cup.

"Wow," Demora offered. Seantie looked up from her cup long enough to throw the *Enterprise's* senior pilot a dirty look.

T'Dani bundled her flimsies together and pushed them away; apparently, she hadn't gotten to the Klingon affair yet. She turned to Josi. So did Demora, Marco, Rafael, and Yaelat; EmJay and Mel'Taya, as the most junior officers, had been left in charge of the ensigns who had been called to bridge duty for the interim. Seantie kept her attention focused on her coffee cup.

Rafael tossed his flimsy set onto the table before him and picked up his *espresso con panna*. He couldn't seem to bring himself to meet anyone else's eyes.

"*Alloccoro mettere paglia al fuoco*," the senior engineer muttered into his coffee cup. The XO scowled,

and said:

"This might have a bad situation infinitely worse, but it didn't. We all need to thank whatever gods we imagine might exist for small favors. *I* like this plan; it seems sound. I do *not* like its provenance. Where all of us when this was going on?"

"Not babysitting?" Rafe returned sharply, at last deigning to look the XO in the eyes.

"Unconscious?" T'Dani offered. With the exception of the incensed science officer, the other people at the table busied themselves with chewing and swallowing in a valiant attempt to keep from looking sheepish.

"Not acceptable answers. Do we bless this plan by putting our names on it? Even if we do, I'm leaving the grievances intact, and letting Starfleet know we weren't the ones who came up with the particulars of the plan. The truth hurts. Be aware, people, that we're going to get caught in the backflow if any potential waste matter from this should happen to make contact with anybody's ventilation apparatus."

"That'd happen anyway, when they saw Seantie's transfer requests. I say do it. It's either that or leave some seriously aggrieved aliens on Betelgeuse Four, which I think the Ancari wouldn't thank us for, and we'll probably just be called back to oversee whatever alternate plan Starfleet comes up with, anyway."

Demora reached for the French press carafe and emptied it into her cup.

"The voice of reason sounds. I agree. I do, however, need somebody who was there for at least part of this god-awful escapade to earmark it and send it to Starfleet." The Orion XO crossed her arms over her chest, and added; "It's just too bad there wasn't some sort of actual brevet we could hang the thing on." Josi turned a considering gaze toward T'Dani, who crumbled a chunk off of a spiced tuber-root scone and nibbled at it thoughtfully.

At length, the CMO sighed, picked up her own cup, drained it, and nodded her agreement. "I can do that. I've...well, *met with* isn't the right term, but at least I've *seen* the zhin-ga-Morrah and their living conditions. I might actually be able to make the thing sound..." she made a wry face, "legitimate."

Seantie winced, but remained silent. T'Dani took another bite of the scone, then changed the subject.

"Speaking of the zhin-ga-Morrah, we've figured out what their venom is. It's a heavily-meshed, interlinked chain of sugars, a molecular conformation known as a *Bucky-ball*."

"That's what the captain said, when we were listening to the news of the murders in the shuttle on the way to Betelgeuse Four! She said she thought maybe

there was some sort of fast-acting poison released by the molecule, and that the structure of the molecule might be the only remaining trace of the poison," Seantie interjected. T'Dani raised her brows at the Betazoid.

"At no time will I ever claim that Renee isn't perceptive; sometimes it's scary. Bucky-balls are not conducive to humanoid health at the best of times, and these particular Bucky-balls are both protecting and being irrevocably glued together by an unlikely partner — xenon, which ought to boil out of them at about a hundred and sixty Kelvin."

"Aren't Kelvin and Fahrenheit equivalent at some point above a hundred degrees?" Marco interrupted. He directed the question at Seantie, but it wasn't the Betazoid matron who answered his question, it was the Rafael:

"They're *exactly* equivalent at roughly five hundred and seventy-five degrees. That's the basis of the physics behind an Andorian boiler, which can work using the same mechanisms in vacuum, bariatric pressures, or pretty much any atmosphere. At a hundred and sixty, they're roughly inverse, which should make the xenon boil out of those Bucky-balls at about minus one hundred and sixty Fahrenheit. My question is:

"How is the xenon held in its matrix at nearly a hundred degrees *above zero*?" Rafe said none of this in

Italian, for which Seantie was grateful. Any number of human languages weren't translated by the Universal Translators, since they were considered dominant Terran languages by the makers of UT devices. Italian was one of these.

Everyone at the table looked askance at the *Enterprise's* CMO. The part-Vulcan shrugged expressively and popped the last of the scone into her mouth. Demora chuckled softly, a sound that was no more a signifier of humor than Marco's snort had been earlier, and reached for a cinnamon roll.

"What, you didn't make that part of your study?" Seantie asked T'Dani, her voice heavy with sarcasm.

The doctor swallowed, dusted her hands together, and smiled grimly. "No. My desire was to get rid of the xenon, not determine how it's kept around. Some odd inverse Krebs mechanism holds it in place, I'd guess. *If* such a thing as an inverse glycolysis exists, and if it does, I wouldn't put it past a creature with protein-resequencing molecules like these things have to possess such a capacity. What causes the mental symptoms in the people whom the jin-ga-Morra have gotten hold of, by the way, are these Bucky-balls floating around in the humanoid brain. Shortly, they're huge, hyper-sharp sugar molecules that the humanoid system tries like mad to glycolyse, and fails."

"You have a theory on how to force glucolysis on them?" Seantie's tone was less sarcastic this time.

T'Dani nodded. "The Ancari use bio-nanite technology in some of their medicine. We're working out how to insert super-ionization charges into the bio-nanites, and keep them quiescent until they actually encounter the Bucky-ball venom. Direct, intense ionization should crack the Bucky-balls into tiny pieces that can be metabolized by natural glucolysis, while liberating the inert gas. Something like that ought to work as both a cure and as a vaccine."

"Who are you going to be trying out this interesting theory out on?" Yaelat inquired.

The *Enterprise's* CMO made a face. "We've decided the male humanoids in comas are our best test subjects. If something awry in this theory, or unobservable in the molecular structure of the Bucky-balls, kills them...well, hypothetically they won't know."

"Until the poor guys meet the angels with the harps," Marco supplied irreverently. T'Dani gave him an apologetic look.

"People in comas are sometimes completely aware of their surroundings. And I'm not a fan of in-vivo experimentation, especially on *people*, but what other choice do we have? The dead zhin-ga-Morra's body broke down its own venom stores, not to mention

everything else; analyzing how and why is the way we came up with the super-ionization idea in the first place."

"And if this idea doesn't work?" Seantie pressed. T'Dani bit her lower lip.

"Then we try something else."

As she'd admitted to the other senior officers of the *Enterprise*, T'Dani found it distasteful to use the individuals exposed to the Morrah venom in order to conduct an in-vivo study. However, as that study progressed and the ionic charges carried by the bionanites ultimately freed the individuals who'd been attacked by the aliens of what was thought to be a venom, it was determined that the substance had probably evolved to protect and nourish the fertilized eggs of the zhin-ga-Morrah.

Ancari exobiologists working alongside T'Dani and her medical team theorized that the Morrah injected the substance as a matter of course into their larval sacks — something that the captain of the *Enterprise* had become, for a short while. This was difficult to prove conclusively, but aliens with as complex a body chemistry as the Morrah were probably capable of breaking down the exquisitely complex sugars of the Bucky-balls, possibly slowly enough that the pupae would develop into larvae before that food source ran

out. As larvae, it was possible that they would eat through the fungus that had earlier housed their eggs; this was hypothesized by the team that had worked on a vaccine, because two of the individuals used as brooding chambers had been disemboweled from the inside out. What the larvae became at that point was unknown. T'Dani assumed that an adult Morrah may have come to collect them at that point. She did not care quite as much as the other scientists did about the entomological particulars of the creatures, she just wanted to be able to free Renee from the effects of what was, to humanoids, a maddening toxin.

Renee's psychological incapacitation had been a frightening, pathetic thing to behold. She was terrified of Colin, that much had been plain to the telepath who loved her, and to both T'Dani and Josi, who knew her, if not better than anyone else on the ship, then at least longer. All of them knew her well enough to realize that, when Renee Ingram felt either fear or sadness, her instinctive desire was to express anger instead. She'd long ago learned how to reason her way around this particular not-always-useful, inborn self-protective mechanism. She'd had to; an officer on a starship couldn't afford to have a hair-trigger temper.

Unfortunately, the Morrah venom did not leave anyone who had been injected with it prone to insightful

reasoning.

It had become clear very quickly to the Ancari hospital staff that Renee Ingram posed a hazard to other patients, to herself, and to the psychiatric facility in general. She appeared to feel no pain, while concurrently experiencing unremitting discomfort. Nothing seemed to lessen the pain and discomfort that the Morrah venom inflicted on its conscious victims, and the Ancari had tried everything from synthetic cordrazine to semi-synthetic morphine to minimally processed vieesha serum in attempt to mediate that discomfort. For the sedative settings of corticostimulators to have any effect, the women who had been attacked by the zhin-ga-Morrah first needed to be strapped down. None of the victims of the venom would tolerate casual touch or the presence of medical equipment otherwise.

Likewise, any attempt to comfort Renee's ceaseless weeping brought on sudden violent episodes, during which she would attempt to injure her caregivers. When she was alone, the presence of obviously male humanoids, and particularly of Colin, would cause her to cower in the smallest corner or niche available, and rend her own flesh with her nails and teeth. Which, the Ancari decided within her first few days in their psychiatric ward, wasn't necessarily an improvement

upon the fact that, when she was subjected to the same situation in a public room, she would attempt to rend everyone else within reach.

And she screamed. In defiance and anger and fear and frustration and utter horror, Renee Ingram screamed.

It was to a forcibly tranquilized creature, whose encased hands and feet were bound tightly to a bed fashioned of nothing harder than foam rubber, in a room whose walls and floors were neurogenically formulated to give absolutely no resistance but possessed the capability to cling and hold, sort of an Ancari version of a Tar Baby, that T'Dani administered Ingram's final dose of the ionized bio-nanite vaccine, in conjunction with a mild dose of stimulant.

She knew what Renee could be like. Renee's adoptive parents, having lost two small children of their own in an air car accident, and subsequently unable to have any more biological children, had been stringently overprotective of their adopted daughter. By the time Renee had reached her eighth birthday, however, they had learned that this stance would have to be altered, both for Renee's safety and for their own sanity.

Constantly monitored, Renee had learned how to evade her caregivers by the time she could walk. Not allowed to learn to swim with the rest of her preschool class, Renee Ingram taught herself this skill by escaping

to the local pool one sultry summer day, scampering up the high dive, and jumping off.

"I figured," she'd explained to T'Dani once, many years later, "that either I'd swim, or a lifeguard would come get me."

It became progressively more difficult for her parents to find what they considered adequate childcare; few who truly attempted to rein in their headstrong daughter chose to attempt it more than once. Not allowed to learn to ride a bike like other seven-year-olds, Renee Ingram stole a bike, and taught herself to ride it in the traffic and on the sidewalks of Pan-dar City, where she was living with a nanny who contacted her parents (offworld at the time). The patient Denobulan/Deltan woman had, finally, helped Renee's parents understand that Renee was the sort of individual who would do whatever it was that she set her mind to, or possibly perish trying — and that perhaps it would be better to find ways by which Renee could challenge herself without scaring the life out of everyone and breaking things.

Corrigan removed the sedating cortical stimulator from her best friend's forehead.

Ingram's eyes were wild when she first opened them. As the *Enterprise's* CMO expected she might, she struggled against the soft straps that held her. Like

Chinese finger puzzles, these tautened in response to her attempts to pull away. The fear, impatience, and rage in her eyes morphed, as she fought against the gentle restraints, into confusion and alarm and irritation. Finally, she quit struggling and focused on T'Dani.

"Where am I?" she whispered, her voice a raw husk. "What is this place?"

"You're in a hospital on Betelgeuse Four. What do you remember?"

