

TARNISHED
REFLECTION
Book 2
A Darkened Glass

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Tarnished Reflections, Book 2, A Darkened Glass

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Chapter One

“I reset the matrix the moment we jumped through it. We weren’t followed,” Colin averred to Captain Ingram’s tense question from where he tagged along behind Rafael, who half-carried the captain through the door of the main sickbay. The Ensign had been in the transporter room, having just returned to the ship from one of the docked runabouts, when Renee had been beamed back aboard with her unlikely companion. Buonarroti threw the big Minaran telepath an incredulous look over his right shoulder.

“We’re fighting a war with things so damned technologically advanced that we can’t even perceive them, and you bring back Daniel Boone?” he hissed into the captain’s ear as he eased her onto the nearest biobed.

The captain of the *Enterprise* was in pain, as her response plainly indicated: “I think my knee’s broken, Ensign, so do me a favor, will you? Shut up now. Then do me *another* favor, and next time you speak to me, know what the hell it is you’re talking about.”

T’Dani regarded the trio with alarm as they stumbled into her sickbay. “What...? Who...? But didn’t you just –”

Rafael had already had this last question answered, and addressed the CMO’s confusion. “The Guardian can manipulate time. She was on his planet for weeks,” the engineer tossed his

head at the Paleolithically-attired alien redhead. “According to him, it only seems like she just left the ship.”

“I am Colin,” the stranger offered in his awful voice. Corrigan turned the medical tricorder she had focused on the captain toward the big man. Colin considered the instrument for a moment, then removed the thing he’d called a psionic damper from behind his ear and switched it off. The CMO’s eyes widened, and she manipulated several controls on the instrument, which replied with a sound that Rafe interpreted to mean *hey! Don’t do that again!*

“What *are* you?” the CMO demanded tersely. The man who called himself Colin blinked large liquid eyes at her, obviously trying to figure out a way to answer that question. T’Dani’s mouth fell open, and a small gasp escaped.

“We don’t have time for this, T’Dani; Fix my damn knee, please, and I mean *now*. You all just need to trust me when I tell you that Colin’s here to help us.”

The part-Vulcan woman frowned, then turned away from the stranger to cut with a laser scalpel through the material of the unusual pants Renee was wearing. Ingram’s knee was swollen with blood; the CMO scanned it, made a face, and then turned to pull an osteo-regeneration unit specific to humanoid knees off of one of the many vitreous shelves around them. “The captain says that the semi-silicon psionic stranger with no distinct humanoid DNA pattern’s here to help us, Mr. Buonarroti. What I’d like to know is how in hell she convinced the tendons in her

femur to part ways with her patella.” She looked up at Renee, having positioned the unit; “Or did *he* have something to do with that, too?”

“I kicked somebody. Hard.”

T’Dani offered Renee a pawky look. “Another individual also partially composed of silicon?” she snapped the osteoregenerator shut around Renee’s knee and programmed it. It switched on with a soft hum, and Renee groaned with relief, allowing herself to sag back onto the biobed.

“I don’t know and I don’t care, as long as he didn’t follow us. Colin, what is it that you’ll need in order to defeat the things that are trying to psionically take over the Federation?”

The stranger sighed. “I’ll need a pseudo-crystalline control system capable of channeling and exponentially increasing psionic force.”

All three *Enterprise* crewmembers gazed at him blankly.

Colin went on: “Understand, I don’t really know if such a thing exists, but it should... somewhere,” Colin shrugged. “I would imagine that – ”

“Things like what you’re talking about are incredibly dangerous,” T’Dani hissed. “In the wrong hands — ”

“This won’t be in the wrong hands, Doctor, it’ll be in Colin’s. You know where to find such a thing?” Ingram snapped at her CMO.

T'Dani's frowned fiercely at Renee; "Not right off the top of my head, no, but I do know that the V'Shar's been attempting to replicate some of the effects such a capacitor would have, using various recombinations of trilithium, or dilithium and pseudo-zirconite."

"How the hell would *you* know what the V'Shar's doing?" Rafael demanded. Captain Ingram rolled her eyes at her CMO.

T'Dani's changed the subject. "How's your leg feeling, Captain?"

"A great deal better. *Dilithium*?"

Both T'Dani and Colin nodded somberly. "Does your ship not utilize dilithium as a warp-field catalyst?" The shaggy-haired psion inquired.

Rafael threw up his hands and announced; "*Essere un po' di fuon!*"

"Sure," Renee replied, "but I can't for the life of me think of a way to use our dilithium chamber as a psionic capacitor without destroying the ship."

Colin grinned at Renee. "I can see how that might not work. Surely, on a vessel this complex, there are other options."

"*Have you all lost your minds?*" Buonarroti interjected, in Standard this time.

The captain of the *Enterprise* turned eyes in a face that seemed to Rafael to have aged ten years toward him. "I'll be here for a little while, Ensign. Please take Colin down to engineering and help him figure out what other options he might have. Time, as they say, is a-wastin'."

"Considering that you only just beamed down to the planet," Rafe consulted his chronometer, "a little over twenty minutes ago, I'm not entirely certain how that works, but then again, after this conversation, I'm not entirely certain how anything works, so I guess I'll just do it," he groused, motioning at Colin to follow him. T'Dani's dry chuckle accompanied them out of the room.

Upon entering the turbolift, Buonarroti adopted a rigid stance and tried to stand as far away from Colin as the lift would allow, a difficult feat to perform in what amounted to little more than an unusually roomy box. He didn't trust the man. "We don't generally keep psionically-active crystals scattered through the ship," Rafe announced snidely.

The stranger didn't answer immediately. As the lift zipped smartly down and across, from the lowest aft section of the saucer through the starship's swan neck toward the engineering levels in the secondary hull, Colin appeared to be performing the act that most people who found themselves in uncomfortable company in a turbolift performed; He gazed with studious fascination at the walls. Once he did answer, Rafael realized that discomfort wasn't the reason for the displaced attention of

the stranger with the awful voice and weird hair and leading man's eyes.

"Just in the turbolift walls?"

Rafe blinked at this apparent non-sequitur. "What?"

"Do you solely keep psionically-active crystals in the walls of your intraship transports for some particular reason?" by this time, Colin was fingering the walls.

Not the walls, specifically, Rafael realized; The Lonsdaleite crystals imbedded into them. "No... they're not psionic crystals, it's just a remnant from an experiment that didn't work. They're... kind of all over the ship."

Colin slowly pulled the fingertips of one hand away from the wall. Ghostly tendrils of light followed his fingers, arcing and spitting like tiny lightning bolts. Had Buonarroti been forced to put a name to that light, he might have called it ultraviolet, but of course, ultraviolet light couldn't be seen without sensory organs specific to its wavelength.

"Turbolift, halt!" he cried, trying unsuccessfully to back further away from the imposing man he shared the lift with. Colin threw Rafael a sympathetic glance and ceased whatever he was doing with the chips of Lonsdaleite in the walls.

"I don't mean to alarm you. But these crystals appear to be intermeshed with the metallic superstructure of this vessel at the

subatomic level. Are such crystals common throughout the *Enterprise*?"

Rafe nodded wordlessly. Colin smiled, a thing without guile that softened his face. It didn't matter to Buonarroti; to him, this man with the unpleasant grating voice seemed more alien than the most insectile Tholian. He turned his gaze away. "All over the place. I'll take you to their thickest..." Buonarroti shrugged, "the part of engineering where they're concentrated. It was the transwarp hub; it's a Ventries port for the passage and storage of awkward hardware now. Turbolift, continue to engineering."

"Transwarp?"

Rafael glanced back at Colin. His brow had furrowed, not entirely unlike the way Yaelat's did when he was confused, though this person didn't possess an Hali'ian's vestigial, pit-viper-like sensory organs on his forehead. "You're some kind of telepath, aren't you? Can't you just take that information from my mind?"

Colin literally recoiled; where his back contacted the turbolift, the walls seemed to chime, softly. The sound dissipated as the turbolift doors opened. Neither occupant of the lift moved to exit.

"Your captain made it very clear that, in the Federation, such an act would be both illegal and immoral. I..." Colin looked down, as though Rafael had somehow shamed him, "I

would like to be part of the Federation, and so can't...*wouldn't* do such a thing except to save your life, would I?"

A line from a book Rafe had read as a child suddenly came so clearly to his mind that he could see the words, as though they'd been printed in reverse over the back of both retinas; *she felt as though she had killed something innocent and buried it beneath a drift of leaves.* A sense of shame swept through him. "I'm... sorry. Please forgive me. I didn't mean to infer anything like that. I just... it's that..."

"That I'm strange and frightening and unlikely, and you don't know how to interact with me. I understand; I feel that way about myself, sometimes. If...if you could just take me to this place, this thing you call a transwarp hub, I could — "

"Transwarp was an attempt to access the quantum tunnels that apparently lie between the warp folds inherent to the Milky Way Galaxy," Rafael explained in a rush. "It didn't work; nobody's entirely sure why. They took out the rest of the transwarp technologies, but the Lonsdaleite..." he shrugged.

"You'd have to entirely rebuild the ship to remove the Lonsdaleite; it's molecularly bonded to the turbolift's systems, so anywhere it is in the ship, it's probably bonded to those systems, too."

Engineering levels have been attained; Is departure from this turbolift imminent, or are alternate levels required? the computer

inquired, causing both Colin and Buonarroti to start. Rafael exited the turbolift; Colin followed.

“Is that...do you think that’s something you’ll be able to work with?”

“I think that may be exactly the thing I need. Is there some way to contact Riana from here, to tell her what we’ve discovered?”

Rafe frowned. “Who’s *Riana*?”

“Ahm...the captain of the *Enterprise*.”

“Is that...sort of a... nickname?” Rafe wondered, briefly, about what sort of relationship Renee had developed over her several weeks/twenty minutes with this man. It was none of his business, really, but still...

“It was the name she was given at birth,” Colin explained, which made the matter about as clear as mud in Buonarroti’s mind, but as Renee would probably remind her chief-engineer-by-attrition, the name by which Colin called Renee really wasn’t the key subject of the question he’d asked.

“Buonarroti to Captain Ingram,” Rafe intoned into the air in general, opening the voice-activated computer linkages which were part of any starship’s internal-scanning capabilities. The *Enterprise*’s internal scan-systems had been rebooted on the way to Tres Two, via an arcane linkage they shared with the main environmental controls.

“Ingram here. What have you found, Ensign?”

“You know all that old Lonsdaleite left over from the transwarp fiasco? Colin says he can use that.”

“Excellent! Send him back to Sickbay; I want him to show me exactly how such a thing can be done!”

Chapter Two

Knowing that Colin had the psionic structures he required in order to perform the feat of blocking their enemies' psionic transmissions, Ingram was reticent to remain at Tres Two one second longer than necessary. As soon as T'Dani had repaired her knee and she'd donned a fresh uniform, and Colin had eaten, freshened up, and changed into a standard yeoman's uniform so that he wouldn't appear quite so strange to her crew, she'd gathered most of her senior staff together in the situation room, to brief them on what was happening, and what Colin, with the aid of a Federation starship, was going to attempt to do.

“Colin tells me that if he can manage to block the telepathic signals these things are using, we can then give the ships or planets they’re trying to take over information about the medications we used in order to —“

“And if they turn around and attack us?” Rafael inquired.

“As long as the transmission channels in our walls function, they won’t be able to attack us psionically, and if they use any other method, well, we’ll know where their ships are then, and can zero in on them at that point and fire back. My plan is to collect an armada as we go along.”

“An armada of *what*?” Marco interjected.

Ingram drew a deep breath. “Of the starships, and probably other ships by now, that are after us. We’ll almost certainly

need to free them first. If I knew exactly where they were at the moment, I'd actually go after them first for this reason, but I don't, so here's the itinerary everyone:

“According to the last Section 31 transmission we received, Betazed and Trill are holding their own against the things pretty well, which is good, since those will have to be the last places we go, considering where we are right now. Marco,” she nodded at her navigator, who nodded back somberly, “has plotted a variant course, which is open to change depending upon what sorts of actions we see, to Delta Triacula, Eta Carinae Borealis, 53 Aquarii, Sol, Procyon, 40-Eridani, Trillius Prime, and the entire Tendaras Cluster; The Betazoids have been afraid since this started that something might be trying to spread all throughout that area.” The things psionically attacking the Federation appeared intent upon breaking up the societies that constituted its central axis, the way a chef might remove the dense heart from a head of cabbage or lettuce to more easily separate the leaves.

“Probably the Betazoids suspect that these things are trying to set up actual bases,” Seantie muttered darkly. Renee nodded; this had already occurred to her.

Colin sighed. “How long will it take us to get to Delta Triacula?” he inquired nervously. Ingram frowned.

“About four hours at maximum warp. However, we’re not going at maximum warp; I want to look like we’re limping, to try and lure in any ships that might have been taken over by

these things toward us. I'm assuming they'll put up a fight, and that we'll be able to force their shields down and..." Ingram narrowed her eyes at Colin; "Why?"

The powerful psion shook his head at her. "Riana, if I'm to do all this, I'll need an influx of psionic energy from outside the Lonsdaleite matrices themselves. I..." he pursed his lips and looked down at the table. "What I'd really like would be to use some percentage of the energy the ship itself puts out."

A chill speared its way down Ingram's spine. "I wish you'd mentioned this before. The ship doesn't put out psionic energy."

Colin nodded. "But I saw in your mind a way to do this. The ship already has converters. In some way, these converters can be reworked to alter electromagnetic energy gravitically, and pass it through variance conduits in order to produce psionic —"

"Colin, what you saw in my mind was a loosely theoretical blueprint I worked up twenty years ago, in order to try and think up some way to pass a simulated academic test and win a bet. There's no veracity to it!"

"Have you attempted it?"

Renee goggled at him. "Attempted...? To use warp coils to manufacture psionic energy out of electromagnetic force? Dear god, no! Aside from you, I don't think there's a telepath on the ship with enough facility to try it. I'd be afraid to actually try that if I had —"

“If you had the resources of an experimental Federation starbase, including entire blast-chambers. Yes, I see. Well, would you be afraid to actually try it with the prospect looming that there may shortly be no Federation starbases in existence at all?”

Renee felt herself blanch. “Hell, Colin. You’re saying there’s no other way?”

“Perhaps we should have remained docked at Guardian Alpha until we worked all this out. We were safe there,” Yaelat said to Colin gloomily. The Hali’ian communications officer was more than just a little bit worried about encountering their psionic enemies again.

Colin looked away from everyone seated anxiously around the glossy black situation-room table, at the subtle patterns of microscopic crystalline inclusions ferning and vining their way up the bulkheads on the starboard side of the room, between and behind models, schematics, and plaques all detailing the many exploits of the several starships that had been called *Enterprise*;

“There’s another way, Captain, and the psions aboard *Enterprise* are willing to help me, but it’s apt to take a toll on your crew. I was trying not to...” he pursed his lips again, as though he’d rather not say the words at all, “not to drag carbon-based beings into this with me. But the linked minds of psions can create channels not unlike what you’d call electrical circuitry and pass their own energies through it. It can be both controlled and enhanced by a properly equipped hub.”

“A hub like...what?” Renee said, both intrigued and appalled at once. He turned back to her and smiled, the coldest, bleakest smile she’d ever seen a humanoid produce.

“A hub like *me*, Riana. I’ve been in mental contact with a number of psionic individuals on the ship since I beamed aboard.” He shook his head, a look of amazement crossing his features. “I didn’t have a really good feel for the sort of diversity of mind there is here. It’s slightly alarming.”

Colin wasn’t the first person to say that about the highly diverse crew of the latest iteration of the Fleet’s flagship. An uncomfortable silence settled over the room.

“There was a monograph presented on the sort of thing he’s talking about, at that science symposia I went to half a year ago. It *is* possible, Captain,” Seantie Voss offered finally. “But it’s physically exhausting and psychologically draining, harmful or even deadly to anybody too far off their species’ fitness prime. That’ll cut into the pool of people who’ll be able to help.”

“I’m fairly sure that energy from any spectra can be altered into energy compatible with another spectra; I seem to recall Tammy having talked about something like that once. We should at least try,” Rafael added. “Would you happen to have access to that loosely theoretical blueprint you were talking about, Captain?”

Renee smiled wanly. “Of course we’ll *try*. It’s what will happen in the interim between trying and succeeding that I’m

concerned about. Colin, how soon could you begin?" Ingram turned her attention to the table before her. Its entire surface was embedded with computer interfaces; she used one of these to call up the information Buonarroti had requested. She kept a copy of it on her personal computer. The rough schematic that she'd drawn in the Academy popped up on the table screen, and she patched it through the table to where Rafe was seated while Colin answered her question.

"I *should* begin immediately. I'm not yet certain exactly what capacities the matrices in the walls will allow me, or what capacities beyond blocking enforced mind-control might be required. It's possible that — "

"Bridge to Captain Ingram." Josi was the only flag officer not in the room; Considering the magnitude of the situation they were embroiled in; the interim XO didn't feel comfortable handing the tactical board off to some nervous cadet.

"Yes, Commander?"

"There seems to be a convoy of unidentifiable ships gathered around one of the m-class planets orbiting Lyra Psitticum. You said you wanted to investigate any ship we ran across between here and the Tendaras Cluster."

"That's right, Commander. Drop out of warp and plot a course toward Lyra that helps hide our presence; maybe circle around and come at the gas giant from the other side of the sun. Once we're close enough, send the audio-visual of the convoy to

the situation room.” What was happening wasn’t visible from the floor-to-ceiling window-viewscreens behind the situation-room table, even after the ship dropped out of warp and the sight of space normalized. Renee turned to her CMO. “T’Dani, I’m going to need you to perform physicals on every psion I send to sickbay.”

The part-Vulcan woman nodded wordlessly, rose, and left the room. “Did you want me to go with her?” Colin asked tensely.

Captain Ingram considered that for a moment. “Not right away. Computer, open an infraship channel.

“This is Captain Renee Ingram. All psionically capable crew are ordered to report to sickbay for full physicals. Your assistance may be required.” She let it go at that. “Computer, close channel. Damn, Colin, I don’t even know what to call the help I’m asking these people for!”

“They already understand what I need them to do. I need their psionic capacity. The Lonsdaleite conduits themselves should be enough to enhance it, as long as I’m able to channel it correctly.”

“And if you’re not? How do we know,” Ingram added, crossing her arms across her chest, “That this sort of thing won’t irreversibly harm *you*? As far as I’m aware, you’re the only one of your kind in existence. How do we gauge *your* level of fitness?”

Colin looked down at the table again. "Even if my body ceases to function, the crystal at the base of my throat will continue for as long as you..." he shook his head and crossed his own arms, a pan-humanoid sign of discomfort. "I made a promise; both my silicon body and my carbon body that is *Colin* made this promise." He looked back up at Renee, his face so grave that it hurt her heart. "I promised that I would do anything to be released from the prison of a planet that spawned me. *Anything*. And I intend to fulfill that promise."

Frowning thunderously, Renee had just opened her mouth, though she wasn't entirely certain what sort of reply she might make to such a statement, when the window-screens behind the kidney-shaped table they were gathered around shifted views without shutting off, making everyone present instinctively clutch at the arms of the chair they were in as though the room itself was moving. The window-screens zoomed in on a blue planet surrounded by half a dozen tiny, almost perfectly round, grey vessels with no apparent power structures, sensors, windows, running lights, identification marks, or egress ports.

"Fascinating," Colin breathed. Ingram wasn't certain whether he was referring to the action just performed by the screen, or what the screen revealed. He stood up and walked to the wall furthest from the situation-room table — the wall, Renee realized, outside of which the tableau now visible to everyone in the room was actually taking place.

He reached for the wall, and it seemed to come alive. Ghostly indigo projections flowed toward his fingers as he they

neared the crystals implanted in the bulkhead, blooming like tiny flowers and dissolving like smoke, again and again in delicate Mandelbrot traceries that Renee would have sworn she could smell. A poem about synesthesia John Harriman had once published began to form in her tired, anxious mind; *silver sagebrush absinthe scent of acacia chaparral and creosote dust*...the captain of the *Enterprise* held her hands up palm-outward and shook her head, as though to physically force away the web of psionic awareness that had threaded its way through the situation room. She opened her mouth to ask Colin what the hell he was doing.

He answered her question before she even asked it; “They’re not ships at all; they’re *lifeforms*!”

Great; just what they needed right now, an undiscovered...wait! “These aren’t the things attacking the Federation...?”

Colin shook his head. “Their intent is the same as ours, but their capacities are...different, somehow. They’re psionic beings; they want to help us. They were not aware when they began their journey just how difficult it would be to reach us.”

“*Us*? You have got to be kidding. *Can they*?”

“I am unsure.” The immensely powerful telepath’s voice might have been dreamy, had it been less of a cold, grating, mechanistic monotone.

“Well, what the hell *are* they?”

“What you’re seeing is a psionic...sort of a projection. It’s not...well, not entirely real. They call themselves...” Colin’s closed eyes flashed open, but only for a moment; “Migg’hyainaan. Not one of those creatures is a single entity. That’s a collection working together. This is very hard for them, they’re risking their lives to do this, but they seem to think that you’ve helped them sometime in the past.”

“Me? Personally? I’ve never heard of such creatures. I’d rather they didn’t cause harm to themselves on my account!”

“Not your account...” Colin frowned. “Not even the Federation. Wait...it’s the ship. Something about the ship.”

“The *Enterprise*? ”

“Yes, that’s it exactly. The vessel.”

Renee frowned and spoke into the air. “Computer, I’ve got a string of potentially interconnected concepts, all converging on something that some iteration of the starship *Enterprise* has done, or somewhere that a starship named *Enterprise* has been. I need you to present occurrences in which all of them exist concurrently; Mig...” Renee paused momentarily and gave her best approximation of what Colin had just said; “Migg’hyainaan, psionic projection, rendering aid.”

Working, the computer replied. The room was tense and quiet for nearly a minute, then; There is no such term as Migg’hyainaan in any extant historical computer logs referent to any iteration of *Enterprise*.

Renee made a face. “Fine, computer; remove this term from the —”

“Riana, add the term *shape shifter*. This is what they are doing. They are not made to perform this function in the vacuum of space; it’s why they’ve come to this planet, it offers an atmosphere and...and other things they need, if they are to continue to survive. They’ve been doing this jumping from planet to planet for weeks, and I’m not sure they’ll be able to function that way much longer.”

This was all just getting weirder and weirder. “Fine. Computer, the string of potentially interconnected terms converging on the *Enterprise* —”

“Captain?” Demora cut in. She, like everyone else seated around the situation-room table, was manipulating the computer interlinks set into the table in order to help Renee figure out what was going on. The status bar that flanked the side of the inlaid workstation Sulu was using showed an image of the helmsman’s face, identifying her search-string as originating within the archives of her own personal computer. “I think I know what those,” she nodded at the viewscreen, “might be.”

“What, Lieutenant?”

Demora sent the information to all the workstations at the table, summarizing the information as the *Enterprise*’s senior officers scrolled through it; “About a hundred and sixty years ago, the crew of the *Enterprise*-NX encountered a rogue planet

whose active core supported life even in the absence of an energy-producing star. They went down to check this out, and came across a band of humanoids hunting what they considered to be a vicious, elusive animal. Well, these animals appeared to Captain Archer, and they weren't animals at all, but psionic sentient beings. The hunters called the planet *Dakala*. Those," Sulu looked up and motioned toward the screen, "might be what Archer's logs call 'Dakalan wraiths'."

Renee had no doubt about the veracity of Demora Sulu's facts in this case. If there was an historical log, biography, hagiography, autobiography, computer memory, or vague strange rumor that concerned Jonathan Archer, her helmsman would have collected it. Demora had always been secretly in love with him, she'd confessed once when under the influence of the toxin of a venomous flying insect.

That venom was also hallucinogenic, and the insect itself was worshipped by the superstitious natives of Theta Borealis Four, whose society members of the *Enterprise* B had been covertly infiltrating in shifts, looking for signs of Romulan influence on the archaic Vulcanoid population. The venom had brought Archer to life in Demora's mind, while simultaneously dissolving Sulu's peripheral nervous system, before Captain Harriman had been able to make the Borealans understand both their sincerity about the untrustworthiness of the Romulans, and Demora's desperate need for an antidote.

Renee understood that it was easier for Demora to concentrate her affection on someone who'd been dead for over

half a century than to face the sense of free-floating distrust that was a remnant of a mother gone sick, insane, and dying while her father was light-years away. Demora had been scarcely more than a toddler at the time; The madness inflicted by her mother's mortal illness had led the woman to spirit them both away to a frozen, unpopulated wasteland out of paranoid delusions of being harmed by other people.

Renee reached up and massaged her temples. How long had it been since she'd last slept? Eaten? Mulling this over threatened to pull her into yet another skein of complexly detailed memories that were the precursors of dreams. "So... those creatures out there banded together to try and help the Federation? And they're dying for it? Any idea how we might speak to them, to let them know that we'd rather they sought their own welfare? I'd really like a chance to get to know this species before it commits suicide on our behalf." She shook her head; "They must be incredibly long-lived."

"I may be able to speak to them." Colin turned away from the wall. His serious gaze fell on Yaelat. The Hali'ian literally winced, and Colin shook his head at him, a look of compassion fleeting across his features before he shifted his gaze to Seantie, who had already risen from her seat to cross the room toward him. Before she even came near him, she whirled in place and cried:

"They're losing their capacity for cohesion, Captain. We need to beam them aboard *immediately!*" the Betazoid's voice was a study in pain and distress.

Renee cast a wild look between Colin, Seantie, and what appeared to be shuttle-sized ships on the viewscreen. “How large are they? How many are they? And *please* tell me they’re not susceptible to psionic manipulation by our enemies!”

“Each, they’re not much larger than a humanoid, though they’re not humanoid. There are slightly over a hundred of them. They’re distinctly non-susceptible to outside psionic manipulation,” Colin replied. “Riana, we must hurry!”

“A hundred...what sort of atmosphere do they need? What sort of medical aid?”

“Basic nitro-diox, very low light, gradual hyperbarics and anti-irradiatives as might be given to a tyr-Rigellian or Saurian or Arkhonian to counteract the effects of raw space,” Seantie rapped back, her voice as toneless as Colin’s was, her eyes unfocused but intent upon something invisible to the non-psions present.

Renee reached out to work the controls on the table in front of her. “Ingram to Felingaili!”

“Felingaili here, Captain.”

“Warp into transporter range of that planet right now; those aren’t ships, they’re sentient beings, and they’re in need of immediate assistance. Ingram to all transporter rooms; *Respond!*”

A quartet of voices answered her. “The ships surrounding the fourth planet of Lyra Psitticum are actually massed lifeforms. Lock onto them and beam them into the shuttle and cargo bays the second we’re in range.” She didn’t wait for an affirmative before opening yet another channel; “Ingram to all shuttle bays; *Respond!*”

This time she received only two replies. She ordered that the shuttle bays immediately be altered to the specifications Seantie had given, then contacted the cargo bays and gave the same order. It occurred to her, fleetingly, that this sort of process would be much more efficient if a starship actually possessed direct-transporter bays that could be utilized in situations like this. She knew, at one and the same time, that she had no idea how such a thing might be accomplished, and that her overtaxed mind would probably forget the idea as soon as she turned it to something else, but neither of those things were important at the moment;

“Ingram to Doctor Morell!”

The voice that responded possessed a distinctly anxious tone. “Yes, Captain?”

“I’m beaming aboard psionically-capable lifeforms about whose physiognomy I know four things; They’re psionic shapeshifters, they require hyperbaric and irradiative healing from the vacuum of space as might be found in reptilian or pseudo-reptilian humanoids, they breathe the same atmosphere as we do, and they can’t tolerate high levels of light. I need you

and Benzon Kliva-t to care for them.” She sighed noisily and turned her head to face the Minaran man in the corner; “I’ll send Colin down to help you as soon as I can.”

Chapter Three

After forcing herself to eat and take a six-hour nap while her ship was in hiding and being repaired as thoroughly as possible this far away from a starbase, Captain Ingram had awakened to a request from one of the shapeshifting creatures the *Enterprise* had rescued roughly two days before. They wanted to thank her for having rescued them, though considering the help that they had provided to Colin, the captain of the *Enterprise* was pretty sure that the burden of gratitude should flow the other way.

By the time Colin had finished his impromptu overhaul of what had heretofore been nothing more than a staging area for bulky engineering equipment, the *Enterprise* had reached Delta Triacula. A terse after-action report submitted to Seantie by a yeoman named Shrev, one of the very few psions aboard the *Enterprise* who hadn't been relegated to sickbay, had been brought to Ingram's attention by Josi. This report claimed convincingly that no action following their arrival at Delta Triacula would have been possible without the help of the non-humanoid sentients that called themselves *Migg'hyainaan*.

The Federation's enemies were no longer wholly unseen; the psionically-enhanced shields, sensors, and weaponry that Colin and his team produced using the energies of their own minds in conjunction with the crystalline structures inherent within the *Enterprise*, had the effect of uncloaking the tiny vessels which, horribly, somehow cloaked themselves in the subspace field.

They *Enterprise* had, thus far, freed the Deltan, Napean, Hali'ian, and Kazar'ian star systems of the enemy ships that had been orbiting around and through those star-systems, and sent down teams of volunteers to what fortified locations remained, to help create the precious psionic anti-psychosis medication from whatever medical stocks the planets retained.

All of those systems would require further assistance; They had suffered what amounted to forced civil war, the intensity of which had cost them all centralized government, most or all of their military capacity, and all of their flight-capable ships. Until all areas of all habitable planets in those systems had been treated with some form of the psionic anti-psychotic, threats of uprising remained. *Enterprise* had been too pressed for time and too thinly-staffed to linger, and they still hadn't managed to contact Section 31 to request help or to submit any report about the medicinal gas that was so integral in ending the psionic madness.

The first reaction of the warp-capable little crystalline enemy vessels had been to flee when they realized their cover had been snatched away. Several had managed to escape from the Deltan, Kazar'ian, and Hali'ian star systems. Sixteen more — what appeared to be the standard enemy complement in each system — had been turned into fiery little stars above the moons of Napea, before Renee Ingram realized that the tiny psionic craft possessed no weaponry other than the fierce psionic effect that the ships drew from the minds of those who piloted them.

Hence those pilots' need to turn the crews of Federated ships into puppets; They required something capable of shooting back. This explained the explosive civil strife that had occurred upon all the planets the *Enterprise* had freed of psionic control thus far, as well as the reason why starships filled with maddened crew were seeking other starships.

That realization had slapped Ingram in the face with the ethical quandary of destroying ships whose crew had no ability to fight back. This had lost them valuable time, and left them vulnerable to the *Surak* coming up toward them from the direction of Sol, and the *Crazy Horse*, flanking them from behind Eta Carinae Borealis.

Dealing with her sister-ships had cost the *Enterprise* twenty percent of her high-warp capacity, all ventral aft shields, the destruction of her accessory impulse engine including its warp interlinks, and the demolition of much of the saucer section overlooking the *Enterprise*'s swan-neck. Fortunately, this area was given over to lounge and dining space in the *Enterprise* B; Since the starship was in the midst of a pitched battle when hull breech had occurred, all non-vital sections had been secured, and no one was present in these areas at the time.

Unfortunately, the same could not be said of the areas adjacent to the accessory impulse engine. Renee and her senior staff unanimously decided that as few of the Federation's psionic enemies as possible should live to fight another day. Though she would still like to capture some if she could, in order to ferret out the details of how and why there were doing

what they were doing, they had begun this brawl; if they hadn't suited up for it properly, that was their problem.

Ingram paused before entering her ready room. She found both coincidence and foreordination to be equally unlikely concepts. Instead of wasting her time worrying which one of those her ship's fortuitous meeting with the Migg'hyainaan might be considered, she steeled herself to encounter any number of interesting alien physiognomies before walking through the door to her ready room.

She hadn't been able to prepare herself for what actually confronted her. The captain of the *Enterprise* came to a halt as though she'd run into a bulkhead. Sitting in her ready room was...was...

Renee had married early, much to her parents' distress, though they had both liked her husband. Melchior had been an interspecies physical therapist on the wildly diverse planet of Nisus, where she had grown up. It was his violet-blue eyes and leaf-green face that turned toward her, his delicate physique that took up the only occupied chair in the room. She was peripherally aware that someone made a sound like a stepped-on mouse; a few seconds elapsed before she realized the sound had come from her own throat.

"I wished to assume a pleasing shape," the psionic shape shifter averred in a satiny voice. Ingram hadn't heard that voice in... she did a quick, agonizing calculation in her head. *Twenty-five years.* Not since Melchior, their six-month-old daughter,

T'Dani's father, and a group of family friends had been brutally murdered in a bombing whose provenance had never been solved to anyone's satisfaction. A look of combined compassion and pain moved over the handsome features of the man Renee had so violently lost. "I realize now that I have erred in my choice." The terrible, wonderful apparition of Melchior melted, and Renee Ingram was face-to-face with...whatever passed as a face in the vaguely snakelike, tentacled, featureless, slate-gray creature curled into one of the overstuffed chairs on the far side of her ready-room desk.

You took solace in Starfleet after their deaths, the alien averred, its psionic tone heavy with compassion. Renee's could plainly see that any Migg'hyainaan conversation must take place entirely in its interlocutor's mind. She also instinctively understood that for a creature so alien to the humanoid mind to appear in its natal form was a sign of both trust and respect.

The sentient being that had requested to meet with the captain of the *Enterprise* had no visible mouth or other organs of auditory speech. Its skin glittered wetly, in such a way that she imagined the creature might both breathe and absorb nutrients through it. Nor did the Migg'hyainaan possess any perceptible form of social hierarchy; Ingram had learned this when she'd asked the computer what title and personal name she should address the alien by, and was told that the only title to which they responded was their own species name, which was at once singular and plural.

Ingram felt perfectly justified in ignoring her non-humanoid psionic guest's comment. "I'm far more comfortable with you in your native form. Is there anything I can get you?" she walked to the replicator and requested a cappuccino. She was sorely lagging on her caffeine-quota.

Thank you, but we do not...imbibe the way you do, and I fear I might distress you. Are all Starfleet captains so... accommodating?

"Everyone in any position of authority in the Federation is expected to be. We have a saying; There are more things in heaven and earth —"

Than can be dreamt of in your philosophy. A wise saying. What is Horatio?

The creature in the chair suddenly seemed to slough its skin; out of this appeared Sheryl Ingram, Renee's adoptive mother. The likeness was faithful to the tiniest detail, complete with long silver hair done up in a mass of old-fashioned, highly piled and obsessively decorated curls and plaits.

Renee carried the warm, fragrant mug the replicator produced to her desk, and sat down across from the shape shifter. "Horatio is a character in the play from which that line is taken. If you don't mind me asking, how long do your people live?"

"Many of your own people's lifetimes. We do thank you for rescuing us. We were... unprepared for the rigors to which we'd

exposed ourselves, but we could hear many worlds crying, and wanted to help. And see! We have much in common. These plays of which you speak, for instance; your kind, too, sloughs its identity and changes its shape for the pleasure of knowing the minds of others.”

Renee smiled. “It’s said by my kind that doing so can help a person better understand their own lot in life. Also, we’re known to do this in order to receive the adulation of others, when our shapeshifting has been particularly well done. Your people have helped us a great deal, for which we also owe you our thanks. And am I correct in inferring that the only social rank your people possess is determined by age?”

Dakalans, it turned out, (it was easier for Ingram to think of them using this term, rather than their tongue-twisting species name) were less physically distressed as psionic-energy generators than any of the humanoids aboard the *Enterprise*, but Renee was still worried that they might have overstressed the systems of creatures so recently plucked out of vacuum. Those who had performed the duty of facing naked space directly, and most of those who had elected to aid Colin when starships crewed by psionically-maddened people appeared, intent on dismantling the *Enterprise* at a subatomic level, were currently undergoing further hyperbaric and anti-irradiative treatment at the hands of Morell’s Arkhonian medical technician. Arkhonians tolerated the environmental healing requirements of the Dakalans just fine. Only twenty-seven Dakalans had been

healthy enough to assist Colin and the other psions aboard the ship; As it turned out, their help had been sorely needed.

The creature currently pretending to be Renee's elderly mother inclined its head to her in the affirmative, and she wondered if, perhaps, this was the very individual who had contacted Captain Archer on its people's behalf. Though she supposed, in the grand scheme of things, which Dakalan she was speaking with really didn't matter; As a people, they were communal to a degree not easily comprehensible to humanoids. "We wished to tell you that the thought of remaining aboard *Enterprise* and meeting other life-forms is fascinating to several of my people, though most of us simply wish to return home.

"May those of my people who find the prospect of aiding you further at least help your engineers devise a method by which to shape shift the energies of your ship? We don't possess the same sort of technical expertise you do, but we do know numerous techniques for blending the spectra. That is our very nature, after all. Perhaps one of those techniques would be beneficial to you."

Renee sighed heavily. The *Enterprise* was definitely going to need some sort of non-living electromagnetic-to-psionic converter. Except for a couple of the Migg'hyainaan, nearly every psion aboard ship was mentally and physically drained to the point of illness, Colin especially. T'Dani had put him into a regeneration unit for burns along his major nerve junctions, and the exhaustion and dehydration that these had caused. Living

flesh was not suited to the conversion of electromagnetic energy to psionic, or vice-versa.

It had taken enormous amounts of psionic energy to hold the *Surak* and the *Crazy Horse* at bay so that their madness could be put down, not to mention freeing four-star systems in a row of psionic invaders. Nonetheless, Colin and his wildly diverse telempathic team had managed to do all of those things before collapsing en masse.

Renee hated the way Colin treated himself like a machine, but it seemed almost as though he couldn't help it, as if the silicon entity at the base of his throat compelled him to it. She would much rather have an actual machine capable of performing the task of harvesting psionic energy from the electromagnetic conduits of the ship for Colin's use. She was otherwise loathe to expose him to the inhumane effects of such activities again, regardless of how willingly those activities were performed.

"Such help would be invaluable. I know it's not quite the best time to extend this offer, but if your people desired Federation membership..." the captain of the *Enterprise* let the rest of that statement wander away. Ingram harbored no doubt that the sentient shape shifter across from her understood both the content and the context of what she hadn't said. Sheryl-Ingram-who-wasn't smiled.

"I think my people might respond positively to such an inclusion, but as you realize, Captain, now is not the time.

Though I am inspired by the optimism you feel in the face of these enemies, still they are terrible.”

Renee nodded in silent agreement. The *Enterprise* had gone into hiding in the Pelican nebula again, this time in the company of her sister ships. Once Yaelat had found prefix codes that forced them to drop their shields, the medication capable of ameliorating the rampaging madness had been easy to come by; the sickbays of both the *Surak* and the *Crazy Horse* possessed it in quantity. Using the capacity of the Lonsdaleite matrices in conjunction with the *Enterprise*’s forward and aft tractor beams, Colin and his team had held the viciously combative *Surak* and *Crazy Horse* at bay while the drugs were beamed off of those ships, and the medicated gas formulated and delivered. Once the crews of those ships had regained the capacity to think for themselves, their captains had agreed to give Ingram full Commodore status over their vessels for the interim of the psionic struggle facing the Federation.

This was, Renee reflected bitterly, not the way she’d hoped to rise through the ranks of Starfleet. The *Surak* was currently working to convert all stores of theragen, psilosynase, and kayolane that it and the *Crazy Horse* still possessed into tiny, hyper-concentrated gas bombs. Though they would end up with quite a lot of these, thanks to the medical requirements of the *Surak*’s all-Vulcan crew, still it wouldn’t be enough to inoculate entire planets.

The fact that the other starships had sustained damage that had lessened their dual impact on the *Enterprise* was scarcely

comforting; quite the opposite, in fact. Together, they now constituted not quite a quarter of an armada composed of more or less damaged Federation starships. Or anyway, they would, as soon as Colin was well enough for them to peek out of this nest they'd made for themselves while repairs were underway. Rafael Buonarroti and his technicians, humanoid and otherwise, had their hands and their tentacles extremely full.

“You’re right, they are terrible. But we’ll beat them. And I want to thank you and your people for helping us beat them.”

The shapeshifting alien smiled Sheryl Ingram’s warm smile, and reached out to take Renee Ingram’s hand.

Chapter Four

“Come,” Renee said with some relief, closing down the computer screen that held the report she was in the process of creating. The captain of the *Enterprise* was trying very hard to craft the driest debrief possible, in order to make her trip through the Guardian at Tres Two, the partially siliceous humanoid she’d brought back through it, the terrible denizens of what had to be an alternate Universe that the Guardian had sent her to, the *Enterprise*’s visitation by the shapeshifting, tentacled Migg’hyainaan, and its subsequent psionic battles sound as little as possible like something crafted by an alliance between Lewis Carroll and H.P. Lovecraft.

This was proving difficult. Nonetheless, Ingram hoped to send the debrief to Section 31 soon. In order to determine whether or not that would be possible, once they left the Pelican nebula, the *Enterprise* would broadcast information through all channels regarding the freeing of Delta, Hali’ia, Napea and Kazari’a, and the most efficient method of formulating the medication useful against the things tormenting numerous other Federation planets. That broadcast would include a request for immediate response. She was certain that Section 31, or any other arm of Starfleet whether public or covert, wouldn’t be the first to respond to this blatant battle-cry, but she did hope at least one channel would carry it to them.

All of the starships had repaired their battle damage as best they could without the aid of a starbase, and all were prepared to use the heavy force of arms bequeathed to *Excelsior*-class vessels, though *Enterprise* was unable to reach any warp beyond seven. Each of the three starships, furthermore, were now armed with the amalgamated medications capable of reversing forced mind control, but none of that would be enough should they encounter resistance by more than a dozen other armed ships at one time, or even half a dozen, if they were Federation starships. It was imperative that Ingram's quarter-armada rendezvous with as many unaffected Federation ships as possible, to increase the amount of medication available, and to garner more sheer firepower.

Rafael stood on the other side of the door. "I didn't mean to interrupt, Captain, but the shapeshifters think we've developed the sort of alternator Colin was needing. May I...?"

Ingram motioned him forward, toward the pair of chairs opposite her desk in the study nook in her quarters. Starship quarters in *Excelsior*-class vessels were quite extensive; Even a midshipman or cadet was required to share quarters with only one other person, unless their species' needs or preferences dictated a more crowded personal venue, and those quarters were quite similar to Renee's own, with a bathroom/dressing room, a study/sitting area, a combined kitchen and dining room, and a full bedroom — quite an improvement over the cramped, minimalist quarters found on the old *Constitution*-class ships.