Renee tried to swallow, and largely failed. Her throat clicked. "I... I think I was...playing chess? And... was I drunk? What did I do? T'Dani, I'm so thirsty!"

T'Dani drew a deep, relieved breath; rationality and thirst had been the signs, in everyone given the medication prior to Renee, that daily successive injections of ionized nanites were successfully breaking down the Morrah venom. If these symptoms did not manifest within the first fifteen minutes of a victim rising to consciousness after roughly two weeks of injections, painful, convulsive death inevitably followed, as had happened to three other patients inoculated with the ionizing vaccine. The other dozen, however, were well on their way to complete recovery.

A seventy-five percent success ratio was too low for most physicians to accept, and T'Dani, if given the choice, would have chosen to wait until the reasons for

the three deaths were understood, before administering the vaccine to Renee. But Starfleet Command overrode that hesitation when, not long after the medical team had begun their inoculations, an uninoculated woman in another psychiatric ward (a Betazoid who, according to her psychiatric record, had been one of the first iron-blooded humanoids attacked by the zhin-ga-Morra), died from complications of the venom itself.

The cause of that death wasn't hypothetical at all. The large, sharp molecules that caused the psychosis had finally caused enough cumulative vascular damage to irreparably shred numerous fine arteries in her brain. That the Betazoid brain was far more highly vascularized than a human's had meant nothing to Starfleet; they had wanted Captain Ingram vaccinated, and immediately. Corrigan had no choice but to comply.

T'Dani reached out and smoothed her friend's tangled, greasy hair back from her face. "You didn't do anything. Things were done to you. Let's get you comfortable. I'm afraid you've got some heavy reading to slog through, when you're up to it."

Chapter Twenty-One

Renee didn't read the mass of information (legal, scientific, medical, sociopolitical, intergalactic, and just generally plaintive) scattered among six disposable compadds only once; she read it through twice. Her two most senior officers, who had taken it upon themselves to present all of it as an emergency-request broadcast to the Federation Council via Starfleet Command, sat quietly beside the bed in one of the four private rooms the main *Enterprise* sickbay possessed. Even confined by the ordeal she'd just undergone to monitored bed rest for the next few days, Renee had demanded to take that rest aboard her ship.

"We thought the plan seemed sound," Josi offered softly. T'Dani heaved a great sigh and nodded in agreement with the XO.

The captain of the *Enterprise* shrugged and leaned her head back against the pillow of the raised biobed, closing her eyes. The breakdown of the zhin-ga-Morrah venom made an individual intensely ill, which was the reason for the bed-rest requirement in sickbay. This illness was due to a combination of the liberated xenon, and the heavy ionization required to break down the venom, both of which could really only be cured the old-

fashioned way; with heavy doses of inapropaline, phytonutrients, and rest.

"I probably would have made many of the same choices," Renee admitted; "not, mind you, antagonizing the Klingons. The zhin-ga-Morraha stand in danger from them, and vice-versa, should the citizens of Qo'Nos get wind of what we're planning here. Most of the High Council is unlikely to be sympathetic to the fact that one of its erstwhile allies has come to the aid of creatures that've murdered its citizens." The captain sighed, thought a moment, and added:

"Josi, I'll need to you contact Ambassador Kage and read him into this, even if the Federation Council's already done it. I want to know that he, or at least a representative he trusts, will be *here* while the transfer of these aliens is going on. Somebody with authority of some sort in the eyes of the Klingons whom the Ancari have in custody should cool matters down, as long as they're present.

"I might also have sent every telepath available on the *Enterprise* into the tunnels as a group, assuming safety in numbers, but from what I'm reading here, these aliens might have been alarmed enough at a large group of humanoids invading their tunnels that they'd have attacked first, and not asked questions at all." She sighed again and opened her exhaustion-smudged eyes.

"Have Starfleet and the Federation Council gotten back to you yet?"

"They have. They've both accepted our agreement with the plan, in lieu of yours. For my part, I'm just glad you're well enough now to give any opinion on this, or anything!" Josi replied.

"Colin and Shrev are all right?"

"They're fine. We did get an eyes-only message from Starfleet for you. I'm assuming it's about that particular issue." Josi handed Renee an electronically locked compadd. "The Ancari wanted to meet with me this afternoon about something, probably also this issue."

Renee looked away from the 'padd and at her XO. "That's fine, Josi. You're dismissed. I'll let you know what this is about later, and you can let me know what Kage and the Ancari authorities have to say."

Josi nodded and took her leave. Ingram opened the locked compadd with a retinal scan that made her head pound, scanned the contents of the 'padd briefly, then shook her aching head.

It wasn't an *Enterprise* first-contact list, as much as it read like one. Renee hoped that this mind-wandering headache-tendency the medication she was currently on would dissipate, preferably sooner rather than later. "Well, Colin and Shrev might not be so all-right once I

get finished looking at *this*."

It seemed that her two wayward yeomen had roped the Ancari, the Andorians, the Benzites, the Boliars, the Bynarii, the Denobulans, the Efrosians, the Frunalians, the Gree, the Huanni, the Jornah, the K'Normiana, the Kreetasani, the Prinosians, the Squib, the Tamarians, the Tesnians, the Vulcans, and the Zyrellians into sending Conjunction vessels to Betelgeuse Four in order to act as zhin-ga-Morrah movers. And scientists from five of those worlds — the Vulcans not least — made it plain in their response that they were more than eager to work out how to solve the insectile aliens' reproductive problem.

Renee wasn't even certain whether the metaphorical ink was dry on the documentation that made the Frunalians Federation members. She handed the compadd to T'Dani before her friend got around to asking her what it was.

T'Dani was unfazed. "Yes, I know; I *did* authorize this, if somewhat after the fact. Nevertheless, it appears that I'm going to have to find a lot more work for these boys to do — they have entirely too much time on their hands. Which reminds me; Seantie doesn't want to oversee them anymore. Direct quote, *because together they constitute about a quarter-ton of grief that I just do not need in my life*, end quote."

"And you're wanting to haul that quarter-ton around? Don't you put in enough time at the gym?" Ingram inquired, while attempting to stretch the tension out of her neck.

"Seantie can't kill them by snapping her fingers. I'm thinking that awareness of such an ability in their manager might lead to some sort of domestication, eventually."

Ingram had known the doctor for nearly thirty years and was hardly surprised that T'Dani would find the prospect of being the direct supervisor of an Andorian individual to be a great honor. T'Dani Corrigan was a confirmed ghelnophile — though she'd never, to her credit, hung out in Federation bars on Andoria, as some were known to do, hoping for the chance at an interesting inter-species liaison. A liaison which ghelnophiles usually found, Andorians being nothing if not... *friendly*, in that particular way.

The day T'Dani hoped for a liaison with anybody or anything would be the day that the gas-giant Andor lost its rings and the ice-moon of Andoria thawed. The part-Vulcan woman had undergone a grueling experience, very early in her life, which she associated, rightly or wrongly, with intimate contact. Ingram sighed.

"I'm already helping Shrev with some of his microbiological research," T'Dani divulged.

Renee raised an eyebrow, then wished that she hadn't attempted that complicated maneuver. "Go schizophrenic for a while and you miss out on everything. How, exactly, did this come about?"

Corrigan shrugged. "I accidentally threw away an experimental portion of his research; he'd put it in the anteroom of the main sickbay, and nobody thought to clear it with me. It wasn't particularly savory-looking research, so I tossed it in the biohazard replicator chute. In any case, some of the methodology he uses is the same as the arcane stuff Sphiph Doliv taught us after you came back with Colin, so I volunteered. It puts me in exactly the right position to oversee him, so again, I'm volunteering."

Renee was apt to tease people she liked, and she did so now. "Yeah, you just want your own captive Andorian, Doctor Corrigan."

T'Dani flushed, probably from the insinuation inherent in the terrible rhyme. Ingram couldn't recall ever having seen her friend perform that particular biological function before. "Half-Andorian, actually," Corrigan clarified.

The captain of the *Enterprise* goggled. "Say...again? I've never..." she shook her head, nonplussed. "And half *what*? Wouldn't they have had to do something like that in a test tube?"

"Human. And Andorians can't be successfully incubated in-vitro. His parents were killed on Cestus Three by the Gorn."

Now Renee sat upright, ignoring the incipient migraine flashes that speared their way across her vision as she did so. "*Shrev* is the...? Let me get this straight; the vaunted *lone* survivor of the Gorn attack on Cestus Three is a yeoman on my ship, and he and Colin just went and did..." she motioned with both hands at the compadds covering her sickbed, "*this*?" Ingram was floored. Somebody like that was apt to pull T'Dani significantly far from her exquisitely narrow comfort zone. "You're certain that managing this fellow is something you really want to do?"

Of course, Renee mused, this might also lead to some sort of domestication. Eventually.

T'Dani shrugged. "I told you I'm volunteering, but of course, the final choice is up to you. Seantie also suggests that he and Colin..." she paused and frowned; "well, that Colin and Shrev be transferred to different ships."

"So does Starfleet, but they're leaving that up to me. Would you, by any chance, have something for an inapropaline-fueled migraine?"

T'Dani flushed again, then turned and walked toward the Ancari replicator to retrieve the requested

medication. "It makes sense that Starfleet Command might think that," Renee's CMO replied, finally, her back still turned. "But it's not a decision you should try to make right now. You need to rest and recuperate." She lifted the hypospray the replicator produced, returned to Ingram's bedside, and pressed the hypospray's injector against Renee's right carotid. As the shuttlecraft that had landed on her head, neck, and shoulders took off into a stratosphere far, far away, the captain of the *Enterprise* smiled. "Can I get you anything else?"

"About a gallon of mineral water, and I have the most unbearable longing for pistachio ice cream. I also need to know the itinerary for the zhin-ga-Morrah pickup. I want to meet the things that nearly killed me, and I want to make damn certain that we have some sort of enforceable strategy against them, should we require it. And has the entire Expo been dismantled?"

Corrigan shrugged. "Relocated, for the time being. Why?"

"Check to see where the sellers of a creature called *gorzari* are. Seantie doesn't know this, but sometime within the next week, before the first Conjunction Ships get here, she wants a report from Colin regarding the *gorzari*'s sentience or lack thereof, their cultural habits or lack thereof, and proposals for their protection, should they turn out to be so much as sentient-emergent."

"Or lack thereof?" T'Dani grinned. Renee shook her delightfully pain-free head.

"Actually, I have a feeling that sentient-level protection will be warranted. There are even some literal animals that legally possess that protection, because their needs are so wildly at odds with the behavior of some humanoids."

"Really? Which ones?"

"The Drella of Alpha Carinae Five is really the only one I know about, but there are probably more. Be aware that Seantie does *not* want Colin to so much as step away from the gorzari until that report's finished. Seantie also wants Yeoman Th'raess'Aen restricted to quarters. Specifically, his own personal, private quarters. The ones aboard the starship *Enterprise*. Make that very, very clear to him, and do it in public, or I've the feeling that he'll manage to inveigle that order to have a whole bunch of different meanings."

T'Dani smiled. "I believe you're right about that. I also wasn't aware that Lieutenant Voss was so busy."

"From what you tell me, she's pretty irritated, but she hasn't been relieved of the management of these two, much as she might like to pretend that she has been. Send her in here the first chance you get, with the latest Conjunction itinerary."

The blonde woman made a wry face. "Yes, Captain.

I think the Kreetasani and the Vulcans are scheduled to be the first to send Conjunction Ships for the zhin-ga-Morrah, and I don't think the Morrah have signed or formally entered into any sort of agreement with the Federation yet."

Renee drew a sibilant breath, then let it out in a whoosh. "I want to be there when they do, Commander. And, damn it all, Colin and Shrev will need to be there, too."

T'Dani grinned. "See? Shrev doesn't even need to be anywhere around in order to manage to get out of being confined to quarters. And for reasons which logically escape me, that reminds me; Colin's working on some sort of psionic translation device to use with the zhin-ga-Morrah, so that he doesn't have to live with the things for the rest of his life."

"Now, *there's* an idea. Think he'd miss me? Ah, well, a psionic translator is an excellent idea; it'll also give him another avenue by which to communicate with the gorzari. Tell Seantie that I want to know how close he is to having a working prototype when she comes to give me that Conjunction Ship itinerary."

"She won't like that."

"She's still Colin's manager, and it's not a request." Colin had been requesting to see Renee nearly every hour on the hour since she'd been beamed up from

Betelgeuse Four and deposited into this private sickbay room, which hosted powerful working telepathic dampers in its walls that Colin himself had installed.

Several other areas of the ship, including the bulkheads of the suite she and Colin shared, also possessed such dampers. The captain of the *Enterprise* was grateful for this setup. She wasn't prepared at this point for such a meeting – not because she feared him any longer, but because she was sorely angry with him – and had suggested to the communications officers of all shifts that Colin be taught the word *denied* in all Federation languages. "How are the rest of the people who were attacked by these things doing?"

"The medication's not quite eighty percent effective as a cure. No idea how it might work as a vaccine."

Ingram reopened her eyes and offered her CMO a somber look. "I'll try my best to make sure it never needs to work as a vaccine. I'll want all the Conjunction crews who'll be carting these aliens around inoculated with it, regardless." She made a face, adding, "You know, I was incapacitated by one of these things, and I *still* don't know what they look like?"

Corrigan pulled out her own tricorder and manipulated its command interface for a few seconds. "Here," she handed the instrument to Renee.

Renee took one look at the screen and winced.

"*Insectile* is a blatantly kind description of these things. Did the planetary governments who volunteered Conjunctions for this mission get sent a copy of *this*?"

T'Dani nodded. "I did make certain that they knew what they were getting into before we signed them on. I went with Shrev into the caverns the first time."

Ingram, at a loss for words, gaped at her CMO for the third time in an hour. "*You...?* Never mind. I'm very proud of you for facing down your fears like that. It'll help inspire me," Renee took another look at the physician's tricorder screen, at the alien horror that had tried to use her as an incubator, "to handle mine."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Colin responded to the order to come to the captain's ready-room four days later with some trepidation. "You'd *better* have been bothering me with requests to meet in order to tell me that psionic translator prototype I wanted in order to talk to the zhin-ga-Morrah will be ready for testing, Yeoman," she greeted him coldly, ushering him inside and motioning him to a seat.

Colin knew better, at this point in his life, than to smile. She'd refused to see him until now, pending...something. A Starfleet tribunal. A formal reprimand. A good, stern talking-to. Colin wasn't actually sure. He was just happy to see her healthy and sane; anything else, he figured, would work itself out in time:

"It's ready, and it works well with the gorzari. Which is a good sign, because they're not just sentient. They've got vastly more interspecies intelligence than the Morrah, but they're easily as alien to us as the Morrah are."

Renee took a seat behind her desk without offering him any refreshment, as she was usually wont to do. A telepathic damper glittered violet-blue behind her right ear. "You do recall that I mandated a report on this

subject? And if they're really sentient —"

Colin interrupted her before she got a chance to ask him seven questions all at once, rather than one at a time. He hadn't slept in a couple of days and didn't think he was up to dealing with that particular habit of hers right now. "The report was the easy part. Do you want to read the entire five hundred pages, Captain, or would you like it summarized?"

"Fine. Why, exactly, would a *sentient* species desire to be traded all over the galaxy by lifeforms alien to it?"

"Because they've lost the capacity to travel throughout the galaxy for themselves. Apparently, their ancestors possessed that ability some incomprehensible time ago. According to themselves, they're not originally even from this galaxy at all; they say they came from *otherwhen*. Their history, which since they've allowed themselves to lose their forebears' technologies utterly, is really more of a myth —"

The captain of the *Enterprise* held up a restraining hand. "Why would the gorzari wish to lose their ancestral technologies?"

"You know," Colin replied gently, "this would go a lot faster if we took off these dampers." He patted the one behind his left ear lightly with the tip of one finger.

Renee shook her head. She knew quite well that Colin had difficulty perceiving telepathic or empathic

energies through multiple dampers. "Not currently possible, Yeoman."

Colin sighed and rubbed at his face; his eyes itched with fatigue. "I knew you were angry at me."

"You also know there will be times that I absolutely have to put the ship or the crew or the mission before my personal feelings. And you are required to do the same. If you find that difficult, that's not my issue." She frowned; "I actually should have listened to you in the first place, though considering that I was more or less trapped in a room with the thing, it probably would have attacked whether I attempted to get away from it or not.

"Now, *why* did the gorzari choose to embrace a belief that would limit their capacity to interact with other sentient species on an equal level?"

"According to what the gorzari believe is more truth than myth, the technologies of their forebears did indeed allow them to interact with other species, but not as equals. The Ancient Ones, which is what they call their ancestors, were militaristic and sadistic in the extreme, and the modern gorzari have conflated that behavior with their predecessors' technological expertise.

"What's that human saying — throwing the baby out with the bathwater? It's a cruel saying, Riana, much as the gorzari believe that their forebears were cruel. According to the most learned of the gorzari, their

Ancient Ones had technology so powerful that it allowed them intergalactic and even inter-dimensional travel at will. Their legends suggest that the forbears of the gorzari still rule most of galaxy M-31."

"This is a legend that you believe to be grounded in fact? That inch-long, multicolored, telepathic *squid* hold a galaxy in thrall?"

"These legends are the basis of modern gorzari culture, Riana. That the gorzari are quite formidably psionic is not by any means a legend. I don't doubt that they may have some of the same neurogenic capacities as the zhin-ga-Morrah and, if they were of a mind to, might appear in whatever form they wished."

"And you're telling me that sentient beings like this are only too happy to be carted around the galaxy to be sold as *pets*?"

"They're sold to humanoids who love them, and who introduce them to the new experiences they crave. They live for the experience of love, and for the love of experience; it's why they shunned their destructive ancestral technologies in the first place."

Ingram shook her head in disbelief. "And that's *enough* for them?"

It was enough to make me want to come with you, and you consider me to be formidably psionic ran through Colin's mind. He determined not to go there.

Instead he explained:

"They choose with whom and where to go. In this way, they receive the affection and the experiences that they desire, usually as a family or clan unit. You are aware that Seantie's acquired nineteen gorzari, all of them friends and relations of each other? It's gotten about that she's taking them aboard a Federation Starship, and another thirty-six are clamoring to go. You'll have to give over one of the shuttle bays for them, the way you did for Mel'Taya."

"Yeah, sure. And we can start towing the shuttlecraft behind us on a long rope. So, is what you're saying that the gorzari actively manipulate people's feelings, in order to *force* people to take them where they wish?"

"In a matter of speaking, yes. Didn't I, after all, manipulate your feelings in order to make you take me where I wish?" well, there, it came out anyway. Colin rubbed his eyes again.

The beautiful woman wearing the captain's pips scowled at him. "I prefer to think not," she replied crisply.

Colin chuckled. "Or vice-versa. Isn't that a great deal of what sentients do, anyway? The gorzari would tell you that at least they're not taking over entire solar systems and turning anything they don't want or need in

those systems into space dust, as was the modus operandi of their predecessors. They take great delight in meeting and interacting with the other sentient species of the galaxy, and sharing their experiences." Colin smiled. "They figured *you'd* understand that motivation."

"*Me?*"

Colin shrugged. "Or, I suppose, any starship captain."

The captain of the *Enterprise* heaved a great sigh. "Colin, I need to know, in all honesty; are these damned zhin-ga trustworthy? And to what extent?"

Colin lost himself in thought for a long moment. "They're concerned about our trustworthiness, too. I'm hoping that a working psionic translator interface will increase their trust, but..." he licked his lips, and chewed on the lower one for a second. "They aren't terribly cognizant of what our technology entails. That's the greatest weapon we currently hold against them. *If* we get their okay to install translators in or on them somewhere, I'd strongly suggest ameliorating those translators with auto-transport traces, or something similar that would give us some sort of ultimate control over them."

"Wouldn't they be able to recognize the presence of duplicity in the minds of whoever installed those

translators?"

"Not if we have mind-blind people perform the installation, say the Ancari or the Huanni or —"

"I'm assuming that the zhin-ga-Morrah are already aware that we fear them?"

"Completely. But here's the thing; they fear us, too."

"So, what we're really playing with here is a detente of fear, what pre-World War Three Terran governments termed *mutually-assured destruction*? In that case, just demonstrating to the things that we can make such items as psionic translators should prove to them that we have the tactical advantage in this..." Renee shook her head, "what, *dimension*? They actually come from another *dimension*?"

"They come from one of the interstitial spaces between dimensions. Please don't ask me to describe what that means, because I'm going to have to study the concept before I'm entirely clear about it myself. I haven't found the time to do that, just lately. And yes; until trust is established, a detente of fear is pretty much what the Federation will be dealing with, when it comes to the zhin-ga-Morrah.

"Our ability to produce psionic translators should be enough to convince them that we'd be able, ultimately, to produce the other technology we promised them, so that they'd never need to attack us again. That's what I'm

really hoping for when we meet with them."

"And should they come to comprehend our technology, and make use of it against us for reasons of their own?"

Colin frowned. "They *do* appear to operate somewhat like the insects that they seem to be where major decisions are concerned, Riana. The ones that disagree with the main mass have expressed their disagreement thus far by killing themselves, which tells me that there's not much room for dissent among them."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"If they turn against us, they'll do it en-masse. I don't envision two or three of them turning privateer. If they agree to our terms, they'll do that en-masse as well. At least as far as I know at this point. Does that help?"

"Not much."

"Not much is pretty much what we're working with. But nobody else has been attacked, or even approached."

"Probably because no one else is *there*. I just do not trust these things! I'll be meeting with you and Shrev together just before we leave for the conference with the Morrah. Colin, if the zhin-ga-Morrah decide to attack en-masse —"

Colin scowled; his face felt tight. "They haven't killed us yet. What is that human saying? Don't

purchase concern?"

Renee's facial expression morphed into something directly between a smile and a grimace. "What John Harriman used to say to me; *don't buy trouble*. Damn, I wish he was here to do this instead of me!"

Colin reined back an urge to smile and took her extremely sensitive revelation as a sign that Renee hadn't decided to wholly throw her trust in and love of him into the nearest replicator chute.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The ship's executive officer stood at ease in one corner of Ingram's ready room, as the two wayward yeomen filed in and stood at attention at her command. The captain was at ease at her desk.

"*Gentlemen.*" Renee didn't smile; this wasn't a smiling occasion, and its contents were being recorded for transmission to Starfleet. "I have some colorfully-detailed reports here, which state that both of you are in extreme violation of your tenure as yeomen aboard the *Enterprise*, to wit:

"You both knowingly overrode direct orders given by immediate supervisors. You both deliberately perjured yourselves regarding your whereabouts in a mortally dangerous situation. You both presented legal documents to individuals on this ship with intent to defraud by misrepresenting the provenance of those documents.

"In so doing, you both sought to use the Federation Starship *Enterprise* for functions of which no officer aboard had been apprised. Furthermore, given no authority in the matter whatsoever, you misrepresented yourselves as legal representatives of the United Federation of Planets to a wholly unknown sentient

species recognized as a threat to humanoid life."

Captain Ingram rose and walked around her desk to stand facing the two men standing at attention before her. It had taken actual training — it was given to all female Starfleet officers, and to certain male ones as well — to overcome cultural or innate behaviors that wanted to arise when faced with the necessity to command bull-necked, broad-shouldered, occasionally belligerent individuals. This could be particularly tricky when those individuals were larger than oneself, attractive to oneself, or both.

The trick was to attempt to set aside all subjective opinion, positive and negative, and view them as inanimate objects, like boulders or mountains, things that could be disassembled at need. Renee focused the bulk of her attention on the part-Andorian boulder for the time being. "Have I left anything out?" she snapped.