“Colin’s going to be in sickbay for some time yet,” Renee replied after Rafe had made himself comfortable. “T’Dani tells me he really tired himself out; she also wants to try to give him actual vocal chords before he wakes up. She thinks it’ll make the process of handling psionic energy in general easier for him if the crystal that manages the bulk of the handling isn’t also forced to perform as a humanoid organ. What has the engineering lab come up with?”

“The shapeshifters thought this was an easy nut to crack. They’re...” Buonarroti sighed softly; his gaze kept crawling back to the blank space on the wall where the complex IDIC Federation logo had hung in pride of place on Ingram’s wall, conspicuous now for its absence. Renee had banished it upon realizing that the laurel wreath it sported around its star-strewn vista was the same as the one she’d seen in the United Empire of Planets’ inhumane abomination, down to the last stroke of paint and the shape of the final leaf:

“Well, the aliens are kind of creepy, but I’m glad to have their help. Anyway, what you need in order to alter electromagnetics into variance is a gravimetric capacitor — you know, like the ones found in vacuum boots? Only they need to be larger; having a bunch of boots working in tandem decreased the final output, and almost everybody who saw it laughed.

“The gravimetrics catalyze electromagnetic energy into a varianced state. That point’s where repurposed warp coils come in; they’re perfect for carrying the variance into a reconstruction unit, the same way they affect antimatter. Really, it was figuring

out what to use as a subspace reconstruction unit that was a pain in the —”

Renee held up one hand. “Send me the schematics later. What you’re telling me is that this thing will work?”

“The aliens say it should work, as soon as Colin’s better.” Rafe frowned. “He will get better, I’m assuming? If not, I’ve got two shapeshifters down in engineering who are willing to try to perform the function for him. To be honest, what’s going to be hard is getting the aliens *out* of engineering; I think it’s love. The capacitor’s got a *lot* of potential uses, too.”

Renee smiled. She really did hope the Migg’hyainaan took her up on her offer to join the Federation, but even if they didn’t, that didn’t mean they couldn’t send individuals to serve in the Federation’s Star Fleet. “Any downsides to this capacitor?”

The erstwhile chief engineer of the *Enterprise* shrugged. “The thing might not work with an alternator, meaning that when you’re drawing energy from the ship instead of from living beings, it’ll probably only be able to effect one ship’s system at a time. But I’m thinking Colin’ll have to get his hands on it before we’ll really know its downsides. Or you could let the Dakalans have a go.”

“You’re so sure it’ll have downsides?” Ingram teased gently.

Rafael nodded somberly. "Everything, Captain, has downsides. Damn lot easier to deal with life if you just accept that as a given."

Renee nodded and chewed on her lower lip. She'd do that. But not before she went to sickbay in order to, at the very least, stare at Colin's sleeping form.

Decommissioned starships were generally decommissioned, and their internal workings sealed in thick coats of polymer, before ever being used as museum showpieces. It was less difficult to coat the working parts of a space-borne museum-ship in polymer than to remove its active modules, since removing entire sections of a ship would necessitate the installment of vacuum-resistant bulkheads or blast-doors. Also, such remodeling would render historical pieces historically inaccurate; Full polymerization, Starfleet felt, would act to preserve historical accuracy as well as to render the ships inoperable.

This decision had turned out to be a mistake — not the first one that august body had ever made, but certainly, Renee Ingram reflected grimly, it would go into the records as one of the worst. Apparently, even thick coats of polymer could be removed with the right protoplasmic tools; The *Enterprise*'s CMO said she knew how to do it herself, though where and why she'd come by such a skill, Renee had neither the time nor the inclination to inquire. And no polymer ever invented could keep a refitted warp engine from working or retooled phaser ports

from firing, regardless of how old they were, once the polymer that sealed a vessel's operations stations had been removed.

In the face of an invasion in which the enemy took the minds of a planet's population, keeping museums safe or even staffed hadn't occurred to anybody as a necessity. Which was unfortunate, because either the people taken over by the Federation's psionic enemies and sent to scour aerospace museums, or those enemies themselves — who, according to Colin, were not working at a remove in such instances; They were, themselves, aboard the decommissioned ships — had one hell of a lot of engineering knowledge.

The final ancient Vulcan ring-drive vessel confronting the triumvirate of modern starships turned into a brilliant spray of light and metallic shards beneath the concentrated fire of the *Crazy Horse*, which had looped around behind the lumbering behemoth. During the interim that the *Enterprise* had spent leapfrogging its way through thousands of light-years of space, from Mu Crucis to Tres Two, their enemies had gotten their hands on an alarming number of rehabilitated museum ships capable of returning fire. Fortunately, the drive systems of those ships were blessedly inferior. They had, for example, no dilithium chambers.

A warp-nine engine didn't merely propel a ship four-fifths again as quickly as an old- fashioned warp-five engine could. Due to the quantum-exponential effects of high warp, modern starships traversed space sixty times as efficiently as the ancient double-armada of Vulcan heavy cruisers that they faced. Even

Enterprise's warp engine, partially dismantled where her accessory impulse drive had been sheared away, kept her moving twenty times faster than any of the old ring-drives could.

Unfortunately, there had been crews on those outmoded ships, enslaved to whatever monstrous psion had unmoored them from the *Tien-Shanar* aerospace museum located between the gravity wells of Vulcan and T'Rukh, crews that hadn't deserved to die. But the psion-infested Vulcan crews were unresponsive to the medications beamed into their ventilation systems once the superior drives and firepower of the modern starships knocked out the shield generators on their ring-hubs; this had been how Colin had been able to determine that their psionic enemies held direct, rather than indirect, sway over them.

Ingram's heart ached for hundreds of people she had been unable to save. She was also incredibly worried for any planet where such psionic monsters might have dug themselves in. Would such a planet also be unresponsive to the medications and psionic interventions that could save them?

Colin hadn't been able to answer that question.

"*Crazy Horse* checking in, Commodore. Sensing no further enemy vessel activity in the vicinity," Yaelat announced.

"Onscreen, please."

Commodore Ingram found herself facing the complex metallic mask of Xelatian Captain Hrncerth-ivA. It was useless

for Ingram to attempt to apply a gender to the individual on the *Enterprise*'s screen. Xenon/fluorine breathing Xelatians were asexual until exposed to particular Xelatian plant hormones, which occurred when certain vegetation developed insectile traits that ensured its spread. Xelatian cicada-clubmoss was considered deeply sacred on its planet of origin, not least because it caused Xelatian sentients to develop the capacities of one of the twelve sexes known among Xelatian animals.

“Commodore,” the pseudo-humanoid captain’s voice was a silky, melodic, computer-enhanced purr. “There appear to be no further adversarial vessels in the vicinity. Do you now wish us to continue patrolling a parsec-wide flank ventral-starboard of *Enterprise*? ”

“Affirmative, Captain. Don’t hesitate to call for our backup if you need it.”

“Thank you, *Enterprise*. *Crazy Horse* out.”

Commodore Ingram turned away from the screen, towards Yaelat. “Hail the *Surak*, please, Mr. Qat.”

It was no surprise to Ingram, once the hail was finally answered, that Captain Serein chose not to open a video feed. She could hear the thickness of tears in his voice; “Serein here, Commodore.”

All the individuals enslaved to the psions aboard the ring-ships must have been Vulcans. That had occurred to Renee well before the decision had been made that the ancient vessels must

be destroyed since, even incapacitated, they would not stop fighting. Only the superior maneuvering capabilities of an *Excelsior*-class starship had kept one of the first old Vulcan vessels incapacitated in the melee from smashing itself into shards against the *Enterprise* as a suicide-weapon.

“I grieve with thee,” Ingram said softly. And she would grieve; she had a hundred things to grieve for, but not right now. They didn’t have that luxury. Nor did she expect Serein’s thanks for a simple statement of truth. “Is there anything *Enterprise* can do for *Surak* before you take up your patrol a parsec dorsal-port of us, Captain?”

Serein drew a trembling breath. “You...our stores of Lexorin are faltering, Commodore. Could you...?”

“Consider it done, Captain. Ingram out. Computer: Contact Doctor Corrigan and tell her that the *Surak* requires all remaining stores of Lexorin from us, stat.”

She would wait until the *Surak* took up its position before continuing on the grim course down through the heart of the Federation. Vulcans were horribly sensitive to the deaths of other creatures. They had to be, in order to have evolved to mingle and carry one another’s neural energies. Renee knew of no other psionic race in the galaxy capable of performing this feat, which made them hideously vulnerable. The captain of the *Enterprise* sighed. Every species, every *person*, carried their own special strengths and vulnerabilities. The Federation welcomed and celebrated these, finding both additional strength

and deep wells of compassion in so doing. These enemies the Federation now faced seemed intent on picking apart the Federation right along these lines of vulnerability.

Not, Ingram mused fiercely, on my watch. Not if the Enterprise can stop them!

Not quite fifteen minutes later, Yaelat turned from his station and announced: "We're being hailed by a Conjunction from Tellar called *Skanu*. It should be in sensor range, but they're using some sort of ionic-scatter shield to keep our sensors from determining their precise location."

The name of the Conjunction Ship meant *Blade*. Renee chewed on the inside of her lower lip, considering her options. The *Skanu* had hailed them, not opened fire, and she sincerely doubted that ships which were taken over by psionic madness would attempt to hail other ships; they certainly hadn't thus far. "Open a channel, Lieutenant."

The three starships under Ingram's command were making their slow, careful way toward Sol. In this particular sector, interstellar traffic was usually quite brisk, but until the appearance of the *Skanu*, the quarter-armada hadn't encountered so much as a stray Malurian privateer. The lack of anything even close to normal interstellar traffic was chilling.

A compact female Tellarite, green-eyed, her golden fur tipped with silver, appeared on the screen. She was of that race of who had five fingers. This race was rare and considered exotic among her species, most of them having been the targets

of genocide during Tellar's Thought Wars. Her uniqueness made her quite well-known in Starfleet, and Renee recognized her instantly.

"Where is Captain Harriman?" the Tellarite captain barked.

Ingram relaxed back into her command chair. "Captain Nijjaret. I can't tell you how strange it is to see you. John's been injured."

Nijjaret nodded, slowly and at length. Her lower lip, that part of Tellarite anatomy that Renee actually considered attractive, quivered slightly. "The same can be said of many of my crew, Commander...*Captain* Ingram. We've been forced far from our usual patrols in order to stay out of the way of these zombie-horrors. What is the status of this war, *Enterprise*? Have you any communications from the *in'sned* slime?"

That was the most complimentary thing Renee had ever heard a Tellarite call Section 31. She didn't bother revealing her current status as pro-tem commodore; it wasn't important.

"We have. Tesla, I need to tell you that we've got something that can neutralize these things. I'd like the *Skanu* to stay in our wake, for protection. We're headed more or less toward Tellar, anyway. Marco, please send them our itinerary; When they receive it, please proceed onward at best warp. The *Enterprise* is a little beaten up, Captain, but the *Surak* and the *Crazy Horse* are flanking us, and we'd be honored to fly with the *Skanu*."

Tesla Nijjaret's entire countenance brightened visibly.
"Neutralize? I assume you mean *destroy*, praise Phinda."

The Tellarite captain turned and spoke to her helm. Tellarite helms were extensive, multi-person affairs, since Tellarite battle and evasive maneuvers tended to be both complex and marvelously inventive. Renee became aware of a slight alteration in the feel of the ship's general motion, and knew that both vessels had jumped to warp from near-stationary impulse. A microsecond's lag on the viewscreen told her the same story.

"The situation's becoming more and more complicated, I'm afraid. We're going to try to limit destruction as much as possible," Ingram said, once she was certain the computer systems that worked both vessels' viewscreens had settled into the mode in which they worked at warp. "It's our people and institutions these things are using as puppets, Captain."

"They often kill mine before inserting their hands. I'm not inclined to be picky about exactly how I break those hands," Captain Nijjaret snarled, baring her fangs.

"I'm sorry for your losses, Tesla, you have to believe me, but I'd like to get ahold of some of these creatures to question, and I want Federation casualties minimized as much as —"

"And how many of the zombie-makers will slip away from the finesse of your grasp?"

Renee frowned. Colin had expressed much the same sentiments. Thus far, the official count of what Tesla called

zombie-makers was unknown in the destroyed Suliban system, but there had been sixteen crystalline craft each at Delta, Kazari'a, Napea, and Hali'ia, and at least twenty-four of the creatures had directly controlled the ancient Vulcan ring drive vessels. "Better a few enemies go free to be dealt with later, than innocent people who can be saved should be killed in their stead, Captain Nijjaret. You know that."

"Starfleet Code, Article Three, Section Twelve. Odd, isn't it, how Starfleet code sections never seem to communicate with one another? From *in'sned* slime to pulishness, while my people perish."

"Your people, Tesla Nijjaret, are the Federation. If your grief blinds you to that, you have my sympathy. However, if your grief continues to blind you to it, and you perform belligerent actions that I don't personally authorize while you're flying in my wake, I'll see that your charter's pulled, Conjunction Ship 21-49-C *Skanu*. This, I hope, is clear despite your grief. And I *really* don't feel like dealing with Tellarite heavy bluster at the moment; my waders have holes and my shovel's broken, so cut me some slack Tesla, hey?"

This earned Ingram a brilliant smile. "It is very good to see you, *Enterprise*. So very good!"

Commodore Ingram opened her mouth to let the Tellarite know that her own visage was far less pleasant to the crew on the *Enterprise*'s bridge, when Tesla's tactical-helm officer cut in; "Large detritus field, measuring half a light-year across and

expanding, bearing twenty-five mark four-two, directly in our path!"

"He's right, Commodore," Commander Felingaili echoed. "It looks like the remains of about sixty small-to-medium vessels. And just outside the circumference of this mess..." Josi manipulated her board, frowning, but Yaelat beat her to it.

"There's a Huanni vessel on the fringes of the expanding detritus cloud that's hailing us, Commodore."

"Drop out of warp and hail the Huanni ship," Renee sighed. The captain of the Tellarite Conjunction spat out the same order. The individuals on the Huanni Conjunction Ship's bridge would see a split screen, half filled with the captain of the *Enterprise* and half filled with the captain of the *Skanu*. "Let the *Crazy Horse* and the *Surak* know what's going on, as well, and tell them to stand by."

Chapter Five

The Huanni were semi-humanoids with large, scleraless purple eyes, expressive doe-like ears that took up a great deal of their heads, and lush, fur-like white-gold or blue-gray hair that spilled down delicate skulls whose fine structure gave Huanni faces an orchid-like prettiness. Their semi-translucent, candy-pink skin was etched with web-like patterns of arteries carrying cobalt-based blood, turning their complexions a lilac hue wherever it didn't otherwise appear to be sky blue mottled with shell pink.

“I am Captain Ansees of the *Mian-Huan*. Greetings to the Federation Starship *Enterprise* and the United Federation of Planets Conjunction Ship *Skanu*. I am supposing that, since you didn’t try to do to us what the ships in this sector have done to each other, you’re not infested with whatever it is that’s unraveling the Federation at the seams?”

If there was one thing a native of Huan loved, it was conversation. Only the tone of the Huanni’s voice let Renee know that the captain of the *Mian-Huan* was male; Humanoids often found it difficult to accurately determine the genders of non-humanoids, pseudo-humanoids, or semi-humanoids in any other way.

“I’m Renee Ingram of the —” Renee began formally.

“What’s happened here, Ansees?” Nijaret cut her off. The Huanni captain’s gaze roved back and forth from one side of his ship’s viewscreen to the other. Renee raised her hands in an if-you-please motion.

Ansees gave an eerily human shrug, and answered Tesla’s question: “We were four parsecs away when our sensors picked up a mass of military vessels performing maneuvers in this sector. Naturally, considering what’s been going on, we warped here as quickly as possible, my people being immune to the effects of this *sahittarvessa*.”

The ship’s translator threw out *unpleasant liquid waste matter in tall monocot growth*, and a number of the *Enterprise*’s bridge crew chuckled, a sound that carried about equal measures of uneasiness and amusement.

“What did you find, Captain?” Renee prompted, looking down at the information scrolling over the tiny screen in the arm of her command chair. This chair was magnitudes more well-equipped than the old model had been, but most of its functions were still off-line. Sensor linkages, though, were working fine, and the available information told her that there were a number of escape pods bearing lifesigns in the field of detritus.

“There were roughly sixty ships facing off when we arrived. About half of them were very old Imperial Guard vessels — you know, the ones they still use for hauling and transport between Andoria and her colonies? The rest were modern Andorian Conjunctions. It was as though the Conjunctions were herding

the older vessels. Then the old guard ships turned on the Conjunctions, and they began an all-out firefight. Partway through, the Conjunctions started firing on each other. It was insanity; We withdrew beyond casual sensor range, because there was nothing we might do in the face of so many armed combatants without becoming casualties ourselves.

“The Conjunctions firing on the guard ships wouldn’t back down, even when the guard ships tried to get away. That’s why this detritus cloud’s so spread out, Captain — er, *Captains*, I should say. Nobody gave ground until the last Federation Conjunction Ship had lost its navigational capacity and been rammed head-on by the last Imperial Guard vessel, which had already lost its environmental controls. None of the guard ships got away, but there are about fifty or sixty escape pods remaining with lifesigns in the area; We were discussing the potential hazards of beaming aboard slightly more than a hundred people who might or might not have been taken over by this madness, before you arrived.

“It seems to me that it would be a violation of all known Federation CC and R to just leave them here, but my ship only possesses thirty crewmembers. Though we wouldn’t be affected by any mind control, still we wouldn’t last ten minutes confronted by a hundred murderous Andorians. Now that you are here, though, perhaps we might divide them among us?”

For a Huanni, Ingram mused, Ansees was downright terse. She had just opened her mouth to explain about the medications

that could alleviate the symptoms of this psionic takeover when Tesla overrode her.

“What sort of cowardly bunch are you?”

“Yaelat, cut off all transmissions from the *Skanu* for the moment, please,” Ingram ordered. Nobody in their right mind would try to take on those kinds of odds. Had Tesla not been a Tellarite, such bluster would have made Ingram question her sanity.

“With pleasure, Commodore,” the Hali’ian man replied. Nijjaret’s voice vanished, and once more Ansees’ eyes roved over his main screen.

“Sorry about that, Captain Ansees. What I need to tell you — and the *Skanu*, if Captain Nijjaret would be so kind as to shut up and listen for five minutes straight — is that there is a trio of medications which, when properly combined and introduced into a ship’s atmosphere, can stave off the effects of psionic takeover. These medications are psilosynase, kayolane, and theragen.

“We can utilize part of our stores to free the people in those life pods of any potential psionic influence. However, I’d prefer those stores increased rather than otherwise; we have, as it were, miles to go before we sleep. Would the *Mian-Huan* happen to have any of these medications available?”

“Hold one moment; I shall contact our sickbay and ask this question of our medical staff.” Ansees vanished from the screen.

“Excellent. Yaelat, hail the *Surak* and tell them to beam canisters of psionic anti-psychotics into every one of the escape pods that have life signs. When you’ve done that, reopen the channel to the *Skanu*.”

Tesla greeted the renewal of the *Skanu*’s communications functions with a glare. Any Federation Starship could commandeer the functions of any Federated Conjunction Ship for emergency use at any time. This was part of the agreement made between Federation worlds and the Star Fleet that constituted, at least part of the time, the heavy armament that protected those worlds.

“I’m assuming you received that transmission, Tesla?”

The Tellarite snorted the affirmative.

“Would your medical happen to have psilosynase, ther — ”

“We utilize theragen and kayolane; Psilosynase is poisonous to my people.”

“Excellent; please beam your existing stocks of those medications to the *Surak* immediately, and Captain, that is *not* a request.” Ansees popped up on the other half of the forward viewscreen just as Tesla opened her mouth to argue. Renee held up her right hand, palm-outward, in the universal humanoid

gesture of *wait*. To the Tellarite's credit, she did so. "Go ahead, Captain Ansees."

"We do have psilosynase, ahm...Commodore," — the Huanni captain had, obviously, heard Yaelat's earlier response to Renee — "but not the other two medications, which are useless to the Huanni. Psilosynase we use for motion sickness and gestational-itching relief, and we have quite much of it. It is not in great demand aboard the *Mian-Huan*."

"Could you kindly send *Surak* your stock of psilosynase, Captain Ansees? They have already delivered the amalgamated medication into the escape pods. As the Huanni are resistant to psionic effects, I would like for your people to act as a sort of buffer for any Andorians who've suffered mental violation. The medication will have taken immediate effect, so you should start beaming people out of the pods. They'll be unconscious when you first bring them aboard, but do be aware that people often remember the actions they've been forced to perform under the duress of what is, frankly, psionic rape, and may attempt suicide after awakening. They'll need to be monitored very carefully."

Ansees made an indecipherable movement with his mouth, nose, and ears. "Suicide is considered a sacred right among my people, Commodore. Surely you know this?"

"The people in those pods don't have the same social structure you do, Captain, and as the commander of a *Federation Conjunction Ship*, I expect you to see that their homeworld's own mores are followed to the letter. That means

you'll put them on suicide watch and keep it from happening should anyone try it. Unless, of course, somebody on one of those pods is able to prove to *me* that they should be granted *kanlee*. Am I understood?"

The Huanni half-bowed toward his viewscreen. "Yes, Commodore. I shall have our medical team send the psilosynase to the *Surak* forthwith. I shall keep you posted on the retrieval and subsequent mental health of the Andorians once we take them aboard the *Mian-Huan*. And also, I would appreciate it if *Enterprise* could send me a dossier on Andorian cultural customs?"

"Thank you for your understanding and aid, Captain Ansees. I'll keep in contact. And I'll send you something better than a dossier; please prepare for our CMO to be beamed aboard the *Mian-Huan*. Ingram out." She closed the channel, then sat silent for a while, staring out at the field of debris before her.

The Federation's enemies were attempting to access armed vessels so that they could fight back, as their own ships had no such capacity beyond the psionic. And it appeared that they were infiltrating places not being watched. Rather than concentrating upon armories or docks or shipbuilding structures, which were heavily-guarded, they had turned to museum hangars and shipping depots, which were probably, considering the current crisis, both closed to the general public and empty of anybody to watch over them. Renee wondered where else they were infiltrating, while no one was looking.

Herding, Ansees had said. The Andorian Conjunction Ship captains had made the decision to force the infested museum pieces as far away from Sector 001 and Procyon as possible and had kept them from returning by destroying them. She hoped the Conjunction commanders had managed to send information about this ploy, desperate as it was, to Section 31 before immolating their own ships in order to ensure the destruction of their psionic enemies.

She could only know this by questioning the survivors.

“Demora, please determine transporter coordinates between the *Enterprise* and the *Mian-Huan* and transmit them to transporter room one.”

“Already done, Commodore,” Sulu said.

“Thank you, Demora,” Renee replied, opening a channel to the main sickbay. Nobody knew Andorians like T’Dani Corrigan — not even, Ingram had heard more than one-person joke, Andorians. For once, that was going to come in handy.

“T’Dani, we’ve come across the remains of a firefight between Andorian Conjunction Ships and old Imperial Guard vessels. There are survivors who are being taken aboard a Huanni vessel that’s come to their aid even as we speak. I need you over there.”

“Right away! Which transporter room?”

“One, Doctor. I’ll want you to help Captain Ansees understand the cultural and psychological needs of the survivors as well as helping his medical team, and I’d also like you to question anyone who’s willing to talk about the current situation on Andoria, and whether or not the people on those Conjunction Ships were in any kind of contact with Starfleet Command or Section 31. I’ll debrief you on all of that later.” As Renee spoke, she could hear T’Dani quietly directing her staff to gather up equipment, much of it arcane and specific to the medical needs of Andorians, and not often used on the *Enterprise*, which rarely hosted more than four Andorian crew members at any given time.

“Understood, Commodore. Corrigan out.”

Renee suppressed a smile. T’Dani had fallen in love with all things *Fendsanili* upon being presented, as a psychologically fragile teenager, with a two-year-old, half-Andorian stepsister who turned to her for love. The infant had probably saved T’Dani from years of psychotherapy with that simple, instinctive act. In return, T’Dani had thrown herself headlong into understanding everything there was to understand about —

“Emergency recording from the *Surak*, Commodore,” Yaelat broke into Renee’s nostalgic musings.

“Let’s see it, Lieutenant.”

An angular-featured, hazel-eyed Vulcan woman, with that ageless sort of visage that Vulcans between forty and one

hundred years of age tended to have, appeared on the *Enterprise*'s forward viewscreen; "Commander T'Lira to *Enterprise* and *Crazy Horse*. Starships approaching at high warp: The *Challenger*, the *Intrepid*, and the *Potemkin*. No direct sign that they've sensed us as yet. Their sensors may be confused by the large cloud of debris in the area." The terse recording repeated once, before vanishing.

Renee rose from her seat. "Yaelat, record and transmit an emergency communiqué to the *Surak*, the *Crazy Horse*, the *Skanu*, and the *Mian-Huan*; this is Commodore Renee Ingram. Potentially hostile vessels approaching. All ships switch to silent running and maneuver into the debris field for cover." On the offhand chance that Captain Ansees was wondering why the duty of rescue had been relegated to the *Mian-Huan*, rather than being performed by the Federation Starships present, this should lay that question to rest:

Federation Starships were tasked with a grim, if sometimes necessary, ultimate purpose.

Though Ingram knew that the *Enterprise*'s sister-ships would receive that communiqué, since they constantly monitored the same emergency subspace bandwidths, she couldn't be certain that the Federation Conjunctions had without also speaking directly to their commanders. "Mr. Qat, open a channel to the *Skanu*."

“What can we do for you now, *Enterprise*?” Nijjaret snapped as the enlarged view of her head and shoulders came onto the viewscreen.

“It’s not what you can do for us, Captain, it’s what you can do for the *Mian-Huan*. Do you think you’d be able to extend your ionization-blocker to help hide the Huanni Conjunction from the sensors of three other starships?”

Tesla blinked. “Ah...I think so, but we’d need to move into the debris field, to use it to bounce the ionization shield off of. You’re assuming these ships are...combative?”

“That’s just exactly what I think, and I want you to do just exactly as you suggest. Hold on, please, Tesla.” Ingram looked back over at Yaelat, who nodded:

“Hailing the *Mian-Huan*, Commodore.”

The main viewscreen of the *Enterprise* split into two visual feeds, Nijjaret on the left, Ansees on the right. T’Dani stood with Ansees; she inclined her head to Renee.

“Captain Ansees, I want your ship to move into the debris field with the *Skanu*. You need to hold off your rescue operations for the interim and shut down your non-essential functions so the *Skanu* can extend its ionization-bafflers over you. We’ve got—”

“What are almost certainly hostile starships approaching, yes, Commodore, we heard. We will do as you require. And we have beamed half of the survivors from the pods already.”

“Excellent. Captain Nijjaret, stay with the *Mian-Huan* at all times, and monitor this battle; if it ends in our favor, resume the rescue of the stranded Andorians as soon as I or Captain Serein gives you word. If it does not, remain hidden and see to your own welfare until those ships are out of sensor range. Is that clear?”

T’Dani’s brow furrowed and she opened her mouth to complain. Renee shook her head and glared at her CMO, at whom Ansees also turned to look. The part-Vulcan woman’s lips thinned as she pinched them together, swallowing whatever it was she’d been about to say. Ansees turned back toward his own viewscreen.

“Clear, Commodore.”

“Ingram out.” She drew a deep breath and closed the communications channel from the control panel of her command chair, composing herself before saying; “Computer, open an infraship channel to the transwarp hub area in engineering.” It was useless asking for Colin himself, the computer simply refused to recognize his presence — he wasn’t part of the crew, and had never been on any list of passengers. Since the crew of the *Enterprise* was currently being handed big fish after big fish to fry, that oversight was simply going to have to do what dozens of other issues were going to have to do.

Wait.

T'Dani ran the soft, smooth-sided brush gently over the child's head, careful of her tiny antennae. She had finally stopped clinging desperately to the CMO of the *Enterprise* after Corrigan sang her a lullaby. Lullabies sung to Andorian children generally consisted of their names in Greater Andorian, the Elder Language spoken by Thalassans, the most ancient race of Andorians. T'Dani, however, sang the lullaby in Lesser Andorian, trying to prompt a correction, or any other reaction besides stark terror, from the child.

The little female Bish'ee, T'Dani had realized when she first saw her, must be younger than five *Fesoan* standard years, since she was about the same size as a six- or seven -year old human; Andorian females tended to be fairly large. T'Dani had no idea what her name was when she picked the child up from where she was huddled miserably in a dark corner of the medical anteroom on the *Mian-Huan*, which also meant that she didn't know for certain what sex the child was until she'd asked around among the traumatized adults awhile.

"Sh'reetastina Fend'laarinas," T'Dani had whisper-sung to the little *shen* as she softly stroked the child's snarled hair, and the *shen*'s desperately clinging fingertips left tiny orange-green bruises behind the doctor's neck. Singing all the while, Corrigan had slowly, patiently washed the child's hair and face, stained almost black with terror-sweat and soot, while Tina clung to her like a monkey to its mother.

The child would not eat, but she was uninjured, and T'Dani wasn't too worried about the child's lack of appetite; it was perfectly normal for a terrified, grieving humanoid of any sort to have absolutely no desire to eat. She'd see if she could coax Tina into a bath, which should help her calm down enough to eat at least a little something, later.

"Did I tell you that this hairbrush belonged to my own stepsister?" she asked Tina now.

This was, of course, a flagrant lie. The little *shen* flipped over onto her back on the warm Huanni biobed the doctor had laid her on, and fixed Corrigan with skeptical ice-blue eyes. The doctor was happy to see the questioning look and the rising antennae; horror was releasing its hold on Tina's brain. T'Dani grinned at her, and watched her try to work out which conundrum to confront first; A smiling Vulcan who spoke *graalen*, or the assertion that a brush which the doctor had only just minutes before pulled out of a replicator was, in fact, some sort of heirloom.

Tina decided to confront the less complicated issue. "Not. You just made that." She reached out tentatively to touch the brush, then pulled her hand away before it made contact, staring at her fingers. The flat nails and opposable thumb that were the gift of some common ancestor to every humanoid and semi-humanoid in the galaxy seemed to fascinate her for a moment, then her antennae drooped from the upright, forward position they had taken on while she was talking to T'Dani and into a position of fear and grief again.

Gently, the doctor reached out and took the child's hand into her own. It was as grimy as her face had been — grimier, in fact, and now that T'Dani was looking at it, she noted that the nails had been torn, as though the very young *shen* had been forced to perform some kind of hard manual labor. "You're right; I did just make this. What I meant was that my stepsister had one just like it. She's part Andorian and part Vulcan."

The child's eyes widened, and her antennae sprang back up; In the way of children everywhere, or so Corrigan hoped, Tina's natural resilience would allow her to build a life for herself. Judging from the names and titles she'd crooned disconsolately for the first half hour that T'Dani had held her, she had lost all her parents and at least one sibling. "And what are *you*?" she hissed softly.

T'Dani laughed outright. "I'm part Vulcan and part human."

Tina shook her head, concentration pinching her serious little features. "*Why*?"

The *Enterprise*'s CMO blinked. She had never applied that question to her own heritage — or anybody else's, come to think of it. "With love," she replied finally, still holding the little *shen*'s hand, "most anything is possible."

The pretty little royal-blue face drew itself up into lines that no child's face should ever possess. Those lines told T'Dani

that Tina knew what the answer to her question would be before she asked it, but... “Will love bring my *zhavey* back?”

Corrigan let go of the child’s hand and pulled the little *shen* into her arms. That ancient progenitor of all ape-like sentients had bequeathed a painfully intense suite of emotions to its progeny, along with flat nails and opposable thumbs and upright locomotion. Sometimes, those emotions could be more awful than even the clever brains that made prosapient creatures able to preconceive their own deaths; That was one of the reasons why T’Dani’s mother’s people shunned emotion.

“No, Tina. Unfortunately, that isn’t one of its powers. But there is a way in which you can avenge the death of your family on the creatures that took over your mind. They *did* take over your mind, didn’t they?” for the life of her, T’Dani could not figure out why there should have been a child on one of those ships. She could only imagine that their psionic enemies were not discerning regarding the size or shape of the tools they used.

In her arms, Tina sobbed.

Chapter Six

“We’ve got three starships headed our way. Can you handle that?”

Colin felt his face produce an expression somewhere between a grimace and a grin. “I’ve been using your computers to help me understand tactics you’ve used in the past. All iterations of the *Enterprise*, I mean. This occurred to me after our meeting with the Migg’hyainaan.” He hadn’t stopped there; he was slogging through all tactics and scenarios encountered by Starfleet at large, the bulk of which he was pretty sure would take him the rest of his life. “When starships whose shield-frequencies match are brought close enough to one another, the harmonics of those shields can mesh, to form a shield geometrically more powerful than one Federation starship alone possesses. Is this correct?”

“Yes; it’s called a Tensar array. You think you can use this?”

“I think I can utilize it to indirectly access the Lonsdaleite transwarp matrices in the *Surak* and the *Crazy Horse*. This *should* effectively increase the capacities of our own psionic array, though whether geometrically or exponentially, I can’t surmise; your operating systems are too diverse for me to be sure. Nevertheless, in order to beam medication onto the starships headed this way — ”

“We’ll have to drop all shielding. Opening us up to the sort of damage we took before.”

“Unless the matrices also function to increase the power and vector of our combined tractor beams,” Colin suggested, manipulating the simple three-dimensional schematic that hung before him in the air. The kindest thing he could say about the mathematics it produced was that they were non-definitive. Again, he grimaced.

He had found, when first using the psionically enhanced shielding the Lonsdaleite matrices produced, that the *Enterprise*’s tractor beam could be made to channel through it by slightly altering the amplitude of the beam. To Renee’s great satisfaction, this had also increased the strength of the beam, causing it to behave almost like a second, more far-flung set of shields. Phasers settings could be altered in the same manner, allowing the *Enterprise* to use weapons through its shields, though the effectiveness of the phasers in that situation was severely lessened.

Once the energy-conversion system had been set up for his use, Colin had found time to ask Rafael Buonarroti:

Did the major operating systems on Federation Starships all start out as completely incompatible components?

The erstwhile chief engineer had assured him that they had. He went on to explain that occasionally, usually when alterations such as the failed attempt at transwarp were

attempted, the primordial incompatibility of a drive system fashioned by humans, a transporter and tractor beam invented by Vulcans, interstellar weaponry developed by Andorians, and protective energy shields created by Tellarites were wont to assert their unique natures. Though all these things represented the pinnacle of their respective societies' spacefaring sciences, at times like this they became a glaring example of this reality's IDIC in its most vexing, and potentially lethal, form.

It's not as bad as it was when they first started it, though, Rafe had teased; I'm told that when they first decided to use combined systems, you'd flush the toilet, and the lights would go out.

It had ultimately been the tractor beam that had kept the *Crazy Horse* and the *Surak* from approaching closely enough to inflict worse damage on the *Enterprise*, after the flagship had dropped its shields in order to first beam the catalyzing trio of medications from the *Surak*, then to beam the amalgamated gaseous mixture into the ventilation systems of both starships. Transporter amplitude could not be altered without dire effect, and so that technology could not be used through the enhanced shields at all.

It took nearly five minutes for the air-circulation ducts of an *Excelsior*-class starship to spread the anti-psychotic medication throughout the volume of atmosphere that ship contained. During a high-speed battle in interstellar space, five minutes could seem like five years. Colin mentally braced himself to go through it all again.

Before Commodore Ingram could ask her next pointed question of the formidable psion over a comm link from the bridge, Josi moved from the tactical station behind and above the captain's chair to come stand directly in front of Renee.

"Both of you are assuming," the erstwhile commanding officer of the *Enterprise* said, "that we'll be able to force them to drop their shields using standard prefix codes. They might have changed those to anything by now, and the only way we'd be able to force them down would be to form a Tensar matrix with them, too. I don't think it'd be easy to lure them in closely enough, and even if we could, they could still shoot at us like fish in a barrel until the medication took effect, because we'd be sharing shields."

Ingram frowned. "Colin, would it be possible to..." she shook her head, and opened a second engineering channel. "Never mind, Colin. Ensign Buonarroti?"

"Here, Commodore. What —"

"How attenuated can we make our shields and still form a Tensar matrix with the shields of another ship, and I'm talking in kilometers away from the hull?"

"One moment, Commodore, I'll check."

"And if they've changed their shield frequencies as well as their codes?" Ingram's XO demanded, hands on hips.

“Then this is going to be a lot harder, but still, it’s a one-on-one —”

“The shields can attenuate quite far, actually, Commodore, and still form a Tensar matrix with another ship; Nearly forty thousand kilometers. Of course, shields attenuated to that point wouldn’t stand against anything much stronger than a well-aimed rubber band,” Rafael interjected.

“And the maximum reach of our tractor beam’s about equally as far. Phasers are useless in the vicinity of a tractor beam — ”

“Photon torpedoes sure as hell aren’t! You *do* know the old saying, *like a photon torpedo into a tractor beam*, right?” Commander Felingaili snarled at her commanding officer.

Ingram grinned up at her distinctly insubordinate exec. She had no problem with Felingaili’s combative attitude; after all, with Renee acting as commodore, Josi was, for all intents and purposes, captain of the *Enterprise* at the moment, and it was her duty to protect both the starship and the people on it. “We catch the ships sideways. Much as I’ve always wished there were, there *are* no torpedo tubes to port and starboard on a standard Starfleet *Excelsior*-class exploratory cruiser. We catch them, we hold them, we match shield frequencies, we beam over the medications, we wait for them to work.”

Josi opened her mouth to speak but was overridden by Demora Sulu; “We’ve reached the heart of the debris field,

Capta — er, Commodore.” The willowy Asian woman’s face reddened. She wasn’t the only person having trouble with the title. Ingram would have cheerfully stood up and proclaimed herself to be the one with the most trouble with it, but the fact that the title came with overseeing the functioning of multiple Federation vessels remained.

“I have the *Crazy Horse* and the *Surak* on an audio-boosted radio channel for you, Commodore. Specifically, they want to know your instructions,” Yaelat said.

“Tell them we’re going to use tree stands and bait to pull this one off, Lieutenant.”

Renee didn’t miss either the *I-hate-it-when-captains-do-that* look that passed between Marco and Demora at the station in front of her, the rolling of her XO’s eyes, or the sensation of pure bewilderment from the Minaran man waiting silent and tense on one end of the still-open intraship channel.

“Excuse me, Commodore?” the Hali’ian comm officer replied, raising his brows, an expression that gave Hali’ian faces an inadvertently mocking air.

“Commander, get back to tactical. I’d rather have fully functioning starships later, but I still might need you. Mr. Qat, open me a full channel to the *Crazy Horse* and the *Surak*. I’ll need to explain this myself. Colin and Rafe, Ingram out.” She punched the engineering channels closed, and leaned back in the command chair, faking an air of calm.

“I thought you wanted us on silent running, Commodore,” Captain Hrncerth-ivA inquired tonelessly from the right side of the *Enterprise*’s main viewscreen upon answering the *Enterprise*’s hail.

“Until we got into the heart of the debris cloud, yes. Now I want to attract them. Here’s what we’re going to do...”

As Commodore Ingram had expected they might, the *Intrepid*, the *Potemkin*, and the *Challenger* split up to search the debris field for the on-again, off-again signals of the other Federation Starships that they sensed there. The trio of *Surak*, *Crazy Horse*, and *Enterprise* in Tensar tandem easily caught the *Potemkin*. Since it sat perfectly starboard in front of the *Crazy Horse*, the other two starships released it, then came about, reuniting their shields.

Ingram’s helm and tactical crew kept a sharp eye out for the other two starships, while her science officer kept them all apprised of the effects that the *Crazy Horse*’s attempts to form a Tensar lock was having on the *Potemkin*.

“Commander Felingaili was right,” the Betazoid matron said; “the *Potemkin*’s changed both their prefix codes and their shield frequencies. The *Crazy Horse* is cycling through frequencies to find one that matches closely enough to complete a Tensar link. The *Potemkin*’s fighting the tractor beam. Both ships have lost power reserves of — *there*, the *Crazy Horse* has established a Tensar link with *Potemkin*. ”

“Incoming communiqué, Commodore, from the *Crazy Horse*,” Yaelat said. “It’s the frequency the *Potemkin* had altered its shields to.”

“If they’ve got presence of mind to change shield frequencies, Mr. Qat, I’d assume they’d have the presence of mind to avoid using the same frequency twice, but thank Captain Hrncerth — ”

“*Intrepid* and *Challenger* are both headed this way at half-impulse speed,” Lieutenant Johnson announced tightly.

“Yaelat, remind the *Surak* to keep pace with us in order to maintain the Tensar field. Demora, get us away from the *Crazy Horse* and the *Potemkin* as fast as we can go; we need to look like we’re at least trying to run away. Seantie, what’s going on between the *Crazy Horse* and the *Potemkin*? ”

“The *Crazy Horse* just beamed over the psionic antipsychotic. The *Potemkin* is still fighting; both ships’ energy reserves are down thirty-eight percent and falling.”

“Keep an eye on them as long as we’re in sensor range. We — ”

“*Challenger*, Commodore, off our — ” Johnson began.

The combined torpedo and phaser barrage of an *Excelsior*-class starship firing from all ports rocked them until they spun, losing their pace with the *Surak*. The strength of the psionically-Tensared shields ensured that the prolonged rain of fire caused

no damage, but the shields spent so much energy deflecting the salvo, whose fierce destructive force could have obliterated a continent the size of Africa, that they fell.

“Shields down,” Felingaili barked; “The *Challenger*’s preparing another salvo, targeting the *Surak*.”

Damn. “Lieutenant Sulu, while the *Challenger*’s busy with the *Surak*, get us around them and grab on!”

“Aye, Commodore.” Demora’s fingers danced across her section of the helm console. Beside her, Thomas Marcus Johnson entered what were either minute course corrections, or potential alternative strategies for getting around the *Challenger* without getting caught in crossfire.

Challenger fired at the *Surak*. The Vulcan starship turned toward the salvo at an inadvisable speed, and Renee felt herself flinch even though she understood Serein’s tactic; he was trying to present the slimmest and least-vital target possible to the mass of fire headed toward his ship. Much of the barrage did, indeed, miss the *Surak*, but plenty hit home.

“The *Surak*’s sustained damage to their environmental systems!” Josi Felingaili’s particular heritage sometimes caused her to yell when excited, but everyone on the bridge was used to this, and ignored the potentially inflammatory effect.