To her well-concealed amazement, they actually thought about the question.

"Captain. Permission to speak?" Colin said.

Renee nodded tersely. "Permission granted."

"I went over my direct supervisor's head to Commander Felingaili in order to gain initial access to the mind of the creature that attacked you, Captain," he volunteered.

Renee gave another terse nod. "That's also in the

report. Mr. Th'raess'Aen?"

"Captain, we gave the same misrepresented legal documents to the crew of the *Cairo*. We thought we might need their help, Captain. Also, we approached fifty separate Federation worlds as authorized representatives of Starfleet to request their help with the *zhin-ga-Morra*. Captain."

The *Cairo* remained moored near the *Enterprise* at the Ancari Docking Station (Federation Station Nine), because Renee hadn't entirely given up on the idea of beaming five cubic miles of *Morra*-infested real estate into the system's primary star, and two starships minimum would be required to pull off such a feat, should it prove itself necessary.

"Indeed. And do you regret these actions, Mr. Th'raess'Aen?"

"No, sir, I do not," the hybrid man replied, "I would perform them again, Captain."

Ingram narrowed her eyes and turned her glare from Shrev to Colin. He shook his head marginally.

"No, sir, I do not," Colin replied to her unasked question. Captain Ingram walked slowly away from them and back around to the other side of her desk but didn't sit. It made her feel ridiculous to be termed a *sir* by her own lover, a lover that Command certainly knew that she had, but propriety or decorum or some damned

thing was what it was, and refused to be outmoded.

"You *are* aware that I have the authority to actively commission both of you to cadet status whether you want it or not, and then fully court martial you?" Renee's made her voice as cold as she possibly could.

"Yes, Captain," both yeomen caroled. No one present was wearing a psionic damper, and Renee was gratified to both hear and feel trepidation in Colin's response. Shrev's voice was a soft, flat monotone which, in an Andorian, might signify either trepidation or rage.

"And *still* you don't regret your actions?" she challenged.

"Not at all, sir," Shrev replied. Colin added; "No, Captain."

Honor is a thing that you give to yourself, Renee thought. She didn't smile, though she wanted to. "Starfleet proposes that I dismiss you both from the *Enterprise*, but has left the final decision in the matter up to me. Your honesty reflects well on both of you, and makes me believe my decisions are the right ones."

Ingram opened a drawer of the antique desk, motioned Josi forward, and handed her two small boxes. "However, allow me to clarify a few things before we conclude this interview;

I've got signed and sealed authorizations to transfer you, Colin, to the Federation Starship *Republic*, and you, Mr.

Th'raess'Aen, to Starbase Seven for the remainder of your tenures as free yeomen in Starfleet. I need both of you to understand that, should *either* of you, alone or as a unit, perform a single fraudulent or unauthorized activity while working as non-commissioned free yeomen aboard *Enterprise* again, I will, with prejudice aforethought, put those authorizations into effect for *both* of you.

"In the esteemed opinion of the Federation Council, this escapade of yours has succeeded *only* because the Federation and its Star Fleet is a success, the fact that either or both of you might have been slaughtered at any point in its execution notwithstanding. I have entered both of you into extended parole with Starfleet, and you will need to conduct yourselves accordingly from this time forward." She glared from Colin to Shrev as she said this. Making one's behavior contingent upon the other's behavior should act as a self-reinforcing noose on both of them, or so the captain of the *Enterprise* hoped.

Transfer me wherever you like, Riana, but I'd die before I'd let you come to harm.

"*Am I absolutely clear?*" Renee pushed Colin's telepathic announcement away mentally and cut into it vocally, lowering the pitch and increasing the volume of her sweet, vibrant voice, thereby consciously turning it

into a cudgel.

"Yes, Captain!" both men replied smartly.

Without another word, and without relieving Colin and Shrev from the stiff, aching poses of attention they held, Captain Renee Ingram marched out of the room.

Josi came forward to stand in front of the two men. She shook her head at them. She had a little trouble keeping a straight face while doing this; her own instincts didn't incorporate scowling up into the faces of attractive male individuals. She, too, needed to fall back on Starfleet Boulder Training. "Ms. Voss wants very little more to do with either of you, frankly, and I don't blame her.

"She has withdrawn her patronage from both of you. Fortunately, Lieutenant Commander Corrigan has been kind enough to volunteer hers; from this time forward, you are to report all of your activities directly to her. Is this understood?"

"Yes, Commander," both men snapped.

Shrev's face had gone as still and cold as the glaciers, snow-tundra, and ice-moraines that covered much of the surface of the large moon his *shen's* people called *Fesoan*, except where rich and cold — or boiling and lifeless — seas surged, and in a thin band of flora- and fauna -rich muskeg swamp girdling the moon's

equatorial region.

Andorian scientists had painstakingly collected ancient Terran bones and museum specimens, and in the deceptively desolate place the Federation called *Andoria*, they ultimately brought the once-extinct Emperor penguin, orca, harp seal, ribbon seal, and polar bear back to life. They had presented these as gifts to Terra not long before the commissioning of the *Enterprise B*, and were aiding human polar scientists in reforming healthy environments in the Arctic and Antarctic regions of Earth for the animals. This came to the forefront of Josi's mind as she gazed at the half-Andorian yeoman, because the latest news to come of that endeavor was that Shrev wasn't such a unique specimen anymore.

"Hold out your hands," Josi insisted, without preamble. Both of the men still standing at attention regarded her warily, but did as they were commanded. She slapped the boxes she held into them hard enough to sting Shrev's palm and bruise Colin's. Neither man made a sound.

"I've been ordered to present each of you with a Prentares Ribbon of Commendation," she continued tartly; "This, basically, is the award given to overconfident individuals for performing reckless acts which, in retrospect, were too dangerous or unlikely to ever have been recommended, tend to involve large

numbers of other people who doubtless have better things to do, and which work out in the end way better than anybody deserves." The *Enterprise's* executive officer shook her head at them at length. "Dismissed!" she snapped finally. She didn't give in to the grin that had been lurking at the edges of her mouth until the door had closed behind them.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The information Seantie had brought to Renee the week before had included Federation and Starfleet instructions regarding just exactly what would be wanted from the zhin-ga-Morrah in this alarming affair. Renee hadn't been able to reply to it with any sort of surety, therefore she hadn't replied. After all, she didn't personally know what sorts of constraints the Morrah would be willing to accept, or what sorts of agreements they would be willing to enter into. She wouldn't be able to respond until after this meeting had been concluded.

Hopefully the jin-gah-Morrah would show up to the meeting. Colin and Shrev had entered the Morrah caverns one more time, with Colin's newly developed psionic translation devices in tow, to determine this eventuality. Renee was worried for Colin's safety, but he and Shrev were the only choice when it came to communicating with the aliens.

The meeting itself, Ingram learned when she walked into the chamber specifically created for it by the Ancari, would include not two, but four Federation Conjunction Ship groups: the Ancari, the Kreetasani, the Vulcans, and the Zyrellians. Command decisions and fate had turned these particular groups, the first to show up and so the

ones who would take part in Renee's meeting with the zhin-ga-Morrah, into impromptu Federation ambassadors to the Morrah for the duration of this conference.

She should, Renee thought wryly, have already figured out that the Ancari would naturally be there, but the Zyrellians, who had been allies of the Ancari long before there was a United Federation of Planets, were a surprise. The Vulcans and Kreetasani were already ensconced in their seats, while the Ancari were acting as armed guards and the Zyrellians, having been confined to a bariatric chamber for the last hour, were just getting settled.

The people attending the meeting from the Zyrellian conjunction ship — captained by a colonel, according to the man's insignia — were wearing portable rebreathers such as the Benzites had once been wont to wear. They would require an oxygen/krypton atmosphere for only a short time on h'Nca, and had logically declined implants. The Ancari had been able to provide all of the accoutrements and necessities that the colonel and the adjutants sent with him (security officers all) required.

Zyrellians were as friendly as the Ancari, and rather more outgoing; the brilliantly green-eyed colonel waved happily across the conference chamber at Renee as she entered the room. Ingram returned the greeting. Neither

the Ancari nor the Zyrellian people had experienced the level of social upheaval and consequent extreme cultural alterations that the other races present had been privy to. Ingram took her seat and looked out over the other individuals present on the large, stepped dais that constituted the Federation Conjunction Team portion of the conference chamber.

The Kreetasani had possessed knowledge of warp power for fifty thousand Terran years. Or, more accurately, the people who had once been the overlords of the Kreetasani, the Maizar, had possessed this knowledge. They had possessed academic, artistic, and medical capacities, too, that were denied to the Kreetasani, but which went otherwise largely unused. The Maizar were a deeply anxious people, deferential in the face of what they perceived to be, rightly or wrongly, superior force. Because of this, they did everything in their power to avoid conflict, contention, and what they considered waste.

To actually use what they considered flamboyant cultural technologies caused the Maizar to fear the potential of conflict or contention that these might bring, and certainly, the development of warp drive would constitute both waste and the potential to come under some overlord's boot heel. Therefore, they buried both knowledge and wisdom and contrived to bring them

forth...later. When times were less anxious.

Which, for the Maizar Renee knew, wouldn't be anytime soon, if ever. They had, in her estimation, become conservative to the point of their own devolution.

The Kreetasani, on the other hand, already knew what it was like to be under the boot heel, soft though that boot was. They had been there for as long as a written history of the two peoples had existed — so long, in fact, that the Kreetasani had largely forgotten to consider themselves slaves, and instead believed themselves superior, since over the eons much of the Maizar attitude toward them had evolved into a caretaker-mode.

The Kreetasani, considered by the Maizar to be a sub-race of themselves, had for a long time been brute and ignorant, kept docile by what higher medical knowledge the Maizar did use. Originally, the Kreetasani had been midnight-blue, but for countless generations they were a kept people, it being believed by both races that they were incapable of being educated or of attaining any rank. Nonetheless, the Maizar had no compunction about using the Kreetasani as breeding stock.

By the end of Terra's twentieth century, the by-then-free Kreetasani resembled the snowy-white Maizar,

except that their own skin was pale gray, striped on the chin, nose, and forehead in deepest aquamarine blue, all of those being skin colors that were common to people with cobalt-based blood. The Kreetasani had become a free people largely because, a thousand years earlier, a Maizar scientist had, in a fit of sentimentality, weaned his Kreetasani offspring free of the drugs that kept them docile, and offered them education. These had formed an enclave in the tropical southern wilderness of Maizaria, and ultimately an underground railroad for Kreetasani wishing to overcome complacency, addiction, and ignorance.

Over time, the Kreetasani stole the secret of warp drive from the Maizar. They then fled Maizaria in droves, leaving the Maizar no choice but to offer the remaining Kreetasani freedom, if they wished it. This was better, to the Maizar way of thinking, than having to deal with belligerent Kreetasani returning to Maizaria in ten generations and demanding that they do so at disruptor-point.

The flamboyant, artistic Kreetasani (as easily offended as only a race who had risen from slavery to interstellar travel could be) had developed a culture that was as different from that of the deferential, conservative Maizar as they possibly could. Both of these races were now members of the Federation. The Kreetasani had

joined because the idea amused them, the Maizar because they otherwise faced the specter of complete Romulan takeover.

Renee, as the senior Starfleet officer present at this meeting, had agreed to perform translation duties between the Kreetasani and the Ancari. Those races' natal languages were exceptionally different, one repetitive to the point of incomprehensibility, the other plagued by equivalent-sounding words possessing multiple pronunciations, and hence syntax. Terran Standard wasn't perfect in the face of either of these languages by any means, but it was capable of communicating its meaning without serious offense to either party. Both the Ancari and the Kreetasani delegates had been equipped with auditory modulators that would allow them to hear everyone else in the chamber, with the exception of one another.

The Federation had, in its one-hundred fifty -odd years of existence, gone far out of its way to develop and provide instrumentation capable of this sort of cultural interface to anyone who desired it. The institution and its members had learned, usually through being thrown into the middle of the most brutal or humiliating situations imaginable, what sorts of misunderstandings could arise when that sort of instrumentation was lacking. Renee's presence, and her personal willingness

to interact with the delegates so intimately, lent a note of grace to the proceedings. The Kreetasani had brought a mixed Conjunction team, as had the Ancari.

The Vulcan Conjunction representative was a young Adjutant Commander, as surprisingly blonde as T'Dani, but possessed of great doe-like brown eyes and a complexion so atypically pale that the translucent skin of her face glowed with the delicate muted-green tint of healthy oxygenated copper blood, as lovely as the most expensive cosmetic, and the fine green and bright-orange trceries of arteries and veins were plain beneath the fine skin of her throat and inner arms. Ingram's seat was near the Vulcan's; she introduced herself as T'Marna, in the soft, emotionless tone that Vulcans used for general conversation. Her team was comprised solely of scientific personnel.

The Vulcan people had been space-capable for nearly eighteen thousand Terran years, which was roughly the same amount of time as they had embraced the teachings of Surak. They had been warp-capable for slightly less than half that long. Therefore, the roughly one-quarter of Vulcan's ancient population who would not accept the teachings of Surak had been exiled from the second planet orbiting 40-Eridani seventeen thousand, eight hundred and eighty Terran years before a dozen Vulcan Conjunction Ships fell into orbit around

gigantic Betelgeuse's fourth planet.

Those people among the ancient Vulcans who refused to embrace the teachings of Surak had been relegated to sleeper ships. Ultimately, they founded a new world and renamed their fierce race *Rihannsu*, what the Federation called *Romulan*. For nearly a thousand generations, as Vulcans and Romulans were further parted by genetic changes so subtle that outsiders could scarcely recognize them, those sundered cousins had no space-capable vehicles able to travel at speeds greater than that of a sleeper-ship.

It had been the Vulcan's tragic mistake of engaging in interstellar competition and espionage, the basis of which had been beliefs that Surak would have considered unworthy — *did* consider unworthy, according to accounts that claimed his *katra* had been carried for a short while in the mind of a starship captain — that had inadvertently supplied the warlike cousins of the Vulcans with warp drive. This led to the misfortune of all-out war, whose bitter flowering led, ironically, to the fruition of the United Federation of Planets.

Renee considered the differences between the Kreetasani and the Maizar, the Vulcans and the Romulans, the potentially horrid zhin-ga-Morrah and the altogether unlikely and whimsical gorzari, as she stood to mount the imposing podium that Ancari technologies

composed of positrons and bioneural mesh had created. She thought of what might have been, and whether or not what was would be sufficient to alter what yet could be to the benefit of all.

Infinite diversity in infinite combination. How did one tolerate the intolerable? By viewing with compassion the real issues that underlay the intolerable beliefs or behavior, and trying one's best to address them, modify them, heal them. Of course, in order to do that, the other party or parties needed to be willing, which was what they were all here today to determine.

"Before we meet with the representatives of the zhin-ga-Morrah in approximately one Terran Standard hour, I need to explain in depth exactly how these sentient aliens feel, what it is that they want, what dangers they potentially pose, and I will also attempt to answer your questions regarding these issues as I go along." Ingram drew a deep, fortifying breath, and began:

"The Morrah come from some interstitial space between dimensions. According to them, they were driven out of it by —"

"Do we trust that they're telling the truth in this, and that they're not simply going to bring in reinforcements when and if they determine what the Federation's tactical capacity is?" a woman from the Kreetasani conjunction

group interjected.

Renee repeated that question for the benefit of the Ancari members of the audience. She was glad she had agreed to do this; it gave her an opportunity to think her response through more thoroughly:

"The individual who interfaced on my behalf with these beings is someone whose judgment I trust, and I asked him much the same question myself," the captain of the *Enterprise* replied. "Probably because they are psionically linked in order to communicate, the Morrah have a sort of hive-mind. What a some agree to, the rest accept.

"If a few are unwilling to accept the judgment of the rest, their social solution is to commit suicide. As the individual who has been their interface pointed out to me, such a social structure wouldn't mesh very well with part of the zhin-ga-Morrah group striking out as privateers against us. Also, because I implicitly trust the person who gave me this information regarding these aliens, I can say with some certainty that the Morrah that are here on Betelgeuse Four are all the Morrah that exist.

"They were, by all accounts, driven nearly to extinction by a race similar to themselves, who wanted the space from which they came all to itself. In the dimension from which they come, there are particular sub- or supra -fungal interstellar growths —"

"What?" the Kreetasani woman interjected again. Several members of the Vulcan contingent moved restlessly in their chairs, a sign of extreme irritation. Renee shrugged elaborately at the Kreetasani to indicate that she meant no disrespect, and held up her hands in a gesture of surrender.

"The honored Kreetasani delegate inquires exactly what it is that I am talking about. Unfortunately, I'm unable to describe such a thing any better than I just did; believe me..." Ingram squinted at the Kreetasani's uniform, "Sergeant, the concept is just as incomprehensible to me as it is to you. These particular sentient beings are *not* humanoid in any way, shape, or form. In any case, the growths I've just attempted to describe are what the zhin-ga-Morrah normally lay their eggs in. In the nature of the dimension from which they come, this is a symbiotic relationship that also works to spread the spores of the fungal labyrinths in which the young Morrah gestate.

"As you may imagine, no such situation exists in this dimension for the exiled zhin-ga-Morrah to utilize. As I said before, the Morrah are in no way humanoid, and in the space from which they hail, there exist no sentient humanoid beings. Therefore, they were unable at first to recognize us as sentient beings." Renee swallowed and cleared her throat before going on. The

entire contingent of individuals before her had been debriefed on the fact that the zhin-ga-Morrah were in reproductive crisis. As far as she knew, only their governments had been apprised of what the Morrah had done in a desperate attempt to relieve that crisis. She sighed and plowed on:

"In order to stem a reproductive crisis that could only lead to extinction in what, to the Morrah, is an altogether alien dimension, the zhin-ga-Morrah turned to the only available resource similar in composition to the symbiotic growths they were accustomed to use as incubators." Captain Ingram paused again, and this time one of the Vulcan scientific team spoke up:

"You are referring, I believe, Captain, to humanoid flesh."

The entire room appeared to rock as people stirred. Ingram waited for some semblance of quiet to return to the chamber before attempting to respond to the statement that had caused such unrest. She could scarcely blame anybody for reacting with visceral horror to something that filled her with visceral horror.

Chapter Twenty-Five

"The circumstance of the Pets of the Galaxy Symposia unfortunately gave the zhin-ga-Morrah a large pool of potential humanoids from which to choose. They required this, you see; they'd been utilizing the interstellar fungi for so long that they'd forgotten exactly what about it made it —"

The Zyrellian colonel who had greeted her so jovially when she'd first entered the chamber leaped to his feet, and snarled; "*How* can you stand there and speak of the murder of innocent people by alien beings so..." the man made vague motions in the air with his hands, a not-uncommon trait of humanoids when they were upset, "*conversationally?*"

"It isn't easy for me, Colonel. You see, I was one of the individuals chosen by the zhin-ga-Morrah for this..." Renee kept herself from making vague motions with her own hands, and from shrieking her reply into the subcommander's face, by sheer force of will; "for the dubious honor of incubating their eggs. I only revived from coma ten Ancari days ago. Now..."

Ingram swallowed and cleared her throat again, removing her hands from the podium and letting them hang by her sides, where she clenched them into

trembling fists where nobody else could see her do it; her nails cut into her palms. "Now resume your seat, Colonel, or have the grace to leave this chamber."

The man sat back down, the scales on his head glittering brightly, the Zyrellian equivalent of an impassioned blush. Again, the roomful of people stirred and murmured. Again, Renee waited for her audience (and, this time, herself) to regain some semblance of calm before continuing:

"The Morrah that attacked me was made fully aware of the fact that I was a sentient being. In remorse, it committed suicide."

This wasn't wholly true. In Colin's opinion, *remorse* was an alien concept to the Morrah, but it was necessary to interject some sort of identifiable, sympathetic tone into this recital of horror before everybody present simply beamed back aboard their vessels and warped away. Renee seriously doubted that they would perform such an extreme act — Conjunction Ship commanders were sworn, after all, to come to the aid of the Federation or the Federation's Star Fleet whenever a need for them was shown to exist. Still...

"Not wanting to see what was obviously a rare and sentient race choose this option en masse," she went on, doggedly, "the crew of my ship determined to attempt further contact, in order to prove to the zhin-ga-Morrah

that, should they be willing to cease their reproduction-driven attacks on us, we would in turn be willing to assist them to find a more amenable environment in which to live, and to help them develop technologies that will allow them to breed successfully."

"Until they've bred themselves to the point where they want everything else we have," one of the Ancari observed coldly. A wave of agreement swept the hall.

"Our plan is to develop mutually-beneficial concessions with the Morrah that would forestall such an eventuality. We cannot, in good conscience or according to the bylaws of the Federation, destroy a sentient race out of hand unless they themselves do, indeed, first attempt to destroy the Federation. And they *haven't* attempted that; all they've done is to mistake sentient beings for non-sentient inanimate objects, and I tell you that this was a *mistake*, mortal though it turned out to be for some individuals." Renee sighed deeply, and added:

"The Morrah are at the mercy of our technologies, and those technologies might still be used, should an agreement amenable to all not be within reach, but I don't foresee this. According to previous reports, the zhin-ga-Morrah are as anxious to find a solution to their dilemma as we are."

As though on cue, the ornate doors to the large

psychogenic room opened. The zhin-ga-Morrah had chosen delegates, also. They would, as Betelgeuse sank behind the cliffs upon which the Ancari had created this council chamber, enter the open anteroom thirty feet below the council chamber proper. There could be no psychogenic shielding between the upper and lower chambers, if they were to communicate with the creatures. Despite the comments of protest that had been made, more than a few of the individuals gathered on the upper dais watched for the entry of the zhin-ga-Morrah avidly.

Renee didn't. She had eyes only for the two newest arrivals in the upper chamber.

"Captain," Colin greeted her softly, drawing his companion up beside him, to join Renee behind the podium. The half-Andorian man made a shy gesture, his eyes and antennae lowered in a position of respect. At least, Captain Ingram thought that's what it was. "This is Yeoman Vraeth'uutr'Shrev Th'raess'Aen. I don't believe you've actually been personally introduced."

Renee nodded slowly and consideringly at both men. Both of them were nervous, both of them had dressed to the nines in official uniforms, and both of them looked exceptionally tired. And Renee was indescribably glad to have the big men standing at her side, on a podium that towered over a pit into which

humanoid nightmares would shortly enter.

This wasn't, however, an emotional reaction that the starship captain was about to share with three hundred other people. Instead, she turned back to the audience and said:

"I take it I'm not mistaken in assuming that you both will be our translators for this meeting, the first between senior Starfleet personnel, these potentially hostile aliens about whose motives only you know very much at all, and the Federation representatives gracious enough to offer their aid in this otherwise unauthorized situation, which has been contrived for the sake of the aliens and those they might otherwise injure?" Renee had the sort of speaking voice that could hold listeners captivated, and she was very good at projecting it, though privately she considered her singing voice abysmal.

Which mattered not one whit in this situation; she had no intention of attempting to sing at any time during this conference. Everyone nearby turned their heads toward her. The dual translator she wore effortlessly reproduced her comment in the most flawless Ancari and Kreetasani dialects of which it was capable, and the voice modulators present carried her ringing tones into every corner of the room.