Marco didn’t have to announce it when their tractor beam grasped the *Challenger* (Commodore Ingram could feel the

beam latch on), but he did so anyway; “We’ve got the *Challenger* in tractor lock, Commodore.”

Nor did Ingram have to advise the *Surak* to come around and Tensar with the *Enterprise* again for its own safety. Ingram could see the all-Vulcan starship performing that maneuver on the screen right before her eyes.

Josi and Seantie spoke over one another, their words tangling into meaninglessness. Before Ingram had a chance to command clarification from either officer, the *Intrepid* came spiraling down from above, targeting the *Surak*’s nacelles.

This was the first time the captain of the *Enterprise* had seen their maddened enemies perform a maneuver capable of destroying rather than capturing a vessel. She didn’t have time to ponder whether this new tactic was caused by a sense of desperation in their enemies, or because those enemies felt they already had enough firepower and were finished trying to capture further vessels.

“*Surak*’s shields are down to thirty percent,” Demora said. “*Intrepid*’s coming back for another pass.”

“Attenuate our shields and get a Tensar on the *Challenger* while we still have the chance. Cycle them through different frequencies, starting with the one Hrncerth-ivA sent us a few minutes ago.” Behind Ingram, Felingaili rapped out her compliance with the order.

“Commodore, the *Potemkin* has stopped fighting the *Crazy Horse*,” the *Enterprise*’s senior science officer intoned. It occurred to Ingram that this was probably the same thing she’d said before.

“Yaelat, contact the *Crazy Horse* and tell them to let the *Potemkin* go. I need them to try to get a grip on the *Intrepid* before it blows the *Surak* to bits.” Per Commodore Ingram’s plan, the *Enterprise* was supposed to be the sole ship left to confront the third and final of their erstwhile adversaries. The *Surak* didn’t have a psionic enhancement system of their own to give it the advantage. A half-remembered adage about plans and mice winged its way through Renee’s head. Around her, the *Enterprise* groaned with sudden structural tension.

“*Challenger*’s trying to break away from our tractor beam, Commodore,” Marco explained. “They’re effecting their own power loads more than ours; the psionic system seems to be making up the difference for us.”

“*Intrepid*’s firing on the *Surak* again. *Crazy Horse* has left the *Potemkin* but is still out of either firing or tractor range,” Josi announced, loudly, then added, with an unmistakable crow of victory in her tone; “Our shields have Tensared to the *Challenger*’s.”

“Did you want me —” Yaelat Qat began.

Ingram overrode him. “All transporter rooms! Beam your contents into the *Challenger*, now!”

“The *Surak*’s lost seventy-five percent of her environmental and drive controls. Her shields are down to about eighteen percent, Commodore,” Demora said.

“The *Crazy Horse* is firing...”

“...on the *Intrepid*,” Seantie and Josi announced, more or less in tandem. The *Crazy Horse* barreled into view at full impulse on the *Enterprise*’s screen from beneath the *Intrepid*, firing all forward phaser banks in a concentrated burst at the forward housings of *Intrepid*’s engineering hull, trying to knock out the *Intrepid*’s weaponry controls. The two great ships just barely glided past one another, and as they did, the interaction of their shields caused the blackness of space to shimmer with rainbow foxfire.

The *Intrepid*’s aim was thrown off, and most of its combined fire at the *Surak* passed harmlessly through empty space, but what did hit the *Surak* was enough to punch through its failing shields and disassemble half of the structural pylon supporting its left nacelle, which blew off of the starship in a pyrotechnical burst. The *Surak*’s running lights and viewports went dark.

Intrepid turned about to deliver a killing blow. Scattered debris flared off its shields, telling Commodore Ingram that various systems, including passive deflection, must have been rerouted. This had been done, she knew, to add force to weaponry, or to whatever frequency they had programmed into

their shields; The *Enterprise*'s own systems had been similarly rerouted.

Before it had completed its turn, the *Intrepid* was brought to a halt so sudden that it must have made people smash into nearby objects, assuming its emergency gravimetrics had also been rerouted. “*Crazy Horse* has established a tractor lock on the *Intrepid*, and is — ”

Commander Felingaili's relieved tone was overridden by a shriek of structural tension that caused nearly everyone on the bridge to instinctively clap their hands over their ears. While working the tactical station, the XO had linked the ops console to it. Since she had done this, no one was at the ops station — which was fortunate, because the sudden back surge of energy from the *Enterprise*'s tractor beam as its systems overloaded to the point of implosion sent shafts of white-hot plasma lancing through the gravimetric control links of the empty ops station.

Much of this struck and fused to the ceiling in hanging patterns, like some sort of extensive, superheated baroque chandelier. Nevertheless, everyone nearby pushed themselves out of their chairs or off of their feet and struck the ground rolling. Shortly, most of the other people on the bridge found themselves on the floor rolling along with them, as the *Enterprise* momentarily lost all environmental controls, spinning with nauseating force as the equal-and-opposite effects of a broken tractor-lock snapped back against the Federation's flagship.

The *Enterprise*'s internal safety systems overrode the minimal environmental settings Renee had programmed for the duration of what she'd known would be a nasty firefight. Sirens and the red flares of emergency alert filled the bridge as the ship's automatic fire-suppression system targeted the ops console. Renee had managed to keep her seat but was overcome by a blinding pain in her head and a sense of nausea so intense that she wasn't able to control it. Only one person on the bridge could.

"Computer, silence those alarms! Commodore, *Challenger* attempted to go into warp, and our safety systems released it, but the blowback's pretty much obliterated our tractor and passive-deflection array. The tactical section of engineering's sustained damage, our weapons targeting-array is in shambles, and there are casualties." The red-alert sirens fell silent at the command of Josi Felingaili, scion of a people who had evolved on a swiftly-revolving little planet whose native gravity was one-quarter less than that found on Terra and nearly half that of Vulcan. This heritage had bequeathed her specialized inner-ear structures that allowed her to keep footing, her consciousness, and her last meal as the *Enterprise* tumbled.

Ingram shook her head hard, trying to keep buzzing black darkness from taking her away in the middle of a battle. Her exec's words sounded far away and muffled, as though they had to fight their way through several feet of hot, wet fabric. The woman who maintained that she had been adopted by human Federation Ambassadors to Orion because they took pity on her

loathed tan-skin status, that caste considered Untouchable on all planets overseen by the U'reon *Caju-tara*, went on:

“*Challenger*’s warp capacity’s down, Commodore, and they’re venting plasma, but they’re using impulse to come about and fire; Raising shields and instituting evasive maneuvers; weapons are still offline.”

The *Enterprise* responded only sluggishly to Josi’s manually-input commands, but it did respond. As normal gravity and motion returned, Ingram herself returned from the edge of unconsciousness. At least, she thought she did. She struggled to comprehend what she was seeing as the injured *Challenger* directed a salvo toward the *Enterprise*...

And it exploded against a great mass of nothingness that loomed somewhere between them. Stunned silence filled the bridge of the *Enterprise*, its air sour with the odor of vomit, synthetic fire-suppression foam, and burned, fused electronic components.

“*Crazy Horse* reports that the *Intrepid* crew appears to be responding to the antipsychotic medication, so they’ve dropped their shields and begun to evacuate the *Surak*,” Yaelat said. His voice was thick and slow, telling Renee that he was probably still fighting the nausea and faintness that uncontrolled g-forces inspired in all vertebrates.

Renee began to inquire of Demora whether or not their own transporters were functional so that the *Enterprise* might help to

evacuate the *Surak*, whose atmosphere was venting into the vacuum of space in sluggish puffs of ice crystals. The words died in her mouth when the large forward viewscreen of the *Enterprise*, still washed by blood-red emergency strobes that pulsed with a heart-like beat, was suddenly filled by the shimmering effects of a Klingon Bird of Prey dropping its cloak; It was the port side of this vessel that the *Challenger*'s last salvo had struck.

Chapter Seven

The attire worn by the female Klingon who appeared on the *Enterprise*'s main viewscreen was a heftier version of what had clothed the man who had accosted Ingram on Minara Prime. It had always seemed odd to Renee that attire which left so much vulnerable body area exposed should concurrently possess armor.

The tawny-haired woman, whose forehead corrugations were as delicate as the drooping petals of an English tea rose, considered Ingram with intelligent storm-gray eyes, nodded a brief greeting, and announced: "I am Commander Nyvora of the Klingon heavy cruiser *KtIngA*. My ship is one of seventeen patrolling Federation space at the insistence of my superiors. The High Council has received emergency communications from the Federation Starship *Arizona* which reveal that it, among other Federation ships, has been crippled by unknown enemy assailants *utilizing* Federation ships. I have been directed to offer..." she drew a deep breath and shook her head wryly; "what aid I can, given the ambiguity of the situation."

Ingram was rendered speechless for several seconds by this unexpected information; It took her a moment to decide which issue to address first. "Your aid is welcome, Commander. I'm..." the title was still awkward on her tongue; "Commodore Renee Ingram of the Starship *Enterprise*. You're in possession of intelligence that says the *Arizona* has been crippled?" the

Arizona was a nod to the alliance not long ago cemented with the Klingon High Council; A Federation starship whose crew included individuals of Klingon descent, primarily those who had once sought Federation asylum, those married to Federation citizens, and those of mixed-Klingon heritage.

The Klingon commander raised a bemused brow at Renee, which accentuated the fine rosettes of her forehead ridges, then gazed down at one of the stations in front of her. “Somewhat. Far more badly crippled are the *Excelsior*, the *Berlin*, the *Melbourne*, the *Atlanta*, the *Endeavor*, the *Phoenix*, the *Roosevelt*, the *Fearless*, the *Hood*, the *Dakota*, and the *Lincoln*, not to mention,” she motioned sideways with her head, toward the badly-crippled starship that the *Crazy Horse* now held in traction so that it didn’t just pirouette helplessly through space as they beamed the remaining crew off of it, “the *Surak*. ”

Renee didn’t miss her helmsman’s sudden tensing when the unusually well-spoken Klingon woman uttered the word *Excelsior*. Nyvora added; “I don’t think any of them will be going anywhere for some time, assuming interstellar vacuum isn’t enough to have ripped the worst-injured apart between the time of their injuries and now. Also, the *Repulse* and the *Eagle* have been destroyed.”

“My god,” Ingram breathed softly. *Repulse* was the single Federation starship with a fully-human crew, whose primary duty was to oversee the airspace around Terra, Tellar, and their colonies; *Eagle*, also known as *A’atlirith*, with an entirely Andorian crew, performed the same duty for Andoria and

Vulcan. Both ships were built along the newest Dreadnought lines, and neither was quite one Terran Standard year out from its maiden voyage.

Usually, what these formidable ships spent the lion's share of their time doing was hauling ambassadorial parties whose planets enjoyed provisional Federation membership from one of Starfleet's two new deep-space starbases into the heart of the Federation, where they could receive formal status as full Federation members. Significantly larger than *Excelsior*-class vessels, *Eagle* and *Repulse* had carried five times the weaponry and half the crew of a standard *Excelsior*-class ship. Their peacetime role as luxurious ambassadorial barges aside, both had been super-heavy battle cruisers, not exploration vessels.

"How were the dreadnoughts destroyed?" if their enemies had fielded a fleet capable of destroying Federation Dreadnoughts...

Nyvora offered Renee what was probably a cynical grin, but which looked like a scowl on a Klingon countenance. "The *Arizona* was put out of commission due to heavy infighting aboard her. They were only close enough to the skirmish to monitor it. The dreadnoughts were destroyed while keeping the heavy armada of Federation Starships from expanding a plan of attack into the heart of your people's rule. *Arizona* crew states that, upon both the arrival and after the destruction of the dreadnoughts, yet other Federation Starships, perhaps even the very ones with you now, if not *yourselfes*, fled elsewhere. What is this madness that has gripped your people, Captain?"

Your people. The firefight between the dreadnoughts and what amounted to an armada and a half — figuring in the *Challenger*, the *Surak*, the *Crazy Horse*, the *Potemkin*, the *Intrepid*, and the vaporized *Malinche* — must have been horrific. The rest of the fleet (two and a half more armadas of variously-classed starships, not including the dreadnought *Vega*, which was currently occupied helping to rig the scaffolding for Deep Space Three at the furthest edge of the Alpha quadrant, or the vast number of Conjunction Ships that Federation planets fielded) must either already be engaged in battle with these psionic monsters, similarly disabled, or simply too far away to be aware of the fray. Considering the current state of communications in the Federation, that last probability appeared the most likely.

At least Ingram hoped so. She narrowed her eyes at the woman on the central viewscreen of her starship's bridge. The Klingons and the Federation were allies now, technically, but this would certainly allow anyone with aspirations otherwise their big chance to change that. "What's all this *my people*? The *Arizona* has Klingon crew," she snarled back finally. "And that's *Commodore*, Commander Nyvora. I need to know where this firefight occurred."

Nyvora offered Renee a Klingon salute, lowering her eyes in the manner of a Klingon subordinate, but the wry grin remained firmly in place. Considering all the confusion and infighting, Nyvora must distrust Ingram as much as Ingram distrusted the Klingon commander. It had been an incredible display of either

courage or hubris for Nyvora to have interceded between two *Excelsior*-class vessels; Renee set herself to figure out which of those it had been.

“Indeed, Captain...excuse me, *Commodore*. As I stated, it was the *emergency* message sent from the outskirts of Wolf 424 by the *Klingon* crew of the *Arizona* to whom my superiors responded.” She raised her eyes again, biting thoughtfully at the inside of her right cheek, as though chewing on whatever she planned to say next.

“You see, there are currently very few crewmembers who aren’t Klingon left aboard the *Arizona*, and what non-Klingons remain have been put into the brig for safekeeping. My people are largely mind-blind, *Commodore*. We do not fear psionic power, but neither do we ever wholly trust those who wield it. Certain non-Klingon *Arizona* crew attacked and, for a time, overcame that starship’s Klingon crew. These attackers displayed what seemed to be various psionic feats in order to defend themselves and to take control of the *Arizona*. Nonetheless, the attackers did not ultimately survive.

“What neither I, the superiors who sent me to offer succor, nor the Klingon crew of the *Arizona* fully understand is *what the hell is happening throughout the Federation*. Would you be so kind as to enlighten me, *Commodore*, or would you prefer I offer you assurance by beaming over my heart wrapped in a parchment upon which the Khitomer Accords have been written, and you could explain the situation to my adjutant instead?” Nyvora crossed her arms bad-naturedly across her midsection,

enhancing cleavage that clearly hadn't seen a washcloth for some time.

Commodore Ingram still considered the woman on her viewscreen with suspicion, though what Nyvora had revealed chilled Ingram to the bone. "You say you received transmissions from the *Arizona*. How? We've tried to disseminate information regarding how this psionic takeover might be blocked, only to find that every Federation channel we —"

"Klingons do not *utilize* Federation communication channels." Nyvora uncrossed her arms, clenched her fists, and held them stiffly at her sides.

"You're saying you have non-Federation communications networks hidden throughout Federation space, and you want me to *trust* you?"

This time Nyvora did smile, a toothy, dangerous thing that, had she been in the same room with it, Ingram would have backed away from as quickly as she could force her legs to move. "Are you inferring that the Federation currently has no spies in Klingon space?" the commander raised both hands and made a curt, shooing gesture; "Patently ridiculous, even if you do rely on agencies like the V'Shar and the Am Tal to do it for you, so your leaders can plead plausible deniability. We are your *allies*, Commodore; we are not *idiots*."

“What I am saying is that, *because* we have non-Federation communications networks in Federation space, we might now help you disseminate whatever information you have *if you will kindly tell me what the hell is going on!*” this last came out in a muted roar that made the woman’s face go a particularly gaudy shade of mauve, and she stood with her hands palm-upraised, the gesture half-beseeching, half-irritated.

It wasn’t Nyvora’s words that swayed Renee; It was all the hand- and arm -gesturing. Klingons in survival-mode, which included lying for gain, did not gesture. Hand-gestures in a Klingon were a sign of willing vulnerability, the more willing the vulnerability, the more trusted the relationship and, hence, more gestures. With almost any other species, she’d have considered the fact that Nyvora simply knew this, and was playing with her, but in Klingons, the gesturing trait was hard-wired and couldn’t be faked without concurrently losing the ability to string sentences together. And the commander of the *KtIngA* was having no trouble making herself understood.

Renee stood up and made her own surrendering hand-gesture. “All right, Commander. It’s like this:

“The Federation has been invaded by largely invisible enemies with enough psionic ability to take over the minds and bodies of multiple others and cause them to do their bidding. They have, for all intents and purposes, cut the Federation in half. They appear to be most attracted to those planets that are home to large numbers of telepaths or empaths; however, this

psionic slavery eventually spreads to others via a mechanism..." here Renee sighed, "not dissimilar to the transfer of a *katra*."

"Vulcan mysticism!" the Klingon woman scoffed.

"I've seen it with my own eyes, Commander Nyvora. More to the point, I've killed those to whom it has occurred with my own hands. Furthermore, the death of the host's physical body doesn't keep the psionic intruders from continuing to use that body as a tool. The Betazoids are the only telepathic race resistant to the effects. Among the mind-blind, only Denobulans, Benzites, and Huanni appear immune to the secondary and tertiary mind control that occurs once one is firmly in the grasp of someone under the sway of the beings inflicting this forced control."

"But Klingons are immune to the effects," the commander asserted. Renee shrugged.

"So it would appear. And it's for this reason that I request you send those seventeen other ships patrolling Federation space to Wolf 424 to render aid to the survivors of the starship firefight. We possess knowledge of a gaseous medication that can make the psionic madness abate; we'll send you the recipe so that your ships can make it, either en-route or using supplies from those starships still present when your patrols arrive. Nonetheless, you should warn whomever you send that, as the Klingon crew of the *Arizona* could attest, those taken over by this mind control are extremely strong and cannot be killed without — "

“Cutting off the head, yes, my people on the *Arizona* did figure that out,” Commander Nyvora finished for Renee, acidly. “I will relay your...” the woman paused momentarily, then continued; “*request* to the patrol ships, along with —”

“Commodore? I’m sorry, I don’t mean to interrupt, but we’re being hailed by the *Potemkin*, the *Challenger*, and the *Intrepid*.” Yaelat said.

Ingram’s sigh was one of pure relief. “You heard that, Commander?”

The Klingon woman on the viewscreen nodded, and made a hand gesture that fell, at least in human terms, somewhere between *so what* and *why should I care*.

Renee Ingram was tired, and she was also tired of talking to viewscreens. She stood up and rotated her shoulders; every ligament in both rotator cuffs crackled, spreading a sensation of momentary relaxation through her upper back even as ghosts of pain and numbness laced down her right arm. Shoulder, upper back, arm, and hand neuralgias were common complaints of starship officers; The human aphorism *carrying the world on your shoulders* hadn’t sprung into existence from nowhere. In this case, however, Ingram was certain that the scars she’d carried back through the Guardian were causing more than a little of her current pain and numbness.

“Commander Nyvora, I’m going to need to explain more about what’s going on to the captains of those starships, and to

you. Josi," she turned half-away from the screen and looked to the right in order to address her exec; "contact the captains of the *Intrepid*, the *Potemkin*, the *Challenger*, the *Surak*, and the *Crazy Horse*. Have them all beam aboard the *Enterprise* to speak to me in conference. Commander," she turned back to the Klingon woman currently onscreen, "you're welcome to beam over and join us once we've transmitted that medical data and you've contacted the rest of your patrols in order to help our people at Wolf 424, for which the Federation will be deeply in the High Council's debt, but the upshot of what you just saw happen here is this:

"The *Enterprise* currently possesses a technology able to reveal the crystalline craft of our psionic enemies, and to put down most if not all of their psionic effects after they've taken over others, long-range at least. We know now that those ships have no form of weaponry or even shielding beyond the formidable telepathy of their occupants. This is why the creatures attempt to take over ships that do have these capacities. They're not just going after operative ships, either; they're also willing to clean up and refit museum pieces. We have no clear idea exactly how many are out there, but I'd imagine that they're not going to stop with the Federation, which is why you must warn your patrols to proceed with extreme caution."

Commodore Ingram found herself once more at the *Enterprise*'s situation-room table, this time with her CMO and Captains Ansees, Nijjaret, Serein, Hrncerth-ivA, Ian Reese of the *Challenger*, Emmanuel Russo of the *Intrepid*, Neil Connolly

of the *Potemkin*, and Commander Nyvora of the Klingon warship *KtIngA*. Ingram had brought everyone up to speed on the use of the psionically-active, sedative antipsychotic newly dubbed *Therosylane*, the psionic capacities that *Enterprise* now possessed (she kept Colin's existence to herself for the moment), and the broad parameters of their mission, then asked T'Dani what she had learned from the survivors on the *Mian-Huan*.

Nearly everyone at the table stirred uncomfortably in their chairs at the information the part-Vulcan physician revealed about the creatures attempting to infiltrate the minds of others in order to use their bodies. The infighting on the *Potemkin* had been particularly savage; The young captain who sat with the other officers in the *Enterprise*'s briefing room, his hands twisting anxiously before him on the table, was an ensign second-class; no officer of flag rank had survived the brutal takeover of the *Potemkin*. As T'Dani Corrigan was explaining, such niceties as innocence or youth or inexperience were not taken into consideration by the newest enemies of the Federation.

“The little *shen* told me there’s something odd going on, and several adults verified her accounts,” the doctor said in soothing tones at odds with the information she was revealing. “Some sort of excavation’s taking place on the southernmost pole. This was what she and her family had been forced to do by psionic mind-control. The creatures use whatever susceptible individuals are at hand for their needs; I was told that there were humans and other non-Andorians in this forced-labor group, as

well as children and the elderly. These people were only transferred to the old Guard ships as cannon-fodder when their overseers intercepted a Starfleet message they found threatening. Whether that was in reference to the message sent to us *from* Section 31, or one of those sent by us *to* Section 31, nobody was entirely clear. They also said that these psionic slavers communicate in some sort of communal manner.”

“The same way Colin sent his telepathic message to all the psions aboard the ship simultaneously, saying that he might need help? And even though this child and all the other people on those ships were under the direct control of these psionic overseers, whatever they are, nobody can *describe* them?” Ingram asked.

Her CMO shrugged. “They said they saw nothing *unusual*, which frankly could mean anything, considering that their minds were being manipulated at the time. And our enemies’ communication would be more like Colin sending a message to the crew, then the crew sending another message to each other and returning a final verdict back to Colin, and all of this continuously. I imagine that’s part of the reason for the apparent lowering of IQ in some individuals taken over by the things; those sorts of psionic communications would certainly be confusing and draining. Although the greater part of that lowering of IQ would probably be caused by physical death itself.”

Again, everyone at the table squirmed in discomfort, including Nyvora; Commodore Ingram kept herself from

following suit through sheer force of will; “Marvelouser and marvelouser. Did you find someone to care for the little girl?”

“I called together every Andorian from those pods who could walk, speak, and think straight, and told them Tina had just lost everything in the world, and that if they wanted to feel better about this horror, she was their big chance. Now she has fifteen *zhavein*, eleven *shreyin* — ”

“You’ve got to love people who’ll be there in a pinch.”

“Andorians will do that, but you know, there’s a hell of a lot of self-loathing floating around among those survivors at the moment.” The *Enterprise*’s CMO sighed, as though she was carrying some onerous burden that she couldn’t ever put down, and changed the subject.

“Andoria’s far southern pole makes what I’ve heard about the surface of Rura Penthe sound like a tanning salon. Because of the odd elliptical orbit Andoria has around its gas giant, its far southern pole sees the sun for only about one Terran month every ten Terran years. I don’t think it’s coincidental that this period is occurring there right now.

“It’s what Andorians call Standing Summer. I’ve been in Laikan during Standing Summer, and it’s a downright balmy at forty-five degrees Fahrenheit; you can literally *hear* the taiga grow. Parts of the equator heat up to nearly seventy, but modern Andorians never go there; they’re terrified of — ”

“Doctor, you’re straying from the subject,” Renee said.

T'Dani flushed. "This means the southernmost pole is warmed up to almost two hundred degrees below zero, which doesn't take wind chill into account. On maps it's called the Southern Sink, but I've heard more than one person refer to it as the Southern Toilet after a little too much grain-wine.

"Anciently, naked prisoners were sent there to die, their foreheads tattooed with the words *may you never rot*. That's one of the few things we know for certain about ancient Andorian customs, because those corpses are still there. If somebody's building a base there, I doubt it's any sort of control-center. I could be mistaken, but in a place like the Southern Sink, the sort of base you'd want to build — "

"Would be a long-term storage facility," Renee finished for T'Dani, before the part-Vulcan woman had the chance to segue into such integral subjects as Andorian footwear or sleeping habits, as she was apt to do. "Or an enormous cryogenic tank."

Rura Penthe. Sometimes Ingram wondered if the *Enterprise's* CMO wasn't an undercover operative for the Vulcan government. But she'd been the woman's bosom friend for almost thirty-five years, and she'd be damned if she'd ever heard anything about it.

"An enormous cryogenic tank is pretty much what the Southern Sink is, so I'm apt to agree with you about that." T'Dani looked down at her hands folded demurely on the tabletop and heaved another enormous sigh.

“What?”

Corrigan looked up at Commodore Ingram. The look in her eyes told Renee that the part-Vulcan woman’s mind had been somewhere far away. “Hm? Oh...I also meant to tell you that I asked if anyone tried to send out signals to appeal for aid. I was told that whatever fields are put out by the crystalline psionic ships themselves somehow scatter the signals so that they break up. I remember you saying that the things are out of sync with standard phase space...” T’Dani shrugged, and sighed yet again. “When do we get to Procyon?”

Of course! Phase-space variant scatter was such a basic issue that Ingram had overlooked it. “That depends on what we find at Terra, and upon how many more ships try to stop us, or we have to stop to add to the fleet, on the way in.” Her little fleet constituted a rough armada now: six *Excelsior*-class starships, two Federation Conjunction Ships, and a Klingon bird of prey. One of those starships, however, was in very bad shape. “We need to take the *Surak* into account.”

Since it was his ship they were speaking of, Serein didn’t hesitate to interject his opinion. “We must leave the *Surak* behind,” the Vulcan said bloodlessly. “A starship so badly mauled is of no use to an armada; indeed, it is a liability. It would not be reasonable to attempt to repair such a level of destruction outside of a fully-functional dry-dock, Commodore, simply because you feel an illogical human guilt due to what has happened to the *Surak*.”

Renee blinked at Serein, nonplussed. "I don't want our enemies to get their hands on it, Captain. You've seen what they've done using ancient museum pieces. And you can probably imagine what they'd be capable of — "

"In which case, we must strip the *Surak* before we abandon it; Jettison and destroy the warp core, disassemble the impulse modules, remove all photon torpedoes and medical paraphernalia, and disalign the phaser arrays. With enough engineering personnel, I can see that this is done within fifteen Terran Standard minutes. If the Federation survives this attack, we can return for the hull later, should it remain intact. This, I feel, is the most logical and efficient course of action."

Ingram nodded slowly. They were trying to win a war here; she didn't have time right now to mourn battle casualties, particularly not inanimate ones. "You're absolutely right, Captain Serein. Could you please go about seeing that this is done? You're more than welcome to utilize the enlisted crew of any of the ships present to help you do that."

Serein inclined his head to her. "Immediately, Commodore." He stood and exited the room, pulling out his communicator as he went.

Renee turned back to T'Dani. "That means we'll be to Earth in about two days at warp seven. Two more days to Andoria, give or take. I would really like to get a message to Section 31 about that suspected Andorian base!" had they had any sort of time or the freedom to use it, she'd also have liked to get Colin

onto some of the other *Excelsior*-class ships in her little armada, to set them up psionically the way the *Enterprise* was. Several of her ship's psions had been tutored on the use of the alternator-matrix by this time; She could split those psions up between the *Crazy Horse*, the *Challenger* —

Nyvora broke into Renee's musings. "My own personnel and several of the patrol ships on their way to Wolf 424 have sent out your message to our communications hubs nearest both Huan and Denobula. We have requested our operatives there to forward the message to the appropriate parties," Nyvora smiled unpleasantly; "who will receive them in due time, assuming they are not all dead, or mad from this mind-invasion, or both."

"But you haven't heard anything back yet?"

"To reach the appropriate parties on Huan and Denobula, our operatives must pass through much the same sort of gauntlets as you have faced thus far. Which is why I used the phrase *due time*; I cannot guarantee that there will even *be* a response, Commodore. To be frank, I suspect that I may receive a response from the Klingon High Command sooner."

"The Betazoids feel that these creatures may be attempting to set up bases in the largely-unoccupied Tendaras Cluster. Would you please see that this message gets to your High Command?"

As Commodore Ingram had expected it might, this got a reaction from the Klingon commander. “Tendaras? That is not terribly far from Klingon space.”

“As I said to you before, I don’t think these things have any intention of stopping with the Federation. If we fall, you might find that those at your heels are not only ultra-strong psionic puppets, but that they’re ultra-strong psionic puppets with expansionist attitudes.”

The Klingon commander rose from her seat. Her facial expression suggested that she’d just tasted something unpalatable. “Understood, Commodore. I shall see that such a message is sent immediately. And I shall add to it the strong suggestion that the High Council send ships to scour the Tendaras cluster and report their findings. They are far closer to the area than we are, most particularly at the reduced warp capabilities of this battle-weary little fleet.” She turned and stalked out of the room, leaving a trail of almost-palpable condescension and an odor not unlike matsutake mushrooms in her wake. Some non-Klingons couldn’t tolerate the body aromas of the people of Qo’Nos, while others found those same odors...provocative, in one way or another.

Several people gathered around the table watched her go. Ingram wasn’t one of them, but she *was* wondering what sort of clout Commander Nyvora possessed with Qo’Nos’ Fleet Command that she could make *strong suggestions* to the Klingon high council.

Neil Connolly, who hadn't ceased fidgeting since he'd entered the room, broke the weighted silence Nyvora had left behind. "Commodore, can I... can I speak to you? Alone?" the young man's eyes were filled with anxiety and appeal. It was, Renee Ingram thought, as though he didn't even realize there were other people in the room.

His beseeching gaze and tremulous manner gave the erstwhile commodore of what Nyvora had termed, accurately if impolitely, a *battle-weary little fleet* a very good sense of what it was he wanted to speak to her about. Letting him do so in private would probably not be the best thing for his confidence. "Whatever you need to say, Captain, you can say it here."

His mouth opened and closed a few times, fishlike. He cast a desperate glance around, as though suddenly aware of the scrutiny of the officers around him. He flushed a brilliant maroon, then blurted: "I... I can't do this, Commodore! I'm a... I'm just a damned transporter technician."

Nijjaret offered the young man a haughty, speculative stare. The rest of the officers in the room looked either pensive or embarrassed, with the exception of Hrncerth-ivA; the Xelatian's expression was invisible behind the mask the captain of the *Crazy Horse* wore. None of these expressions, or the emotions that drove them, colored Ingram's mild response.

"You're a Starfleet officer, *Captain*."

The young man blinked at Ingram owlishly, his Adam's apple bobbing with apprehension. "I'm...just an *ensign*!"

Tesla Nijjaret snorted. Renee fixed the Tellarite with a cold, unblinking glare until the *Skanu*'s captain had mastered herself and lowered her gaze. Only then did Commodore Ingram turn back to the young man seated across from her. "No, sir, you're not. Circumstances *have* elevated you to the rank of Captain on a Starfleet *Excelsior*-class vessel responsible for the safety of the United Federation of Planets."

She could, of course, send Josi or Demora over to the *Potemkin*, but that would simply teach this boy to accept the false premise that safety lay in shirking duty, in knuckling under to the often-illusory desires spawned by longing and fear, and by their close kinsmen, triumph and disaster. *Never make a permanent decision for a temporary emotion.* That way lay madness, and she wouldn't be doing him a favor by pandering to it.

"Furthermore," Ingram continued in the same gentle but inflexible tone, "you are the captain of a Starfleet *Excelsior*-class vessel flying in armada with other vessels, whose officers are available for advice. And *I*, not you, am the one who will make the final decision as to how this armada will be used for the safety of the Federation. That level of decision-making is one you're already relieved of." She swept the table with her gaze, making certain that everyone present understood, and accepted, what she'd just said.

When she found consensus in the faces gathered around the briefing-room table, she reached out and took both of the boy's fidgeting hands in her own, forcing him to still and concentrate on her. "You've bound yourself to the rules of this game, *Captain Connoly*, and your sudden change in rank is one of them. The Federation needs your protection, and you've sworn to supply it. What's happening is tragic and frightening and difficult, but you *aren't* alone. You have dependable people around you. Now you need to show them that *they* can depend on you. You have sworn an oath to do this whether or not you want to, and regardless of how you really feel. Can you fulfill that oath?"

He closed his eyes and swallowed so hard that, for a moment, she thought he'd somehow swallowed his voicebox. "I... I will do my best, Commodore," he replied, his hands tightening against hers.

"That's all anyone can ever ask. Thank you, Captain Connoly." Ingram happened to know for a fact that the person who was now Connoly's executive officer was, if not significantly older, at least a great deal more staid than Connoly himself. When they got out of this conference room, she'd have a private talk with that person, to make sure that this terrified boy was under the eye of somebody who could replace him at a moment's notice, if need be. She hoped that wouldn't happen.

Chapter Eight

The voice of the antediluvian male humanoid on the main viewscreen lagged behind the movement of his mouth, thanks to the vagaries of the fuzzy, two-dimensional communications network that was all the surviving members of Starfleet had been able to patch together in the shambles that was Terra. At least, Yaelat thought from where he struggled to keep the distance-attenuated signal flowing in something close to real time, it had stopped cutting in and out in rhythm with the particulate-waves of Sol's stellar wind, or stalling altogether.

And to think the ancients imagined that signals like this would be able to travel past their own star-systems and into reaches their minds weren't adequately trained to comprehend. A signal like this, the Hali'ian imagined as he finessed his communications board, would scarcely carry as far as Jupiter before the warping effects of the gas giant cancelled it out entirely.

Yaelat finally found a logarithm capable of boosting and maintaining the transmissions coming from Terra, at least for as long as the starship maintained its current geosynchronous orbit opposite the dark, cold, locked down remains of Earth's enormous space station. This allowed him to turn his attention to what the injured El-Aurian lieutenant was saying.

“Whatever it was left like a bat out of hell not too long ago. Heading...” he paused and consulted a grimy scrap of what

looked like well-used news flimsy that he held in one fist, "more or less zero, minus ninety at fifty-two. We just...we simply don't have the technology online that can determine warp vector."

"But you're certain about the ninety and the fifty-two?" Commodore Ingram asked. *Zero* referred to Sol on Starfleet charts. Without warp vector information added, the other two numbers supplied mere Stardate-lightyear latitude and longitude on a theoretical two-dimensional, Solar-system-thick grid with Terra as its center.

After gaping blankly at the screen he faced for nearly a minute, as the light-sound lag inherent in the technology he was using effectively cancelled out the enhanced communications capacities of the starship (Yaelat had learned that if he tried to overcome this technological gap, all he'd manage to do was destroy the fragile, aged transmitters and receivers being used by the Terrans), the man onscreen tentatively touched his forehead, winced, and replied, "Well...you know, it could be eighty-five or ninety-five, and forty-five or sixty instead, but yes, they went in that general direction, Commodore."

The lieutenant onscreen removed his trembling hand from the bloody bandage that swathed his head. His dark skin looked washed-out and pale, as did his eyes. Yaelat hoped he'd be able to get medical care soon. The ionizing radiation currently filling the upper air currents of Terra made the prospect of beaming anyone aboard the starships now present a more dangerous

proposition than the lieutenant's current state of injury warranted.

"Alpha Canis Majoris A and B," Renee intoned grimly. Yaelat half-turned to look at her; She was entering the information the lieutenant had given into the arm of her chair and receiving information in turn. "Or Procyon. Or 40-Eridani. Thank you, Lieutenant Sedna; at least this gives us something to go on. I'm going to send teams down to your location in order to provide humanitarian aid. Ingram out." She looked back up, toward the combined helm and navigations station where Demora and Marco sat. Like Yaelat, they also gazed back and forth from the main viewscreen to the woman who had been made commodore of the flotilla of interstellar ships, which had recently released Terra from a psionic stranglehold that had unleashed a more extreme state of violence than they'd found on any other planet thus far.

That humans were among the more aggressive humanoid species in the galaxy was widely known, but still, the reminder was disheartening. Not having received any sort of indication that Section 31, or the Federation Council, or whatever was left of Starfleet had received any of the messages that the Klingons were trying to send to Huan or Denobula, everyone was feeling more than a little overwhelmed. When would it end?

Yaelat watched Commodore Ingram draw a deep, slow breath and consciously school her face into an almost Vulcan mask of calm, which didn't alter when she turned to his station to find him staring at her. "Mr. Qat, contact the *Challenger* and

the *Potemkin*. Tell them to set course for Sirius but wait for my signal before proceeding. Lieutenant Sulu," she looked back at her helmsman, "I want you to set the same course."

"Yes, Commodore," Yaelat replied crisply, his words tangling into Demora's "Aye, sir." The Hali'ian had always been bemused by Starfleet's use of that particular gender-title for its officers, male or female or otherwise. It seemed to Qat to be just as odd as the human tendency to call vessels *she*. He didn't think that he, personally, would be able to use that particular title of respect in response to Renee Ingram and still keep a straight face. The indisputable fact that he had nothing but respect for Ingram's formidable command capacities aside, the one thing she most emphatically was not was a *sir*.

"Now, Mr. Qat, please open me a channel to all the other ships we've got in the convoy."

The starship's main viewscreen divided itself into multiple hexagons, an interesting function that the communications officer wouldn't have thought of himself, in order to handle the task of presenting six separate transmissions at one time in a pleasing and comprehensible format.

The woman in the center chair didn't waste time on pleasantries; "There are a lot of people on Terra in need of medical attention, including whatever Therosylane is left on the ships I'm going to leave in orbit here. They'll also need a staggering amount of food, infrastructure repair, and armaments against further potential uprisings. The particular harm that's

been done to Terra's atmosphere makes using transporters untenable. I want the *Intrepid*, the *Crazy Horse*, the *Mian-Huan*, the *Blade*, and the *KtIngA* to stay here and shuttle crews to the surface and give all the help you can, as well as to begin atmospheric cleanup from orbit."

"Yes, Commodore," the captains of the *Intrepid*, the *Crazy Horse*, and the commander of the *KtIngA* replied. Yaelat was surprised that Ingram had requested this from the Klingon heavy cruiser, but he was sure she had her reasons, perhaps because Klingons didn't seem to be as badly affected by the psionic hallucinations. After a pause, Tesla Nijaret also answered in the affirmative. Renee rose and walked toward the viewscreen.

"You have a concern about those orders, Captain Ansees?"

The male Huanni nodded, his ears wilted against his skull like the petals of an orchid whose suspending stem had been bent. "What about the Andorian survivors I'm carrying?"

Ingram's mouth twisted, a personal affectation that Yaelat knew meant she was biting at the inside of her lower lip. "According to all reliable information I'm in possession of, now might not be the best time for survivors of anything to be heading in that general direction, Captain. Please don't alarm your passengers, but do request that they help with the aid efforts if they feel up to it, and request that they be patient."

Yaelat nodded to himself. Even he knew enough about Andorian psychology, or really just humanoid psychology in

general, to know that the best way to take frightened, grieving people's minds off of their own plight was to give them useful work helping to undo the plight of other frightened, grieving people. It's what he'd have wanted, himself.

It was what he *did* want. "Commodore Ingram?"

She half-turned toward him. "Yes, Lieutenant?"

"I'm sure there are people on the *Enterprise* who would also like to take part in this reconstruction. It's where we all went to the Academy at, after all. Permission to request volunteers and take a shuttle down?"

She smiled at him. "Permission granted, Lieutenant. Get as large a group and take as many shuttles as you think you'll need, but make it fast; we'll be warping out of here..." she paused, considering the most reasonable time limit to give to his humanitarian gesture, "within half an hour. Understood?"

"Understood, Commodore. Thank you."

"Not at all, Mr. Qat. Thank you."

"Permission to accompany him, Commodore," Demora requested from the helm.

"Permission granted, Lieutenant. Godspeed to you both. Lieutenant Johnson, set in coordinates for Sirius, and send them to the *Potemkin* and the *Challenger*. Let them know that we'll be leaving the Sol system in thirty Terran Standard minutes."

Alpha Canis Majoris was a trinary system composed of a faint, elderly white dwarf not much larger than Terra and a young, yellow-white star twice the size of Sol, commonly known as *Sirius A*. In the luminous far-magnetosphere of Sirius A, a brown companion sixty times the size of Jupiter orbited, as though trying to warm its sluggish, cool surface in its neighbor's hot rays.

Because the gravity wells between the three dissimilar stellar bodies were fierce and far-reaching, the Sirius system possessed no planets, only spiraling bands of asteroids whose rich ores had long been exploited by spacefaring cultures both in and outside of the Federation. Ingram had no firm idea of what she expected to encounter there. Crystalline psion-ships in hiding, perhaps, which would be logical; There were few better places to hide for the long term in Federation space than among the often-well-equipped asteroids playing hide-and-seek through the sensor-inhibiting gravitational tides of the Sirius system.

However, Commodore Ingram had long ago learned that the capacity for reality to surprise her knew few bounds. Well outside the Sirius system proper, her XO gave a distinctly non-regulation yelp of surprise.

“Don’t keep us all in suspense, Commander,” Renee intoned dryly.

Her previous spirited yelp belying the grimness of her tone, Felingaili said; “More or less of an armada of *Constellation*-class vessels are moored here.” The XO, who had long ago

made a hobby of determining the provenance of various sorts of ships solely by their running-light patterns, added; “*Exeter*, *Constellation*, *Excalibur*, *Melbourne*, *Archer*, *Monitor*, *Dakota*, and *Defiant*. They’re gathered together in the dead space formed by the gravity well intersections of Sirius Alpha and Sirius Beta, more or less in the center of the system, Commodore.”

Ingram tried, and failed, to hide a wince. That was every *Constellation* still active in Starfleet. The *Constellation*-class was the most pugnacious class of exploration vessel the Federation had ever fielded. The fact that the *Excelsiors* were larger, more modernly-equipped starships notwithstanding, they had already sustained damage getting this far, and even at the best of times, *Enterprise*, *Potemkin*, and *Challenger* just didn’t have the sort of firepower between them that would allow them to take on a full armada of *Constellations*.