The Kreetasani contingent laughed outright, stifling their mirth only through heroic measures of attitude that

included covering their faces with their hands. Neither of the yeomen near her had taken that acerbic comment as anything but what it was — a dressing-down disguised as damning with faint praise — and none of the other delegates caught the potential humor inherent in it. Captain Ingram smiled wryly at the Kreetasani. It *was* funny; bizarre and unlikely and potentially ruinous and just downright funny.

It was her relief that Colin was unharmed by the zhin-ga-Morrah who would shortly be entering the chamber below them, and the vestiges of medication in her system causing her current unruly thoughts and emotions, she knew. She'd heard more than one medical practitioner jokingly refer to inapropaline as *inappropriate*, but at least it put one in a good mood. Relatively speaking.

"We are, Captain. The motives of the zhin-ga-Morrah are exactly as you yourself explained to the delegates gathered here. We wish to perform psionic translation, in order that the treaties the Morrah wish to enter into with the Federation may be explicitly stated, publicly stated, and stated for the record," Colin replied.

"We're also equipped with prototype psionic translators," Th'raess'Aen interjected; "If it's successful here today, those scientists wishing to work with the zhin-ga-Morrah will be able to communicate directly."

He patted the piece of equipment he carried in a sling; both men were wearing one. It looked like a combination between a large 'padd and an extremely bulky tricorder, set with multiple psionic positronic-guide and decibel-wave receivers, transmitters, and screens.

"And have the zhin-ga-Morrah been apprised of this?" Renee asked softly.

Both Colin and Shrev nodded. "They have, Captain," Colin replied, just as softly. *The damnable translator doesn't work with Betazoids or Rumantians, but the Morrah aren't humanoid*, he added telepathically.

"You'll only need me if the translator doesn't work, Captain," Shrev added. "May I remain anyway?"

Ingram considered this for a while. "No, Yeoman." The *Captain* of the *Enterprise* motioned him off the podium that towered above the lower chamber where the zhin-ga-Morrah would shortly appear and toward her own seat; "I want you confined to quarters until this is finished."

Shrev bent his head and his antennae and turned without another word and walked down the aisle that led to the main door. He wasn't happy with her decision, but then, she wasn't terribly happy with the great bolus of deception that he and Colin had used in order to bring things to this juncture. Renee turned back to Colin just

as Shrev left the conference chamber, and a skittering, rustling sound that put her teeth on edge sounded from the lower section of the multi-tiered room.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Intolerable, intolerable, intolerable...Intolerable, intolerable, intolerable...

This was the unremitting drone of the Eldest. In younger Morrah, this drone invariably led to ganglial breakdown and death. But the Eldest were more resistant to its tones, for the shape and structure of the Morrah changed subtly as they grew and aged, this alteration in physiognomy ending only when the void reached out and claimed them.

There weren't many Eldest; any number of them had succumbed to ganglial breakdown hundreds of years before, at the thought of being marooned in this place. Because they were Eldest, of course, they were more used to a certain level of existence, which this dimension could not possibly provide. No matter what the humanoids claim, the Eldest insisted.

The close-cousins destroyed that level of existence for us long ago, the rest argued.

In normal space, in the place from which their venerable race hailed, the Eldest were not to be gainsaid. The scents and sounds given off by the carapaces of the Elders, which only Elders could produce, insisted that this ancient tenet be obeyed.

We are no longer in normal space, *the rest argued*. And we wish existence to continue.

This existence? *The Eldest roared*. As minions of these frail- soft walking -pods?

Intolerable, intolerable, intolerable...Intolerable, intolerable, intolerable...

The rest quailed away from that drone which was, to them, intolerable indeed.

We must make these concessions. There is nothing in this dimension except these walking-pods. They possess and manipulate this dimension using technologies suited to it, which we scarcely comprehend, *the younger Morrah insisted*.

As they will possess and manipulate *us*, should we make these concessions, *the Eldest roared*. *The Eldest always roared*. *As there were only one hundred and six Eldest remaining, they felt it within their right to roar*. Better we had fallen to the power of the close-cousins!

This was a sorrow, particularly to the infants. *There were now slightly more infants than there were Eldest*. *Still mottled and delicate of carapace, having only just shed the winged shells of their larval stage, the pupal Morrah were growing well now, their slowly-darkening carapaces stretching and growing with them, still plastic and soft, as they would remain until they had attained adult stature and sentience.*

Their minds, too, were not yet wholly developed, not yet fully sentient. These tiny jewels had been born of the flesh of the walking-pods. They yet remembered that flesh, its sweetness, its responsiveness, and in their innocence, they sang of it to the others.

Though it was these songs that had driven the Eldest to take up the position they now espoused, still the division of mind and the excess of emotion among the colony made the infant Morrah squeal and huddle together, fearing annihilation. Anger arose among the many toward the Eldest as the infants expressed their dismay, and the Eldest ceased to roar, but instead continued, soft of tone and cool of heart:

The melody of many more young can be had, right now, right here. Those we cannot use will flee in terror before us; their emotions come easy and deep, and though they cannot be used, they are yet soft, frail, easy to rend. And then we may simply take their technologies for our own, until all flee before us, as we were forced to flee the close-cousins.

The words of the Eldest were almost enough to sway the rest. Almost.

Think you we are mindless infants? *The rest inquired of the Eldest, and without awaiting reply, without allowing any crystalline interval of respect into which the Eldest might interject any further*

phantasmagoria, the bulk of the colony went on:

Yes, the songs of the infants are sweet. Yes, we could stream as a great hive onto the surface of this miserable sphere and take what we wished. But not fast enough! For long and long the infants will be soft, growing into their carapaces; just as soft as the walking-pods themselves, and far less nimble of mind. We have spoken to the walking-pods, have heard their minds, and their minds, oh, their minds are clever! Better to make concession with them, than to ever have to face their wrath, for it would be deep and terrible, as terrible as the threats of the close-cousins, and it would fall upon infant and Eldest alike.

As it will do regardless of any concessions you make, *the Eldest intoned, the shapes of their thoughts as bitter as the flesh and blood of the walking-pods that had not been amenable to the gestation of the infants.*

Their fear of what it is that you espouse, Eldest, will lead them to make their own concessions to us, *the bulk of the colony soothed, reasonably.*

But exiled from their home, stripped of any vestige of normalcy, the Eldest appeared to have lost the capacity to reason. We demand the right to make our voices heard in this void! *The Eldest bellowed, and the rest bowed to that request. They knew, regardless of the outcome, that the Eldest would never seek escape in the*

void.

And they knew that the Eldest would hold the infants as surety against any outcome. The care of infants, as their shells hardened and their minds woke, was the purview of the Eldest.

The walking-pods would not know you, *the bulk of the colony reasoned.* Clever though their minds are, they judge most often by the outward appearance of things. Hence, if you wait, until the infants are grown and ready for breeding, we would have already formed more colonies elsewhere, with the aid of these walking-pods.

The Eldest took this phantasmagoria and inspected it. To the Morrah, a psionic phantasmagoria was as real as quarried stone, and it was this stone, as red as the blood of the walking pods that had spawned the infants, that the Eldest passed from one to the next.

You offer this to us as if it is a choice, *the Eldest replied, finally.* As if it is an... *ultimatum.*

And so it is, *the bulk of the colony droned in reply.*
And so it is.

The assembled Conjunction groups made a collective sound somewhere between awe and horror when the zhin-ga-Morrah's representatives entered the lower chamber. It occurred to Renee, looking at how the

creatures moved, that a thirty-foot high, smooth, horizontal psychoprojected wall might not be quite enough to keep them out of the upper chamber, should they for some reason become...agitated.

"We'll just have to make certain that doesn't happen," Colin whispered. The sound carried, but not as far as it would have if he'd answered her telepathically; he had turned the psionic translator on.

She shook her head at him, pushing away this reassurance much the same way she'd pushed away his vow of protection, earlier. She knew he loved her, and she knew how much.

The three creatures below the podium exuded an unpleasant odor, like ancient dried blood caked on a rusted knife blade baking in some unimaginable oven. They were mottled ochre and sienna, taupe and russet in marbled patterns that reminded the captain of the *Enterprise* of something...something she'd seen recently...

Those big beetles, flying toward the lights of Expo Town.

"Do their young have wings?" It was out of Renee's mouth before she was consciously aware that she'd spoken.

The voice modulators in the chamber picked up the query, as did the translator still slung over Colin's

shoulder at the level of his hip. A sound came out of the translator that made everyone in the chamber cringe and rub at their faces, a sound that set not just the teeth but all the bones of one's face on edge. The zhin-ga-Morrah in the chamber below did not stir.

Nonetheless, they replied. The instrument Colin had rigged to catch purposeful psionic communication muttered to itself incomprehensibly in the awful Morrah language for nearly a minute, then announced:

How can you know this?

Ingram decided that honesty would be the best policy at the moment. "I've seen them."

Two of the zhin-ga-Morrah sat back on their haunches. Using the odd leg that sprouted from the rear of their abdomens like a tail to sit back on, and using their other two abdominal legs to stand on, the Morrah stood up, stretching their bullet-shaped heads toward Renee, far above them on the podium.

Captain Ingram found that she had to force herself not to step backwards, away from them, though those threatening alien heads were fully twenty feet below the soles of her boots.

You are one of those we attempted to gestate with.

It wasn't a question. Perhaps the zhin-ga-Morrah could smell some vestige of the attack that had been visited on her; perhaps the aliens utilized some

incomprehensible sense that no humanoid possessed, in order to reach their conclusion. Renee didn't respond right away. Which response would garner her the most leverage?

Which response might infuriate these alien creatures?

"I am," she replied, finally. The Morrah made a noise that not even the psionic translator could contend with, a sort of grating, squealing hiss, like a newly sharpened pitchfork being dragged with concentrated force over polished marble. Everyone in the chamber bared their teeth, wincing at the sound, even the Vulcans.

We were told that those who bore our young all died.

"I never said that I bore your young. I said I've seen them. You need to know that we possess medications now that can destroy your eggs and your essence upon implantation, so any lingering thoughts you might have about using us further for that purpose are in vain."

The translator took a remarkably long time translating that. Colin took that opportunity to lean over and whisper into Ingram's ear:

"You dismay them. They don't know what to make of you."

Captain Ingram scowled in thought. She'd had that effect on a lot of people. With a humanoid, she knew

how to ultimately work that to her advantage. With these things?

Before she could reach any sort of decision on that matter, the Morrah spoke again:

You wish us to make concessions with you. What guarantee do we have that you will not attempt to destroy us out of hand? What guarantee can you make that you will aid us, rather than exterminating us?

"I've been told that you hail from a place where others have already attempted to exterminate you."

It was no attempt.

"And yet you are here." Ingram instinctively discarded the next comment she'd been planning to make, which imputed that, perhaps, the Morrah's adversaries had attempted to exterminate them for the same reason that Starfleet yet might. Instead, she said:

"It must have been a difficult decision, to leave your home."

The zhin-ga-Charrah assured by their actions that it was no longer our home.

"So, what you're saying, then, is that you had to make a group decision to face the unknown together, rather than staying as you were and dying at the hands of the Charrah? You had to put faith in something that offered no guarantees. From what I'm told of your people, such a leap of faith is...*alien* to you."

The Morrah thought about this for a long time. Obviously, they had some ability to keep private thought, group thought, and psionic communicative thought at different levels; perhaps this was one of the functions of the motile nerve ganglia that Renee had read made up their brains. In any case, what it might have been that they thought, whether privately or as a group, didn't spur the psionic translator to function.

We faced extinction, the darkest-hued of the Morrah responded, finally. Captain Ingram shrugged.

"You still face extinction. When I saw your young, they were nothing more than helpless flying beetles. Even were you to refuse our aid, and somehow elude both our weaponry and the effects of our medications, to ultimately find some planet whose populace met your needs to breed young, it seems to me that those young would be helpless, that it wouldn't matter how many of them you bred. We would still follow you wherever you roamed. We would still exterminate you. Is my meaning clear?"

You are saying that if we refuse to let you aid us, you will exterminate us?

"I am saying that we will go far out of our way to aid you, should you take a leap of faith to put your trust in us, but we will indeed exterminate you should *any* of you ever attempt to murder sentient beings to use them

as incubators for your young again." Renee was trying, valiantly, to close all the loopholes she could imagine these things might be able to wriggle out of detente through, which was exceedingly difficult; the Morrah might perceive a loophole that a humanoid mind couldn't.

The Conjunction ship crews, she noted, were exceedingly nervous. Not even the Vulcans succeeded in hiding this fact. Ingram didn't have the time, and refused to take her attention away from the terrible alien creatures in the chamber below her, in order to attempt to soothe them. They, too, were going to have to make a leap of faith in this instance. It would hardly be the first time that a starship captain had attempted to hammer out terms of peace with aliens who had, up to that point in time, been set on murder as a viable option.

Renee could only hope that this wouldn't be one of those times in which that attempt failed.

What you are saying is that we have no choice.

Ingram sighed. Sentient beings wouldn't abide being in that sort of impasse —even, it seemed, these utterly alien sentient beings. "Of course, you have a choice. It's the choice between probable battle — I won't dignify it with the term *war*, because frankly there aren't enough of you, and you don't have any level of technology at this point that could sustain a war — and

ultimate extermination, versus a state of mutual aid and understanding that would eventually allow your people to exist in this dimension without fear of extermination."

The Morrah thought about this for nearly two minutes. They had, Renee thought, seemed to come to some sort of agreement, if what she was reading of their body language had any similarity at all to humanoid body language...

When what Colin had told her couldn't happen, occurred.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

As there was no one left on the Pet Expo premises, there was no one at all to see it when a hundred or so zhin-ga-Morrah climbed the sheer, night-shadowed northern face of the scarp toward the council chamber the Ancari had erected on the least accessible of the mesas remaining there. Not even the other Morrah knew.

This was a suicide force, composed entirely of the Eldest zhin-ga-Morrah. They knew full well that what the humanoids were telling their compatriots could only lead to their extinction, and they intended to go out fighting. The planet's two small, weak, tidally locked moons peered down at them like impotent eyes when they crested the cliff face, but still no humanoid saw them.

The bioneural walls the humanoids had concocted to hide behind hid the Eldest from their view.

One of the Morrah in the pit below the main council chambers was also Eldest. Since the Eldest could hide their intent from younger Morrah more thoroughly than the humanoids could hide from the Morrah behind their walls, it was but the work of a moment for this Morrah to slay the other two. This Morrah had put out the call

for the rest to come forward; the Eldest in the pit had sensed intents among the aliens that they did not speak.

So very many intents, so alien and dark. There was no point attempting to communicate this to the main colony, which had already decided to put itself in thrall to the soft, weak, technology-heavy *humanoids*. Better, the Eldest decided, that they should all be slain, that they should be extinct as a race, that the void never again ring with the songs of the infants, than they should become test-subjects and minions of this *Federation*.

Bioneural mesh, such as the council chamber had been constructed of by the creatures that crawled across the skin of this planet, was a technology that the Eldest zhin-ga-Morrah, who had long ago absconded with an injured Charrah ship and a thousand infants under their care, understood. The ships of the Charrah were composed, in part, of a similar substance. It was the work of a moment, not to break it down, but to simply dissolve it en masse.

The humanoids fell hard and ungracefully against the rock faces, among the boulders and cobbles and shifting scree as the facade dissolved. Some fell so ungracefully and hard that they expired where they fell.

Others fell into what remained of the pit that held the single Eldest Morrah who had slain the others. That one turned to slay them, and paused. The humanoid...the

one who had said she had already borne their young...the smaller one, that humanoid might yet be of use.

Its reticence was its undoing — literally. The weapon the small humanoid carried unspun the thoracic carapace of the Eldest just as neatly as the Elder zhin-ga-Morra had unspun the neurogenically engineered council chamber. The same technology, the others realized as they ran purposefully over and around the worn outcrops of rock that the still-living humanoids tried to shelter behind and beneath, had created both the weapon and the chamber. It was only that the energy-intensity of the weapon was intensified and concentrated a thousand-fold.

Nor was the energy-weapon the little iron-blood humanoid carried the only one present. As the tiny band of Eldest tore and rent every humanoid they could reach into variously-hued rags that twitched and trembled with residual life-energy even as all life faded, similar beams laced from behind boulders and rock-spires and returned carnage for carnage.

The smaller iron-blooded humanoid pulled out some other variety of technology, even as the larger iron-blooded humanoid, whom the smaller tried to shield with its own body, used its technology to beg and plead the Eldest to end their rampage. It was a blasphemy, the Eldest thought, their very vision blurred with rage every

bit as intense as any rage ever felt by any humanoid, that these pitiful weak things should have thought themselves worthy to even speak to the Morrah.

Before the Eldest nearest the to the pit – now a mere five feet deep – had a chance to see what it was that this new piece of technology the small humanoid held might do, and even as those Elders drew back to lunge at and attempt to exterminate both the infuriating iron-bloods and their unknown weaponry, the flimsy skin of the mountainside tore open.

The air was fetid with blood and gore and haunted with cries of horror and pain. Renee and Colin, the only two people still alive who had been within a circumference of fifty feet from the lower chamber when the aliens struck from outside, found themselves in the bottom of a ridiculously shallow pit that reeked of ichor and the output of the most destructive weapon the Ancari had been able to arm Renee Ingram with. The damnable Morrah moved so *fast!* A combination of the Ancari weapon she held, and the fact that the monstrous creatures were aware that hemoglobin ran through her veins and through Colin's, were the only things that either one of them could imagine held the enraged Morrah at bay.

And neither of them imagined that their privileged

existence would continue much longer.

"You are violating the terms of your agreements!" Colin cried at the Morrah around the pit, but the sentient beings the Federation had been ready to render aid to might as well have been rampaging animals, for all the good it did. Renee handed the Ancari weapon to Colin so that she could pull out her communicator with her right hand (her left arm adamantly refused to work). Unless these things could somehow block subspace transmissions, she intended to contact both the *Enterprise* and the *Cairo* and tell them to beam this area of the planet, and every zhin-ga-Morrah swarming over and beneath it, into the center of Betelgeuse. Both ships' transporters were already programmed for these coordinates, after all, and...

A series of terrible rending cracks, like an avalanche of armor-stones cascading down a cliff, made Renee drop her communicator and cringe. She barely had time to look behind her before a wave of Morrah rushed over her.

They touched her nowhere, more agile and true footed than any stampeding herd of animals Ingram had ever heard of; they poured from holes and crevices in the mesa that hadn't existed previously. Fifteen hundred or more, they swarmed the area, and where any of them encountered their compatriots who had somehow

dissolved the walls and floors and seats and podium of the Ancari chamber, battle ensued.

Three minutes after the first wave of zhin-ga-Morrah had entered the chamber bent on destruction, those Morrah had been rendered into autolysing gobs and smears and sharp-edged tatters of carapace littering the mesa top. A minute and a half after the horde of zhin-ga-Morrah who had killed them first appeared, there was a motionless silence, broken only by humanoid moans and sobs. The Morrah half-flattened themselves against the rock face, and did not stir.

Renee reached with her right arm for the communicator that had fallen from her hand with the sudden surge of Morrah. Her left arm was useless, and any movement of it arm sent pain through her body like a spear. Horror and proximate destruction had lengthened the period of numbness that had ensued when she had landed, rolling, on the stone floor and heard something in her shoulder snap, but the numbness had faded, and pain washed through her body in waves and rivulets. "Renee Ingram to *Enterprise!* Come in, *Enterprise!*"

Colin's translator dutifully turned her words into a garble, which she assumed the Morrah, still as the cobbles that had fallen into the pit in the melee, could hear quite clearly

"*Enterprise* here, Captain," her senior communications officer replied sanguinely. Unlikely in the extreme, that either the starships or the Conjunction ships currently orbiting Betelgeuse or moored at the space station that also orbited the planet would have any idea of what had transpired here in the last five minutes.

"Yaelat, there are a number of injured people at this location. Have the *Enterprise* and the *Cairo* lock onto all sub-par humanoid readings and beam them into one of the starships' sickbays immediately. *And* I want the transporter teams on both ships to target every zhin-ga-Morrah who's down here; if more than *one* of them moves more than a meter in *any* direction, beam *all* of them into the sun. Can you do that?"

"Absolutely, Captain. Do you want us to beam you and Colin into sickbay too?"

"No, Lieutenant, just everybody else for the moment. Just...maybe beam us out of this damned pit and onto level ground?"

"Aye, Captain." There were neither Ancari neurogenic nor psychogenic fields left in place that would inhibit transporters; the unmistakable chiming of their beams filled the space around her.

Colin had sustained a broken ankle in the fall that ensued when the rampaging aliens had dissolved the neurogenic floor he'd been standing on, but the translator

he still held was intact. Ingram could feel the pain of his injury through the light psionic link that always tethered them, unless they were separated by dampers, like a ghost of her own pain, and it had the unpleasant effect of increasing the general agony she was experiencing. She'd either broken her left arm at that point where the ball joint of the shoulder and the humerus formed a narrow neck, or she'd torn the entire rotator cuff off its moorings.

Renee found herself on the relatively flat ground of the mesa; Colin was repositioned next to her. The psionic translator, as though to prove her theory that it had come through the fall uninjured correct, announced in Standard:

Their desire was to go along with your plans until the infants were old enough to breed, then attack again from whatever haven it was you found for us, this time taking your technologies as our own. It seemed to us, from what you had revealed to us before, that you would see that as treason, and slay us all. We denied our intent to follow the plans put forth by the Elders. They had no knowledge that you had developed ways to keep us from ever using you as breeding organs again. They felt they had been given no choice thereby. For the sake of our infants, we ask that you not slay us now.

"None of you move even an inch, or I'll have every

one of you beamed into the sun! What promise could you possibly give that we could believe?" Renee snarled. The mesa rocks were stained deep magenta, indigo, and vivid green with humanoid blood. The captain of the *Enterprise* took a half-subconscious head count, and was displeased to see that less than half of the people who had been gathered in the hall now peeked out nervously from impromptu hiding places, as filthy and ruffled, frightened and angry as she was herself. "These people were here to help shuttle you to a new home; what surety do they have, now that your people have murdered and maimed so many of them, that you won't simply do it again?"

The translator roared unpleasantly until it had translated this verbiage.

You have our infants. In the caves below us, the airy caverns we have opened entrances to here. They are harmless, witless and docile as many of the animals you possess caged on this planet for your pleasure as companions. You may hold them for surety; they are so docile that you may keep them as the things you call pets. There is algae in plenty in the caverns to feed them. They will remain as they now are for long and long...

Here the speakers paused. It wasn't a single Morrah's voice coming through the speaker of the

translator, but a chorus; *they will remain infants for at least a hundred of your years. Would that be long enough for us to prove our intentions to you? You could bring them to us then, thus they would never be a nuisance to you.*

"Then I will tell you *exactly* what concessions you'll make with the lives of your infants, and your own, should you contravene these promises. You will never allow yourselves to be used as weapons against the United Federation of Planets, or to be used as weapons by any Federation individual or government against anyone else. You will never attempt to attack any humanoid for any reason, unless that humanoid has inflicted grievous physical harm upon you first. You must promise that your only attempts at transport or utilizing humanoid technology will be through pre-authorized Federation channels, and will only occur on or between those planets or systems eventually set aside for your use by the United Federation of Planets. Now, tell me what I've just said to you!"

Renee's shoulder hurt horribly. She had let go of her weapon to grasp it, and the constant pain that both it and her psionic awareness of Colin's broken ankle sent through her body threatened her with dizziness and nausea. She set her teeth and tried to ignore it, and all at once, it withdrew. The Minaran who sat beside her had

taken all of it upon himself. She'd told him he should never do this for her again, but at the moment, she was entirely too busy to argue.