If they attempted to...but wait; “If they’re in a gravity-well dead space, how did our sensors detect them, Commander? Is it possible they’re some sort of...” she shrugged, “*illusion* purposely being projected by our enemies?” Colin had made it plain that the ability to spawn illusion was more than a small part of the mind-control the creatures who had turned their attention toward the Federation were utilizing. Ingram turned her chair until she could look up at the woman working tactical, and noted that her exec looked grim.

Felingaili shook her head. “No, Commodore. At least, I don’t think so. What drew our sensors was the energies being

put out by the...oh, dozen or so unidentifiable little ships scattered among the *Constellation*-class vessels.”

“Enemy ships?”

“They’re not those crystalline things revamped from Cabal vessels if that’s what you’re asking, Commodore, no, but...” she drew a deep breath and blew it out in frustration, raking a hand through her hair, which unlike every other woman on the bridge of the *Enterprise*, she wore loose; Orion tresses didn’t tangle. “They’re nothing I’ve ever encountered before, but in rough conformation, they’re not entirely unlike Starfleet *Runabout*-class vessels. It’s almost as if they’re...oh, holding the *Constellations* in traction, somehow.”

“All stop. Red alert,” Commodore Ingram said. The ship responded with a whoop and a flash of scarlet lighting. “Computer, mute that siren. Mr. Qat — “she shook her head and bit her lip. She was so used to working with the Hali’ian man at communications that she’d momentarily forgotten that he’d taken all the shuttles, along with Demora, Uta Morell and half of the junior medical staff, several Dakalans, most of the Rumantian monks, and the entire planetary-engineering staff of the *Enterprise* with him to Terra; “Excuse me. Ensign Kanchumurthi, please hail the *Potemkin* and the *Challenger*. Tell them to approach closely enough to form a Tensar link between their shields and ours, and to wait for further instructions.”

“Yes, Commodore.”

Ingram narrowed her eyes at the tiny runabout-like vessels surrounding the starships that her commander had brought up on the main viewer. According to the data on the tiny screen in the arm of her command chair, they appeared matte to the starship's passive sensors, as though made of the fabric of space themselves. Ingram knew that this meant they possessed some sort of shielding that deflected passive sensor mechanisms. The streamlined ships moved through the armada of stationary *Constellation*-class vessels like a little hive of remarkably agile bees through a thicket. The starships themselves seemed to be somehow frozen in space.

“Can you institute an active scan of the runabouts in order to determine their provenance, Lieutenant Voss?”

“Negative. There's some kind of field around them that's bouncing our scans right back at us.”

“You're using standard electromagnetic scan mode?”

“Yes, Commodore.”

Ingram manipulated the controls on the arm of her chair. “Colin?”

“I am here. I've opened an audio line to the bridge. I'm assuming you want me to scan the unknown ships using the Lonsdaleite matrices?”

Ingram cast another glance at the screen on the arm of her chair. “Absolutely.” The three *Excelsior*-class starships were

now linked in Tensar tandem, meaning that Colin had the all the Lonsdaleite of each of those ships at his disposal. The force and spectral variance of such a scan should be enough to break through whatever shielding the runabouts were using.

Environmental controls on the bridge, as they did every time Colin utilized the electromagnetic-psionic alternator setup, dropped to minimal. It was impossible to use basic services, such as the heads or the replicators, while the Lonsdaleite carriers were in use. She would, Renee thought for the umpteenth time, have to request some particular energy conduit be constructed to travel via separate circuits to the alternator and its associated carriers, assuming they ever got out of this in one piece. Anyway, it was still better than sending part of her crew to sickbay every time the carriers, which Colin called a *matrix*, were used.

To her utter amazement, both the runabouts and the *Constellations* before her on the viewscreen faded, as though they had suddenly become translucent to the spectral fury of the stars they lay quiescent between. But around them...

No fewer than thirty of the minute crystalline craft belonging to their enemies surged into being on the *Enterprise's* large central viewscreen. Renee rose from the command chair, as though a change in position might clarify the situation. "What the hell?"

"We still don't have the ability to scan the interior of those runabout craft, Commodore," Seantie said.

“She’s right. Aside from whatever that field is they’re putting out, the things might as well not be there at all,” Josi Felingaili agreed. The crystalline Cabal vessels were as quiescent as the seven Federation *Constitution*-class vessels in the tableaux on the screen.

Renee chewed thoughtfully at her lower lip, watching the actions of the little dark ships that looked so like, yet so unlike, Starfleet *Runabout*-class vessels. They were holding the *Constellations* in traction, Josi’d said...

“Seantie, are the spectrally-reflective fields those unidentified ships are putting out surrounding the *Constellations* as well?”

“Affirmative,” the Betazoid woman at the science station said, a tone of surprise in her voice, “although...” she frowned, “I’m having trouble determining exactly the method they’re using to do it.”

Renee made a decision. “Contact the *Potemkin* and the *Challenger*, Ensign Kanchumurthi. Tell them to follow us into the gravity well where those *Constellations* are. They are to maintain Tensar contact, but let us do all the heavy lifting.” If she wasn’t mistaken, those bizarre little ships belonged to allies trying to free the *Constellations* from the influence of the crystalline craft surrounding them. One thing she was certain of was that the *Enterprise* would be able to make that happen. If she was mistaken, and the odd runabout-type vessels had also been commandeered by enemy psions...well, the *Enterprise* and

her sister-ships in Tensar mode should be able to deal with that, too, but not from so far away.

She hoped. At least, they'd be able to do all that as long as they weren't turned upon by an armada of *Constellation*-class starships. If *that* happened, they'd be space dust.

"Not even *we* have the technology to accomplish what you just did."

Renee considered the fellow who called himself Junior Agent Abell, trying to work out whether that particular tone was forbidding or simply thick with jealousy. Her viewscreen offered a wide view of the unusually large bridge behind and around him, and she noted that most of the posts there, some of which sported consoles she couldn't identify, were staffed by what looked like the equivalent of Starfleet midshipmen not yet past the ninety-day trial period that would make them provisional cadets. Abell, himself, barely looked old enough to shave, belying the terrible solemnity of the black-on-black, oddly equipped, non-regulation clothing he was wearing.

"The person I suppose would be your boss' boss sent us a communiqué telling us to do *anything* we had to in order to stop these things. So that's what I did. I can send you a copy of that communiqué, if you need it."

"Not necessary..." he paused and considered her narrowly, "Commodore, I suppose I should call you? No, the person who

sent *that* is a little higher in our chain of command than you'd imagine. So, what, exactly, did you do in order to obtain a..."

The young man looked down, not at either of the consoles to each side of his command chair, but at his own arm crooked before his face; There seemed to be some sort of implant in the clothing he wore that acted like a combination of tricorder, compadd, and personal computer. He manipulated whatever it was he was inspecting on his forearm with movements that made it look as though he was crushing and flicking away insects that had alit there, then shook his head at it before banishing the hidden hardware back into the depths of his clothing with a brisk tap. "Psionic resonator?"

"I went to Tres Two and told the semi-sentient machine on the surface of its only planet that I required one."

The look on the young man's face when he lifted his gaze back toward the viewscreen made him look like a surprised toddler; she imagined that, in his line of work, it was probably an expression he tried very hard not to make. "I...it...psionic resonators are *incredibly* dangerous, Commodore."

"This one's quite friendly. His name is Colin."

Abell opened his mouth to comment, but he was overridden by another youngster, seated at a station that looked like an odd union of helm and communications. "Agent? Chain Ship Three says the *Constellations* are beginning to report in. The medication is working. According to Three, the captain of the

Dakota says they were dragooned by these things we're fighting in order to do something in the Procyon system, but the captain's not able to remember what that was, exactly."

"So, you *did* finally receive our messages about the Therosylane." Renee was relieved by this, but at the same time, the woman's statement had sent a chill down her spine. *Dragooned*? It seemed to her that such a thing would imply that the ships had enemy agents aboard. But if the medication was working, and the *Constellations* were free of all outside influence...

"From the Klingons, no less." The young agent flashed a smile; "I can hardly wait to hear this entire story, Commodore."

Renee reached over to the arm of her chair, called up her personal computer's data link, and sent the unfinished debriefing she'd been working on to the Section 31 runabout the *Enterprise* was in contact with. "I just sent you over what I've got of it so far. Now, let me see if I understand you correctly; Those little ships you're in can basically make whatever amount of Therosylane might be required by...?"

"Anybody. We have..." the young man looked uncomfortable, but went on anyway; "um, technologies that vastly increase our capacities beyond what you think you see on your screen when you look at our ships. But that's neither here nor there. The Inspector General's going to want to see this psionic resonator for himself."

“The psionic resonator you’re referring to is a person, and I’ve granted him asylum aboard the *Enterprise*. Now, unless your Inspector General — what naval-equivalent status is that, anyway? Fleet Admiral?”

Abell shrugged. “More or less, yes.”

“All right then, Junior Agent. *Ensign*, wouldn’t that be the correct correlation as well?”

Abell’s mouth tightened, but he nodded.

“All right then, Ensign. It’s like this; unless and until your Inspector General shows up personally to tell me otherwise, the *Enterprise* and her sister ships are needed at Procyon. And your magical medicine-ships, accompanied by the *Constellations*, are very sorely needed to put down any lingering psionic hallucinations at Terra, Hali’ia, Napea, Kazari’a, Delta and, for good measure, Vulcan, where we’ll rendezvous with you once we’re finished at Andoria.”

The young man on the screen shook his head. “I don’t have orders to that effect. Furthermore, I’ve got the technology to stop you from doing anything other than what my standing orders might — ”

“*Might?*” Ingram stood up and strolled very slowly toward the viewscreen, until she was nearly standing on the plinth that supported it. Without looking away from the screen, she said; “Ensign Kanchumurthi, kindly open a general channel to all

Federation Starships in this vicinity, code Beta prime. I want them to hear what I have to say.”

Kanchumurthi blinked at her for a moment, then turned his full attention to the board in front of him, almost certainly in order to determine what among Yaelat’s armory of arcane communication codes was *Beta prime*. “Yes, Commodore.”

“Override that!” Abell barked at his own comm officer, who turned to her board with much the same facial expression and intensity of action as Kanchumurthi was confronting his own. Finally, she looked back up and shrugged, confusion and fear limning her features. The junior Section 31 agent in control of the runabout’s bridge went to the comm station himself; the woman seated there rose precipitously and backed away.

Abell’s gaze was venomous when he raised it back toward his main viewscreen. “You’re using a proprietary Section 31 communications override, Commodore! I *demand* that you — ”

“You demand nothing, *Junior Agent Abell*,” Renee snapped back frostily. The runabout’s young crew, whom Ingram imagined weren’t too terribly green anymore after spending the interim of this conflict under the enforced aegis of Section 31, shifted uncomfortably in their seats behind and around their commander. Ingram went on:

“Just in case your technology is somehow altering what it is that you’re currently perceiving, allow me to clarify what’s really going on here, Mr. Abell. *I am a Federation Commodore*

on Starfleet's flagship during an armed conflict. *You* are the equivalent of a Federation Ensign on what is either a Starfleet *or* an enemy vessel during an armed conflict. I can't be entirely sure which sort of vessel you're on at this juncture.

"As an act of courtesy toward Section 31, I will leave the determination of what sort of vessel you're on up to you. Should you prefer not to engage what I can *guarantee* will be a total of eleven Starfleet heavy cruisers in combat, now that the senior officers of the Constellations are back in their right minds, then the orders you will follow *right now* are mine. As a junior officer on a *Starfleet* vessel, if you refuse to follow my orders..." Renee shrugged elaborately. "Well, Mr. Abell, let's just say that it probably won't be pretty for anyone concerned."

"I doubt you've got the capabilities for that, Commodore, even given a psionic resonator."

Renee smiled a slow, shallow smile at the young man. "I'd rather not have to do it, Ensign, but be assured that I captained an unauthorized starship to the docking bays above Guardian Alpha, and I did *that* through Section 31's best defensive technology. I'm capable of a lot of things, *Junior* Agent Abell. Now, unless you've got your Inspector General attendant on this broadcast to recuse my orders, I'm going to Procyon, and *you*, sir, are going to split your wonder-ships and the *Constellation* vessels present up between Delta, Hali'ia, Napea, Kazari'a, Terra, and Vulcan, in order to mop up the last of this invasion and provide humanitarian aid. *Am I understood?*" the smile fled

from Ingram's face. The young commander of Section 31 Chain Ship One tried to stare her down for a protracted moment.

To his credit, he did not break eye contact for an instant. "I will follow your orders, Commodore, but be aware that I will be lodging a complaint with Inspector General Shawn Kell of Section 31 at the soonest possible opportunity."

Renee inclined her head. "That's your prerogative, Ensign, but you *will* carry out my orders first, or I'll see you brevetted down to head-janitor at Starfleet Academy. Ingram out." She turned from the viewscreen before Ensign Kanchumurthi had the opportunity to close the channel. She had neither the time nor the inclination to take part in any further hurly-burly. "Marco, take us to Procyon; Ensign Kanchumurthi, let the *Challenger* and the *Potemkin* know they're to follow us in."

Chapter Nine

In the bleakest, iciest part of the Andorian wilderness, known to natives of *Fesoan* as the *strange cold place*, there had once stood a great henge of eight red-gold armor stones. Gently and continuously warmed by interactions set into motion by their own molecular composition, no snow or ice collected on them, or on the polished floor of the same eternally warm iron-red, gold-flecked rock that had once been set between them.

T'Dani surmised that this alien warmth in the dead center of the Southern Sink was what had drawn their enemies here to begin their excavations.

The now-missing, hand-cut henge had been arranged in a perfect octahedron. Along the full length of the also-missing floor, most of which had been stained by sacrificial droplets of copper and salt left by a century and a half of visitors, two sinuous characters, written in a script that looked to many humanoids like a pentatonic musical scale, had been etched. Those characters, carved so deeply into the priceless exothermic volcanic slate brought long ago from Vulcan's Forge that it would be a millennia before they wore away, had wept and bled two concepts — two *feelings*, which T'Dani whispered to herself. In any case, she *thought* she'd whispered them to herself, until Ian Reese, walking close at her left side, said: "What was that, Doctor?"

“Nothing,” she replied, staring bitterly over the great sunken hole that her tricorder told her was the unimproved entrance to an enormous bunker, where the ice was colder than death and as hard as steel. Of the memorial structure that should be sitting where the hole now gaped, nothing remained.

Before they’d had the wherewithal to build the compact, tiered, geothermally-fueled underground cities or the slender stacked towers that were the architectural hallmarks of their race, Andorians had constructed their sacred spaces from henges of stone far underground, near hydrothermal vents. Even now, serious rituals and affairs of state were conducted in or near them. The missing memorial-henge had been constructed on the surface of the moon instead, to symbolize the rising of shame and deceit into the light, where the warmth of friendship and time might alter those feelings into emotions capable of healing the spirit;

Sorrow, and forgiveness. Those had been the words etched in Vulcan script on Vulcan stone by Vulcan hands all the way across the floor piece of a priceless Vulcan artwork that had been placed in the bitter cold of the Andorian wilderness. The first time she’d seen it, T’Dani had wept with awe. But the tears that found their way down Corrigan’s face inside her visored hotsuit now were tears of rage. Blinded by their intensity, like noonday light flashing off turbulent green water, she came to a complete halt and half-folded over herself, as though in obeisance to the sheer magnitude of her anger.

The glove of the envirosuit that took T'Dani's right arm to steady her was not significantly different from her own. The helmet was; it was high-domed and deep, and nearly all faceplate, to take into account the larger, sensorially-enhanced skull of the person wearing it.

"Come now, Doctor; I've just spent days keeping Neil Connoly from flying apart at the seams. *That* put me into human-mode. I don't know if I'm up to doing the same thing for a Vulcan."

Blinking away her tears, which caused her rage to internalize so that she began shivering even in the very high Vulcanoid setting she'd programmed into her suit, she stood up and looked at Ensign — no; *Commander*, now — Ch'leeir'Nevis saalv'haamil of the *Potemkin*. Pure Theskian, his irises and pupils were a blue so dark that they appeared black, and his skin, thickened by evolution for existence at the coldest edge of the Southern Continent, was a vivid azure, devoid of the delicate mottlings and shadings of vein and artery found in Andorians of Talish, Bish'ee, interracial, or even Thalassan heritage. Only the Aenar, who lived in the deepest northern wastes of *Fesoan*, had skin of equivalent weather-enduring consistency.

The semi-quaver tone of his voice, bequeathed to him by that race of Andorians who were believed to have first developed both politics and song, suggested that he was joking, but he didn't smile. Theskians rarely smiled, and almost never for the same reasons that other races did. They could learn to,

but that usually took years of direct interaction with races who smiled freely and continually, like humans. Nevertheless, his fine features reflected concern, and his eyes were filled with compassion.

Did he imagine that she wept over the complex and difficult artistry of the place? She shook her head at him and sniffled to clear tears out of her sinuses. “I’m slightly over half-human, Nevis, so you see, you’re more than halfway there.”

“What the hell are you two going on about? We have a mission to complete!” Captain Reese said irritably. Renee had confided to T’Dani that Ian Reese, over seventy but in no way nearing retirement, liked to adopt the mannerisms of a crotchety old man should he become flustered or embarrassed by something, but to confuse him for one would be a mistake. Obviously, T’Dani’s open show of emotion had both flustered and embarrassed Reese. This didn’t concern T’Dani; she had that effect on a lot of people.

Martin Lieu, Xenoarchaeologist and Lieutenant of Communications for the *Intrepid*, spoke into the nervous silence held by the rest of the party, which included a minimal security crew sent by the *Enterprise*; a young female Denobulan, a wide-eyed, muscular Saurian male, and three human men, two of whom were tall, dark identical twins from one of the Proxima colonies. “The area in front of us, where this enemy excavation seems to have begun, was...well, sort of the equivalent of a war memorial between the Vulcans and the Andorians. It was...um, a direct apology from the Vulcans for the violent actions their

government took against Andoria before the return of Syrranite — ”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, Martin; I could rebuild a warp core with the best of ‘em, but I’m no history buff. You’re saying that the Vulcans and the Andorians, two of the *founding* members of the Federation, once went to *war*?”

“*Once?*” Nevis hissed in a tone of sheer disbelief that wrung a grin out of T’Dani.

“No disrespect intended, Captain,” the Denobulan woman said in a voice that could scarcely be heard over the scream of the wind, even with the voice-modulating helmets they all wore, “but did you miss *all* of your history classes?”

Reese shrugged and grinned. “Elementary school? I think I was probably fishing. High school’s a blur. And as I recall, the one history class they made me take in the Academy started at six AM, so I plead hangovers. You are all serious, here, aren’t you?”

Nevis rolled his eyes. The twin guards snorted. T’Dani shook her head at Reese. “Atrocities were committed by both sides,” she said.

Ian frowned. “It seems to me that some things are best forgotten. Don’t you, yourself, have part-Andorian family members, Doctor?”

This drew interrogatory stares from more than just Nevis, but T'Dani refused to allow her private life to become a change of subject. "Forgiven, yes," she replied tightly; "The memorial that stood here radiated sorrow, and begged forgiveness. *That* was its point. But forgetfulness..." she turned back to the obscene, sharp-sided hole torn into the ice of eons. "*That's* the sort of thing that forgetting the atrocities of war gets you." She raised one gloved hand and pointed at the entrance to the underground chamber.

"Okay, okay," Ian grumbled, unholstering his phase pistol with one hand and his tricorder with the other; "Point made. Now let's go see what the hell's in there."

The yawning cavern ripped into the ice, whose ragged edges were as sharp as razors, was alarming, and they proceeded with caution. Reese carried a multiphasic, hyper-sensory tricorder, something he himself had invented fifty years ago — perhaps, T'Dani mused, while skipping out on his Federation History classes as a midshipman in Starfleet Academy. She was pretty certain, however, that the captain of the *Challenger* had made up all of that in order to redirect her attention, so she'd quit crying. She had more than one family member who used the same sort of tactic on her.

Reese led them past the dangerously jagged entrance and halted at the head of a foyer polished as smooth as glass. For a short space past the entrance, the eerie blue-green-purple glow of cloud-veiled Procyon through thin, pressure-striped ice lit their way. Beyond this yawned utter blackness, at least in the

estimation of most of the landing party, who carried flare guns armed with long-lasting heatless photon flares, in order to deal with this eventuality. Reese unholstered his.

“Wait,” Nevis, the one person without a flare gun, said. Whatever it was that he sensed inside the cavern made him nervous enough to reach out and grasp Ian by the arm. “Captain, if you give me your tricorder, I can go in there and get you the data you need. Something...” he shook his head, not having the words to explain what it was he was sensing; It was like, T’Dani had been made to understand long ago, trying to explain the taste of sugar without using the term *sweet*. “Something about the way this chamber is excavated makes it potentially unstable. And it’s a lot larger than it seems from here.”

Reese took the flare gun into his other hand. “Relax, Nevis, this is just gonna help those of us without antennae see.” He shot a flare toward the ceiling. Neither the gun nor the flare produced either percussion or heat; it was designed solely to produce light.

As the enormous frozen chamber sprang into existence before the rest of the landing party, a partially subsonic groan rose from somewhere far beneath their feet. As a unit, everyone froze, except for Nevis, who backpedaled with great alacrity for about four meters. Ian cast a dour look at the Theskian over his left shoulder, then sighed. “Looks like the way this thing’s excavated, it’s *not* particularly stable. Sorry, Nevis, you were right. We’ll just need to finish up in here fast.” Reese switched

on the specialized tricorder he carried, and began to log place, activity, and Stardate.

“I can still do this on my own, Captain,” Nevis interrupted.

Reese shook his head, and began again; “Captain Ian Reese recording, from the Sink located on the Uul’khes’neh Peninsula on Andoria’s Southern Continent. Here to examine an excavation performed by unknown enemies of the Federation, Stardate 9899.45 Procyon time. Excavation has been made beneath a now-missing war memorial according to Doctor T’Dani Corrigan. This area is considered to be unstable by Commander Nevis; Exploration to proceed anyway by my own authority.”

T’Dani didn’t miss the back-and-downwards movement of Nevis’ antennae through the mask of his high-domed environmental hood as he gingerly stepped forward to rejoin the rest of the landing party. Nor did she mistake the tightening around his mouth and eyes or the slight shake of his head. He reached down to finger the gear he carried, Andorian mountaineering gear that no one else in the party possessed, as the captain ended his recording. She was certain from this body language that he was going to make an issue of this, given the Theskian tendency to make an issue out of pretty much anything, and was more than a little surprised when he didn’t. No one else in the landing party looked particularly thrilled to follow Reese into the enormous ice-cavern that lay spread before them, either, but they did it anyway.

The vast storage space had been blasted out of the iron-hard living ice, then sealed with polymers to preserve the deathly chill. The walls had been shaped into shelves and pallets, parts of the floor into tables and stands. Computerized and electronic equipment, these sealed against the weather, filled the shelves. Most of this was easily identifiable equipment, all sporting Federation ID markings when the polymer layers over them were polished away by reversing the field of one of the protoplasers T'Dani had brought with her. Doing that with a protoplasers turned the medical device into both a tool for stripping off quasi-organic polymers, and a potentially horrid weapon.

“I hope nobody needs a laceration fixed while we’re here,” the *Enterprise*’s CMO teased *sotto voce*, recording the Federation markings and the *graalek* script on one of the weather-resistant crates into her own tricorder. Nevis, across the aisle inspecting something in the depths of the ice-wall using a tricorder programmed to the specifics of Andorian environmental conditions, snorted humorlessly. “It looks as though they just took these from supply depots for educational facilities,” she added, loudly enough this time so that the other people gathered throughout the vast space could hear her, or at least the echoes that her voice made.

“Places nobody would be watching, again,” Leesa Yuhon, the Denobulan security ensign standing at her side, offered gravely.

“Not all of this comes from Federation storage,” Ian Reese replied. His strident tone carried in echoes through the icy cavern. The readings of his tricorder had led him to closely peruse the many ice-tables gathered in the west-central area of the space, near the jagged hole that was the room’s only exit. “Doctor Corrigan, could I get your help with the protoplasers over here?”

T’Dani, along with most of the rest of the landing party except for Nevis, who was still obsessively scanning the walls around and behind the ice-shelves at the back of the excavation where the Federation equipment had been stacked, went to see what it was that Reese had discovered. She showed the captain of the *Intrepid* how to use one of the reverse-protoplasers, figuring from his previous behavior that he’d probably insist on using one himself, and not wanting to watch him strip away flesh from his own or someone else’s very necessary extremities in the process.

It took far longer to unwrap the odd little devices on the table around which they had gathered than it had to remove the polymers on the Federation equipment. The things on this table were wrapped in polymerized puzzle-boxes, or in outright foot-thick masses of the stuff. The protoplasers T’Dani was using gave out with a whimper; the one she’d given to Reese went on doggedly.

The frustrating process finally revealed spiky-looking cylinders no larger than Corrigan’s pinkie fingers, incomprehensible knots of wiring composed of pseudo-

crystalline amalgams, gear in the rough shape of a humanoid skull that seemed to be made out of long, trans-conductive metal thorns — tiaras from hell — and clusters of unusually large test tubes whose contents were unmistakably biological.

The captain set down his protoplasers and directed his tricorder at one of the tiny cylinders, shaking his head at what the device told him about the piece of alien hardware. “This is some sort of...” he shook his head again, worked the face of the specialized tricorder, frowned deeply, then read from his instrument’s screen; “Inactive trans-quanta exo-temporal hyper-excitation Planck-constant disinhibitor.”

Everyone else gathered around the ice-table exchanged a microsecond’s glance of bewilderment. “Which in non-physicist terms would be?” T’Dani prompted. Reese frowned at the hardware on the ice-table.

“The hypothesis has never progressed beyond mathematics. Put simply; if Planck’s constant could somehow be exponentially increased, directed quantum tunneling between adjacent Universes might be possible. This tricorder’s more or less telling me that it’s able to sense some kind of trans-dimensional effect in a piece of hardware that has no apparent...” he sighed, “well, for lack of a better term, way of being used. There’s no obvious way to tap into its capacities at all.”

“Perhaps it would require some...well, energy input like that telepathic fellow is doing on the *Enterprise* right now?” the Saurian, whose face T’Dani couldn’t see because the face-shield

on his environmental suit was darkened to protect his sensitive eyes from the light, and whose name she couldn't recall, offered. Reese nodded slowly.

"You could be right about that. Although there's no obvious way to hook this *to* anything, it possesses a lot of unscaled temporal-phase EMF. To utilize that..." Ian's lifted a hand to rub at his face, then realized that such an act was impossible through the mask of his envirosuit. He went on:

"You'd need something like the power output of a starship or starbase, or really, you'd need that sort of output just to turn the damned thing *on*. Which says to me that this is specifically meant to be used *on* a starship or starbase. Unless, of course, it's putting out some sort of field my tricorder doesn't recognize as a field, that's capable of altering what the tricorder's sensing." He turned the impressive sensory and computational power of his tricorder toward the other alien artifacts on the table. "Let's see if—"

Nevis' voice rang like a bell through the length of the excavation, rendering further conversation improbable at best, which was certainly the Andorian's intention. Every word was enunciated slowly and with great care, a sign of his extreme agitation. "The ice in some of these areas is becoming unusually labile. It would be dangerous to remain here much longer!"

Reese directed an expression of unmitigated annoyance toward the ice shelves just east of their position. "Corrigan, could you *please* go see what he's got his knickers in a twist

about? You'd know more about Andorian knickers than the rest of us."

T'Dani felt her face flame for three separate reasons, and chose to ignore all of them, though she did take the precaution of tucking her still-running tricorder into one of the deeper pockets of her envirosuit before she was tempted to hit Reese with it. "Yes, Captain," she replied tightly, motioning at the protoplasers he'd set down. "Just be careful with that thing, or you'll hurt somebody. *Its* kinetic potential is real," she announced condescendingly, in the sweetest tone imaginable. Choosing to ignore both Reese's concentrated glare and whatever it might have been that he muttered after her, she turned and stalked back toward Nevis and the extensive shelves holding Federation electronics and energy-generation equipment.

Halfway there, the floor caved in, so suddenly that T'Dani didn't have time to consciously realize that she was falling before she fell.

Her tumble ended on a rock-hard, transient ice-shelf in the groaning, flowing crevasse, which widened even as she became conscious of what had happened. She clung to the shelf desperately. She didn't dare cling to the wall, which was moving away from her even as she watched. This wouldn't be a shelf much longer; it was swiftly turning into a pinnacle that would crumble beneath the weight of its own apex and the puny humanoid lifeform that perched atop it.

Above her, through the oddly animal noises of the moving ice, she could hear Ian Reese trying to hail one of the ships in orbit of the large moon, so that they could beam her out of there. His tones became more and more strident as time, as labile and merciless as the ice around her, went on. Other voices overrode Reese's desperate attempts to contact a starship; they sounded nearly as desperate and upset as Ian's.

T'Dani turned her attention away from them and back toward her predicament, which it was looking more and more likely she was going to have to get herself out of personally. She wasn't in any significant pain. She was cold, but her environmental suit was more or less in one piece. Both of these factors increased her odds of doing so. To her absolute disgust, some Vulcan part of her brain actually started calculating those odds. They were diminishingly tiny — less than a single percentage point.

Her grim reverie was interrupted by a nearby sound that didn't fit with the musical chiming and beastly groaning of five hundred million tons of flowing ice. It was a hissing, zipping noise that reminded T'Dani of the sound made by a particularly irate Grellman semi-reticulate *eris*, the only native and most widely feared reptilian species found on her homeworld of Nisus. For this reason, when something with a nasty barbed blade and a thick twist of metallic twine on one end magically sprang out of the ice not two inches from the fingertips of her left hand, she found herself wondering, with some whimsically

human portion of her brain, if it might not be some as-yet-unknown species of ice-reptile.

Of course, the barbed mountaineering scythe wasn't a reptile. It was, however, the reason for T'Dani's ensuing whimper of horror, as an ungentle tug on the other end of the tough twined-metal lasso to which the tool was connected sent her little ice-pinnacle spinning backwards off its precarious base. The pinnacle smacked with enough force into the retreating wall that T'Dani lost her hold on the slick surface.

A powerful hand caught her flailing right forearm.

"No!" she cried; "I've lost all traction! I'll pull you down with me!"

"If you go," the voice that replied caused the ice all around them to echo with a primal, musical chiming, "we'll both go. Now *hold on!*"

Corrigan drew breath — whether to berate her rescuer, or to scream in fear, or to try and match the glorious notes and half-notes being sung by the ice around her as Nevis' voice bounced off of ten thousand facets, she wasn't sure. She never knew which it would be, either. That snakelike hiss sounded again, and she found herself flying through the air once more; Upward, this time. She tightened her grip on the Theskian's forearm hard enough to bruise the steely muscle she could feel through layers of cloth and an environmental suit.

The automatic belt-hoist that Nevis had attached to a length of heavy wire-twine with utilitarian ice-knives at either end, capable of either holding firmly or slicing cleanly depending upon how they were used, groaned as the wire-twine flexed under the combined weights of a part-Vulcan woman and an Andorian *chan*. Nevertheless, it performed its function and hauled them both out of the deadly crevasse. Nevis clawed the last few yards out of and away from the collapsing crevice using the sheer strength of his legs, pulling T'Dani with him.

The two lay panting on the shifting ice for several seconds. It took T'Dani that long to realize that Nevis had yanked her out of the crevasse from the side nearest the blasted hole that constituted its door. He must have used the mountaineering tool to help him leap across it; not even Andorian muscle, so similar to Vulcan muscle in tensile strength that the difference between them made no difference, was powerful enough to enable a jump like that.

Nevis regained his breath first:

“We have to get out of here, or the entire floor is going to fall in!” he sprang up, unhooked the chain-hoist from his belt, then reached down to help T'Dani up. He was moving even as she struggled to get her feet under her. “Everyone, go — *run!*”

Finally deciding as a unit to listen to an Andorian while on the planet orbiting Andor, nobody questioned Nevis until they were well away from the storage bay that had been blasted out

of the ice by who knew how many hundreds of people enslaved to the whims of as-yet-unidentifiable psionic overlords.

They paused to take stock of injuries — mercifully absent, except for several shredded areas of T'Dani's environmental suit — eight hundred yards away from the jagged hole cut into the ice. Using the information that had been passively taken during her ordeal by her tricorder, which Nevis took out and handed to her, since the pocket she'd put it into was near one of the shredded areas he was trying, unsuccessfully, to patch, T'Dani formulated a theory about what had just happened; Talking kept her mind off the horrible chill trying to gnaw its way into her bones.

“Vulcan heat-stone is interactively exothermic because of the combination of structures that form in its matrix as it cools. They mimic the structures of a number of heavily irradiative rare earths, but all they radiate is heat. Architects and engineers use it a lot in the upper storeys of buildings in dangerously cold climates, far and away more efficient than pumping heat through miles of complex ductwork.

“The psions who excavated this place must have moved the heat-stone from the memorial to line parts of this storage room, and then hidden it under slabs of ice behind the walls of the excavation, after turning off or outright destroying the force fields that kept the stones from reacting to the cold. It looks like that's why the ice is so labile, and why you couldn't contact one of the ships to beam me out of there. Subspace electronics go

haywire in the presence of heat-stone; that's another reason why it's usually so heavily shielded.

“Our enemies almost certainly wanted to use those effects to hide what they were trying to do here, but I also think this was some sort of booby-trap, that maybe they had somehow put the stones themselves into cryofreeze, and our presence...undid that, somehow.”

“What the hell is it they’re trying to accomplish here, exactly?” Lieu demanded. “It just...it doesn’t make any sense to me!”

Reese frowned. “Something extremely long-term that’s so sensitive they’re willing to trash it all and begin again later, whenever the hell *later* is for them. Given enough time and study, we should be able to determine exactly what the non-Federation items in there are. What we need to formulate now is some way to get back in there to complete this mission without setting off whatever alarm-system causes the place to start melting when unauthorized people — ”

Everyone standing in the icy, wind-scoured bowl that was Andoria’s Southern Sink started with fright as a high-pitched scream too loud to have been made by any number of humanoid throats in tandem assaulted their ears. Without a sound, Nevis turned and fled farther from the entrance to the storage chamber, legs pumping as though he was trying to win a thousand-yard dash. The others followed with alacrity, even T’Dani, though she was so cold now that she couldn’t feel her feet. Nobody

stopped until the space between them and the shrieking hole was tripled.

“It’s all falling in,” Nevis panted, the pitch and timbre of his voice carrying even over the ungodly noise of mile-thick rending ice. “They didn’t just booby trap it to try and kill anyone who found it, they booby trapped it to destroy whatever’s there. Whatever it’s all for, they didn’t want it captured.” He reached into one of the pockets of his environmental suit for his communicator. “We have *got* to get out of here!”

The rest of the landing party also pulled out their communicators. It wasn’t until Nevis hissed in pain upon pulling the tricorder from his pocket that T’Dani realized that the metallic cable he’d used to save her life had shredded his gloves, and more than one section of the skin on his hands. Where the wounds were exposed to air, they steamed fitfully. He must be at least as cold as she currently was, but Andorians had no shivering reflex. Nor, for that matter, did Vulcans; her own shivering reflex was human-derived. She reached out to take the *chan*’s unoccupied hand, to tell him that she wanted to fix his injuries, but the transporters of separate starships whisked them away before she had a chance.

On the surface of Andoria, where a memorial henge had once stood in the center of the Southern Sink, a hole ripped into the ancient pack ice fell in on itself with a resounding crash, smashing and burying under millions of tons of ice and stone and fast-freezing slush whatever it was that the newest enemies of the Federation had come there to hide. All the remaining

proof and information anyone had about what had been happening in that storage room existed in the tricorders the landing party carried.

Chapter Ten

Renee Ingram had, long ago, learned to both dread and to be very patient with people who opened a conversation with the words, *I need to apologize to you about this; it was all my fault.* She did not, for one moment, believe that should someone once make an error of judgment, they should never be allowed to live it down. Nonetheless, she felt compelled to say something.

“I made a Theskian and an expert on Andoria part of your landing party for a reason, Ian,” she gently chided the man who had taken a seat on the right end of the long couch she’d had moved directly in front of her ready-room desk, after learning about the disastrous effects of the mission he had led. The room’s guest chairs flanked the couch in a semi-circle.

“And I was too anxious to see what these bastards were up to down there to listen to them, Commodore.”

Ingram considered this from several angles, then shook her head. “No. The fault was mine. I should have considered that it wasn’t the best idea to send people whose minds had been accosted by our enemies down to an excavation that those enemies probably wanted kept secret.”

Reese winced and flushed. He must have known, she thought, that of everyone she’d sent down there, he was the only one who fit that description. “I...as far as I know, I wasn’t

reacting to..." he snapped his mouth shut, seeming to grow smaller in his chair.

"There's still no way of knowing what the aftereffects of mind control like what we're up against might be, or if it lingers. None of that is your fault, Captain. There's also no way of knowing whether the excavation might not have collapsed anyway, even if you had listened to Nevis and let him go it alone. It seems to me that it was rigged to react that way to unauthorized intrusion in general. The way it worked out, at least nobody in the team died down there. I *would* like to know how it had been rigged, and what it was you found before things started coming apart."

"Oh. Right." Captain Ian Reese visibly struggled to pull himself together and handed his tricorder across the ready-room desk to Ingram. "The others...they got more, or at least other variations of, information on their tricorders than I did."

"Are you prepared for me to call them in here?"

The muscles in Ian's throat worked convulsively, but he nodded. "Yes, Commodore."

Renee contacted Ensign Kanchumurthi to have him put the chain of communication into effect that would bring that about, telling the second-shift communications officer to be sure that all of them brought the tricorders with them that they had taken to the surface of Andoria. While waiting for the others to arrive, Ingram rose and went to the replicator, feeling vaguely waitress-

like as she requested a variety of refreshments and carried them over to arrange them on the edge of her own desk.

She'd already spoken to T'Dani to obtain the CMO's take on the mission. Ingram did not want this to seem like some sort of inquisition, regardless of how irritated certain individuals had become with Reese. Should this drawn-out nightmare ever end, she'd be facing her own inquisition by Starfleet Brass and, probably, Section 31. She didn't feel like inflicting the same thing on somebody else just because they'd displayed what couldn't be conclusively proven to be a poor sense of discretion.

Leesa Yuhon, Sangmar-Nee, Charles and Tucker Taylor, Martin Lieu, Ch'leeir'Nevis saalv'haamil, and T'Dani Corrigan entered the ready-room of the *Enterprise*-B as a unit. T'Dani walked unabashedly up to Renee's desk, poured herself not one, but two steaming cups of sour-*sjrula* tea into which she added honey sticks, and sat down next to Reese. She did not offer Reese one of the cups. Leesa, Charles, Nee, Tucker, and Martin arranged themselves on the chairs to either side of the couch. Nevis remained standing at attention near the door, his countenance so taut and impassive that he almost seemed to be trying to present the caricature of a furious Andorian.

Ingram sat down herself, entirely ready to tell the peeved executive officer of the *Potemkin* to be at ease, and to order him, if necessary, to take a seat. Before she had a chance to arrange the potentially-inflammatory words into order, however, T'Dani half-turned, tilted her head at the *chan*, held up one of the mugs,

and motioned with her head at the space remaining on the couch beside her.

Nevis cast a quick glance at Reese, who sat with roughly the same unmoving rigidity as the Andorian was using to hold on to his temper, at the other end of the couch. Looking back at T'Dani, his antennae twitched backwards just slightly. The muscles in his jaws locked, and the sensory organs that were part of his frontal sinuses became still once more; Ingram imagined she could hear his teeth grind. Corrigan's expression became beseeching.

Nevis sighed, closed his eyes, lowered his head, and moved gracefully around the couch to accept the mug and the seat T'Dani offered. Finally, he reopened his eyes to look across the desk at Commodore Ingram, and his expression relaxed, his antennae dipping forward and down slightly as he inclined his head to her.

“My intent during this meeting,” Ingram began without preamble, nodding back at the Andorian before focusing at last on the other people in the room, “is to combine all the data that your tricorders contain, and to request your honest impressions of everything you saw, experienced, or sensed while you were planetside, in order to understand what our enemies were up to on Andoria.” She motioned at the refreshments on her desk. “You may all as well make yourselves as comfortable as possible; I suspect we’ll be here awhile.” She tapped her desk; “You can leave your tricorders here while you’re at it.”

Renee took the time to upload the information on Reese's multiphasic unit while the people filling her ready room did as she had requested. The tricorder, though uncommon, was still Starfleet issue, and as she had expected, it opened a holographic interlink above her desktop that automatically interfaced with the other tricorders as they were set on the surface. Renee had time to pour herself a mug of rum- and cherry -flavored hot chocolate before the complex interlink manifested fully, offering whoever had entered the multiphasic data a range of options.

Direct real-time playback or Stardate-driven playback (omniscient-amalgamation or single-unit specific), word search, and occurrence search were the ones with which Ingram was most familiar. She selected omniscient-amalgamation, direct-real-time playback, and sat back to watch and listen. In the hologram before her, Reese opened the mission recording, both noting and dismissing Commander Nevis' concerns in the first few sentences.

Ingram pursed her lips and shook her head, fairly sure that Reese would pick up on her sense of disapproval. Nobody's face or body was visible in the recording at this point; Ian's tricorder was taking in the enormous storage space in front of them. As the other units melded with Ian's, the slightly fuzzy picture snapped into sharp, three-dimensional focus; Shelf after shelf and table after table filled with unidentifiable, polymer-wrapped items.

The hologram split in two, as part of the team went toward the shelves, and the other part approached the tables. The

amalgamated tricorders performed the function of filling in the space between the teams with time-lapsed footage of what every tricorder had seen and heard as the teams moved and shifted, and suddenly the hologram became unified once more, a vision of everything the team did from that point on, as though Renee Ingram was sitting somewhere near the cavern entrance watching them.

“Computer, stop!” she ordered suddenly. “Reverse recording two seconds and replay at one-tenth speed.”

Frowning, Martin and Nee sat forward in their chairs, their libations forgotten as everyone in the room tried to spot whatever it was that the commodore had seen. One and one-fifth seconds into the slow-forward recording, they saw it; Behind the wall that Nevis was scanning while T’Dani stripped polymer and Reese recorded and tentatively handled the odd bundles on the tables, a dark shape, just barely discernible behind the darker stripes of ice that composed the glittering cavern, seemed to flow.

“Computer, pause. Anyone have any idea what that is?” Ingram inquired.

“The heatstone memorial on the planet’s surface was gone when we got there,” Nee offered, the great round golden eyes in his narrow, pseudo-reptilian face turned unblinkingly toward Ingram. A crepuscular species, Saurians usually always wore dark, wrap-around vision protectors or even dark veils on their earless heads, but the lights in the ready-room had shut off, and

the glow of the hologram was dim enough that Nee didn't require protection from its lambent light. "The doctor offered the hypothesis that the stones had somehow been used as a kind of booby-trap to melt this storage area if somebody who didn't belong there went in. That might be the shadow of one of them."

"And nobody noticed this?" Commodore Ingram's voice went as cold as the ice that was holographically suspended in front of them.

"Nevis did," Reese offered. "I mean, he didn't say that he *saw* anything, but...he knew something odd was happening the entire time. He's about to say so in the recording, I think."

Every member of the team Ian Reese had led drew and released a deep breath, and much of the tension left the room. Ingram ordered the recording to continue and didn't pause it again until the away team had been beamed onto their own respective ships, at which point it petered out on its own and offered her the same suite of options it had offered her before.

Renee Ingram drained the last drops of cocoa from her cup. Watching her best friend disappear screaming into an ice-crevasse had caused her to wish that it contained real rum, and lots of it. "What are your impressions on what was being done here?" she looked around at the assembled officers. "Captain Reese? You're the one with the most understanding of that specialized tricorder."

The captain reached over and poured himself a cup of black coffee before responding. “The cases with Federation markings largely appeared to be power-generation and enhancement equipment of various types. The things on the table...” he shook his head and took a long swig of coffee. “Well, like I said, the items were so oddly — ”

“The other items were largely psionic. I gave Colin a copy of your recording, Captain, and that was his estimation,” Commodore Ingram interjected.

“That would seem to stand to reason,” Charles Taylor said, “considering that it was put there by psionic beings.”

Reese nodded. “And the energy-generating equipment was almost certainly meant to run the rest. The questions now are how and why and — ”

“*When*,” Nevis said.

“Have you any theories regarding why Andoria might have been chosen for this...” Ingram shrugged, “base, storage facility, whatever you want to call it?” She had asked the question of the Theskian XO of the *Potemkin*, but it was Lieu who answered.

“Commodore, when Andorians first attempted warp travel, the archaic warp-ship they used inadvertently drew a cometary dark-body into its trajectory, which destroyed the ship and opened a transient wormhole. According to what studies were done on it, the thing was an unstable cul-de-sac, and it dwindled and ultimately faded after about forty years. But the studies that

were done were never performed from orbit using modern instruments. Maybe in some other dimension, or with some sort of tweaking, a wormhole might exist that's an Einstein-Rosen bridge."

Ingram nodded, slowly and thoughtfully. "You have a point there, Mr. Lieu. So, we're in concurrence that this was a long-term storage facility for potentially dangerous psionic technology and the equipment that could power that technology, based on Andoria because of the preservation that sustained cold could provide, and located in the Procyon system because of the potential presence of intergalactic or interdimensional bridges that may have already been torn into nearby subspace?"

Everyone in the room made motions and murmurs of thoughtful agreement. *Enterprise*'s erstwhile commodore went on; "Is there anything that you noticed or hypothesize that I've left out?"

The roomful of people gave that serious thought, for which Ingram was grateful. This entire conflict was complicated on so many levels that she was certain there were nuances she was missing. She didn't want this thing to come back and bite the Federation in the future, but she honestly feared that it would do so more than once, and regardless of the multitude of ends they sought to tie together.

"I feel as though there should be," Nevis gave voice to her own apprehension as though he was reading her mind, causing

her to raise her brows at him, “but the strangeness of the situation itself is somehow obscuring them.”

“Then I guess we’re going to have to turn a lot of this over to somebody well-versed in obscurity.” Renee Ingram let her gaze wander over everyone else in the room as she said, “Mr. saalv’haamil is to be commended for his courage and quick thinking. He is, and make no mistake about this, the only reason any of you got out of that place alive.

“Also, Captain Reese is to be commended for pressing on despite the obvious dangers. If he hadn’t, we still wouldn’t know what that storage room contained. Because we can now identify it, we can quarantine or destroy it should it be found elsewhere. Because of the information on your tricorders, specialists may be able to work out what the alien items were, what they are likely to do, and perhaps even who our enemies are.” She dismissed the amalgamated recording and ordered the light level of the room back to standard but did not return the tricorders.

“But we’re not going to do that here. Section 31’s finally gotten us back into contact with both the Council and Command. We have, at the very least, put our enemies to rout, and that seems to have begun before your presence triggered the storage room’s collapse, so it’s unlikely that any new storage facilities might have been made by our enemies elsewhere since then.” Ingram drew a deep breath and offered everyone a smile that she had to force onto her lips. “After what you all went through down there, I thought it only fair that you should be the first to

know that we'll all get the chance to go home, or at least get out of the front lines, not too long from now."

Chapter Eleven

“How is it, Captain, that he’s come to understand so much of our world so quickly?” Fleet Admiral Halsey narrowed cold blue eyes at Renee Ingram. The man’s pupils never seemed to dilate, and she wondered if he had some sort of vision problem.

Ingram averted her gaze and looked around the Congressional chamber of the Palais de Concorde, whose lower floor was filled with mobile computerized tables around which panels of expert witnesses sat, and whose ascending tiers of immobile computerized seats held jurists, council members, Starfleet brass and, much to Ingram’s amazement, the Adjutant Councilor of the Klingon High Council, Azetbur’s second-in-command. Azetbur had sent him at the behest of her cousin, Commander Nyvora, who sat between him and the Ambassador of Klingon to the Federation, elderly Ambassador Kage. The Adjutant’s name, Renee seemed to recall, was Kest. Nyvora had been called upon to testify to the veracity of Ingram’s accounts; apparently, the Klingon Empire wanted multiple witnesses to the testimony.

Composed almost entirely of transparent-aluminum windows, braced by struts upon which some of the Federation’s most beautiful artwork had been fashioned, the enormous Congressional Chamber of the Palais had long ago been redubbed *The Federation Building*. Both the older and newer sections of the Federation Building had already been repaired of

the damage inflicted upon it. Delegates who had turned into violent puppets had been the impetus for the bulk of the Federation Council fleeing to Denobula and Huan.

Starfleet buildings in San Francisco had not fared anywhere near as lightly. Though the institution as a concept stood intact and largely unmoved, that institution as a physical location on the North American continent had been destroyed, Starfleet personnel being nothing if not thorough. The rebuilding going on in California was slow and methodical, and would continue to be as long as the mystery behind the attacks remained unanswered. All Starfleet functions on Earth, including the academic ones, had been relocated to Federation bases in Western Europe. The next graduating class of Starfleet cadets would consist of the smallest, and possibly the most psychologically challenged, to ever emerge from training.

The waldo-wielding teams she could see at work through the window were using what Colin had called *phase-shifting psionic rectifiers*, in order to try and locate all possible remains of several psionically-dampered stellar craft, which had crashed somewhere near this position. Occasional shards of the otherwise-invisible little ships glowed an eerie indigo in the beams put out by the instruments, by causing a shift in the instrument's core, which was capable of transfiguring psionic spectra into the shorter ranges of visible electromagnetic light.

Starfleet had utilized Colin's knowledge and theories regarding real and potential psionic technologies in order to develop working psionic equipment (Colin had brought working

models of most of these back with him through the *Guardian*), then turned around and used that equipment against him. Ingram supposed she could hardly blame the institution whose main headquarters had been destroyed by unknown psionic enemies for feeling trepidation in the face of previously unknown psionic powers. Once the Migg'hyainaan had been proven harmless, Starfleet's attentions had turned toward Colin as a potential adversary. Or, at the very least, she thought bitterly, a scapegoat.

The most recent tally of destroyed enemy vessels, including Federation craft the invaders had appropriated, stood at one hundred and fifty-four, an odd, difficult number to qualify. It seemed to Renee that there should be any number of other enemy vessels in hiding somewhere, probably the Tendaras Cluster. Her knowledge of their tactics led her to believe that they functioned in pods of sixteen, which, if their enemies had fielded a dozen pods, would leave over three dozen ships unaccounted for. However, the Klingons hadn't had any success finding anything, even with the help of the Betazoids, who were certain that the Tendaras Cluster was where the ships that had occasionally, if ineffectually, harried their planet both hailed from and fled to.

It would take the newly acquired psionic technologies on the *Enterprise* to ferret them out, and that ship, along with her crew and the only man currently capable of wielding those psionic technologies, had been entirely removed service. Renee had also been removed from the loop of information regarding

subsequent discoveries following the actions they had taken aboard the *Enterprise*, and Colin had been incarcerated under heavy scrutiny. If she wanted to learn about anything that might be discovered in the aftermath of the attempted psionic takeover of the Federation, she'd have to do it the way most Federation citizens did; Listen to the hourly reports put out by the Federation News Service or other media outlets.

Finally, Renee refocused on Halsey and replied to the question he'd asked. "Colin's a telepath, Fleet Admiral. He took what he needed in order to understand from my mind." There was no other way, really, to say it, though she knew how it sounded even before a low murmur of unease swept the roomful of Federation Council members, jurists, and involved onlookers.

"And you still wonder why we have him in custody?" Halsey snapped.

"And if I said I willingly gave him what he took?" Ingram snapped back.

Halsey smiled wryly. "Then I would assume, Captain, that you aren't in full possession of your faculties. Surely you know what he is capable of?"

I know better than anybody what he is capable of. Renee immediately discarded that response. "What I know is that without him, none of us would be alive right now, or, if we were, we would be enslaved to a telepathic race — "

“Tell me, Captain, just what *is* it like to be enslaved to a telepath?”

“Fleet Admiral Halsey, this is not a fruitful line of inquiry, and I request that you pursue another,” Judge Advocate general T’Strali ordered from the head of the computerized Inquest Commission table, which hummed softly to itself under Renee’s trembling hands as she balled them into fists. She had refused to mount the Congressional podium usually used by speakers in the great room, bitterly insisting that she was not, in fact, on trial at this juncture, and would not allow social or psychological manipulation to make it seem as though she was. Eugene Halsey had sneered at Renee’s refusal to be manipulated, and taken the opportunity to utilize the podium himself.

Halsey sighed and pulled at the hem of his dress uniform as though it was uncomfortable, the first sign of humanity Renee had seen in him for days. “General, I have doubts as to the functional nature of Captain Ingram’s mind. And,” he went on, raising his voice to override the Vulcan woman as she opened her mouth to speak, “there is no proof — I repeat, absolutely *no proof* that I have seen in this chamber — that this creature she brought back with her against all Federation laws is *not* in league with the things that have relentlessly attacked the Federation on multiple fronts.

“In her debriefings, Renee Ingram states that the destruction caused by them was not direct but proximate, brought about by telepathic hallucinations forced upon the minds of the Federation’s own citizens,” through the sudden silence of the

chamber, Eugene Halsey glared at Renee from his bully-pulpit; "not the least of whom were starship captains and their crews, whose control over these vessels might have wrought the deaths of countless billions, had the crews of unaffected Federation vessels not sacrificed their own lives and ships to keep this from happening. Now," he continued, rubbing his hands together briskly and turning to face T'Strali and the other Board of Inquiry members, "I *propose* that Captain Ingram is indeed a tool of the creature we've detained, and that — "

Renee raised her own voice to a strident tone to override Halsey. "If he is such a *creature*, why would he have ever let you detain him? Why — "

The Fleet Admiral leaned over the podium toward the Commission table, concluding the rest of the sentence in a roar; "*A tool of this creature, capable of acting on its behalf regardless of its own status in detention!*"

Halsey modulated his tone as he turned his gaze, once more, to T'Strali, who, like the rest of the Vulcans, and more than a few of the other races in the chamber, had been rubbing at her temples as the interrogation of and by noisy humans caused people's hearing organs to ring. "Not only do I move for Ingram's ejection from this inquiry area and her own detention, but I move that she be stripped of any badge of authority in Starfleet until this situation has been finalized to the satisfaction of every member of this board." Visibly struggling to calm himself, he added, before the judge advocate general could interject any comment:

“Considering what sort of wringer we’ve just been dragged through by some unknown psionic race, it seems to me that a creature such as the one currently controlling Ingram’s mind would have had to be made by some type of very subtle and purposeful genetic manipulation not known in this dimension. I have the proof of that here, *Captain*.”

Halsey manipulated the podium’s computer interface, and information appeared on every station in the Congressional Chamber, information that had given Eugene Halsey the impetus to call this particular meeting. The markers had finally been processed; Renee Ingram had gone through not just space and time to retrieve Colin, but into some other quantum Universe entirely, according to the spin taken on by the z-particles of positrons exposed to Colin’s cellular magnetic field.

The phase-space occupied by those particles was distressingly similar to that found in the remains of the crystalline craft. A number of psionic individuals invited to take part in this debriefing in order to study Colin had averred that a living carbon-based being was not a craft; the phase-space readings, their statements read, must be inaccurate. Renee wondered how many of those psions realized Colin was at least partially composed of crystal.

“This will not be the final analysis undertaken to determine the provenance of this creature,” Halsey assured all assembled in a grim tone. “Does this inquest panel truly wonder why I cannot help but find it deeply disturbing and suspicious that a starship captain should be drawn to such a thing through more than

standard four-dimensional time and space?" the Fleet Admiral set the palms of his hands flat on the podium and leaned toward Renee as he spoke, as though he couldn't quite see her clearly from the other side. She subsided deeper into her own chair. "Do you have an answer to that question you haven't yet shared with us, Captain? Or has your own mind and the minds of your crew been as compromised by this creature as the minds of those exposed to its compatriots?"

The individuals at the main table gazed helplessly at T'Strali, who sighed quietly. Renee bridled the droll, distinctly insulting response that she really wanted to give the Fleet Admiral, before the judge advocate had a chance to call the meeting — which was snowballing furiously out of the Vulcan's control — to a halt.

Halsey snorted at Renee's lack of response, and T'Strali took that opportunity to pull the conversation back to some kind of meaningful track. "Fleet Admiral, there are several ways in which Captain Ingram's mind can be probed for whatever degree of competency you wish. However — "

"With what tools do you intend to preserve the safety of the Federation while this is being done? Outside of some kind of forced psionic scanning of Colin or Ingram, we have no way of knowing where these psionic attackers might have fled to, or whether they might not even now be rallying against us again."

Halsey's tirade made no visible effect on T'Strali, but it had an effect on the Palais onlookers. The judge advocate general

needed to raise her voice in order to be heard over the shufflings and murmurings echoing through the chamber, even with the voice-enhancing mechanism clipped to her collar.

“The safety of the Federation has thus far been maintained with the tools given us by the...” the Vulcan paused and shook her head. “By the man known as Colin.” T’Strali held up one hand palm-outward, universal humanoid body language that meant *stop*, as Halsey drew breath to retort. “I am not *finished*, Fleet Admiral. None of the psionic commissions who have studied this instrumentation find a single fault with these tools, and there *are* no more powerful ones at our disposal anywhere.

“Furthermore, forced psionic scans of anyone involved in aiding us *against* the invaders will not be performed on my watch. Therefore, my question to you must reiterate what Captain Ingram just attempted to inquire; Why would a telepath give us the very tools that can be used against him if — ”

“They are an illusion!” the fleet admiral pushed himself away from the interrogation table to approach T’Strali where she sat at the commission table, lowering his voice to a near-whisper which, carried by the voice-modulator he wore on his lapel, cut through background noise more effectively than a shout might have done. “How can you know illusion from truth if it is your own mind that perpetrates the illusion?”

The Vulcan woman offered the fleet admiral the Vulcan equivalent of a dumbfounded stare. “Sir, Starfleet has trusted this *illusion* enough to use it on Colin himself, and I refuse to

partake in wearying circular arguments. You have, of course, the authority to relegate the captain to whatever rank or lack thereof that you see fit, and to deny her access to Starfleet property.

“Conversely, it is imperative that *someone* present at the time and place of the event in question be available to this Board of Inquiry, or the entire act of inquiry avails us nothing. Your points of view are emotionally persuasive in light of what the Federation has just suffered at the hands of formidable enemies. Nonetheless, they are not entirely logical. Therefore, I must categorically deny your request to detain Renee Ingram in any fashion. However, I will mandate that she be scanned for mental competence, and *if* it is then found that any segment of your hypotheses are justified, we shall formulate a plan of action based upon those data at that time.” T’Strali reached forward to manually ring the antique bell that sat at the center of the table and added; “I proclaim this hearing dismissed.”

“They’re trying to say that you can’t be trusted, that you’re manipulating my mind.”

The Judge Advocate’s office had finally acceded to Ingram’s multiple, carefully-written requests to personally check on Colin’s wellbeing in detention, which had been allowed only after she had agreed to undergo psychological and physiological scans, along with another lengthy debriefing afterward. She was required to stand all the way across the room from Colin; He’d been detained in a duranium and transparent-aluminum room devoid of everything besides a simple food replicator, a sleeping

cot, and necessary hygiene compartments. The entire room was encased in a ridiculously thick force field that must have taken up an eighth of the current unpredictable power output of Western Europe. Added to which, it looked like he'd had a telepathic damper implanted behind his left ear, and the cold violet-blue, rhythmic pulsations of multiple dampers in tandem danced around his cell.

As there was no known technology currently available to the Federation that could get Colin out of a brig like that without deconstructing the building around him, no guards were posted at this brig. Halsey didn't trust what Colin might do to their minds. It was equivalent to wrapping an electric eel in a thick layer of foam rubber, but still worrying about what effect it might have on the lifespan of the fish in an aquarium in the next room — at least, that was Colin's acerbic opinion of the situation.

If Renee had thought that their conversations tended to lead to confusion and misunderstanding when they'd been empathically linked, it was nothing in comparison to the confusion and misunderstanding their conversations led to with him locked in that sterile chamber. But she supposed she could hardly blame him; if she'd been trapped in a cell like that as weeks dragged by, she imagined she'd be having anxiety attacks by now.

Colin shrugged and crossed his arms tightly across his chest. "Perhaps they're right? I'm surprised that they even let you in here to talk with me."

On the *Enterprise*, to make it easier to treat injuries he'd sustained in the fight he'd led against the enemies of the Federation, T'Dani had cut the wild coppery mass of dreadlocks that had surrounded his face. His features were easier to read without so much hair, but they were filled with despair. He had lost weight — at least, it looked as though he had to Renee, although the prison clothes fit him differently than what she was used to seeing him in, so she couldn't be sure. It enraged her to see him dressed and treated like a criminal.

“*Right?*” Renee swallowed what it was she really wanted to say. She'd been doing that a lot, lately. “T'Strali let me in to tell you that they want to run multiple scans on you to verify —”

“They've developed more already? Then I suppose your Federation is technologically advanced beyond anything you led me to imagine. Unless, of course, these scans involve hot pincers, which is about the only thing they *haven't* used yet.”

“The Federation isn't my personal property, and I also need to tell you that we're being monitored.”

Colin grinned at her coldly. “Then that guarantees the pincers, doesn't it?”

“I never meant for you to be in this situation, Colin. I'm sorry. I'll try to get you out —”

“If you can,” Colin had finished for her, then sighed and closed his eyes, leaning his head back against the wall to which

the brig's narrow cot was bolted. "From what you've told me, your hands are tied. Perhaps I should just make friends with the conclusion that it's my fate to be an animal in a cage."

"*Stop it!*" The self-derogatory humor, the impersonal despondency of his tone — she couldn't bear it, and she couldn't let herself break down. What she wanted, anything she wanted, was a million miles away, and it would be a long, hard climb to get to it from this place.

"Is that all you came to say to me?" the smoky baritone T'Dani had given him rang pleasantly from the multiple hard, slick surfaces in the room. The little crystal that was his companion had been easily relocated into his frontal sinus.

Renee shook her head. "What more can I say?" she swallowed hard, then added; "They believe you're somehow controlling me psionically."

"Then it's best that you don't say anything at all," he replied, and the visit — the first time they'd allowed her to stand in the same room with him for over a month — was finished. She didn't look back at him as she'd walked out, because she was been certain that she'd burst into tears if she did, and so she didn't see the worry and longing that played over his face in concert as he watched her go.

Chapter Twelve

The main inquiry table had needed to be enlarged. It now seated Renee, the Starfleet Board of Inquiry, all the Vulcan, Betazed, Napean, Cairn, and various other doctors, telepaths, and empaths who made up the committees that had analyzed Colin, and the distinguished Saromine physician Sphiph Doliv, the Federation's Surgeon General.

Also present were the four scientists who studied the Guardian at all times. The unexpected presence of those scientists weren't just a surprise to Renee, apparently; When the Guardian researchers had walked into the room, most of the Board, the jurists, a few of the Council members, and half of the telepaths at the inquiry tables had glanced at one another nervously for a split second.

Everyone gathered in the congressional chamber remained standing until Halsey and T'Strali had taken their seats. Fleet Admiral Halsey was, perhaps, the only person there who wasn't surprised to see the scientists. "Doctors, thank you for coming! Please be seated."

T'Strali produced the Vulcan approximation of an enraged howl; she grunted softly. "Fleet Admiral, I had not yet called the meeting to order."

"Forgive me, Madam Chairman. I have no wish to disturb set protocol. However, it's come to my attention that the

researchers who had been manning the ground station near the Guardian at the time in question may be privy to information pertinent to this inquiry."

Renee shifted in her seat. Halsey handed her a reptilian leer, but took his own seat beside Doliv without saying anything.

T'Strali called the meeting to order, then turned to the Saroming surgeon general, who had spent much of the previous day analyzing Renee's brainwaves and hormones. "Doctor Doliv, I understand you had some information to contribute?"

The four-foot-tall native Alpha Centauran stood and walked to the podium at the front of the room. The automatic platform at its base sensed the differential in his height, and obligingly raised itself for him. "Yes, thank you, T'St...erm, Judge Advocate. I, ah..." he cleared his throat and looked down at the compadd he held in one hand, between two slender, triple-jointed fingers and two thumbs. "According to what I found when Ms. Ingram visited the medical complex here, there is no sign of telepathic mind control..." he heaved in a deep breath through the fluttering gill-slits bordering his face, which led to the book-lungs that Saromings had evolved with. The extensive neutral-gray chromatophore layer in his epidermis flared with a mottled sienna pattern that signified nervousness; "that could not be explained in some other fashion."

Renee bit the inside of one cheek. They hadn't even finished the entire series of tests; T'Strali had called her away, to allow her the brief, frustrating visit she'd had with Colin.

“And I have your battery of tests here in front of me, Doctor. It seems somewhat thin. Could you explain why?” Halsey attempted a smile, which Doliv replied to with a shake of his head that mussed his down-like hair, which fringed his typically half-bald Saroming pate and matched the hair that fringed his prehensile tail.

“I saw no reason to continue.”

“Ah. So, your alternate explanations solved the issue?”

“To my satisfaction, yes.”

“But, Doctor...I’m sorry. I should be sensitive to the fact that you are nearing retirement and may not have the rigor necessary to perform exhaustive investigations.”

The little physician bridled at this; his visible skin flushed green and orange, warning colors in the copper blooded Saroming.

“*Fleet Admiral,*” T’Strali remonstrated in a tired voice. Renee was tired, too; she hadn’t slept most of the previous night, or the two nights before. She picked up the steaming cappuccino on the table in front of her and took a tentative sip.

“I’m sorry again, Doctor, if I seem somewhat...blunt. I mean no disrespect, but the situation as it stands cannot abide window-dressing. You were not tasked to answer the questions presented by the Inquest Board to the best of *your* satisfaction, but to the satisfaction of the Inquest Board *in toto* — ”

“To what conclusions have you come, Doctor?” Zh’ial’Lia, Administrative Lieutenant of Andoria for Terra, overrode Halsey firmly.

The fleet admiral glared at her. Zh’ial’Lia, a willowy Talish *zhen*, was present both as the representative of *Fesoan*, and to speak for her blind and mute telepathic Aenar mate, ch’raas’Jerdobal, who’d been part of the psionic commission who’d appraised Colin. Everything that had transpired on Andoria during what the news media had dubbed *The Psionic War* had made Lia and Jerdobal a mandatory delegate choice. The two Andorians ignored Halsey’s reactions to the *zhen*’s interruption as though the fleet admiral wasn’t actually in the room.

Sphiph sighed deeply; the color flared less brilliantly on various sections of his face, muting back down toward a neutral pale gray. “Are you aware of the concept of supernormal sign stimuli?”

The largest number of blank glances Renee’d ever seen swept the room, reminding her poignantly of how Colin would look at her when he had absolutely no idea what she was talking about. She finished her coffee and wished vainly for another.

“In the animal world, there exist particular triggers for each species’ particular life needs — on Terra, for example, blood triggers sharks to a feeding frenzy, and galaxy-wide, the pheromones certain female insects excrete triggers males of their species to want to mate. These are simple triggers, as befits

simple creatures. The more complex a creature is, the more complex its trigger needs to be. In certain of the higher life-forms, this triggering mechanism becomes vestigial; it breaks down, as it were, in order to let the brain have control over the life of the individual. In such higher creatures, imprinting can occur that is — ”

“Doctor, will you please get *on* with it?” Halsey snarled. Sphiph flushed greenly again.

The Saroming had been a people dedicated to peaceful coexistence from the moment Zephram Cochrane and his little colonizing group had limped into the Alpha Centauri system; Many of the resolutions in the Federation’s peaceful, tolerant charter had been drafted by them. Doliv’s coloration and the stance of his tiny body, however, made it plain that he did not like being dismissively interrogated. Because of the way their integuments worked, the Saroming could not lie; They had learned early in their evolution to settle misunderstandings through non-violent means, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t be confrontational.

“Fleet Admiral, I am *trying* to. Humans have very few triggers; some would say that they have none, but they do respond to Orion pheromones and other primal stimuli not meant specifically for them, and that response,” the doctor motioned with his head at the wall across from him, “much like the non-utilitarian artwork humanoids are wont to produce, is the sign of a *trigger*, vestigial though it may be. Now, the more closely a stimulus matches its trigger, the more forcefully the trigger

responds. What all triggering mechanisms...well, seek, is their perfect stimulus — "

"Please —"

"*When* that occurs," Sphiph rode directly over the fleet admiral, "it can be directly monitored for effect by looking at the chemical responses given by the body of the creature responding to the stimulus. *When* a perfect stimulus is given out by one sentient creature, and the trigger is another sentient creature capable of returning the stimulus, the sign stimuli become what is known as *supernormal*, and the neurogenic signatures in both creatures reach levels that are similar in type and intensity, *Fleet Admiral.*"

The Saroming slapped the 'padd he was holding down against the podium for effect. "A supernormal sign stimulus will be chemically — physiologically and psychologically — responded to by a creature attuned to it even when that creature has never been exposed to that stimulus before."

Renee, when tired or under extreme stress, was wont to let her mind ramble and to make bizarre jokes to herself, and she thought; *That theory would make the biggest and most boring damned Valentine's Day card anybody has ever seen.* She'd turned sixteen before she realized that only a select few appreciated it when she shared either her ramblings or the bizarre jokes those ramblings sometimes prompted. Colin was one of those few people. That realization was uncomfortable, and Ingram pushed it out of her conscious mind by forcing

herself to focus with extreme clarity on what was happening now, and absolutely nothing else.

Halsey's apparent annoyance with Doliv wasn't mitigated by the sight of a Betazoid empathic technician glancing with raised eyebrows at one of the Napean envoys present at the table; both nodded enthusiastically at the doctor. Renee wondered what that was about.

The fleet admiral pinched the bridge of his nose between the thumb and forefinger of one hand, affecting a headache, and drew a deep breath before replying. "Is this not more likely to be the potential outcome of the psychological illness known as Stockholm Syndrome, Doctor?"

Sphiph swallowed audibly, "I... potential is..."

"Is this equilibration of chemical signatures not one outcome of telepathic rape, Doctor? You don't have to answer if you don't want to; there are plenty of telepaths in this room who could answer for you!"

"Rape is a *violent* act that produces violent — "

"Performed by a violent person on an unsuspecting victim and filling them both with violent intent, is that not so, Doctor?"

"That is *not* what these chemical signatures are! They — "

"But you didn't perform the tests that would verify that beyond a shadow of a doubt, now did you?" Halsey's voice attained a level as silky-soft as the belly skin of a snake.

Doliv's integument flushed pale aqua with sickly spots of yellow. The pseudo-humanoid Saroming lowered his several dark, spider-like eyes. "No, I did not," he murmured.

"That will be all, Doctor," T'Strali said softly. "Please send in the witnesses waiting in the corridor when you leave, if you would be so kind."

Sphiph shot a look of apology at Renee, then bowed wordlessly to T'Strali. Standing back from the podium slightly in order to spur the floor mechanism to lower, he turned his back stiffly to Fleet Admiral Halsey as he left the room, his tail lashing behind him.

Chapter Thirteen

“I wish to call my witnesses now, if I may, Judge Advocate,” Halsey said into the rustling quiet of the chamber after the door had closed soundlessly behind Doliv.

T’Strali shook her head. “These witnesses are not slated, Fleet Admiral. If there is time left at the end of this meeting, then I will allow it.”

Halsey opened his mouth to protest, but the door opened again and T’Strali’s witnesses, whom she’d summoned using the control panel that was part of the table in front of her, walked in. Renee felt some degree of her exhaustion and alienation lift as the engineering chief and the CMO of the *Enterprise* entered the room.

The judge advocate general formally rang the battered ancient bell near her post at the head of the table, and admitted the witnesses into the hearing, adding; “Ensign Buonarroti, please take the podium; Lieutenant Corrigan, please be seated.” The Vulcan JAG turned dark eyes toward Rafael as he walked to the podium, waiting patiently until he appeared ready to field the first question. “Please state your name and rank for the record.”

“Rafael Buonarroti, Ensign Chief Engineer, *Enterprise* B.” He flashed Renee an encouraging smile, prompting T’Strali and Halsey to frown in tandem.

“Ensign Buonarroti, please tell us what occurred on the afternoon and early evening of Stardate 9866.8, USS *Enterprise* 1701 iteration *Beta* time.”

Rafe paused, then shook his head slightly, “I’m sorry, Judge Advocate, but exactly where would you prefer I start?”

“Begin with the purpose that brought you to the Tres Two, Ensign.”

“As you wish, Judge Advocate. Will I be cross-examined during this debriefing?”

T’Strali leveled a meaningful gaze at Halsey; “Not until you are *finished*, Ensign.”

“Thank you, Judge Advocate.” He drew a deep breath and began; “After Dr. Corrigan flooded the ship with gaseous medications that released the crew from adversarial control, Captain Ingram told us it was imperative we go to Guardian Alpha. None of the crew, to my knowledge, were apprised as to why...” Buonarroti proceeded to detail the experience from his own point of view, making it to the point at which the *Enterprise* had docked above Guardian Alpha before pausing.

As Renee had assumed he might, Halsey leaped headlong into the breach. “After performing computer sabotage on a Starfleet defensive station which caused it to destroy the Federation Starship *Malinche*, Ingram then ordered you to abscond with the dilithium matrices of three Federation science vessels. Is this not correct, Ensign?”

Rafael considered Halsey for a long moment, then shrugged. "The *Malinche* was one of the starships pursuing us. Its appearance was a coincidence of timing. The sabotage performed on the defensive station and the use of dilithium matrices not our own was done at the request of the ostensible Starfleet section that *ordered* all unaffected vessels and their crews to do *anything in their power* to stop the enemies psionically attacking the Federation.

"The contents of that communiqué have been made public domain, but strangely enough," he went on grimly, overriding the fleet admiral as he attempted to reply, "I don't happen to see any of those particular section officers here. Though I suppose if I was able to pick out Section 31 operatives, they wouldn't be doing their jobs very well, would they?"

A nervous chuckle swept through the room. Buonarroti had touched on one of many issues that bothered Renee about this inquest. Where *was* Section 31? They hadn't sent so much as a representative, unless, as Rafe had just bitterly implied, their representatives were incognito — which, according to Federation regulations concerning any Board of Inquiry convened by Starfleet, was a blatantly illegal act.

If representatives of Section 31 were here at all, protocol demanded that they identify themselves; if they were here as part of the inquest board, protocol demanded that they be seated at the inquest table. They hadn't, and they weren't. Of course, considering that she'd implicitly threatened to use what they probably considered to be a dreadful-weapon in order to blow an

armada of their arcane little runabouts out of space if the crews of those runabouts didn't follow her orders, it wasn't unlikely that they were also more than a little bit peeved at her.

Halsey scowled and opened his mouth to rebut Buonarroti. T'Strali beat him to it:

“Is this the *entirety* of your after-action report, Ensign?”

“No, Judge Advocate.”

“I find this bewildering, since I am relatively certain that I told Fleet Admiral Halsey that cross-questioning would not be allowed until the *entirety* of your statement had been given. Or am I mistaken in this regard, Fleet Admiral?”

That was as close as a typical Vulcan ever came to making a scathingly sarcastic joke at someone else's expense. Halsey wasn't unaware of this; he colored, as the nervous chuckle swept the room once more like the return of a tide, beginning with T'Dani, who had let out a surprised yelp of laughter at T'Strali's blatant levity. Waiting just long enough to become aware that Halsey wasn't going to respond, T'Strali inclined her head toward Rafe again. “Please continue, Ensign.”

Rafael continued his exposition without pause, until he reached that part in which he had played a significant role. He paused to think before explaining:

“In our engineering section and other places, as well as in other starships of our class, there's what can only be

termed...well, technology that's not viable. The crew make fun of it sometimes, between themselves — off-duty, you understand. The basic schematics for *Excelsior*-class vessels left crystalline lattices fused into the walls. These are remnants of the transwarp-drive attempt. They're pretty, but they don't *do* anything, and were considered harmless, so nobody bothered taking them out of the general schematic, probably because that would require the complete rebuilding of a ship.

“Later schematics may have simply continued their inclusion assuming that they’re decoration, although...” Buonarroti drew a deep breath and ran a hand through his neat short hair, “Colin says they can be used as a telepathic defensive, tactical, or even a navigational or communications matrix, and that’s what he and the rest of the telepaths on the ship and the Dakalans who came to our aid did — used the Lonsdaleite inclusions psionically somehow, I mean.

“Like I said, I’m not telepathic and I didn’t personally take part in this, but the group of people Colin got together made it so you could *see* the bastards that were trying to turn us all into zombies. The ships they were in didn’t even have weapons. That’s probably why they tried to take so many of our own ships, so that they could fight back. The Dakalans were instrumental in helping us create an alternator that could help Colin program a psionic rather than electromagnetic modulation into our defensive and tactical arrays, which let him use them without using people for power like he originally was, which wasn’t as efficient.” He went on to detail the experiences

encountered by the crew of the *Enterprise* before that ship had returned to Earth for refit, finishing with; “What more is there that you need to know, Fleet Admiral?”

“I’m interested in eight things specifically, Ensign, but I’m sure I’ll come up with a few questions that don’t immediately spring to mind,” Halsey snapped, looking at T’Strali; “that is, if you don’t object, Judge Advocate.” T’Strali inclined her head and motioned Halsey toward the podium behind which Rafe stood. The fleet admiral always seemed too restless to address his questions from behind the main table like everyone else, and stood to question the ensign. While it was a habit that reminded Renee of John Harriman, she found it annoying when Halsey did it, for reasons she couldn’t adequately define to herself.

“Yes or no, Ensign; Your erstwhile captain felt so compelled to go to Guardian Alpha that she engaged in the willful sabotage of a Federation station and thievery from Federation scientific vessels.”

Rafe blinked. “Compelled?”

“*Yes or no, Ensign!*”

Renee felt a fond rush of pride at Buonarroti reply. “It isn’t a yes or no question, Fleet Admiral, it seems to me to be purposely inflammatory.” Only Rafe’s direct involvement in the situation kept him from acting as Renee’s counsel for this inquest, but he knew the rules of the game.

Halsey bridled. “I could hold you in contempt, Ensign!”

“You could rephrase your question, Fleet Admiral. I’m not trying to show contempt, I’m just — ”

“Renee Ingram performed sabotage in order to use a time-space matrix that neither she nor anyone else upon the *Enterprise* B was directly permitted to use, and ordered you to abscond with the dilithium of three other Federation vessels, all in order to bring a psionically-powerful creature from another time-space dimension into the Federation, *yes or no, Ensign!*”

“Yes, Fleet Admiral. The use of any and all Federation infrastructure by starship crews attempting to turn back invasion is allowed per Starfleet Regulation twenty-one, sections seventeen through thirty-two, *and* per Federation — ”

Halsey waved a dismissive hand at Buonarroti as though he’d just made some inane comment about the weather, and overrode his recitation of code; “*After* which Renee Ingram beamed back aboard a Federation Starship with an alien whom the telepathic crew members of that ship obeyed without a single question, who utilized non-Federation, non-humanoid aliens to alter and enhance the capacities of a Federation Starship, and then proceeded to warp straight back into the heart of the Federation?”

Rafe’s brow furrowed as he considered all the ramifications of this multifaceted question. Finally, he shrugged. “Yes, Fleet Admiral.”

“And *no one* questioned those occurrences?”

“No, Fleet Admiral.”

“*Why?*”

Rafe shifted behind the podium. “Because the captain ordered Colin to be given whatever assistance he needed, sir.”

“And Colin proceeded to turn a Federation Starship into an inescapable weapon?” Halsey folded his arms and regarded the young man behind the podium grimly.

Buonarroti considered the finer points of this question, and again decided not to argue over them. “For a period of time, yes, Fleet Admiral.”

“Are you in charge of the engineering department on the *Enterprise B*, Ensign?”

“The previous head of the engineering department was killed, and there hasn’t been time to formally — ”

“You *acted* as head of engineering on the *Enterprise B* at the time in question, yes or no?”

“Yes, sir.”

Halsey strolled in a slow circle as he spoke his piece, directing all but the very last of it toward the groups of tables and ranks of seats arranged throughout the congressional chamber of the Federation building; “Renee Ingram allowed an alien entity and a group of non-humanoid, shapeshifting creatures under that entity’s control to alter a Federation Starship

from its regulation specifications and its prime directive. As chief engineer, you were never appraised of or conversant with exactly how the alien telepathically controlled the ship in order to reveal the Federation's tormentors, or with how to stop him from telepathically controlling *Enterprise* if the need arose, were you, *Ensign*?"

Rafael blinked, his face a mask of disbelief, his reply a protracted stutter; "I... there wasn't...nobody...*maldizione!*" he threw up his hands, "they didn't *alter* the *Enterprise*'s specs!"

"Now *I* must suggest that the question be rephrased, Fleet Admiral," T'Strali interjected dryly. "Mr. Buonarroti is *not* on trial here." A low sigh swept the people assembled in the hall.

Renee was glad the Vulcan JAG was part of this inquest. Even informally having been declared not in possession of her own senses and stripped of any rank disallowed her the authority to act as a viable attorney for herself in a Starfleet inquest, and no one else had taken up that duty. Ingram had lodged several formal complaints regarding this unforgivable breach of a Federation citizen's rights, but nobody here at the tattered seat of Federation rule had bothered to respond to them, as far as she was aware.

Halsey walked to the table and poured himself a drink of water prior to rephrasing; he did not offer Rafe one. "Ensign, do there currently exist any form of technical schematics showing exactly how the starship *Enterprise* was telepathically altered, or how those alterations might be reversed?" he inquired tartly.

Rafe frowned openly at the fleet admiral. "Yes. And I could take the alternator out at any time."

"I believe you are purposely misunderstanding my question. However, perhaps you feel you are simply protecting what you perceive to be your post as acting chief engineer on the *Enterprise* B. Therefore, let me rephrase; Were this situation to occur again, you — by which I mean *anyone* in a legitimate command capacity aboard the *Enterprise* at the time in question — would have no idea of *how* the psionic control of starship's systems was performed in order to stop it from occurring, would you?"

Rafe mulled over the fleet admiral's question. The man Renee had made her chief engineer was certainly not unaware that the fleet admiral could toss him out of Starfleet as casually as Buonarroti might toss a stained uniform into the refresh chute of a replicator. While in normal circumstances, the word of the captain of any Federation Starship regarding the preferred staffing of that ship would be given legal precedence, the captain in question had just been stripped of rank. The word, Halsey was blatantly inferring, had *not* been given, and should he so desire, he could hold Rafael Buonarroti responsible for that oversight. Renee clenched her hands into fists until her short, neat nails cut into her palms, and clenched her teeth until they creaked, in order to keep herself from rising from her seat to confront Eugene Halsey, who had stopped directly across from her in his perambulations.

Rafe's voice was tight when he replied, "No, Fleet Admiral, but the same thing might be said for any number of instances —"

"Like a core breach?" Halsey's voice went soft, and Rafe winced. The fleet admiral returned his water glass to the table and moved across the room slowly until he was directly in front of the witness podium. "Do you know to what extent this alien's use of the *Enterprise*'s crewmembers caused injury?"

Rafael looked over at T'Dani, then back at the fleet admiral. "I wasn't apprised, sir."

"I was," Halsey continued in that silky, irritating tone. "Did you know that one of the Betazoid women the telekinetic alien called *Colin* used as a psionic battery lost the child she was carrying?"

"No, sir, I'm sorry. I... I lost my brother near Vulcan, and my uncle...well, he's still missing, but he's probably —"

"I'm terribly sorry to hear that, Ensign. It is tragic when people are forced to take part in struggles that are foisted upon them by malicious outside entities. Ensign," Halsey continued his questioning without pause, "who was in control of the ship after it had been turned into a telepathic weapon of war?"

"The captain directed us where —"

"Again, I think, you purposely misunderstand my question. Who was *physically* in control of the altered *Enterprise* B?"

Rafe shifted nervously behind the podium again. "Until the alternator was in place, the telepaths were in control of the — "

"And who was in control of *them*, to the best of your knowledge, Ensign?"

Buonarroti looked down at his hands, pressed flat against the podium. "Colin, sir."

"*Colin*. Colin was in complete control of a Federation Starship. Fascinating. And do you suppose he knew how to alter the ship and where to find our telepathic enemies and so-called alien telepathic allies because he understood their motivations, Ensign?"

"I... couldn't presume to say what someone else *thinks*, sir."

Halsey rounded on the table, "How about you, *Ms. Ingram*? It was your mind and your ship that this being took over; would *you* presume to say what it was thinking?"

Ingram ignored T'Strali when the Vulcan JAG caught her eye and shook her head. "I would presume to say, Fleet Admiral, that if it hadn't been for Colin's actions, none of us would be here to participate in this inquest, so your point is meaningless."

"Meaningless," he whispered, moving to place both palms flat on the glossy black computerized table so that he could lean on them and bring his face close to Renee's. "I've read the reports of the Federation psionic and medical committees

gathered here to study the alien. *They* claim that this was hardly the first time your alien lover has engaged in murder!"