Upon our continued existence, we swear that no zhin-ga-Morrah will ever allow itself to be used as a weapon against any humanoid in this galaxy. We will enter the void before we allow this to occur. We will enter the void before we would attack, personally or as a group, any humanoid ever again.

We will trust the Federation to aid us in the transport and technology we require in order that we may eventually develop new colonies and sub-colonies of Morrah civilization in Federation space, and the United Federation of Planets will oversee and instruct us regarding these matters. We made these promises, too, before the Eldest did grievous harm here. Eldest who disagree do not automatically enter the void; the sincerity of our concessions are shown, too, in that we sent those dissenters who were our Elders into the void for you.

We will meet your requirements. We realize that we require your help. We know you can destroy us, now and forever. We await your decision.

"First we must see to our dead and injured. The Ancari currently here will erect a weapons-field around you; you may not leave this place for any reason. If you

attempt to do so —"

Renee cut off what it was she was going to say to the zhin-ga-Morraah, in order to turn and watch Colin slump to the ground. It was nearly impossible, Ingram knew from her time with him, for him to heal another's injury and remain conscious through the experience, and he was injured himself. It wasn't possible for him to heal his own physical injuries. The pain of his broken ankle was mediated by unconsciousness. And her arm was healed.

Your ships will destroy us. We understand. We can wait. We have already waited a very long time.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

"My people must respectfully decline, Captain," the young female Zyrellian captain said softly. The colonel in command of the Zyrellian Conjunction Ship from which she'd come, the *Delfos Mekk*, had been killed, along with most of the diplomatic team who had accompanied him to the surface of h'Nca. "We do not feel we were adequately warned of the potential danger inherent to the aliens —"

"Assuming that you were sent the same debriefing packets as ourselves, the very real threat posed by the aliens was made quite clear," the willowy blonde Vulcan adjutant's voice was as emotionless, cold, and hard as a rod of iron.

Captain Ingram raised one hand palm-outward, a request for silence that both humanoid races understood. "I didn't convene this meeting in order to inspire grievances, explanations, or challenges. Should you have those, you'll need to direct them through Starfleet Command. Make no mistake, I'll be answering them in due time.

"The purpose of *this* meeting is to help the crews of the *Enterprise*, the *Cairo*, and the Ancari Amnesty Board determine whose help they can count on in relocating the

zhin-ga-Morra, considering the attack we've just lived through, and who would rather decline the duty." The Kreetasani had warped out of the system not long after their remaining people had been healed and returned to their ships.

The *Enterprise* had been forced to show the Kreetasani that direct retribution against the surviving zhin-ga-Morra wouldn't be tolerated, before those ships had enacted the better part of valor. Hence the need for this meeting, which had originally been slated as something else altogether.

Ingram cringed inwardly, every time she started to imagine the reparations that a people like the Kreetasani (who insisted on restitution should someone merely mispronounce their names) would demand after being attacked by aliens to whom they had offered aid. Just the act of calling them *Kreetasans* had, more than once, nearly precipitated interstellar conflict. She hoped the reparations they'd want wouldn't include actual scarification but, she reasoned, she'd lived through worse.

"As I said, Captain Ingram, we must decline," the Zyrellian woman said once more.

"Very well, Captain. You're free to return to your ship whenever you'd like and, as I've said, you're free to register whatever report you feel is necessary with

Starfleet Command. You are *not* free to attempt to fire toward h'Nca or engage the Ancari outposts at the edge of the system in attempted retribution for the inadvisable behavior of the Eldest zhin-ga-Morrah, however."

The Zyrellian captain, sitting nearest the viewscreen-windows in the *Enterprise's* situation room, inclined her head to Renee against the muted glare of Betelgeuse rising around the nighttime limb of its fourth planet. "The *Enterprise* has made that very clear to everyone involved, I believe, Captain Ingram. We wish no belligerent interaction. This, you understand, is why we must retract our declaration of aid in this instance."

Renee nodded silently, and turned her attention to the Vulcan adjutant. "I take your words to mean that your people don't also retract your declaration of aid?"

"That is correct, Captain Ingram. We feel that the scientific benefit of interaction with the Morrah far exceeds any future potential dangers."

Ingram's gaze fell, next, on the two representatives of the Ancari Amnesty Board. They had looked, Renee thought, like abused Moluccan cockatoos ready to attack a broom ever since they'd walked into her ship's situation room. If what her senior officers, also arrayed around the black computerized table, reported was accurate, every Ancari on the planet would have preferred to accompany them off the surface. The h'Ncanoid people

had very quickly deserted the entire northern hemisphere of their world once they had learned of the alien attack on the Federation representatives.

"We wish only the creatures off our planet. We will do all we can to expedite this state of affairs," the board president snapped — literally; on his last word, his beak made a sound like an old-fashioned tungsten light bulb filament popping. The Zyrellians took this opportunity to leave the situation room.

Renee Ingram sighed softly. "Very well. The Jornah, the Squib, and the Gree should be here within the week to help. You're prepared to fit the holds of all ships with neurogenic cages?"

"And weapon-wielding security," the aqua-blue and maroon Ancari board president hissed.

Renee shook her head. "The agreement doesn't —"

"We. Do. Not. *Care*," the male Ancari enunciated with poisonous slowness. He narrowed his eyes to glare with avian precision down the curve of the table from where he sat, toward Shrev, the only non-commissioned individual present in the situation room.

T'Dani had barricaded Colin in sickbay and refused to let him out, so he wasn't here. *Every time he does something like this, he ages damn near a year*, the *Enterprise's* CMO had told Renee — which, of course, was why Captain Ingram had told him not to do it

anymore. Of course, he didn't listen to what she said any more than the Ancari official sitting across the length of the table was doing now. The h'Ncanoid continued:

"We have ameliorated the *agreement*. It is our home that is in proximate danger from these things, whom we were *told* brooked no danger." The birdlike being returned its attention to the captain of the *Enterprise*; "You, in this case, may make a complaint through the Federation Council, but again, we care not."

Ingram nodded, and bent her head at length, in what she hoped was obvious avianoid submission. She had reasons for letting the Ancari have their way about this, aside from the very real danger presented by the Morrah. "Understood, President C'rix."

The now cat-sized Morrah infants had already been surrendered by the adults, to be given over to those able to prove that they possessed the scientific capacity, compassion, longevity, and patience to be able to care for them for at least a hundred years. Ingram had seen for herself that the undeveloped zhin-ga-Morrah were far more docile than Terran housecats, and of great interest to those visiting the Expo specifically to obtain insectile companions.

The captain of the *Enterprise* focused on the individuals with whom she had originally planned to convene this meeting, before the attack by the Morrah

and the belligerent withdrawal of the Kreetasani. The little group of Kemanite traders looked as irritated and flustered as the Ancari.

Mel'Taya, the *Enterprise's* head of security, hadn't missed all this high dudgeon. Upon first entering the room, the *chae-na* had executed a swift about-face, and re-entered it at the side of a man recently promoted to security under Mel'Taya, a somber-faced, low-caste Orion with brooding golden eyes as sharp as an Ancari's. This cadet (his name was Tenger; the captain of the *Enterprise* knew from direct experience that his caste would have allowed him no other title) had taken the seat between the Kemanites and the captain of the *Enterprise*, while the Andorian had taken the one between the Ancari and the Zyrellians.

As usual, Mel'Taya had summed up the situation flawlessly.

"About the gorzari," Renee began.

"The trade in these creatures constitute nearly one tenth of our planet's gross domestic product," the well-swathed Kemanite, the designs of whose headscarf proclaimed hem High Trader, snarled. In daylight and outside of their trading posts, Kemanites strove to hide their bodies and faces from strangers. Nonetheless, the anger in hir sharp gray eyes was obvious. Ingram had noted that none of these Kemanites seemed to be the one

she and Seantie had interacted with in the gorzari booth earlier that month, and the captain wondered if perhaps having allowed what a Kemanite Trader would consider an apostate into a trading booth had earned her a demotion back to Kemanos.

"The Federation is aware of that. The original reason why I requested this meeting —"

"If you will not rescind this outrageous demand, we will rescind our provisional Federation membership!"

Such an action would be troublesome for the Federation; the Kemanite Union formed a natural barrier between the Federation, and a corridor of Beta quadrant space that Section 31 had declared a hotspot of troublesome species. These were kept from expanding toward the Alpha quadrant by the Kemanite's unique cultural stance of raw belligerence, and a trade policy toward non-belligerent species that was so welcoming it could almost be considered promiscuous.

Captain Ingram considered requesting the Kemanite to bridle the tone with which she spoke to the captain of the ship upon which she sat, then discarded the idea. After learning of and dealing with the Morrah, it was hardly surprising that everyone — herself included — was walking on a temperamental knife's-edge. It wouldn't be to Renee's benefit to reveal something like that right now.

"As I was about to tell you, S'aam," Ingram used the Standard equivalent of the Kemanite's own general title of respect, "the Federation has determined that you should *still* deal with the gorzari. However, as it would be against the Federation's Sentient Rights clause to actually *sell* sentient beings," Renee sat forward and lifted one hand again, palm-outward, nearly into the face of the furious Kemanite leader who was again about to override her, and went on in a rush:

"The Federation has offered to stipend the government of Kemanos the standard offered to Federation Ambassadors whose citizens still utilize either credits or money, for any citizen of Kemanos properly trained *by the Federation in Federation directives*, who is willing to aid the gorzari in obtaining the interactive intergalactic goals which they have for their people." Ingram paused and drew a great breath. Trying to get all that out before somebody yelled over her again had made her somewhat lightheaded.

To Captain Ingram's relief, the trader subsided back into his seat, his eyes losing their furious glare and taking on the speculative look common to every trader of any humanoid species Ingram had ever encountered. "What sort of stipend would this be, exactly? And can the Federation provide it in..." the Kemanite's gaze glazed, momentarily, with the unmistakable syrup of

greed, "gold-pressed latinum?"

Next to her, Tenger shook his head marginally. The captain of the *Enterprise* ignored this. Though an Orion might, Renee didn't even know what that particular standard of currency was. "I'm sure that can be worked out between your Trade Commission and the Federation Council once the zhin-ga-Morrah issue has been settled. I've been designated merely as a messenger. Would such an agreement be acceptable to your Trade Commission? *That* is the question that's been put to me to answer for."

"I take it we might not like the alternative?" the Kemanite next to the High Trader inquired.

Renee shrugged. "The *Cairo* and the *Enterprise* have already taken all gorzari on the planet into —"

The High Trader leaped to his feet. Beside him, Tenger followed suit. Captain Ingram laid a soft, restraining hand on the Orion officer's forearm.

"By what authority?" the Trader snarled at the table in general.

"By the authority of the h'Ncan Amnesty Board," the president of that body replied. "Ours is a Federation world, and ours is the world upon which you were trading in sentient beings. Therefore also, by Federation authority."

Considering the containment needs of the gorzari, neither starship could have performed this feat without

the help of the Ancari. "Of course," Renee modulated her voice to its most soothing tones, "we will return them, should you be willing to sign sworn affidavits regarding Kemanos' willingness to act as Federation Protectorate to them, which would also include the aforementioned Federation training and stipend, full Federation membership, and your sworn oath to *never* trade in sentient or emergent-sentient beings again."

The Kemanite trading contingent looked, by turns, shocked and infuriated. "I... I do not possess that sort of authority!" the High Trader sputtered, falling back into his seat in defeat. The laconic Orion security cadet, as though he had decided to become either a mirror or a mime, matched the Kemanite's motions almost exactly.

"In that case, you will wish to contact your government, let them know our plan, and request that they send someone *with* that authority to h'Nca. Meanwhile, I will contact Starfleet Command and request that they send the current Federation Ambassador to Kemanos here immediately, with your requested form of remuneration. We'll be here until the last of the Morrah have been transferred; the gorzari aren't going *anywhere* soon."