This time Renee half-stood and leaned forward out of her seat, forcing the fleet admiral to either move away, be kissed, or have his nose bitten off. He wisely chose the first course of action. "I believe that what you *mean* to say is that it was not the first time he's engaged in *self-defense*, unless you somehow believe that the telepathic entities who've been attacking us are *allies!*" she snarled.

"I believe they are *his* allies!" Halsey hissed.

T'Strali broke in with a tone like ice-frosted glass. "Excuse me, Fleet Admiral, but it is not Ms. Ingram whom you currently have the right to cross-examine. This conversation between the fleet admiral and Ms. Ingram will be stricken from the record and *you*, Fleet Admiral, will resume your seat immediately. Thank you, Ensign Buonarroti, you may stand down. This Inquest Board now calls Lieutenant Commander Corrigan to take the stand."

Chapter Fourteen

T'Dani took the podium. She, too, smiled at Renee, causing all the Vulcans present to raise their eyebrows in appraisal. "Ms. Corrigan, I request that you state your name and rank for the record," T'Strali requested stiffly.

"I am Lieutenant Commander T'Dani Corrigan, Chief Medical Officer for the *Enterprise* B. Do you also wish my version of events at the time in question?" she directed her inquiry to T'Strali, but focused her elegant blue eyes on Halsey. T'Dani's voice was opera-trained, and she didn't require a voice modulator for it to carry, even in the great conference chamber of the Palais.

"Indeed, Doctor, though in this instance I would like to hear specifically about the telepathic events and the injuries so sustained. You are, I presume, a telepath yourself?" T'Strali asked.

T'Dani nodded briefly. "I didn't take part in the events, as there were other psionically-capable individuals more available than myself at that time, but I believe I understand them well enough."

"Why did you not take part in those events, Doctor?"

"As CMO, I suspected that my skills would be required at the conclusion of those events. And as I believe I just stated, Colin had other psionic workers at hand to select from."

“Describe the events of the time in question as you understand them, Lieutenant Commander Corrigan.”

“Before this even begins, General,” Halsey broke in, “I wish to testify for the record my belief that no psion who was aboard the *Enterprise* at the time of the event in question is a reliable witness, as all had their minds taken over by the alien being whose fate is currently in question.”

“My mind was not taken over by *anyone* at the time in question, Fleet Admiral,” T’Dani shot back tartly. “This, I believe, is why I have been called here.”

“Ms. Corrigan is correct in her estimation, Fleet Admiral,” T’Strali said.

“I wish *my* statement of protest recorded.”

“And this board of inquiry has done so. Doctor Corrigan, please proceed, and Fleet Admiral, you may *not* interject while she is speaking, am I clear on that point?”

Halsey inclined his head at the Vulcan JAG. “As always, Madam.”

T’Strali motioned for T’Dani to proceed.

“According to the Captain’s perceptions of time — which are not relative to the functioning of the Guardian, according to papers I’ve read on the subject — she was on Colin’s home planet for approximately thirty-seven of that planet’s days. During this time, they discussed many things, but exactly how to

halt the telepathic enemies of the Federation was not one of them.

“As soon as Colin had beamed aboard the ship, he sent out a telepathic message, which, between telepaths, does not come in a stream, but as a simultaneous package. Shortly; He needed to understand the ship’s layout in order to use it as a telepathic weapon — apparently, he was relatively comfortable aboard the ship and had few issues with the use of Federation technology because Captain Ingram had familiarized him with it beforehand. In any event, he was seeking crystal lattice technology, a technology that has only begun to be explored among my mother’s people and by Hali’ian telepaths, but with which he is well-acquainted.

“The use of the dilithium chamber was out of the question, although dilithium is the crystal of choice among Vulcans for telepathic lattice work. Colin’s first intent was to explore the possibility of the dilithium. It wasn’t until he inspected the turbolift walls on the way down to engineering that he realized he had other options.

“The power used in altering the ship’s purpose, as Colin proposed, was derived from other psionic individuals whom he chose to work with. The psions who helped Colin were not all humanoid — ”

“And I have grave misgivings regarding this, but it is a separate subject,” Halsey interjected tartly. T’Dani scowled.

“Let us remain on topic, please. Fleet Admiral, refrain from speaking while Doctor Corrigan offers her testimony,” T’Strali admonished. Halsey shrugged and motioned T’Dani to continue.

“As it turns out, psions are capable of working in tandem, of forming a sort of psionic network. The method imitates electrical or electronic circuitry, but inserts the possibility for intuition and emotion — a fact of which no psionic individual aboard the *Enterprise*, or elsewhere in the Federation to my knowledge, had ever been apprised.

“Unfortunately, flesh is not evolved to deal with such energies; this was the reason behind the injuries sustained during the time that the *Enterprise* was used as a weapon against our unseen telepathic enemies. The worst of the injuries were, in fact, sustained by Colin himself. This discounts the loss of the Betazoid Yeoman’s child, but I have here,” T’Dani pulled a small ‘padd from the inner breast pocket of her uniform, “a sworn affidavit that she acted of her own free will, and that Colin had first vehemently refused to use her in the matrix circle he ultimately put together.

“He refused other telepaths and empaths, as well. She was the only one who insisted. It was finally her threat to cause herself injury were she not allowed to participate that forced the captain to capitulate. The yeoman’s husband and extended family had been killed in the first wave of telepathic discord sown by the invaders, and she very much wanted to be part of

the invaders' demise. She is currently undergoing psychiatric treatment on her home planet.

"Part of the damage the telepaths and empaths who helped Colin sustained was caused by the length of time they performed the function for which Colin used the *Enterprise*. However, over time and with the allied aid of the Migg'hyainaan, our engineering team developed an alternator capable of —"

"Damage?" Halsey prompted. T'Dani nodded.

"Channeling telepathic energy — or undertaking any of the dozen or so other uses that are commonly made of psionic fields, which are derived from the psionic spectrum by those capable of perceiving it — is a heavy drain on any species' body. Most of what I dealt with in all of the individuals who aided Colin were varying levels extreme exhaustion, in combination with near starvation and dehydration, depending upon the species and metabolism of the individual in question. These existed in Colin, too, but chemical burns along all of his major nerve channels also occurred, severely compounding the problem of dehydration.

"A certain amount of accelerated aging ensues when psionic energies are used. Though raised in a development-acceleration tank from which he was only released roughly five years ago, Colin possesses telomere markers that make him thirty-two years old in actual chronological age. However, when the aging of brain regions required to perform psionic tasks are studied,

this apparent age increases; I would presume him to be, psionically speaking, roughly forty-seven years old.”

The *Enterprise*’s Chief Medical Officer was speaking in a tone that T’Dani herself referred to as *High Vulcan Logistics Mode* — a description which Renee’s old friend occasionally preceded with the addition of certain colorful human epithets. In Ingram’s experience, T’Dani’s main use of it was to lull people into a sense of security before conversationally slapping them across the face with something that they either couldn’t or wouldn’t want to try to refute.

But that’s exactly what the Vulcan method of reasoning was designed for, the principal physician of the *Enterprise* was wont to explain to people thus slapped. T’Dani also had a wickedly sharp sense of humor that hadn’t, Renee’d been assured more than once, come from her human father.

“Colin was also undergoing multiple immune system responses to illnesses he’d never come into contact with before. I was required to put him into a regeneration tank for two days, followed by an intensive antimicrobial series and treatment with psilosynase serum modified to treat chronic peripheral psionic nervous system inflammation.

“Which means that after two days in a regenerative coma, he spent thirteen hours with a high fever as a result of the antimicrobials, and the next two days nauseated from the effects of the psilosynase until it was properly modified. *Then* I had to treat him for severe dehydration and try to convince him that he

needed to take nourishment. He also had several odd maladies that Federation doctors tend to be unfamiliar with — cavities, for instance. Fortunately, he is in peak physical condition, or he might have died of dehydration, starved to death, gone into irreversible telepathic coma, sustained septic damage, or suffered a stroke. Is there anything more you need to know?"

Again, Halsey jumped up from the table to prowl around in front of the podium like a strutting barrister from some ancient Earth melodrama. "You say the being had no mental discomfort about coming aboard a *starship* from what, according to Ms. Ingram's debriefings, was a Paleolithic existence? No mental discomfort about working with *aliens*?"

T'Dani thought about the question a moment. "He is...a combined creature. The crystalline entity that is part of his being is capable of performing highly technological feats, Fleet Admiral."

"A *combined* creature. And has this crystalline entity of Colin's been previously immersed in a realm maintained by computers and moved about through space at warp speeds?"

"No, but that was not something he was concerned — "

"Was *it* concerned about the hundreds of people and *creatures* of various alien races who were present aboard the *Enterprise*, after having lived alone for a severely abbreviated adult life that certainly must carry some extent of psychological

backlash? Was *it* concerned about what would become of itself after it had altered the *Enterprise* into a telepathic weapon?"

Again, T'Dani paused for thought. "Not apparently, Fleet Admiral, but I cannot personally speak for the emotions that Colin may have been experiencing at the time. Everyone was too busy — "

"Not apparently. Is it apparent to you, Doctor, that this being's nonchalant comfort with technology beyond his scope of knowledge came about because he had immersed himself in a new world of data taken by force directly from your best friend's brain?"

T'Dani shook her head. "No, I had not considered that, Fleet Admiral."

Halsey gazed at T'Dani with a look of amazement and seemed, for a moment, nonplussed beyond words. "I suggest you consider it now, Doctor," he murmured finally. "Consider also, why the weeks between her arrival on his planet and their return? But I've been told by some members of this inquest that this isn't a pertinent question, so let us move on.

"This being was prepared, then, to use a starship's dilithium chamber in order to turn it into a telepathic weapon?"

"I believe so, if he found no other option."

"You are aware that this could have destroyed the ship?"

The part-Vulcan doctor nodded. "I was prepared for that possibility from the outset. It was part of what Colin told every psionically-capable individual when he boarded the *Enterprise* and requested their aid."

Halsey glared back over one shoulder at Renee. "You would have allowed this being to *destroy your ship?*"

Renee licked her lips. She should strive to cease baiting this man, she really should. She didn't like him, but he was, after all, a superior officer, and at least she didn't have to put up with the pathetic chicanery of fake compliments from him — he'd made it plain that his task was to act as public prosecutor in this inquest, to the exclusion of everything else, including, it seemed, verifiable proof, common courtesy, and basic Starfleet protocol. "For the protection and continuity of the Federation, Fleet Admiral, I was prepared for the *Enterprise* and all its crew, including myself, to be destroyed. We're prepared for that eventuality before we're given even the most minor of commands. That's *General Order Twenty*, in case you've forgotten, sir."

"You've made your point, Ms. Ingram," T'Strali interjected. "Fleet Admiral, please continue questioning the witness *whom you are permitted* to question, or I will have every part of this inquest session stricken from the record and we will have to repeat it tomorrow."

Halsey nodded shortly, then walked to T'Dani and took the Betazoid compadd from the podium before her. "It would seem

to me," he said softly, "that the state of Ms. Ingram's mind is not limited to Ms. Ingram. I submit that any mind touched by the alien Ms. Ingram brought back from an unknown space-time through the Guardian is suspect. And though you state that your mind was not taken over at the time in question..." he paused, glaring at T'Dani.

It was probably, Renee surmised, the glacial coldness of the part-Vulcan CMO's eyes that kept him from finishing that statement. That, and the fact that T'Strali would have put an immediate end to this portion of the inquest should Halsey attack a witness so blatantly. "So, what you're saying, Doctor, is that this telepathic alien was ill with afflictions that might have allowed him to act in ways forbidden by the United Federation of Planets, including the forcible use of others' minds?"

T'Dani bit her lip, thinking.

"I'm sorry, Doctor, I didn't hear you?"

"It does not occur to me that what Colin did could have been mediated by having given in to — "

"I'm sorry again, Doctor, but perhaps it didn't occur to you the same way the being's penchant for telepathic rape didn't occur to you; and that was a *yes* or *no* question."

Again, T'Dani stared at the Admiral without replying. Halsey shrugged.

“Lack of response is generally accepted as assent.” Halsey went for another glass of water. As usual, Renee thought, T’Dani timed her rejoinder perfectly.

“I have never before heard anyone accuse a virgin of rape, Fleet Admiral.”

Everyone at the table rocked backward, partly in reaction to the too-much-information content of T’Dani’s clipped rejoinder, partly to escape the water Halsey gagged up. The chamber exploded with conversation and more than a little laughter. T’Dani waited patiently for the Fleet Admiral to stop coughing and the chamber to quiet. Her pretty mouth wore the puckered frown that people wear when they’re trying very hard not to laugh; Renee imagined her own facial expression ran along the same lines. Halsey wiped his own mouth roughly with the back of his formal uniform sleeve.

“The one has nothing to do with the other! I’m speaking in the telepathic sense, Doctor,” he rasped.

T’Dani nodded serenely. “So am I. In a psionic being, the sex drive and the psionic interface are inextricably linked, since the same nerves carry both energies. You had another question?”

Halsey glared at T’Dani for a moment before going on, clearing his throat twice. “Is it not possible that the bulk of the telepaths refused to work with this alien creature and its alien compatriots from outside *Enterprise*, sensing nefarious intent?”

T'Dani shook her head firmly. “*Colin* refused to work with the other telepaths, because what he required could potentially harm them mortally.”

“And yet he worked with a telepath who lost her child!”

The part-Vulcan doctor shrugged. “Which appears to refute your mind-control theory, Fleet Admiral. I swear here, now, and under oath, that both *Colin* and Captain Ingram repeatedly attempted to make her desist. She blatantly refused. This cost us four hours of very precious time. We could have begun the destruction of the invader sooner, otherwise.”

Chapter Fifteen

Thing after thing had gone wrong, from the moment they'd learned that the timelessness of hyperspace could be used to disseminate almost anything through the linkages of the multiverse, back and forth through the timelines that ruled particular threads. Horrifying effects of time dilation and expansion, for example, had occurred at unforeseen and, apparently, random rates between areas of hyperspace; A month might pass for an individual so transported, while those on the other side lived through a decade or more.

Keep the remaining psionic cannon fodder here to use against the Cardassian fleets.

This had been Roxanne's council to the seventh-generation, Augment-enhanced, memory-implanted clone she'd raised to the Imperial throne nearly twenty years earlier. That Empress had spurned her advice, in her lust for the soft new kingdom that Roxanne's revamped Tantalus device had revealed. Having proven that this device was a Planck-constant disinhibitor had made Roxanne a power behind the throne, much as her father had been before her. She had assured the Empress that such a device could easily put down resistance against the Empire, but the Empress' own poor choice of troop and materiel deposition threatened to make that assurance a lie.

The deposition, torture, and death of Spock had ceased to give Roxanne the pleasure of vengeance long ago. Shane Kell's

betrayal of her trust had spurred her to put together her own armed insurrection to capture the Vulcan usurper, if only to have some outlet for the rage and sorrow her old lover had heaped upon her. *That* had been a long, bitter journey that Roxanne shied away from remembering, a journey filled with frustration and pain bolstered only by the device she possessed. She'd had to reveal that device to the Empress, of course; one didn't keep secrets from a short-tempered psionic Augment and also remain alive.

Roxanne stripped off the heavy weaponry belt she'd been burdened with for the past hour. She was as stiff and sore as if she'd worn it for a week, which the chronometer artistically embedded in the Gothic scrollwork of the alcove walls told her she had. She made a face.

Random time dilation. Imperial scientists had confirmed that it would only get worse; there could be no telling, after a jaunt into any quantum Universe, exactly how the passage of time between that Universe and this one would be effected in the future. The Empress couldn't seem to comprehend that time dilation *mattered*. Or maybe she simply didn't care.

Roxanne had hoped that restoring the legendarily powerful clone to its imperium would halt the slow crumble that the Empire's foundations were undergoing, and revive the timeless maxim *In Division Is Conquest*. Spock's treasonous takeover of the Empire had weakened it severely and, without a doubt, encouraged the current uprising, which hadn't yet ceased to build upon itself.

No; that was inaccuracy spurred by fear putting comforting thoughts into her mind. It had gone beyond a simple slave uprising. Over the past decade, it had grown the armed appendages necessary to turn it into an incipient rout of Imperial forces. In the last year alone, they'd lost Archonis, Minos Korva, Cheron, and all systems linked to those bases. Klingon and Cardassian ships, bolstered by rebel slaves, had been captured scouting as close to Terra as Axanar.

The fact that the cloned Empress was greedy for the takeover of a whole new dimension before the proper subdual of the Empire she already ruled was not the only error that plagued this endeavor, but it was certainly the worst. Having sent Roxanne on various (fruitless) missions which might or might not stem the tide of uprising and rout — including this latest travesty, designed to bring the deposed Inquisitor General Shane Kell, and whatever minions he might still possess, back to the dimension in which he had been spawned — was the next-worst.

We should never have sent them away in the first place!

It pleased her when the rough action of throwing her weapons belt hard against the delicate architecture of one wall scarred the fine artwork there. Heaving a tired sigh, she turned her attention to the stranger unconscious on the floor at her feet. Roxanne wondered if perhaps she could somehow use this hostage to fortune she'd inadvertently brought back in Kell's place against the monster she'd raised up to the Imperial throne. Roxanne no longer harbored any illusions that the Empress

planned to fit the mask she'd fashioned out of all her own poor choices directly onto Roxanne's face.

As usual, even given the desperate needs and hopes pinned on this particular mission, the Empress would make Roxanne wait. Sato made everyone wait. Though it was possible that she was being spied upon, even in her own chambers, Roxanne would use that time to her advantage.

She strolled thoughtfully around her unconscious prisoner. Anyone who accompanied another through hyperspace without a disinhibitor implant came through unconscious — a great advancement from the original Planck-disinhibitor with which Roxanne had originally escaped the murderous attentions of Shane Kell. *That* disinhibitor had allowed hyperspace to have its way with anyone not directly attached to it.

The newly cloned young Empress had been endlessly amused by the mutations hyperspace could wreak on living tissue. As experiments on successive disinhibitors progressed and the mutations began to come through alive, the Empress had devised a zoological garden in which to keep those specimens. Which was probably where this fellow would end up, assuming Her Majesty didn't torture him to death first.

Once the experimental slaves could pass through hyperspace alive and free of teratology while clinging piteously to their disinhibitor-implanted keepers, the Empress had sent Roxanne to bring Shane Kell back. Shane and his troops, captured and cowed and ultimately altered by Sato Seven, had been sent years

ago by other, less expensive paths into that soft, sweet Universe for which the Empress lusted. It had been made clear to the deposed Inquisitor General that only by subduing the place in the name of the Empire could Shane Kell ever hope to gain forgiveness for his transgressions.

He and his troops had been forced through the matrix crystal on Minara with no real certainty that they'd reach their planned destination. Such fodder couldn't be trusted with disinhibitor technology; either they would win through and conquer a new galaxy for the Empire, or they would perish. Though the psionically enhanced troops would have been more use against the Klingon-Cardassian uprising, Shane's banishment had pleased Roxanne greatly.

Until Sato, without first obtaining the counsel of her Regent, had ordered the annihilation of every potentially psionic race within the Empire's reach, in order to keep them from turning tail and joining the uprising. This flagrant waste of potential war materiel had horrified Roxanne. Sato had justified her actions (as if a creature like Sato required justification) by saying that, should psionic enemies get their hands on the psionic-enhancement techniques developed by Kell on Minara Prime, the Empire would never stand a chance.

Roxanne had admitted that this theory had merit. But now, like a spoiled child who'd thrown some coveted toy out of her own reach, the Empress, alarmed by the progression of uprising into all-out war, wanted what psionic troops she did have returned from elsewhere. Roxanne had explained that there was

no guarantee she could bring Kell or any of his troops back. The fact that the disinhibitor had homed in on some psionic activity that seemed similar to Shane's signature had caused Sato to disregard Roxanne's counsel yet again.

As was now apparent, the disinhibitor hadn't deposited her closely enough to Kell or his people to retrieve any of them. Frankly, Roxanne suspected that Shane had some way of knowing she was coming, and had laid a dangerous false trail for her to follow; She had scarcely escaped from the guarded hospital room. Only the human shield who lay at the tips of her boots had allowed her to do so.

Carefully choosing a non-integral part of the human anatomy, Roxanne delivered a wake-up kick to the dark-haired man on the floor, allowing irritation to compound the force behind the toe of her boot. The intensity with which he'd been protected had told Roxanne that, whoever the hell he was, he might not be altogether useless as a tool. Of course, this had also kept Roxanne from being able to leave the complex into which she'd materialized, in order to search for Kell.

The prisoner came awake with a gasp of pain. Had Roxanne been in his position, even had she been injured, she would have attempted to leap up to strike back at her tormentor. As she expected, he did leap up, but stiffly, as though his bones ached, which she wouldn't doubt; she had, after all, taken him from a hospital bed. Roxanne took up a defensive pose, but her human shield didn't attack. Rather, he glanced around himself wildly, as though unable to comprehend where it was he found himself.

“Where are we?” he panted. Roxanne relaxed her pose and swept her gaze up and down him. He had addressed her like an equal, in a way she would have classified almost as loving.

He couldn’t have chosen a more startling or off-putting behavior had he tried.

Leading Roxanne to imagine that he *had* tried. Fast as a striking snake, she reached up and grasped his face, pulling his head toward her with one hand locked around his jaw, the other like a vise behind his neck — the same maneuver Shane Kell had used on her, the last time she had tasted his blood. In the years that had passed since that time, she had made certain to use every tool at her command to strengthen her body. She would *not* be put into that sort of position ever again. The stranger gaped at her in transparent disbelief and pain, his blue-gray gaze as guileless as that of a newborn.

“I ask the questions here. Blink once if you understand.”

His eyes, tearing in pain, were crowded with confusion and its attendant clamoring cries. Nevertheless, he blinked once. Roxanne let him go in such a way that he fell to his knees. She opened her mouth to demand his identity, but a low, purring tone from the doorway that opened from the alcove abutting her personal chambers beat her to it.

“What new complication have you brought me this time, Regent?”

Roxanne forced down a shudder and turned to face her Empress.

Surges of adrenaline heightening his blurry senses, John Harriman looked around, trying to figure out where he'd been taken and why he was here, while ignoring the bone-bruising pain that had been foisted on him by...

Renee Ingram? He'd seen Renee put on various false fronts in order to mislead before. She was good at it, but he still doubted that was what was happening now. This woman was leaner, harder, and older than the one he knew. Cold, cruel, calculating. What would it take to do that to Renee Ingram? He didn't think that even the takeover of the Federation by the enemies *Enterprise* had been ordered to subdue would produce such behavior. The executive officer he knew would immolate herself before turning into something like this.

How damn long was I in stasis?

A cowl of dirty gray strands that dulled the uncharacteristically short-cropped chestnut hair of the woman who both was and wasn't his XO, and the lines of too many years of fatigue and bitterness that etched her face, spoke of a passage of time in decades. He drew a carefully silent deep breath and flexed his shoulders. He was weak and slightly stiff from time spent in regeneration. He cast a furtive look down at one of his hands.

Weak, achy, and confused he might be, but his hand was the hand of a man in the prime of his life. He hadn't significantly aged from the last time he was conscious, then. Certainly not in the way Renee appeared to have done.

No; Not Renee. A month or two couldn't wreak such havoc on a person. Had she lost the ship? Where *were* they? He looked away from his hand and around at the room he was in.

The stone-floored room was empty but for a scatter of large, sumptuously embroidered pillows, whose colors glowed with the unabashed richness of silk in the light streaming through ornate French doors. *Glass*, he wondered, *or transparent aluminum?* *Locked and barred, or accessible?* The walls were stuccoed so delicately in various patterns and hues of white and off-white that they appeared to have been tatted, except for where not-Renee had thrown her weapons belt against one, scarring its quicklime artistry. His gaze travelled from the belt back to the scene outside the French doors — second-story, maybe third, he surmised, with a quickly-squelched shiver of acrophobia — before the Asian woman who'd drawn the attention of his tormentor had finished crossing the room.

This close, he could literally *feel* her presence. She seemed to put out waves of seduction and malice that he could nearly smell, that swamped all ideas of self-defense and escape in their all-consuming aura. Harriman possessed a hard-won wariness of anything that was *too much* (too fast an assumption, too demanding a request, too sudden a commitment...). His mind shied away from the blast of sensory-emotional data that poured

from the woman the way golden sunlight poured through the room's transparent outer doors.

Her attention turned away from the woman who wasn't Renee Ingram, and her gaze fell on him like a physical blow. John would have sworn under oath that she...she was...he clenched his jaw hard against the words that wanted out; Harriman had long ago learned to remain silent under physical blows.

The words made it out anyway; "Hoshi Sato?" he inquired, to his own horror. The woman raised a brow at him, the expression almost Vulcan in its attitude of supercilious calm and returned her attention to the woman she had called *Regent*.

The thought that he might actually be dead blew through him then like a cold wind. His analytical mind flicked the impression away. Dead people didn't feel the pain of bone bruises or the warmth of sunlight. They certainly didn't respond like idiots to synthetic pheromones, which were probably what this woman, who looked exactly like a highly-regarded Federation xenolinguist who'd been dead for seventy-nine years, was using in order to effect the minds of those with whom she came into contact. He looked back at the discarded weapons in their belt on the floor not too far from the transparent doors, through which trees beckoned.

This time, his attention lingered on what he had first dismissed as a Federation IDIC plaque, like the one his executive officer kept in pride of place in her quarters. It had

been the laurel-leaf border that had caused him to mistake the obscene thing that hung on the delicately-gessoed wall for one of the hand-painted IDIC plaques available everywhere on Vulcan. A chronometer was inset into the wall near it, and that chronometer's figures were either out of sync by a factor of centuries with the last Stardate he could consciously remember, or their display was programmed in a timekeeping method as alien to his mind as the travesty of IDIC next to it on the wall.

He'd seen one much like it twenty-seven years before; When he was a second lieutenant on the *Hunley*, they'd run into the remains of a star gone hypernova while in the process of dilithium fusion. The unusual black hole that resulted had caused Planck-rifting in the surrounding space-time. Several crewmembers had been inadvertently pulled into an alternate dimension, an Empire whose insignia was a planet-piercing sword. The survivors had no idea why they, out of all the rest of the crew, had been so effected. Upon investigation, they'd found that other individuals had preceded them into this horrific place, and that there were causal linkages between the *Hunley* crewmembers who'd been snatched away, and others who had been in this dimension. Those linkages ranged from things as solid as direct genetic relationship, to things as tenuous as having met a person who had also interacted with this dimension or its denizens.

Harriman had been one of those crew members. *He knew this place.* Horror twisted its way up and down his spine like a slimy thing with too many legs. He'd wriggled out of difficult

situations with fewer immediate resources, but he'd also gotten used to having the help of...

He looked back up at the woman who was not his first officer. Her stance had taken on an uncomfortable compromise between deference and self-defense. The woman who was but couldn't be Hoshi Sato said, conversationally:

“Obviously, *this* is not Shane Kell.”

The name rang some distant bell, but before Harriman had time to ponder its ringing, the woman who was not Renee Ingram replied to the woman who could not possibly be Hoshi Sato; “We sent two hundred operatives through the time-space crystal. We can only *assume* that they ended up in the appropriate space-time. As I’ve told you *before*, Your Majesty.” She tossed her head at John, her gaze as cold as Mount Hood in January.

“Indeed. That was the excuse you made for this failure before you made it. It hasn’t escaped me that Shane Kell was your lover, Regent,” the petite Asian woman snarled.

Not-Renee winced and raised a hand to her temple, as though struck by a sudden headache. “I *never* tried to hide that, Your Majesty. You also know that he tried to kill me, to take the — ”

“Oh, do shut up! I won’t tolerate any more failures.” The imperious individual, who in Harriman’s timeline had been dead for a generation, snarled at the chilling doppelganger of his XO.

Both women appeared, for the moment, to be paying such adversarial attention to each other that they seemed to have forgotten his existence.

That was what he had been waiting for. Lunging low across the ground, he grasped at the handle of the phase-weapon in the discarded belt. Without wasting time removing it from its holster, he directed it at the nearest windowpane and pulled the trigger, following its beam through the hot, shredded mess of transparent aluminum it produced and over the carved-stone railing of the outdoor patio. As he fell in a gasping, grasping heap through the thick tree canopy below, he could hear shrill voices echoing behind him.

Chapter Sixteen

Planet-wide Terran transporter links were finally back up and running, and Renee wanted to check on her pets. Though their cages automatically fed and watered them, Ingram disliked relegating the birds to cages when not aboard ship, and anyway, boarding them on the *Enterprise* while it was in dry-dock was out of the question. A quick call to Josi, whose debriefings were finished, had procured her a pet sitter. The part-Orion officer loved animals.

Renee got none of the welcome-home reception that she'd expected.

Felingaili was sitting on the couch on the top floor of the townhome Renee used when on Earth, in the Smoky Mountain range of northern Georgia, holding Renee's exotic Tri'avilla parrot in her lap. Renee greeted her erstwhile XO, then leaned down to offer her tightly-closed fist to the bird, and the Tri'avilla — whose name was Jynx — snapped at Renee with an ivory-colored hooked beak, scarlet-ringed amber eyes flashing. The only things the Tri'avilla remembered for more than three minutes were instinctive, and the scent of a flock member was one of those things. Having gotten a good sniff, the bird subsided, muttering; *Colors changing hue, shadows on the hill.*

Josi's return greeting was nearly as cold as Jynx's reception had been. Usually, her greetings were so warm and effusive that people had been known to draw mistaken conclusions regarding

her feelings for them. “Is everything all right?” Ingram inquired worriedly, sitting down on the overstuffed chintz next to her. Jynx crawled into her owner’s lap and trilled, in Renee’s own vibrant contralto; *Now I understand what you tried to say to me.* Ingram scratched her pet under the chin, and it purred like a cat.

Josi sighed. “I’ve been hearing a lot about the inquest. Are you hungry?” she stood, prepared to go into the kitchen for a snack.

Renee shook her head. The inquest process was supposed to remain closed until all debriefings, judgments, and conclusions had been finalized and approved by the Federation Council, but media attention surrounding the inquest that marked the conclusion of the Psionic War had rendered it about as impermeable as Deltan lace underwear. She supposed that it was a mistake to underestimate organizations like the FNS, whose gifts of archaic equipment and subsequent aid to Starfleet in re-establishing communications networks between Sol and its colonies had put them deeply into the debt of Starfleet, the fact that they had been forbidden to interview her personally notwithstanding.

“Halsey’s trying to...” Renee sighed. “I can’t be sure of this, because it’s Halsey’s job to act as prosecutor for the commission, but still, it’s almost as though he has some sort of personal vendetta against Colin.”

Felingaili raised both brows at Ingram, then pursed her mouth tightly and shook her head. “Eugene Halsey’s a Starfleet

Fleet Admiral. Colin's an alien being from..." she threw her arms into the air, then stood with them akimbo as she added; "some godforsaken alien world. How far are you willing to go to protect somebody who, for all intents and purposes, doesn't even belong in this space-time continuum?"

Ingram scowled up at the woman who had, until recently, been her first officer, and continued petting Jynx who, like every bird Renee had ever owned, contorted her body into ridiculous poses to better help her owner reach the itchy spots. "Colin saved my life. He's never done a single thing that would lead me to doubt his sincerity. What sorts of debriefings are they giving you, that they've made you privy to information about where Colin came from?"

Josi scowled at her. "What, I don't know that Colin's an alien? Our lawyers insisted that information not be withheld from us, so that the grilling we're getting would look more like a search for the truth and less like a literal inquisition. And there's no getting away from this inquest, considering that it's basically war coverage; It's being carried by every news service and wannabe news service in two quadrants. I'm serious; you have *feelings* for Colin?" Josi seemed dismayed.

Renee frowned back at Felingaili and sidestepped the question. "Sure. I have the feeling that the place I rescued him from would qualify as Dante's seventh circle of hell, and that sending him back to it, which seems to be what Halsey is pushing for, would be in violation of the Federation charter's Rights of Sentient Beings clause. If nothing's been kept from

you, then you know as well as anyone that somebody *created* him to be a weapon — ”

“Hence my concern. And he’s *not* a Federation citizen. And you *still* haven’t answered my original question!”

“You weren’t there. You can’t understand. Hell, *I* don’t wholly understand, and it’s almost beyond my capacity to say what the reality I rescued him from is like; The use of sentient individuals and groups as *things*, terror and avarice the stick and carrot behind every action and reaction, an empire whose guiding principles are exemplified by a blood-covered, planet-piercing sword. And the entire Federation Council’s acting like Colin’s somehow the *creator* of this place, and that’s just ridiculous.”

“He’s a representative of it. He must be, because he comes from there. And they’re more than a little scared that he’s somehow got a hold on all of our minds, that he’s somehow a more advanced form of whatever it was that’s already been trying to turn Federation citizens into psionic puppets.”

Renee regarded Josi impassively for a moment. “You say that as though you know that the psionic creatures who were attacking us come from the same place as Colin. And that’s news even to me. You know firsthand what Colin did to himself in order to demolish the ships these things were in. Now, why would he have done that if he was one of them?”

Josi's delicate coppery complexion flushed. "He could have done it in order to obtain plausible deniability for what it was he actually plans to do. I didn't sense this from him, but it's still not beyond the realm of possibility," she said. "Look, *nobody* knows what the things were, but it's as viable a theory as any other. And you're sidestepping the question again! Are you in love with this guy, Renee? Because you know as well as I do what that particular emotion can do to someone's objectivity."

"Colin is a very dear person. And I owe him my loyalty. Hell, we all do. He — "

The Orion woman made a dismissive sound. "I told them that their estimations of your relationship with Colin were mistaken, but..." she drew a deep breath, and plowed on; "I try not to intrude on people's private feelings. I think, in this case, that maybe I should have."

Renee stood up to directly face her erstwhile first officer, setting Jynx down gently on the couch. "What my relationship with Colin is or is not has absolutely no bearing on *anything*. Is that *objective* enough for you?" the words came out harsher than she'd meant them to, laced with emotions that were difficult to deny. A cold, sharp sliver of pain lanced through Ingram's head, as though she'd somehow been hit in the brain with a snowball, and she winced.

Josi wasn't wholly wrong in misinterpreting the wince and the strident tone of voice for anger. She held up both hands palm-outward and took a half-step back. "I'm *asking* because I

thought you should know that he *is* in love with you, and I know..." she sighed, "I know how hard that particular state of being's been on you in the past, that's all. Look, I think we could both use a drink." Felingaili turned to go to the kitchen. When she passed Renee's sparrow's cage, the bird went wild, bashing itself against the wires and squealing.

"Hey," Renee crooned at the sparrow, reaching up to the shelf above the agitated bird and taking down a little crystal goblet full of dried mealworms. Selecting one, she clipped the door to the little bird's cage open and offered it to him while whistling a series of notes. The sparrow timidly peeked out of his cage.

The new living conditions must be spooking him, Renee thought, knowing that the creature was neither timid nor stupid. Apparently having determined that attack was not imminent, he hopped onto Renee's fingers, chewing at the mealworm. He finished the dried treat, whistled the same series of notes back to her, and settled down to take a pretend dust-bath in the hollow of her hand. She'd have to reiterate to Josi that she preferred the birds be given their freedom while in the townhome.

"What would you like to drink?" Josi called. The sound of the Orion woman's voice spooked Ingram's sparrow, who squealed again and leaped from Renee's hand, chittering nervously as he flew downstairs. The deep, soothing tones of a Vulcan ring-necked dove followed. The tiny passerine often slept nestled into the thick opaline-golden neck feathers of the six-pound purple-black avian.

Renee shook her head after Hey Hey as she considered Josi's question. Her friends seemed to be completely out of sorts tonight. She opened her mouth to reply and nearly jumped out of her skin when the Tri'avilla let out an agonized scream.

Renee and Josi both rushed to the parrot's rescue, but she was perfectly fine, sitting in a hollow of overstuffed chintz preening herself happily. Ingram blinked at Felingaili blankly, her heart hammering in her chest. Josi shook her head in wide-eyed innocence, and once more held up her hands palm outward.

"I do *not* know whatever gets into that creature's mind," she averred. "Could you imagine forgetting to take it out of the room while you made love?"

Renee picked up the Tri'avilla to take her downstairs to her night cage, wondering in tandem where Jynx had come by such a horrific sound and why Josi had chosen to plague her with that particular image. She buried her face in Jynx's feathers and muttered endearments as she walked downstairs and into the dim room where the bird's cage was kept. Avians could be odd things — as could part-Orions; Josi had a couple of peccadilloes that might have culminated in her inadvertently teaching Jynx how to scream.

When Ingram finally turned from Jynx's cage toward the door, she jumped as hard as she'd jumped when Jynx had screamed. A large form stood in the doorway. The light from the hallway picked out copper highlights from its hair.

“Colin!” Renee gasped, and like any stupid bird, followed her instincts. She had approached him closely enough to take his hands into her own before she felt the chill seep through her — a chill not unlike what she’d felt after stumbling through the Guardian into a subterranean lake on Minara Prime.

You need to do what I tell you now, Renee. I’ll give you everything you need to do it, but you need to do it to save your friends, the Federation, everything you love.

Something in one of those sentences was wrong, as wrong as a Tri’avilla singing off-key. The cold was complete now, like an icy hand gripping her brain.

You need to kill me, Renee. You need to kill me before I kill you.

“Colin...” Ingram gagged at the sensation that occurred when she opened her mouth, like a hand shoving snow into her throat. “Not...Colin!” she tried to break away from his grip, cold as the clasp of a corpse, and as implacable.

In the cages behind Renee, her lovebird chirped in fear and Jynx danced with agitation, screaming. In reply, Colin opened his mouth and screamed, too — a woman’s agonized scream. Knotting his fingers brutally into Renee’s recently regenerated long hair, he lowered his head and sought her mouth with his own. She twisted violently in his arms, attempting to slam the top of her skull into his jaw and, simultaneously, kick him.

Colin's grip loosened somewhat, and she tore away. Some of the painful cold that numbed her mind subsided.

Her teeth chattered. "Never...calls me...Renee," she hissed, backing away, looking for a weapon. It was as though she'd come to take Jynx out of her cage and found a Komodo dragon nestled in her arms instead. She opened the top drawer of the antique desk next to Jynx's cage, feeling for the phaser she always kept there.

It was gone.

Not-Colin lunged at her.

He knocked her down and pinned her to the floor. Colin's full weight falling on top of her so ruthlessly should have stunned her, and almost certainly broken bones, but it didn't, another sign that she was dealing with some other, lighter being. This gave Ingram hope. Thrusting a leg between the thing's thighs, she brought her right knee up toward her chin with all her strength but received nothing more gratifying than snarl for her effort. Her knee twinged as though she'd gouged it on stone.

Rather than curling into a mewling ball, as she imagined Colin certainly would if she'd done such a thing to him, the creature on top of her laughed and punched her briskly in the face twice, making the dim world spin and her head ring. There were a number of humanoid species whose sensitive reproductive organs weren't directly between their legs. Though Renee's brain was currently too sluggish to call them to mind,

she did imagine that this might be one of them, or something like them.

Nevertheless, that icy telepathic grip was gone for the moment. "*Josi!*" Renee screamed.

The thing on top of her let loose with another manic laugh, then buried its face in her neck and bit her throat, thrusting its own thighs hard between hers before she could kick it again. "*Josi isn't here!*" it hissed; it didn't try to imitate so much as Colin's voice, much less his telepathic signature, as it breathed into her ear; "*You'll soon realize that some things are better done without.*"

This time, fire accompanied the ice that tried to invade Renee's mind. She lifted her leg and kicked down, this time, into the small of the thing's back, but the motion had little force. She received another punch for her trouble, which she attempted, first, to deflect with her arms, and then return. She wished desperately for an edged weapon. Along with the painful numbness stealing over her mind, a sound like a transporter beam started somewhere in her head.

The invader leaped up and ran for the hallway. Ingram heard the front door slam open, and the sweet air of the Smoky Mountains in June suffused the struggle-stuffy room. She moaned.

"Captain Ingram?" A voice floated down the stairs. So, she hadn't imagined the transporter. Renee sat up and moaned

again; she'd pulled muscles fighting whatever it was that had accosted her. She could feel blood seeping down her neck from the bite the thing had given her — no love bite, that. She only hoped that what had given it was not truly a Gila monster. Her face was hot and beginning to swell from the blows she'd received.

"Here!" she cried weakly. Steps resounded noisily down the carpeted stairs. They dashed into the room and turned on the light.

"I was attacked," she told the two men — one an ensign and another with no uniform. Both sported weapons, and she shivered, hoping this wasn't somehow stage two of the attack.

"*Colin!*" Jynx cried from her cage, in Renee's own voice; "not Colin."

The men looked at one another in dread. The uniformed one flipped open his communicator; "Ensign Kanchumurthi to General T'Strali."

Renee sat up the rest of the way, then rubbed at her eyes. *Ensign Kanchumurthi?* She reopened her eyes and blinked up at him. It was as though something in either the air before her, or something in her mind, kept her from recognizing the man's face, even though she distinctly recognized his voice. She let her face fall into her hands with a moan.

"Go ahead, Ensign," the judge advocate's crisp voice replied.

“General, Captain Ingram is safe, but she’s been attacked. It...it may have been Colin.”

“*What?*” the reply was not made by the Vulcan; the voice was male, tinny with distance. Renee swallowed hard and shuddered.

“*Don’t* do that, Colin, stay where you are; the force field can incapacitate you. Ensign, when did this attack take place?”

The men looked back at Renee.

“The thing...it ran out the door just as you beamed in.” She blinked, raising one hand to her torn neck and wincing. “Why...why are you here?”

“She said that whatever attacked her ran out just as we got here.”

“Hold one moment, Ensign Kanchumurthi. Do not, for any reason, leave that spot; am I clear?” the judge advocate general replied.

“Clear, General. But Captain Ingram’s hurt, she needs medical care.”

“I just heard her speak. I assume she is conscious?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Then do as I bid.”

Renee could actually hear the holding-pattern buzz of the communicator in the young man's hand. She shook her head hard, then wished she hadn't. Her hearing was as strangely enhanced as her vision seemed to be lessened. She reached up tentatively to explore the extent of the bite on her neck.

Kanchumurthi pulled one of the cleaning towels from a shelf near Ingram's birdcages, knelt down next to her, and handed it to her. "Is there anything else I can get you right now, Captain?"

"I... I don't think so, Ensign. But thank you."

Renee's head had begun to spin nauseatingly by the time T'Strali reopened the comm channel. "Is Ms. Ingram stable, Ensign? I wish to talk to her."

Kanchumurthi handed Renee the communicator. "Ingram here, Judge Advocate."

"Renee, I need you to —"

"I need to see Doctor Doliv. Advocate," Ingram interrupted. "How long have you been with Colin?"

"For the past half hour. Renee, did this person attack you immediately as you beamed into your home?"

"No. No...it...whatever it is, it's some kind of shape shifter and was first pretending to be Josi. I think it was whatever the things are that were attacking Terra earlier. They must be scattered among the population somehow." Ingram could still

hear Colin speaking in the background, but the judge advocate general must be walking out of earshot, because the sound of his voice was receding.

The JAG sighed, never a good sign in a Vulcan. "I sent Ensign Kanchumurthi and Yeoman Lashvilli there to see if you were...Renee, an intruder has entered the Federation Complex Hospital on the Champs Elysees and taken John Harriman hostage. Whether through space or time, we are unable to verify; the method of the intruder's ingress and egress is altogether unknown. And this intruder appeared as *yourself*?"

Chapter Seventeen

What had probably saved Josi, Sphiph had explained to Renee, were the woman's own pheromones. Though these were magnitudes less potent than they might have been due to the medications Josi took in order to suppress them while aboard ship, they still possessed the same qualities; to attract a mate by enhancing apparent sexual appeal, and to drive away an attacker by simulating the aura of death.

The Orion woman was in regeneration tank on full life-support functions, under the care of Doliv and Uta Morell, who had scarcely risen from the treatment of her own injuries. The Starfleet field physician gave Renee a copy of the debriefing she'd prepared for T'Strali, who was due to arrive at any time. That debriefing was as simple as it was alarming.

Morell had been assessing the reflexes of the recently awakened starship captain in the company of Josi Felingaili, who had taken the afternoon off from pet-sitting in order to greet her now-conscious CO. This was a function that Ingram would have fulfilled herself, had she known that John was awake, and had she not been banned from entering that part of the Federation Complex where Colin was being kept, which directly abutted the hospital.

Suddenly, according to Morell's report, *Renee* had materialized next to John's bed. The written affidavit swore that there had been no transporter effect accompanying her

appearance. William had been struck speechless, but the guards assigned to Captain Harriman hadn't been. They had moved forward, demanding to know Ingram's intentions. The first thing Uta had noticed was that this doppelganger of Renee had looked haggard, but she suspected that what the security guards had been responding to was almost certainly the belt full of phased and concussive weapons she sported.

She had wasted no time in pulling one of those weapons from the belt and turning it on the person nearest herself — Uta Morell. By the time Uta had awakened, (from emergency surgery; the weapon the person impersonating Renee had used was some sort of disruptor device) the hospital had been locked down by Starfleet security.

The guards who had been assigned to the hospital room had not been so lucky as Morell. They were dead, Josi was lingering at the brink of death, and Renee's intrusive doppelganger had disappeared, taking John Harriman with her. The phase-altered disruptor signatures her weaponry had burned into the wall's rooms and furniture were unknown to the Federation, and the DNA traces she had left behind had matched Renee's own by a factor of no more than fifty percent, for all that she had looked, to Morell's eyes, exactly like the woman who'd been XO of the *Enterprise* B for nearly four years.

And T'Strali had been trying to contact Renee Ingram for hours, but something had impeded that contact, making it seem as though Renee was nowhere on the planet. The Vulcan JAG

had finally sent Kanchumurthi and Lashvilli to see if Ingram's house held any clues as to her disappearance.

There was nothing Renee could do to either help or comfort Josi, whom she blamed herself for having put into a position that had gotten her severely injured. According to T'Strali, who had taken Renee's debriefing about what had transpired in her townhome by communicator, the remainder of the *Enterprise*'s crew, down to the last yeoman and the lowliest ensign, were being sequestered away from Terra, under stringent guard.

Ingram had already submitted meekly to the exceptionally unpleasant and, she was convinced, severely over-reactive ministrations of Sphiph Doliv, and had taken up watch again near Josi's tank, trying vainly to eat a sandwich while rereading Morell's terse affidavit. The Saroming physician's staff bustled around the hospital floor that had been assigned to them, carrying the cages which were home to Renee's birds. It wouldn't be terribly odd for Sphiph to have birds in his hospital suites. For many years, Doliv had been the acting director of the Federation Medical Institute on Denobula Triaxa, and he utilized their methodologies extensively; The Champs Elysees hospital offices he'd appropriated were apurr and atwitter well before her birds took up residence.

"Just don't feed them to anything," Renee was saying listlessly to the slender little physician, when T'Strali strode into the room.

“I would never do that to these lovely creatures,” Doliv cooed in reply; Renee’s Vulcan Ring neck cooed back. The elderly Saroming reached through Jynx’s cage to stroke her calico plumage. She bit at his hand smartly, her beak coming together with a bladelike snap. Sphiph jumped back hurriedly and flushed aqua-green and powder blue in quick succession. Renee tried to work up enough energy to make a Doctor Doolittle joke, but T’Strali spoke up before she could manage it:

“Someone is demanding rather earnestly to see you, Renee,” the Vulcan Judge Advocate said shortly. “I think you had better come before he tries to push himself bodily through the force field.” Without waiting for a reply, the JAG turned on her heel.

“Can’t you just let him go?” Renee set down her mostly uneaten sandwich. It appeared to contain the chewy, salty, preserved meat of some animal whose myoglobin contained copper, some sort of cichlid food paste as a condiment, and pond weed instead of lettuce, all the same lovely shade of off-green that Renee imagined she was herself at the moment. Saroming cuisine was not known as one of the great gustatory delights of the alpha quadrant. She hurried as well as she was able after the Vulcan woman; “You were *with* him when the thing impersonating him attacked me, and when the thing impersonating me — ”

“No, we *cannot* let him go.” T’Strali stopped and turned to face Renee. “You must trust me on this, it is very important that he remain as he is for the time being.”

“I thought you were on my side,” Renee snapped acidly. The judge advocate turned and strode on.

Colin’s brig was in the same complex as the hospital and the Palais, probably because that complex was the least damaged of any in the area. He was striding around it like a large cat in a small cage when the two women entered.

“Riana! Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Are you all right?”

He shook the question off. “What happened?”

She shrugged. “I was attacked.”

Colin flushed. “Were you *hurt*?”

Renee considered the question seriously. T’Strali broke in before she had a chance to respond.

“From what I understand, Colin, the creature in question attempted to rape Ms. Ingram and, concurrently, to convince her to murder you. How much of this did you know?”

Colin closed his eyes; his face went from flushed to livid, and he clenched and unclenched his hands spasmodically. When he reopened his eyes, Renee recoiled from the hatred in them, directed at the judge advocate general.

“You caused this to happen, and I swear, the minute you let me out of here, I’ll kill every last one of you!”

“Colin, what are you —”

He turned his vivid gaze of hate on Renee, and she recoiled again, dazzled by the power of it. This was no stumbling of a translator. Above his cell, one of the dampers popped out with the sound of a plate-glass window shattering, and Renee flinched. Alarms began to sound throughout the complex.

“Don’t forget what I’ve said,” he spat icily, and turned his back on both of them.

Chapter Eighteen

Renee stayed in Doliv's main consultation room that night. Not that she had any choice; the overprotective Saroming physician simply refused to let her out. She submitted to the chemical tests that allowed him to formulate an analgesic sedative for her that would work, and she slept deeply, but upon awakening she felt, again, as though her heart was being dug for in her chest by a dagger.

She hadn't had an opportunity to be with Colin for nearly two months now — actually *be* with him, to touch his mind. This entire experience had taught her something she'd heard telepaths mention. She'd never had any reason to give credence to it before, but to touch the mind of another being was a more intimate act than anything a non-telepath could imagine. Ingram was beginning to wonder if what she'd experienced from Colin's mind on his planet had been real, or if it was all...illusion.

She touched the hard knots of scar tissue on her body. These were *not* an illusion. He'd had access, precarious though it was, to the Vian matrix for five years. He might have escaped to some other world long before — except that such a possibility had never occurred to him, until he'd accessed the knowledge in Renee's mind.

Had the Guardian heard her plea only to send her to a deranged madman whom the vagaries of coincidence had trapped? Of course, that was possible, but she didn't believe it

likely; If escape to another continuum in order to attempt to control or ravage it had been his intent, why would he have needed *her*, when after all the information her brain contained had given him all that he needed — the knowledge of other worlds, which before had been beyond his comprehension?

Colin could then have simply left her corpse on Minara Prime, but he hadn't. He had gone through exquisite, very nearly lethal, agony to heal her; The keloids on her body were proof of that, even had she not known what had happened that night on Minara Prime. Colin had shared his memories of it with her himself.

And why are all the arguments for or against Colin's innocence circular in nature?

Riana, she thought, closing her eyes, trying to reach some kind of memory of the Colin she knew through his name for her. Nothing. She jumped when Doliv padded in quietly. It was only then that she realized that she was weeping. She hated to cry, but had no more control over it, sometimes, than she had over hiccups.

“Renee, are those hurting you? Can I *please* remove those scars for you? It won't take two hours.”

She supposed that, really, she couldn't continue to treasure things that would never do more than limit her physical activity and possibly shorten her life. Added to which, they and what underlay them were appalling. According to Federation doctors,

her entire right arm and lower leg had been neatly resected and even more neatly ligatured by a process resembling old-fashioned laser surgery. She nodded and rubbed at her eyes, but included a caveat; “As long as you don’t make me feel as terrible as you made me feel last night, sure, but otherwise I’ll keep them, thanks.”

Doliv chuckled shortly, a soft purring sound, and vanished into the next room to program one of the surgical biobeds for the dispersal of heavy keloids.

One of the Guardian Alpha scientists had taken the podium by the time Renee arrived for the day’s inquiry session. No one said a word as she took her seat late.

“Please continue, Dr. Duquesne,” T’Strali prompted. The scientist looked back down at his ‘padd, manipulating or calling up some data on the screen before resuming what he was saying. Halsey’s expression was thunderous. Renee wondered what she’d missed. She also wished that she could stop thinking and worrying about Colin; it had become continuous, like a reflex or an annoying tic. She hadn’t missed the telepathic dampers at the building entrance, or the guards everywhere.

“There is no...” Duquesne paused, then quit fiddling with his ‘padd to look up directly at Halsey; “No data obtained through study or use of the Guardian indicates that the Guardian responds to any other stimulus than the entreaty of the individual confronting it, although it is true that an entreaty does not have

to be entirely verbalized for the Guardian to understand what is wanted.”

“And yet Ms. Ingram brought a mentally unstable, powerfully telepathic alien back *through* it.” Halsey wasn’t pacing today. Renee wondered why.

The scientist swallowed. “I...it cannot be surmised exactly what might occur once an individual reaches the destination that the Guardian provides in response to a request. All that is currently known is that there has to be some sort of...” the elderly man frowned, and his soft face crumpled into a thousand delicate, tissue-like lines; “*connectivity* between the person making a request of the Guardian, and the place to which the Guardian opens a doorway. For years we assumed that this connection must be racial or temporal, but now we realize that it is not. It’s both more complex and simpler than that.”

Renee continued to watch Halsey through the corner of her eye, and he continued to ignore her. “The experiences of Kirk and his crew with the Guardian made clear that this powerful space-time matrix is capable of altering history — ”

“No, Fleet Admiral, I’m sorry. It is the actions or inactions of the individual or individuals *using* the Guardian which are capable of altering history. It is surmised that the person who contacted President Archer about the Xindi, and perhaps inadvisably revealed more to him about the future than he should have done, did so using the Guardian, and thereby — ”

“And can this alteration occur in the opposite manner?” Halsey interrupted. His voice had gone silky; he was, Renee thought, about to make some major point.

Duquesne stared blankly at the fleet admiral, who grimaced, or attempted to smile. With Halsey, it could be difficult to tell one from the other. “I’m sorry Doctor, what I mean is this; if an individual who goes through the Guardian is capable of altering history, then is the Guardian, itself an instrument of space-time, which *is* history, capable of altering an individual who passes through it? Is this, at the very least, *possible*?”

The scientist shook his head slowly, then shrugged. “*Possible*, Fleet Admiral. Where the Guardian is concerned, anything might be possible.”

Yet another circular argument. Nonetheless, a horrid chill swept through Renee, not terribly unlike the one she’d felt last night in the arms of...

Colin? she asked herself bluntly; was that Colin somehow and I’m just refusing to admit it because —

But then why, she argued with herself, would he have been trying to convince me to kill him?

Because some part of him still cares for me. He had told her to kill him...before he killed her.

It all made just too much horrible sense suddenly. Perhaps *help us!* had been too broad an entreaty for the Guardian to tie in

with accurately. At precisely what point had she also requested to care about Colin so deeply? *No, Renee, be honest*, she said to herself coldly:

To fall in love with him. She wasn't the sort of person to be drawn into thoughtless infatuations. But if, somehow, a psionic matrix could change the basic personality of an individual...

"Ms. Ingram?" T'Strali was saying gently. "Are you all right?"

Renee nodded silently, not looking up.

"You're very pale. Would you prefer I terminate today's inquiry and call medical?"

Renee shook her head wordlessly.

"Would you please take the stand, in that case?"

Renee blinked at the Vulcan momentarily. It took her a few seconds to realize that this was the second time that T'Strali had requested that from her. "Of course," she replied hoarsely, and dragged herself to the podium like an old woman.

"Ms. Ingram, kindly tell this Board of Inquiry exactly what occurred after you returned home at twenty-one hundred hours last night." Halsey directed the question. T'Strali had turned away, and was carrying on a conversation in Standard Sign with the young male Cairn telepath on her right, whom Renee presumed must be deaf, which was not an unusual state of

affairs in a telepathic species that was also mute, as the Cairn were.

As Colin himself should have been.

Halsey glared at them, and their hand-movements dwindled. "Would you like me to repeat the question I've just put to Ms. Ingram?" the fleet admiral inquired icily. The Cairn youth flushed and rose hurriedly, leaving the room.

"I was at least peripherally present during the occurrence, Fleet Admiral, I believe I understand your question's gist," T'Strali replied regally. "Please answer the question, Ms. Ingram."

Renee drew a deep breath and began to tell the board and jurists what had taken place in her townhome the night before.

Halsey looked away from Renee, as though bored. She could swear that he was cleaning his fingernails. T'Strali observed his behavior, as was proper for a Vulcan, emotionlessly. Ingram ignored them both and plowed on.

"As my memory-bird's behavior seemed to me an impedance to further conversation, I took her downstairs to her cage." Renee decided to refrain from mentioning the behavior of her sparrow, though in retrospect, the behavior of her birds had been a warning. "When I turned to leave the room after putting her away, someone...*something* was blocking the doorway. This was the thing that had appeared to me as Josi just moments earlier."

“And how can you be certain of that?” Halsey said dismissively.

“I thought it was easily understood that Commander Felingaili was unconscious in a regeneration tank during the time of this occurrence, because *something* that definitely wasn’t me accosted her yesterday afternoon, just as *something* that wasn’t Josi accosted me last night. And it was something that *must* have had a hell of a lot more freedom than Colin does, in order to — ”

“Fleet Admiral, kindly restrain yourself from interrogating the witness from this point forward, until she has finished her account. And I would caution *you*, Ms. Ingram, to continue telling us what occurred at your townhome without including unwarranted theories,” the JAG interjected coldly. Physical evidence had acquitted Renee Ingram from a charge of murder; only this particular inquest session might acquit her of complicity.

Renee thought hard before continuing. “The creature at this time presented itself as Colin. It accosted me and attempted to implant the telepathic idea in my mind that I needed to murder Colin.” She shook her head slightly, feeling sickened by the continuing circular arguments and commentary she found herself making, but continued doggedly.

“I fought against it as well as I was able, but it inflicted psychic pain on me in the form of numbing cold, and also attempted to injure me physically. My resistance wasn’t as

effective as it might have been. The creature ceased its attack and fled through my downstairs front door, as soon as it became aware that other people had just..." Renee stumbled to a verbal halt, dumbstruck.

"Ms. Ingram?" T'Strali prompted. Renee shook her head and went on.

"I'm sorry, General. The men you sent to check on my well-being after it was known that the person ostensibly caring for my birds was not Lieutenant Voss...those men beamed in *upstairs*. My secondary-source emergency pad is in my bedroom, upstairs. The one in the study must have been precluded from working for some reason. As I said, the creature fled by the front door when it realized others were on the premises. That's the extent of what took place at my home here last night. Fleet Admiral Halsey," she added suddenly, "could you please bring me a glass of water?"

The request obviously took the fleet admiral aback, but he could hardly refuse, though all his movements were slow, as if he hoped to prolong the process.

"Thank you very much, sir," Renee said when he handed her the glass, but she didn't drink.

"Did you wish to cross-examine the witness now, Fleet Admiral?" T'Strali inquired blandly.

"I do indeed, General," he hissed. "First, I want to know what she did immediately after the attack."

“I went to the hospital and was treated for injuries sustained.”

“And then?”

“Colin requested to see me. The judge advocate went with me.”

“Why?”

Renee frowned. “I...”

“Could you *please* share with Ms. Ingram the conclusions you’ve shared with this Board, Judge Advocate General T’Strali? She’s apparently unaware of everything that transpired last night.” Halsey still stood in front of Renee, arms folded, but he refrained from his usual theatrical pacing — those days, it seemed, were over.

T’Strali stood up from behind the JAG’s raised desk and came to stand in front of Renee as well.

“Ms. Ingram, certain of the markers in the room from which John Harriman was taken match subatomic structural phase-markers present in Colin himself — ”

“*No.*” Renee shook her head vigorously; she felt as if her heart was being slowly chiseled away, and a stone set in its place. “You *can’t* implicate Colin in this mess just because somebody from the space-time continuum where he was created might have been after him!”

“Ms. Ingram,” General T’Strali soothed, “I would not have been with Colin during the time of your attack except to interrogate him regarding these issues. I would not have allowed you access to him alone; none of us know exactly what telepathic or telekinetic capacities exist in this being, or what he is fully capable of.”

Almighty stars — Colin could walk through walls! Ingram flushed, not certain if she was appalled by that fact or by T’Strali reminding her about it. “How can a man be in two places at one time?” she begged. Fleet Admiral Halsey snorted.

“Numerous accounts of false psychopropagation by our enemies were recounted by those who were attacked and subsequently regained sanity.” The tone of Halsey’s interruption projected triumph. T’Strali did not gainsay the fleet admiral.

“But the duplicates in that case were *phantoms...*” Renee’s voice broke on the word, and she bit back the remainder of her plea — because there was nothing more she could do, now. The one certain way to pick a phantom out from a real person was that it did not react normally to outside stimuli, such as vicious kicks to sensitive areas. This had been something her unaffected crew had experienced while fighting the psionic takeover of the *Enterprise*. It was the hallucinogenic precursor, she believed, to psionic takeover of the humanoid mind. She’d noted as much in the ship’s official log personally, while waiting for John Harriman to come out of surgery what was, seemingly, eons ago.

And John...*where was John Harriman?* Why had he been taken?

The noise in the room reached levels irritating to even human ears as council members, jurists, psionic and medical board members, and observers argued the point between themselves. The judge advocate general returned to the main table and sounded the beat-up brass bell — rescued from the ruins of Starfleet Academy in San Francisco two months ago, when this inquest had begun — until the room quieted.

“They were indeed phantoms, Ms. Ingram, just as what accosted you last night at your home was a phantom,” Halsey said when the room finally quieted. “Almost certainly, this was a ruse to draw our attentions away from what had just occurred; a dry run to determine the ease of infiltration of the current seat of Starfleet by some method of which we have no knowledge, whose perpetrator contrived to imitate *you*, Ms. Ingram. While some consider what happened to Captain Harriman to be a separate issue, I do *not*. We need to put an end to this, and there is one thing that is certain; the brig in which the creature we’re discussing is kept is in the same complex as the room from which John Harriman was taken. We have no way to know how or where the creature you call *Colin* will manage to call in its reinforcements next.”

“How in the world is the sudden appearance of one individual *reinforcement*?”

Halsey glared across the room at Renee narrowly. “How in the world is unforeseen terror attacks in which Starfleet officials are spirited off to who-knows-where *not* a reinforcement of our enemies’ original tactics? And who’s to say what other tactics they’ll try next, in order to rescue our prisoner? I say send the creature back to where he came from; he can’t be rescued *or* reinforced if he is not here!”

T’Strali added; “Colin threatened the lives of the Board of Inquiry members yesterday evening, Fleet Admiral.”

“Did he do this in your presence, Ms. Ingram?” Halsey’s tone went so soft that Renee had to strain to hear him clearly. She nodded, miserable and speechless.

Halsey was neither miserable nor speechless. “Then the board, its jurists and council, concurs with my opinion that this being must be sent back to the space-time continuum from whence he came before further damage ensues?”

“*No!*” Renee howled again. Halsey gazed at her sympathetically.

T’Strali nodded tightly. “I will convene a vote. Even should the jurists agree with your interpretation of this inquest’s findings, such a potentially lethal decision must be made by supermajority, Fleet Admiral.”

Halsey inclined his head graciously, “Of course, Judge Advocate General.”

T'Strali reached out to sound the bell once more, in order to dismiss the inquest and its onlookers and convene a final vote among the council and its jurists.

“I want to be sent back with him!” Renee cried out, before T'Strali could tap the brass knocker against the bell. The room erupted again, not with murmurs or even conversation, but with shouts. The judge advocate again had to use the high-pitched chime of the bell to help her restore order.

“She *is* mad!” Fleet Admiral Halsey lamented when the room grew quiet; “Poor girl!”

“This session is dismissed. We will reconvene in three hours, Terran time, to announce the findings of the jury and the outcome of the voting process, as well as to give our opinion on Ms. Ingram’s request. Doctor Duquesne, please remain behind; your input is required in this matter.”

Renee spent part of those three hours near Josi’s regeneration tank. According to the status board active above the tank, the Orion woman was doing better. Her hippocampus was redeveloping links to her higher brain centers, a promising sign that this coma would, in fact, end.

“*Tellarites*,” Sphiph Doliv snarled without preamble as he hustled into the surgical suite. He stopped short when he saw Renee. “How is the inquest going?”

She shook her head. “Not well. Halsey’s talking about sending him back to that awful place I brought him here out of.”

“Oh, dear,” the Alpha Centaurian physician sighed. He heaved himself up onto the biobed nearest Josi’s regeneration tank, swinging his feet where they dangled above the floor. His skin flushed the soft pinkish hue that spoke of compassion in his species. “I read what you had to say about that place. It’s hard to believe such a thing might be real. You know,” he added, softly, “when telepaths have a relationship, there are things you have to consider that would never occur to a non- telepath. You can get so lost in each other that you need some kind of agreed-upon outside signal to use in order to return to the living world. And there are different levels of telepathic intimacy; you need to decide before you even start which ones you want — ”

“*Stop! Sphiph, stop!*” Renee had to step back behind Josi’s regeneration tank to keep herself from reaching out and slapping the physician. She wasn’t entirely certain what a Saroming’s response would be to interpersonal physical violence.

“I’m sorry, dear. I just saw a roomful of Deltans, so it was somewhat on my mind. Besides, you never know, you might need the information someday.”

“It’s seeming more and more unlikely all the time, Doctor. I didn’t know you were so keen on torturing your patients.” She turned her back on him and walked into the next room. Jynx hissed at her, while Hey Hey hopped up and down from one perch to the next in his cage, then danced around in a circle, requesting immediate mealworms. Doliv didn’t reply. Ingram left to find herself some lunch that she knew she wouldn’t eat.

She was about as emotionally exhausted as she'd ever been when she returned to the inquiry chamber nearly four hours later. They had started without her. Bitterness welled up to join a thousand other emotions inside her; to accept a jury-panel's ruling without all principals present was more than just unprecedented, it was almost certainly illegal. She didn't even bother walking through the ornate antechamber and into the main room to take her seat, she just leaned against the outside of the half-open inner door, arms crossed and eyes closed, and listened.

T'Strali was speaking: "According to the Guardian scientists, we are most likely to find the correct frequency by replicating, as closely as possible, the circumstances that brought Colin from his space-time continuum to our own."

"So, you think we should allow her to go back with him?" Halsey asked.

"You yourself have argued persuasively that her mind has been under the control of what appears to be a mentally unstable telepathic being. I cannot believe that leaving her with that being for the remainder of her life would be an ethical consideration. However, I believe she must go with us to Guardian Alpha, because as I believe I just stated, the more closely we can replicate the — "

"Fine, fine," Halsey pushed the rest of the Vulcan's statement away. "The sooner this can be done, then, the better. Is it possible to at least transport the alien on a ship other than

the *Enterprise*, so that he has no access to psionically-active Lonsdaleite?"

"That is an eminently logical suggestion. The *Lexington* is of a different class, and I believe they are available in space dock. Alternatively, there are several small, fast transport ships that are available. Shall I make the necessary arrangements?"

"Actually, I think I'll do that, Judge Advocate. No need to trouble yourself; I take full responsibility for the outcome of this mission."

"In that case, I conclude this Board of Inquiry closed, and..."

Renee didn't stay to listen to the formal lines that finalized a Starfleet Inquiry session. She turned and left the antechamber silently. The erstwhile captain of the *Enterprise* doubted anyone had even realized she'd been there.

Chapter Nineteen

“We’re doing this *why*, exactly?”

The badly bruised *Enterprise* had, ostensibly, been given a new captain tasked with taking the starship to Starbase Seven, so its ops systems could be upgraded prior to full post-war refit at McKinley Station. This was standard practice, performed in order to keep refit crews safe and comfortable during the primary and final stages of starship refit. Legitimate paper trails and command links really existed for that order, too, should anybody go looking.

In reality, the *Enterprise* had no new captain, and it was nowhere near Starbase Seven. The CMO was insisting on an explanation.

It had been ten inordinately confusing, boring, and nerve-wracking days, depending on whether you were the officers, the crew, or Demora Sulu, who had been tagged as captain of the *Enterprise* for this escapade. T’Dani had cornered Demora in the situation-room just off the bridge, next to the captain’s ready-room, to inquire why it was that they were following the solar shadow of a star around.

Everyone aboard the *Enterprise* knew where they actually were; it would have been impossible to send out passive sensor probes every fifteen minutes and keep the crew in the dark as to their location, but the ship itself was on transmission blackout.

Nobody had attempted to violate that blackout, which lessened Demora's concerns somewhat. She was not supposed to reveal the purpose of this mission, regardless of the fact that the entire thing gave her an overwhelming sense of *déjà-vu*. Indeed, just before the CMO had come to the door, Sulu, who was using the situation-room for its handy multi-computer display capacity, had entertained the fleeting thought:

Now, watch; T'Dani's going to come in and ask me what we're doing here, exactly. At least, Demora thought wryly, the odd prescience she appeared to be surrounded by had given her a couple of minutes to contemplate what she'd do if that *did* happen.

With a sigh, Sulu motioned T'Dani toward one of the dozen royal-blue, cushioned chairs surrounding the videographic central table, then got up, went to the room's replicator panel, considered asking for a bracing glass of plummy Chateau Picard '93, then reconsidered and announced; "Two genmai-cha, hot, no caffeine."

Demora Sulu understood at last what the burden of command was; That inability to confide every concern, to ask for advice, to show worry that might ruin morale or, potentially, doom a mission or even the lives of everyone aboard. But on every starship, there was always a small, select group of people the captain chose to help bear that burden. On the *Enterprise* B, T'Dani was one of those people. Demora was another. Josi was, too, but she was still on Earth, recuperating from her near brush with death.

Demora carefully balanced both cups back to the table. If either John or Renee would have confided concerns to herself or T'Dani, then certainly there couldn't be any harm, Demora reasoned, in unburdening to T'Dani herself. The idea of disclosing her unease about this mission to someone was a pleasure easily equivalent to the pleasure of eating when hungry. Sulu hadn't realized her own value to either Harriman or Ingram in this respect before, but she'd never forget it again. She sighed luxuriantly, and began:

"I was contacted by someone apparently very high-ranking in the Federation two weeks ago, by irregular channels and the use of cryptic codes. Forged documentation was provided for the ship and its mission that had nothing whatsoever to do with what we're doing here now."

"And that would be?" the part-Vulcan asked. She took a sip of her tea, and leaned closer to Demora after she'd put it down. Sulu mirrored her action.

"The latest rumor is that all of this psionic mind-control was done by Talosians. Preliminary analysis of the wreckage on Terra suggested that one or more of the things might still be alive on Earth, so a task force was assembled to look for them. The contact told me that the creatures realized they were being hunted, and at least one of them took on a form the people hunting them weren't able to ferret out. It's suspected now that it might be hiding in plain sight, perhaps even among the inquest board. The task force hunting the thing wants to keep the alien

believing that it's hidden for as long as possible. They'd like to try to capture this one rather than kill it, for questioning."

"Which member of the Inquiry Board do they imagine — "

Demora cut off T'Dani's question with a wave of her hand. "That's the problem, nobody's sure. And so, the entire board is coming *here*."

T'Dani blinked. "To Tres Two? *Why*?"

Demora shrugged and sat back, nursing the bracingly savory-bitter tea. "I don't think the contact who sent us out here was altogether certain. If he was, he didn't say. All I know is that this is where our part in this mess started, and that we're here specifically to protect Renee, no matter what. She's apparently been kept totally in the dark about the Federation's suspicions."

"Why would they do that?" T'Dani, Vulcan physiology notwithstanding, was visibly upset. The *Enterprise*'s CMO was, in fact, one of the most demonstrative people Demora had ever met.

Demora pursed her lips and set down her cup. She hadn't liked this part one bit and had actually cursed at the Federation operative who'd given her the news. "They told me that they needed the influence of..." she paused and picked her cup back up, cradling it, pleased by its warmth against her hands. "T'Dani, did you get the feeling that Renee is kind of enthralled by Colin?"

The CMO frowned. “You aren’t going to try to convince me that *Colin* is a Talosian?”

“I don’t know. Nobody’s sure. I was just in here reviewing all the studies and conclusions made during the inquest; there *is* a percentage of his genetic structure that’s unidentifiable. Those eyes of his! But I also checked all logs relevant to Talosians, and they don’t have eyes like his, either.”

T’Dani’s turn to sigh. “If he is, he knows a very great deal about his own particular, unusual chromosomal and physiological functions. And am I mistaken, or aren’t those files you’ve been in here studying restricted?”

Demora sat back in her chair and shrugged. “Halsey himself said that Colin had taken knowledge from the captain’s mind, and she could do *your* job. And look at this.” She manipulated the computer controls at the station she was sitting at. The station across from her winked to life, and T’Dani gazed down at it. The part-Vulcan woman’s mouth fell open in shock.

“We’ve got clandestine authorization?”

“Completely. Isn’t that what I’ve been saying? So now you see how it was I was looking at the restricted Pike files.”

Corrigan looked back up at Sulu. “Renee doesn’t have a detailed representation of human DNA stored in her memory, Demora. She’s a sentient being, not a...” T’Dani motioned at the table, “computer. What Colin took from her mind was largely sociological and cultural. What you’re referring to is some kind

of eidetic knowledge of the variation in patterns of deoxyribonucleic acid structures. Colin's an extremely unique person, but aside from the crystal that's part of him, and roughly one one-thousandth of his genetic makeup, known markers predominate in him."

"That doesn't mean *he* doesn't have the kind of memory you're referring to. And look at this," Demora manipulated the table settings again, bringing up one of the inquest reports, "the guy can *walk through walls*. He's telekinetic as...as...well, I don't know *what*! Telemorphic, maybe? Maybe he telepathically influenced the equipment. Or walked into the laboratory and manipulated it directly."

"What, the gel electrophoresis media? We used antiquated technology because of its arcane nature for this very reason. Even assuming he has extremely refined telekinetic abilities," the CMO glanced at the information on the table below her, and lifted a brow; "or I should say, just because he *does* have extremely refined telekinetic ability, he would still have had to know what the patterns of DNA look like in that context, and also possess the ability to influence or replicate chromosomal patterns in the media, which would be an unlikely skill at best.

"Doctor Doliv was the only one the Council knew of who had any idea how to use such ancient methodology as gel electrophoresis — you know how passionate he is about the arcane." Both Renee and T'Dani had asked the enthusiastic little Alpha Centaurian to teach them the method, and he'd eagerly complied. T'Dani drained her mug and set it down

carefully. “Colin has a unique ability to meld with others — anybody, of any sentient species — without causing them pain. According to the inquiry documents I’ve read, that was the red flag that made Halsey put him under arrest.”

“No, you’re wrong about that. My contact told me they put him under arrest because he either *was* the enemy, or because the enemy would try to destroy him, given the chance. Also, what I was trying to tell you before; Renee apparently has feelings for the guy. They’re using the force of how upset she is about the way they’re treating Colin, and the fact that they won’t let her near him, as a shield.”

That information brought an actual glower from the part-Vulcan woman, but she made no comment. Demora finished her own tea and went on:

“I guess that somehow psions have trouble maintaining illusions when they’re subject to the powerful emotions of others — anger, love, whatever. I understand they’re trying to flush out the creature using Renee’s emotions. My contact didn’t say whether they’ve been successful or not. *Our* job is to protect Renee; that’s what we’re doing here.”

“While *their* job is to deceive Renee in order to use her emotions,” T’Dani’s lips screwed up into a bad-tempered moue. Her denim-blue eyes flashed anger, but her tone remained conversational; “Unless people are in actual physical contact, emotions mask telepathic communication. At the very least, they make it difficult, which makes empathy a more potent

psionic force than telepathy in general. It sounds almost like our enemies are *running* Starfleet's board of inquiry, with that kind of quasi-ethical subterfuge going on. They even gave *us* different excuses why Colin had been put under such heavy guard.”

“Running the board? You think it might be T'Strali or Halsey?”

T'Dani shrugged. “I have no information that would let me confirm or refute anything, except that Colin's a powerful telepath, and considering the actions he undertook while aboard the *Enterprise*, it seems unlikely in the extreme that he's in league with our telepathic tormentors. Also, it may be preferable to keep Renee's feelings for anyone in particular to ourselves for the time being. I know that if I was...” the CMO grimaced, “*enthralled* by someone, I wouldn't want it made common knowledge.”

Chapter Twenty

Renee had been watching Colin sleep for nearly fifteen minutes when he opened his eyes. She drew a breath to say something — he had supposedly been drugged to sleep earlier, to facilitate his transport to Guardian Alpha. But there was no drowsiness in his eyes. He put a finger to his lips to urge Renee not to speak.

Do you know how to do this?

The motions of his hands were sideways, but he signed slowly, and Renee caught the gist just fine, if not the veracity of any emotion expressed in it. Lack of deep emotional expression was the great failing of sign language. She nodded.

Is there anyone else nearby?

A guard, outside.

Colin attempted to look around from his supine position. Renee knew that he had limited vision from the brig of anything but the brig; They made them that way on purpose, although this wasn't actually a brig cell, it was a cargo-hold cell. He didn't sit up.

I need to tell you what's going on before we beam down to the planet.

Renee drew a deep, shuddering breath almost against her own volition; a sense of relief so sharp that it was painful drove it out of her lungs again. *Who taught you to do that?*

Colin grinned, and she wanted to kiss him. The same person who taught me to fly a shuttlecraft.

What...?

The vast majority of the inquest was a ruse. I wasn't really in detention. There are a number of psionic creatures still at large, and Section 31's been trying to capture any on Terra. They did manage to corner two, but those two self-immolated somehow. We don't have a lot of time, so let me explain.

There's an illusion-producing telepath aboard this ship somewhere, and we want to try to get it to beam to the planet with us, once we have some idea of who among the board members it actually is. At the very least, we had to get it someplace where it couldn't hurt a lot of people, but if it beams down with us, it'll probably try to use the Guardian once we get there. I'm going to try to damper it, but it doesn't seem like dampers work very well on it — the brains of these things are different, somehow.

Why didn't anyone tell me this? I thought... Renee dropped her hands quietly into her lap and shook her head.

We needed your strong emotions. They seem to act as a better damper on whatever this thing is than my dampers do. I'm genuinely sorry, but we tried to make you as angry and sad

and confused as we could. We were trying to flush the last creature out on Terra. But after what happened to you and Josi and Harriman...

Colin shook his head, sorrow darkening his jewel-like eyes. We can't wait any longer to tease out exactly who the creature's pretending to be, or even whether there are others on Terra in league with it. I think this thing becomes used to, or maybe even likes, the same strong emotions over time. We need a new set of emotions, and making you miserable is making me miserable.

Renee drew another shuddering breath. You said it yourself; this job is dangerous. Why isn't a Section 31 operative doing this? You shouldn't have to be exposed —

He held up one hand, palm-out, to ask her to stop signing. Sphiph is a Section 31 operative. That's why he came with us, or didn't you find his presence odd? Riana, don't think I didn't know what I might be getting into from the moment I pulled you out of the water. I've faced danger all my life, and for no other reason than simple existence. Only you taught me to stand and face danger like a man, and not flee like a child, for reasons other than brute survival. I'm not running now. I have no intention of leaving you to face this alone. Death will come some day and separate us forever, but not today, not this minute, and that's all we ever have, really.

She had no answer for that; the look of mixed longing and defiance in his eyes ravished her. I think it's Halsey, she signed finally, when she'd regained some measure of composure. I

kicked the thing as much as I could when it attacked me, and Halsey wasn't very keen on moving around the next day.

Colin sighed and closed his eyes for a moment. At least we know he's definitely set to beam down with us, and you don't have to somehow get me out of here so I can search the ship, which would be truly hair-raising. At some point before we leave the ship, you should try to test those suspicions, and give me time to let the doctor and the judge advocate general know what you suspect, unless you can let them know them yourself, so that we don't beam down with extraneous people.

This will be dangerous, Colin continued, his face grim, and I haven't a clue how it will play out. The damper I'm wearing is set to project outward. I think only Sphiph knows about that. Riana, I hate to ask such a thing, but you need to stay between me and Halsey until we get to the planet's surface. I'm utterly transparent to these creatures, that's why they've kept me mostly away from Terra. But they want to try to capture at least one of these damned things, to interrogate it, and I think I might...

There was a sound of movement in the corridor. Colin wrapped his arms around himself, curled into a ball, and shut his eyes. Renee closed her own eyes and allowed the anxiety-fueled tears she'd been trying to hold back to gush down her face.

John! she wished, futilely. Of course, it wasn't John Harriman; it was Eugene Halsey. Renee opened moist eyes and glared up at him.

He shook his head at her like a callous schoolmaster. "You will not be allowed to go with him. You will not be allowed to beam down to the planet."

Renee came to her feet; she didn't have to pretend fury. "The judge advocate said I had the right to say goodbye!"

"And leap through the portal after him?" Halsey sneered.

Renee wiped at her face. "Why should you care?" she had to get to the surface of the planet, into the presence of the space-time portal. Why she felt this way, she couldn't have enunciated if someone had held a blade to her throat, but she trusted her own instincts — to a fault, her recently-shanghaied CO had teased her more than once.

Halsey shifted his narrow gaze back to Renee and smiled one of his chilling smiles. If he had meant to make a reply, which Renee doubted, it was overridden by the sound of the door sliding open again. Little Sphiph, a silvery flush interspersed with flashes of maroon betraying his nervousness, bustled in with three beefy human medical technicians. T'Strali, Doctor Duquesne, and a hoverstretcher followed behind.

"...weighs nearly three hundred pounds in Earth-normal, be careful picking him up," Sphiph Doliv lectured the technicians. The nearest technician raised an eyebrow at the doctor, and the Saroming shrugged; "Low near-earth gravity makes for big people, and he's done a lot of heavy lifting in his time; if he starts to come awake, do not hesitate to sedate him again. You

don't want him to get his hands or anything else on you, understand? He's of the sort who's want to break things when he's frustrated."

All three technicians scowled at the brig, but hesitated to approach it. The elderly Duquesne, panting slightly from his efforts to keep up with the rest of the party, cut into the Saroming's chatter:

"It isn't advisable, Doctor, to put an unconscious individual through the Guardian portal. I need to stress to you — "

Renee made a sudden decision and darted out of the room. Colin had said that he needed time to talk to T'Strali and Doliv. As Ingram hoped he might, Halsey followed. She allowed him to catch up with her three-quarters of the way down the long, winding corridor to the transporter room. He clawed at her arm.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"I'm going with him!" she snarled; Renee turned the full force of her emotions on the fleet admiral, or what she was fairly convinced was something pretending to be Eugene Halsey. As though in response, he reached out and grasped both her upper arms with a cold, stony finality that snapped her around toward him like she was a rag doll. His touch made her feel as if she'd stepped into a walk-in freezer, and her mind went...elsewhen.

Endless secretive bloody battles, all culminating in the creation of a male thing that wasn't exactly a man, that was forever exactly both more and less than humanoid (so well he

understood this truth! So desperately had he hidden it!), and the loss of the thing, betrayal by a damned psionic rectification crystal...betrayal, always betrayal, in the end.

Ingram shuddered. The hard, bitter little corm of loss and the fear of loss within her, which had taught her that she could never truly control the vast impersonal realities of natural law and human nature, recognized itself in full-blown form in the heartless creature that held her, and yearned toward it. Every rational, compassionate, hopeful urge within her recoiled, as though...as though...*from a slap hard enough to snap the bones of her neck, but even that, even death concealed a sneering betrayal behind its beckoning face...*

Renee blinked her way back to the present — at least, she thought it was the present. She'd just been inside a perception inside a perception and was dizzy from the experience. Her mind, it seemed, had left her for a while.

Halsey's gaze bored into her and he opened his mouth to speak, but whatever it was he was going to say was forestalled by the clatter of footsteps down the corridor. Colin led the way, blinking sleepily and offering no resistance, held in arm locks by the three tentative technicians, who also sported phaser rifles trained on Colin's broad back. Halsey rounded on T'Strali and Doliv in rage.

“I told you he needed to be sedated until — ”

“We cannot ethically return him to his place of origin unconscious,” T’Strali interrupted. “The state in which he came through the portal must be the state in which he returns.”

“I did *not* authorize this!” Halsey blustered. “This is a mentally unstable being who has, or whose compatriots have, foisted desolation upon the Federation, and I for one do not care in *what* state he passes back through the Guardian, so long as he goes!”

Renee tore away from Halsey’s bruising grip and positioned herself brazenly between the fleet admiral and Colin. Halsey reached out to pull her away. The moment he touched her she knew, yet again, that she’d been right; cold seeped into her bones from his fingertips, and she shuddered. The moment stretched in her mind like hot taffy; she could not summon the strength to wrench her arm away. The brisk snap of Judge Advocate General T’Strali’s voice cut into the uncomfortable eternity Renee found herself mired in.

“I believe Dr. Duquesne has made it clear that in order to return the prisoner to his own space in time, approximating all states as closely as possible is key. No one was unconscious the first time. Which means you’re wasting precious time, Fleet Admiral,” T’Strali finished coldly, glaring pointedly at Halsey’s grip on Renee’s arm. He released her forcibly, as if she was a crumpled tissue he wanted to discard.

Ingram backed further toward Colin. His touch would be warm, and she longed to be able to touch him, to wipe away all

memory of Halsey's contact from her mind. It was inhuman on more than one level, that touch, and it filled her with a distress she couldn't have put into words if she'd tried. But she didn't need words, not with the image of a bloody sword so firmly emblazoned on her mind.

What have I done? she wondered. Even in the midst of the warped agony of realizing that the war these psionic monsters had foisted on the Federation was a situation that that she, *herself*, had created, she knew that she didn't have the luxury of experiencing that agony.

It's him, she attempted to sign, backwards and behind her back. Nobody in the group behind her gave any indication that she was doing anything more than nervously twisting her hands together.

The fleet admiral glared at the Vulcan JAG. "I only have concern for her safety after the intentions she expressed to the jurists and council, Judge Advocate. I am aware that Vulcans suppress emotion, but it's difficult for a human to see another being put themselves into peril and not respond. I would rather she was not part of this."

"The decision has been made, Fleet Admiral. Unless you would rather stay here?" T'Strali lifted one manicured eyebrow. Halsey scowled.

"Of course not; someone must ensure the woman's safety."

“Indeed, someone must,” T’Strali agreed softly, turning to lead the way into the transporter room.

Chapter Twenty-One

Demora had just opened her mouth to make a joking reply to T'Dani — *you think that's likely anytime soon?* — when the comm line from the bridge to the situation-room sounded. The particular sound the link produced told Demora that the message came from the dual helm and navigations station, and the tone of the man overseeing both of those stations concurrently was urgent:

“Captain Sulu, there’s a ship docking at Guardian Alpha.”

Here was Demora’s next dilemma; she had no idea what ship they’d be approaching in. Her sub-rosa Federation contact hadn’t known. She’d been instructed to give them time to dock and beam a ground crew to the surface of the planet before attempting contact. That contact should be the sign to the illusion-producing telepath that its game was up, and that was, in fact, the message she had promised to relay to whomever answered her hail; *the game is up*. Her mysterious contact had also promised that the *Enterprise* would be protected from the depredations of *Salem One*. She could only hope that this would be the case.

“Marco, the minute anyone or anything beams to the planet’s surface, start for the planet at full impulse,” she snapped; “Yaelat, open me a channel to whoever’s beamed down. Okay?”

Two disembodied voices answered her in chorus. “Yes, Captain.”

Demora scarcely had time to return the cups to the replicator before the comm link chimed again. The sound denoted a message from the communications station, this time. The Hali’ian communications lieutenant didn’t wait for her to respond to the chime. Her enigmatic commands, and days of skulking around a star, had made him edgy. “Captain, I just received an encoded dispatch from Starfleet on the high-end channel. Want me to route it in there? It’s eyes-only for you.”

“Please, Yaelat.” Demora felt a sheepish grin spread over her face. Renee was the only starship commander she’d ever met who gave an order using the word *please* — she supposed that she’d just heard the respectful term so much that it had become habit. If Ingram ever used any other mode of authority, somebody was in serious trouble.

“Did you want me to leave?” T’Dani asked baldly.

“Absolutely not.” Demora opened the table’s direct-communications link which, in the case of the *Enterprise* B, was the entire table. Upgrades had been performed on various of the *Excelsior*-class Starships in the fleet that made the staff and situation-room tables holography-capable, but the *Enterprise* wasn’t among these. Demora imagined that, should the ship survive its latest visit to Tres Two, it would also be given the latest upgrades.

The stray thought made Sulu shiver. Her contact had made it plain that there were no guarantees given regarding survival on this mission, for anybody. Which, Demora supposed, was why nobody had bothered attempting to refit or even really repair the *Enterprise* beyond reinstating various burned-out circuits before sending it here. She decided it was probably best to keep *that* unpleasant bit of knowledge entirely to herself.

The UFP and Starfleet logos flashed up the length of the table briefly, in the ostensibly calming blue and green tones the designers of *Enterprise* iteration *beta* had contrived. The dispatch insisted on a dual-officer retinal scan prior to the disgorgement of whatever information it contained, and Demora was glad she hadn't dismissed T'Dani, who possessed a higher actual rank than herself, this stint to Tres Two notwithstanding.

The face of a human woman filled all table stations. Sulu manipulated the table controls at the captain's seat to turn the sound down as low as possible, but that proved unnecessary. The display let all table stations know that sound had been removed from the transmission. A fully encoded transmission, then, Demora mused, in which sound would have registered as nothing more than a background garble even if they had been able to restore it.

Superimposed sentences flashed over the woman's face, written in scripts that Demora didn't recognize, but then, they too were probably encoded. Only the computer systems of a Federation Starship, a Federation Starbase, or a well-equipped Federation planet could quickly decipher such a message. The

dispatch came to an end, then replayed itself almost immediately.

Having received official clearance from herself and T'Dani, the starship's computers performed their deciphering duty without prompting; The second time written words appeared, they were entirely legible Terran Standard, *katakana*, Vulcan Standard, Betazoid's dominant written language *Tevnith*, and *graalek*. The great brain of the *Enterprise* knew what languages the flag officers assigned to the *Enterprise* were conversant in.

The message was horrifying, regardless of which language conveyed it:

I've been instructed to transmit this message to the starship Enterprise immediately, should such information come into my possession regarding any member of the board of inquiry convened for the Guardian Alpha incident of Stardate 9866.8. Shortly, the partially decomposed body of Fleet Admiral Eugene Halsey has been discovered in a steam tunnel on Andoria.

T'Dani swore softly in the fifth language displayed by the table — or maybe it was a prayer for the deceased fleet admiral. Not being conversant in that intricately complex tongue herself, Sulu had no way to be certain. Nor did she have the time to ask. She punched a code into the table controls, and the screen went dark. “Looks like your hunch was right, T'Dani. Computer, save this message to encrypted file Ingram-RNO, and allow no one but Captain Ingram future access to it, code Sulu Beta five four-four-four-one.”

Acknowledge, Lieu — the computer began blandly, in its newest male-ish, Starfleet-approved, simulated tones. It was overridden by navigation's comm tone followed shortly by Marco's voice; "Positive for transporter signatures, Demora. *Full impulse?*"

"Unless you know a way to enter warp this close to a star. Yaelat, open me a channel." Sulu jogged out of the staff room onto the bridge with T'Dani trailing behind. "*Enterprise* to landing party," Demora called out as she reached the bridge; "Landing party, please respond."

Enterprise to landing party. Landing party, please respond.

An unpleasant surge of mingled adrenaline, relief, and worry flowed through Renee Ingram at the sound of Demora Sulu's voice. Halsey frowned and dug out his communicator, flipping it open so hard that the clamshell top — a design for communication devices that was well over two hundred years old, kept out of respect for tradition but distinctly outdated — nearly rebounded to close the device again. "*Enterprise?* What is it that you're doing here? You aren't authorized — "

The game is up, Fleet Admiral, Demora's soft tenor cut in bluntly. Behind it was the sound of a crisp snap, as Colin freed his arms from the simulated restraints he was wearing.

The individual who was pretending to be Fleet Admiral Eugene Halsey dropped both his communicator and the illusion that he was Halsey. Horror filled Renee for a split second, but

that was wiped away by the torrent of rage that flowed through her from Colin as he discharged his damper field. Sphiph's medical tricorder had been fit with an equivalent field, and the elderly Saroming physician switched it on with trembling fingers.

Ingram felt it when Colin modified his field to wrap itself around her, a sensation like innumerable tiny bubbles bursting against the surface of her skin. The creature that had been pretending to be a Starfleet Fleet Admiral for so long turned toward her in the same moment. Caught between the focused power of two formidable psionic lifeforms, Renee knew that she should attempt escape, but she was rooted to the spot.

The being they were hoping to capture threw back its head and laughed. Ingram had thought, once, that this individual looked like the Pict from Hell. Alterations made elsewhen had altered him into something that was significantly more hellish than Pictish. The uniform that had fit the illusion of Eugene Halsey like a glove hung from this impossibly ancient, inhuman thing in folds and pleats, where anatomical features had either withered with age or been replaced — the thing seemed crypto-crystalline. What had once been a man offered her a horrible smile.

“You aren’t the one I wanted, after all. But you’ll do.”

Renee heard her own thoughts as though they came from far away. *No wonder we couldn’t find any evidence of what they were; surely at the core this thing is human!* Or, like Colin,

some amalgamation of Federation races that wouldn't register as an alien intruder.

She felt the augmented being reach casually through the damper Colin had tried to shroud her with, and quailed away from a touch that she knew she was powerless against. She knew, too, that his intent was to crush her like an insect, but the damper still had some restraining power on him. Rather than being crushed, she was merely flung aside. Unable to keep her feet, her head struck one of the decomposing pillars that encircled the Guardian. The last thing she heard was Colin's bellow of fury.

Chapter Twenty-Two

When the ionosphere of the rapidly-approaching, lonely little planet on the bouncing, bucking starship's screen suddenly came alive with an opalescent glow that obscured every part of the surface, Demora literally leaped toward helm and navigation, where she caught herself on the back of the navigation chair, from which Thomas Marcus Johnson worked both stations simultaneously. The navigator's presence made her feel both reassured and nervous. "Marco, fall out of impulse *immediately!*" They weren't quite past the orbit of Salem One, but the defensive station ignored them completely, as promised.

Sulu, still clinging to Marco's seatback, threw a desperate glare toward the Betazoid officer at the science station on the quarterdeck above. Her manipulation of her station controls suggested that she'd already turned the starship's impressive analytical capabilities on the phenomenon. "What the hell is going on, Seantie?"

"It's a quantum singularity, Captain," Seantie Voss' compelling contralto was grim. "You were right to stop, and really, we should back away further, because there's no telling how far the thing might spread."

"What's causing it — the creature on the planet? The Guardian?"

Seantie shook her head. “It seems to be following the temporal distortion waves the Guardian always puts out, but quantum singularities are thought to occur in areas of retrocausality. They’re basically physical indicators of temporal-distortion loops, as might be found in the center of a black hole.”

“We aren’t *in* the center of a black hole, Lieutenant!” Demora snapped; she had a sudden overwhelming urge to beg Marco to tell her that he *hadn’t* actually gone to warp near the star but swallowed it down. The nauseating rhythm of the temporal waves pushing against the ship threatened to make her seasick, and she decided to take Voss’ original advice. “Marco, back us away another thirty thousand kilometers.”

“Aye, Captain,” the man in the seat in front of her said.

Seantie shook her head at the information scrolling across her console. “No, indeed. This particular effect-and-cause loop has a less natural provenance, I think.” Seantie assumed the gaze that every humanoid of Demora’s acquaintance took on when asking a question of the computer, which involved staring fixedly at a point somewhere between the floor, the ceiling, and eternity; “Computer, exactly what is causing the quantum singularity presently occurring in real time on the surface of the planet Guardian Alpha, as perceived by *Enterprise*’s sensors?”

Working, the computer replied with a blandness that was the polar opposite of what Demora currently felt. The rising and falling sensation of the temporal waves diminished. Sulu

straightened up, moved away from the helm and navigations console onto the quarterdeck, knotted her hands behind her back, and vented her immense frustration at the relative slowness of the ship's powerful mind by bouncing up and down lightly on her toes. The computer spat out a response in less than thirty seconds, which, to the sentient beings waiting for its answer, felt more like fifteen minutes:

The singularity currently occurring on Guardian Alpha appears to have its cause in a forced-linearity point located within a quanta of non-linear univariate regression-expansion functions, which are centered upon the interactions of various individuals currently occupying non-phase space on Guardian Alpha. It is theorized that the entity on Tres Two functions via quantum filaments, which might act to fuel a quantum singularity. Such a singularity infers that the specified function of X to X-Y data has been —

“Computer, cease!” Demora snarled. She’d spent the vast majority of her Starfleet career misunderstanding and disliking this branch of physics and its associated mathematics, which had always seemed to her to have been invented by certifiably insane engineers heavily dosed with hallucinogens. It figured that the first crisis of her first command would feature it blatantly. There was, she reflected, almost certainly some interminable, multidimensional fractal-chaos-quanta equation that described how the misunderstood and the feared tended to rear their heads in one’s life at the least opportune moment — probably one of the very equations that she’d never been able to comprehend,

much less solve, to the dismay of her teachers, the amusement of her father, and the failing of that particular course.

The petite Asian woman heaved a deeply aggrieved sigh; “Computer, how can a quantum singularity such as the one just described be...” she shook her head, momentarily at a loss for words, aware that her choice of verbs could send the computer winging off in entirely the wrong direction; “undone?”

To undo or unmake a singularity such as the one currently taking place on the planet, as perceived by ship’s sensors, would have no more than a nine percent likelihood of success, plus or minus an unknown or possibly infinite number of standard deviations. Should that act, performed as an isolated event, be successful, it would entail the reduction or elimination of the forced linearity point forming the singularity, as well as the elimination of the univariate complex that impels it. However, such an action carries an approximately ninety-one percent potential of worsening the current situation by imbedding the forced linearity point rather than eliminating it.

Seantie and Demora threw one another a nonplussed stare, waiting for the computer to offer up more — or at least more comprehensible — information. When none was forthcoming, Seantie prodded:

“Describe in detail what the elimination or reduction of the forced linearity point currently found on Guardian Alpha would entail, computer.”

The elimination or reduction of the forced linearity point currently found on Guardian Alpha would entail the removal of particular individuals currently on Guardian Alpha to an unspecified location or locations in space-time. Such a location or locations must remain unknown, because the non-linear regression of least-squares function in this case suggests an unbounded repetition of the situation that is currently, and possibly continuously, recurring.

“Well, *that’s not happening*,” Demora snapped, and thought a moment. Undo. Unmake. Untie. No; the computer had already said that there was no untying this particular knot. It would have to be cut. “Computer, how is a quantum singularity such as the one currently occurring on Guardian Alpha *destroyed*?”

Theoretically, introducing antimatter into any quantum singularity will have the effect of destroying the quantum singularity while producing time.

“Producing *time*?” if Demora hadn’t already known that the whole affair that they were trying to fix probably had its origins in the enigmatic living machine on the planet below, that semi-metaphysical response would have clued her in to the fact.

None of that sounded like something that a dilithium matrix would tolerate. A high-warp engine performed its functions by altering space-time in more than three dimensions, allowing the vessel it powered to move through space in severely dilated

time, thereby travelling magnitudes faster than any natural phenomenon could. In the presence of something *else* that effected space-time...

Well, such a thing would be very bad, indeed. Nobody on the bridge had to ask the computer to perform any sort of mathematical calculation whatsoever to know that; it was a simple physics conundrum learned in high school, and subsequently drilled into the heads of anyone declaring helm, engineering, command, or navigations majors in their pre-Academy acceptance briefings.

Theoretically, the computer hedged.

Demora rubbed her forehead with the tips of her fingers. Sometimes, she knew, solutions hinged upon asking the right question...

“And what would the effect of introducing antimatter into the heart of the singularity be on the individuals currently on the surface of Guardian Alpha?”

“It’d kill them!” Seantie gasped in horror, in the same instant as the computer droned the words *biological death*. Demora half-turned away from the scandalized look on Seantie’s face, and plowed on:

“Computer, is there any way to introduce antimatter into the heart of the quantum singularity currently occurring on Guardian Alpha in order to destroy it *without* causing any sort of harm to the individuals currently on the surface of Guardian Alpha?”

Working, the computer replied, handing Demora another interminable half-minute wait, during which she took up the habit of nail biting.

A Chua Bubble composed of either an infinite number of infinitely small attractors, or a single macroscopic and infinitely oscillatory attractor, would act to shield the individuals currently on the surface of Guardian Alpha from the effects of both the antimatter fed into the quantum singularity, and the time produced by the destruction of the aforementioned singularity.

Demora was seriously over her head in chaos mechanics. She turned to Seantie in desperation and directed a starship-captain-like barrage of questions at the science officer. “Computer, these questions are directed elsewhere; Lieutenant, *what is a Chua Bubble?* Why would people have to be shielded from *time*? How can a shield like this be created? And I have no clue how much *actual* time we’ll have to figure this out, so here’s the real question — where and how can something like this be directed from the *Enterprise*, since we’re probably the only ones clued into this information at the moment?”

The Betazoid matron, who had been a mathematician specializing in the para-seismometrics of advanced physical systems prior to her choice of a new career in Starfleet, replied at length; “The Universe is basically a function of the interplay between chaos and quanta. They intermingle and revolve around one another, can’t exist independently of one another, and are the source of all apparent reality. Chaos interpolation

has no form without the interaction of quantum particles, and quantum particles are inert without chaos interpolation.

“To answer your time-relative question, let *me* ask a question; why do people need to be protected from a dilithium engine’s effects? The same sort of thing is true in this case. As to the interactions of chaos and quanta...” Seantie paused, frowned in thought, and then continued:

“On the everyday level, matter represents quanta and antimatter represents chaos. Everyone knows that matter introduced into a quantum singularity will, over time, produce antimatter — that’s where we get it from. The glow of the atmosphere of Guardian Alpha is a function of that happening somewhere, *somewhen*, in relation to Guardian Alpha right now. It has to have something to do with Renee having brought Colin into this reality from somewhere else.”

The science officer paused again, still frowning in concentration, finally adding: “It follows that, if feeding matter into a singularity produces antimatter over time, then feeding antimatter into a singularity will directly produce time — really, if it’s looked at as a mathematical equation, it should act to *multiply* time, since we also know that the presence of enough antimatter in normal space-time itself acts to produce a quantum singularity. And a Chua Attractor is a chaos motif. When a chaos attractor has the proper conformation, and gets large enough to form a bubble, it can paradoxically function as a repulsor.

“A Chua Bubble in this case would be a chaos paradox, a repulsor that should work in a fashion not altogether unlike a starship’s shielding. Natural chaos attractors are formed by time variations working on any three given variables, and the three variables that have us in this situation right now are Renee, Colin, and those awful telepathic things...” Seantie trailed off mid-sentence, then jumped right out of her seat. “Computer! Could a *psionic* Chua Bubble be formed between Renee Ingram and Colin on Guardian Alpha, *right now*?” she turned a hopeful look on Demora.

The computer only took twenty seconds this time to come back with what was, in Sulu’s personal estimation, the first wholly comprehensible paragraph that had been spoken on the *Enterprise* bridge in the last ten minutes:

A latent Chua Bubble already exists between Renee Ingram and a psionic resonator found on the surface of Guardian Alpha at this time. It is drawn from the univariate complex formed over their continuously oscillating relation to one another through variables of space-time. However, the formation of an active psionic Chua Bubble from this complex would require psionic energy to be actively fed into the existing system.

“Am I to understand that such a univariate-complex system as previously discussed *does* exist in real time and non-phase space, and that it *can* be brought into full function if it’s fed psionic energy, computer?” Seantie pressed. Always a good idea to double or even triple-check when dealing with something like this; attempting a difficult, theoretical, and potentially lethal

maneuver on the basis of misunderstood data had put paid to more than one Federation Starship and its crew.

Demora made a face. She'd learned a number of interesting things at the debriefing she underwent after the Psionic War, and the information the computer had just supplied sounded exactly like one of the functions that had been coaxed out of the tricorder data recovered from those weird little instruments destroyed by the cave-in on Andoria. This was not a comforting revelation, but in the last several months, she had received a number of revelations that were anything but comforting. The computer's next response to Voss intruded on Sulu's angst:

It exists as the trend-value portion of the univariate regression equation into which the current recursive situation might be translated. Psionic energy fed into this trend-value will act to bring the system into kinesis from its phase-potential state, the computer replied — nonsensically again, Demora thought.

Seantie didn't appear to share that opinion. "And feeding in antimatter around a Chua Bubble activated to protect the trend-value will balance the physical reality of this unbalanced equation because...?" Voss prompted.

Because only a negative factor such as antimatter can balance the physical structure derived from a non-linear univariate regression equation that spawns trend values any time a non-linear point is forced into the equation, the computer finished for her. Demora closed her eyes; A mathematics-of-Wonderland headache was brewing at the back of her skull.

“Is this *theoretical*, computer?” the Betazoid matron demanded, wanting to cover all her bases. It took the powerful instrument a long ten seconds to reply.

Theoretical, but with a statistical probability approaching 97.3149 percent, plus or minus no more than two standard deviations.

“Which is rock-solid certainty, when dealing with chaos or quantum theorems,” Seantie observed dryly, half to herself. “And feeding psionic energy into...hmmm, Colin...um, *functions* as a psionic resonator, correct, computer?”

Demora considered it cold-blooded that Seantie should refer to a person as though he were nothing more than an electronic instrument...but hell, they’d been dealing with theories that reduced him to a mere *mathematical equation* moments ago. The computer responded to the Betazoid’s question in the affirmative, citing the presence of the sentient crystal that was part of the man as a psionic resonator, and not the man himself — the computer simply did not know who Colin was.

Seantie went on doggedly; “So, if this psionic resonator had an adequate amount of psionic energy available, what other condition or conditions would need to be met for a psionic Chua Bubble to form between it and Renee Ingram?”

Galvanic proximity, the computer replied mildly. Demora threw Seantie a sharp glance.

“Renee and Colin need to be touching,” Seantie explained.

“Can we contact them to tell them what to do?” Demora demanded of Yaelat.

The Hali’ian comm officer shrugged expansively and turned to his board, his expression clearly skeptical. “Communications go haywire in the presence of quantum singularities, Captain, but I’ll try.”

Sulu rounded on Seantie again. “Could we use the psionic setup Colin’s already rigged on the ship to send psionic energy to the planet through the tractor beam?”

Seantie shrugged, chewing on her lower lip. “It might take me half an hour or so to figure out how to do that. I *do* know how simple messages can be sent via tractor beam; it can be used as a form of communicator when standard communications go down, at least up to distances below a tenth of a light year. I’ll try to set it up that way, and include in the psionic energy-stream a constantly-repeating message to *touch*, because you might not be able to get through.” Seantie turned on her heel and hurried to the turbolift, adding, as though to herself; “I’ll probably need every telepath and empath on the ship to help me with this.”

The half-Rumantian, half-Kriosian bridge ensign, who currently overseeing the tactical board, turned without requesting replacement, and hurried into the turbolift with Voss. Demora shrugged, retired to the captain’s chair, and punched in the code that gave her an infraship channel.

“To all psionically-capable *Enterprise* personnel; your presence is mandatory in the transwarp hub-area in main engineering. Repeat, this is Captain Demora Sulu ordering all psionic *Enterprise* personnel to report to main engineering.” Closing the infraship comm, she next opened the bridge channel to engineering. “Rafe?”

“Lieutenant?” the chief of engineering replied, with an alacrity and in a tone of voice that told Demora that he had known he was going to be called on next, since crew was being ordered to engineering.

“I’m going to need you to rig the phasers to set off a short antimatter burst at the Guardian sometime in the next forty minutes. I’m thinking that putting an antimatter core into a photon torpedo might be too messy. Oh, and before you do that, you’ll want to jettison the dilithium matrix. If this works, we can get towed home by — ”

“*Excuse* me, you want me to *what*?”

“Get the dilithium matrix off the ship; we’re going to try something that has a potential for effecting the linear flow of time. Then I need an antimatter burst. Very, *very* short. Using phasers. Toward that damned machine on the planet we’re orbiting. All in less than an hour. And for all our sakes, remember to raise shields from the engineering bridge before doing any of this.”

Buonarroti heaved the long-suffering sigh common to starship engineers. “Yes, Captain. But aren’t there *people* down there?”

“No time to explain. If we do it right, Renee can explain. Just...make it so!” Demora closed the channel. She’d just opened her mouth to ask Yaelat whether he’d had any luck establishing a communications channel when suddenly the bridge was filled with an eerie, chiming static.

“Captain, I’ve hooked onto a transmission that I *think* is coming from the planet from what might or might not be now, but it’s garbled into nonsense. I’ll try to clear up the interference.” Yaelat drew his dark, bifurcated brow down nearly over his vivid green eyes in concentration, tweaking the communications settings with all the finesse he possessed. He had made it quite clear in his debriefings that he wanted nothing to do with the Lonsdaleite matrices in the *Enterprise*’s walls; indeed, he was having psychological issues just with the thought of using his own *canar* anymore.

Demora sympathized with him, and anyway, she needed him at his station, almost certainly more than he was needed by Seantie at the transwarp hub terminal. *Enterprise*, the Federation’s flagship, was usually the go-to vessel whenever Starfleet implemented experimental controls. *Enterprise* iteration *beta* had been chosen as Starfleet’s experiment in heavy crew diversity and novel crew interaction, and as such, it happened to possess an unusual number of psionic crew members. T’Dani also remained on the bridge.

A voice broke through the ghostly white noise of the quantum singularity. It was Doliv, as far as Demora could tell. The Saroming ability to change the pitch and tenor of their voices as utterly as their integuments altered color helped some, but not much; “...*got* to try and penetrate...medical attention I *cannot* give...” The link broke, and Demora rushed to Yaelat’s console to search vainly for a clear channel through which to reply.

“We can’t break through the interference on any of the usual channels, or any of the less-usual channels, either; I’ve tried,” the Hali’ian offered unhelpfully. “Frankly, there *is* no way to gain a clear link in the presence of a quantum singularity. We’d be fortunate not to intercept transmissions from some other planet, or even some other time.”

Demora gave up looking for new channel combinations and finally programmed the console back to the settings Yaelat had been using when Doliv’s partial message came through. She had no idea whether or not anyone anywhere would hear her reply, but it appeared to be the only communications setting that had the slightest chance of working. She didn’t stop to ask if the landing party could be beamed off the planet; transporters wouldn’t work at all in the presence of a quantum singularity — that was why nobody would ever beam into a Romulan engine room.

“Captain! Doctor! Whoever’s listening, we can’t break through the interference caused by the singularity surrounding the planet. The telepaths are going to try to use the crystal

lattice in our walls to halt the singularity. Nobody knows whether or not they can, but they're determined to try! Stand by! Can you hear me, Doctor Doliv?"

There was no reply. Demora had no way to know if she'd even gotten through. She rounded on the ship's CMO, who stood by the captain's chair, hands balled into fists and face pinched white with worry.

"T'Dani, I have *no idea* what's going on planetside! You need to prepare for multiple potential injuries occurring in every species of person who might be down there."

T'Dani's nodded wordlessly, and turned toward the turbolift at a run.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Colin understood, when the creature dropped the illusion it had so skillfully maintained, that its purpose had been twofold; To rid those of its kind remaining in Federation space of the mortal threat he posed them by banishing him to some lethal place in time, and to somehow summon reinforcements through the Entity at Guardian Alpha.

It tried to reach psionically through the haphazardly flickering blue damper fields that surrounded it, to feed its desires into the matrix. As though in response, the Guardian spilled out a strangely curdled, undifferentiated energy. The planet's ionosphere came alive with a glow as feverish as Minara Prime's night sky. The great space-time matrix seemed to swell visibly, as though breathing.

Colin forced a psionic link with the creature before it could finish what it had begun with either Renee or the Guardian. To Colin's eyes, his psionic adversary emitted a dark smoldering that had been polished to an impossibly fine sheen, one whose only purpose was domination and, failing that, slaughter. He considered the untenable place and the unsavory choice to which the thing had brought him, and demanded:

What do you possibly imagine you can accomplish?

Watch and see! the once-human, now heavily crystalline, psionic pseudo-machine snarled. Turning on Doliv, it flung out

telekinetic energy so potent that it was visible, to destroy the unprotected doctor and his irritating damper. The technicians, whose phaser rifles also sported outward-projecting psionic dampers, trained them on the alien, who pivoted like a cornered cat to attack.

T'Strali leaped between the technicians and the thing that was not Halsey, throwing up the Vulcan equivalent of a psionic shield. Some Vulcans were superlative psionic workers, Colin knew. He had met several while staying on that planet, though most of the adepts of Gol and Selaya had fought the psions invading the 40-Eridani system literally to death, to keep Vulcan free from their influence.

The judge advocate general was neither particularly powerful psionically, nor highly trained in Vulcan mental disciplines. Colin had spoken to her on the subject, and he knew she'd never had the desire to be a priestess of Mount Selaya, the ancient Vulcan healer's temple district set above the fumaroles fifteen kilometers outside the city of ShiKahr, or a dedicant of Gol, that austere stone monastery of logic and mind-control perched atop the enormous, sandstorm-swept mesa known as Vulcan's Forge.

The powerful psion's energy arc pierced the Vulcan woman like a spear, and she fell soundlessly. This momentary diversion allowed Doliv to duck behind one thick, quasi-metallic curve of the Guardian itself, but the Saroming undercover operative never let his damper field — the strongest among the fields they

carried — waver. The guards hurried to T'Strali's side. They might be able to stop her bleeding, but the injuries...

The damper cage Sphiph and Colin were attempting to set up around the psionic madman was crumbling under the influence of the pitiless, effervescent light pulsating out of the Guardian. Colin snarled in frustration. The man who'd created him, now both less and more than a man, was unaware that Colin remembered his name, his rank, his standing. His face. Some part of Colin had hoped his damned creator would disappear himself through the Guardian and spare them both, but that, it was plain, wasn't at all what he intended to do.

Colin stopped trying to telepathically reinforce the dampers when he felt Shane Kell reach out to the matrix with intent again. Alive as the Guardian was by all standards of measure, even as aberrantly as it was behaving at this moment, it would nevertheless fulfill its purpose, regardless of the objective of the being that bent its intent upon it. Doubtless, that was the reason why this planet was a wasteland. And he wasn't going to give something that had already hurt the woman he loved the chance to hurt her again.

He ran directly toward Kell, using his own psionic talent as a shield, rather than trying to combat the crystal-driven creature telepathically. Colin knew he had the aptitude to battle the creature who had once called himself Shane Kell psionically, but he doubted that he could also battle reinforcements. He'd been given a mission to complete; He needed all of Kell's attention, all of Kell's knowledge and memories.

He needed to do what, in this place and time, it was an inexpiable crime to do.

Grasping Shane by the front of the uniform shirt that he had surely murdered to acquire, Colin was granted the satisfaction of seeing surprise, quickly followed by fear and helplessness, flash across what remained of the cruel features that were...that had been...

To his amazement and horror, Colin felt the man from another dimension reach into his own mind, and saw that this dimension was a parallel Universe, one so closely-knit to this one that interactions between the two might have occurred hundreds of thousands or millions of times before. A mirror Universe tarnished by the presence of a United Empire of Planets that desired easy conquest, which lusted for expansion that didn't come with an attendant attenuation of power.

The mind that worked to invade Colin's possessed no percentage of the compunction that had soured Colin's temper and kept him awake through Vulcan's cool nights. It possessed, also, absolutely no dry wit or any careful dissection of ethics. Its arrogance freed it from the need for even the pretense of ethical behavior, and its amusement was garnered through the infliction of pain.

If the dimension it came from was a mirror, that mirror was a badly warped and tarnished one.

The once-human thing in Colin's hands laughed; it laughed at the strength of the hands that grasped it and the mind that drove them. The sound of that laughter pulled Colin into nightmare. Kell's face had been the first thing he'd ever seen. The terror and revulsion that had, at that moment of egregious not-birth, been felt by the crystal that had always been part of Colin, struck Colin again like a blow to the solar plexus.

His psionic adversary's fingers sought his face, to deepen the link and drag him back to that laboratory on that forsaken planet, from which he would never escape alive again. Shane Kell sought to finally kill his own creation.

Colin had been implanted with a tiny cybernetic implant, triggered to respond to another psion's attempt to forcibly access his lower brain functions and kill. When the implant switched on, it produced a memory of his own hand tightening around a glass until it shattered. The act of the glass shattering had alarmed his interlocutor when it happened, just after the man had explained to Colin what function he was expected to perform:

If we capture one of these, it'll need to be both controlled and interrogated psionically, and frankly, you're the only person we know of with the capacity to do that. Because these things don't give in; they either need to be killed, or to be taken by force, and again, you're the only force we've got that can do what we need done. Because you realize, I hope, that there's not just psionic skill at work in these things; there's some kind of precognition, and that has damned well got to be stopped.

It had not been a request; it had been the agreement by which Renee Ingram and her crew would be acquitted of any and all charges against them. He'd known, at the time, that such a bargain was blackmail, that the very idea of charges against the captain of the *Enterprise* was unjust, and he'd said so.

Exactly like the thing to whose raiment Colin now clung, his interlocutor had laughed. Unlike the thing in his hands, the man who oversaw the workings of Section 31 in the United Federation of Planets had offered, rudely and forthrightly, to sweeten his terms — to make them at least *appear* just.

The implant in Colin's brain flashed cerebral lightning through the autonomic centers of his mind, effectively pushing his psionic adversary away from the part of his brain that controlled his heart and lungs, making Shane's control loosen for a microsecond, out of sheer surprise. Desperately, Colin gathered what shards of strength remained to him, used them to remove one hand from the unfrayable material of the uniform he clung to, and struck Kell in the face with the heel of his hand. The man who had prepared him for this mission, who had quite literally scared the wits out of him when he first appeared, had explained just exactly how and where to deliver such a blow, and why.

Colin tried to harden himself against the pain he imagined would occur when he hammered Kell, hard, at that spot on his forehead that humans referred to as *the third eye*. He wasn't prepared for the actual pain that ensued. Whatever it was that

he'd rattled against the un-giving crystalline implants in Kell's skull caused a burst of agony that...

Colin screamed in unison with Kell, then grasped at the frayed edges of his mind again and pushed the pain back toward his enemy, intensifying it as it flowed. There had been an alien suture in Kell's head that had popped under the force of the blow, a suture that hardened into part of the hollow bony sinus in humans, but which remained soft and flexible and filled with rhizomorphous nerve-endings that looped back upon themselves in Kell. The man had never removed them, considering them useless.

And they were useless, except for the function to which Colin had just put them.

Colin imagined the wound he had inflicted on the not-wholly-human Kell to be a portal, lined and sheathed with the steel walls of pain. He pushed through that psionic portal dizzily, into the semi-siliceous creature's forebrain.

I hate it and I will destroy it, I will see that it's destroyed first; it will be remembered with fear and loathing in this place, no matter how long it ultimately takes to conquer here!

Until the Kell from the mirror Universe had been faced with the reality of possible failure, the fact that Andoria would provide an ideal long-term storage environment for the fruits of some later incursion hadn't crossed the madman's mind. His part-Andorian mind.

Colin pushed further into the semi-crystalline, aching brain of the person who had created him, who, guided by arrogance and avarice, had created him with such physical and mental strength that he could now hold and manipulate his own creator with no difficulty. While the crystalline implants that parts of Shane Kell's cerebrum had been replaced with were still numbed by pain, Colin stitched every last thread of psionic potential he possessed through his creator's twisted mind.

The Multiverses pirouette on a floor of apparent stability woven by superstrings. None of those strings possess any sort of dimensionality except at the nodes where they intersect. If those nodes are manipulated just right...

That was what all that instrumentation on Andoria had been for; to manipulate the nodes of the Multiverse and summon horrors through. Ultimately, such an act might not even require Entities like the Guardian; That eventuality was exactly what the augmented Shane Kell had been planning for. It was what the quiescent psionic instrumentation could have done, once married to equipment capable of generating the right sort of power.

But that instrumentation did not exist anymore; It had been destroyed in this Universe.

Hence Kell's attempts to summon reinforcement using the Guardian, to destroy Colin in order to begin its depredations again. Kell didn't dare fail; Imperial punishments for failure were too horrific to be dwelt upon. Colin caught visions of tormented beings who yet lived and breathed, even though their

skins or their skulls had somehow been folded inside-out, of beings whose sensory and reproductive organs had been so intertwined that...

Colin pushed past these horrors using the echo of pain as a shield, and demanded; *How many more like you are here?*

I created the technology by which the crystals could finally be tamed and enslaved. The Empire entrapped me, and it was either perform this duty for them, or perish. I was sent with a preliminary team to find a way to provide access to the resources we needed. I didn't implant the people chosen for this mission, and I have no idea how many there are. Were.

The immediate pain of the concussion Colin had visited on Shane was receding, and he felt the wizened little creature's mind attempting to use its own wound-portal to push Colin away, to tear out the threads of consciousness Colin had spread through its mind. Colin flinched against the psionically painful backwash, and once again this horribly twisted version of Kell gave a humorless laugh:

How many there will be. The one who took your Captain Harriman was probably after you. All subsequent attempts to create things like you from scratch were dismal failures. I should thank you for helping me realize this, for helping me understand just how much I had to offer an Empire that wanted to destroy me.

Colin decided that he had obtained more than enough information from this parody of a humanoid.

Before the quasi-crystalline network with which Kell had replaced much of his own cerebral cortex could work up enough focused intent to burrow its way back into Colin's mind, Colin curled his dominant hand into a fist. Pulling the ancient, frankly frail thing toward him, with a single fierce backhanded blow that fractured half of the metacarpals in his hand and tore ligaments in his shoulder — injuries he would be only peripherally aware of until Doliv mentioned them later — Colin struck as hard as he could in the opposite direction, using Kell's skull as a fulcrum.

The vicious psionic predator's neck broke with a sharp, wet snap.

Renee moaned and tried to sit up. Colin dropped the lifeless twitching corpse of what had once been a man like it was a filthy rag, and turned to peer toward her through the fog of dazzling light the Guardian was fitfully spitting out. He wanted to go to her and take her into his arms, but he couldn't; behind him, during the time he and Kell had been linked in unholy psionic union, T'Strali had been bleeding out her life into the sands of a sterile planet. It was the judge advocate general that Colin hurried to pull into his healing embrace.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Demora paced in front of the forward viewscreen for fifteen minutes that crawled past like two decades, waiting for some sort of sign that the telepaths and empaths using the tractor beam, the little workbench Colin had devised for himself in the storage junction in engineering, and the vast majority of the energy available to the ship outside of life support, had activated what she personally considered to be some kind of mythical energy bubble of phase-space around the people gathered on the planet — or at least around Colin and Renee.

Rafael had not just jettisoned the dilithium matrix; He had encased it in temporally-padded pallets, had the heavy thing beamed aboard one of the ship's shuttles, and set the shuttle out of the system on a course back to Sol at impulse speed. The chief engineer fully intended to recover the matrix that he'd so painstakingly put together not six months before. Sulu thought that this was ridiculous. If what the psions in engineering were trying to do worked, the *Enterprise* would end up being entirely refit anyway. If it didn't, well...

Demora supposed somebody might need the dilithium in the future, assuming the Federation would even have a future if this failed. The painfully bright, opalescent glow flowing and pulsing around Guardian Alpha remained unmoved, and Demora remained both torn with anxiety and unsurprised...

Until eerie, rotating discs that seemed to be composed of gold and silver light became visible through the glow cast by the quantum singularity. The discs rose glimmering like Terra's sun and moon might, if an observer on Earth were watching them rise through some improbably thick veil of upper-atmosphere solar radiation.

The silver and gold spirals met and merged and grew until they changed conformation, looking like impossibly bright spools of jeweler's thread, stretching finer and finer but never actually touching one another anywhere as they curled in a twisting, ever more complex dance through and around each other. The opaline glow of the quantum singularity thinned and pulled back as the gleaming spirals composed of spirals pushed or blew it out of the way.

Demora backed away from the screen, fascinated and frightened by turns. She felt the captain's chair hit the back of her legs and fell ungracefully into it. "Ensign Buonarroti?" she husked, trembling fingertips holding down the Engineering comm button. "Raise shields and fire that antimatter burst now!"

Everyone on the bridge knew to look away from the horrible fire of antimatter. Time, though, when it came rushing back towards the ship, was as lightless as the center of a black hole.

I'm...okay, Renee thought muzzily in response to a question no one had asked aloud. Her head ached in time to the glowing, opalescent pulses that she could see through her closed eyelids.

What was happening? She reached up to wipe blood out of her eyes, and forced them open against the eerie glare.

Doliv and Colin knelt beside T'Strali. Colin threw back his head and moaned deep in his throat. The Saromng turned his tricorder on the other man with one hand and flipped open his communicator with the other. Both instruments emitted distressing noises.

“You can’t do this, Colin, she’s too different from you inside. *Enterprise!*” he cried into the static-heavy communications link, “You have *got* to try and penetrate this interference, T'Strali needs medical attention I *cannot* give her here!”

As Renee crawled toward Colin, Demora’s reply came back like some sort of demented haiku; “Captain!... can’t... interference...singularity...don’t... not they can. Stand...” and the link fizzed out.

“They *better* can, or you’re going to have multiple internal injury casualties in sickbay. Or corpses! Colin, *stop!*”

It was almost as though Colin was attached to T'Strali by an electrical link that he couldn’t break. Renee shook the remaining fog out of her head — blood from the gash in her temple pattered her like warm raindrops — and grasped Colin’s hands. Pain was there, certainly, but overriding the pain...

For the first time, Renee experienced what telepaths and empaths referred to as the *phantasmagoric effect* of another individual's mind.

All sentient beings' brains contained phantasm filters, through which they processed their immediate environments, and with which they imagined or re-imaged environments not immediately present. The phantasm filter was the nexus between the conscious and subconscious minds, the fountainhead of artistic and spiritual impulses, and — some well-respected psionics researchers postulated — a repository of genetic memory. It cross-referenced experiences to other experiences, and was the direct producer of dreams, daydreams, imaginary scenarios, and full-blown hallucinations. It was that portion of the mind that could keep telepathic or empathic forces from being foisted upon an unconscious or unwilling individual, to keep them from being driven insane.

A phantasm filter's functioning went largely unnoticed by any healthy non-telepath, but in psionically-capable humanoid individuals, particularly during times of illness, high stress, or any sort of arousal, the dream-like phantasm filter switched on, and any subsequent telepathic encounter might appear to take place in an internal environment removed from real space-time, possessing its own physics, chronological flow, and social rules.

Renee realized, in that moment, that the crystal-driven, lobotomized eunuchs who had attacked the Federation possessed the ability to impose their own phantasmagoria upon other beings at will. Years of experimentation using the Suliban had

taught them how to do so whether their prey was awake or sleeping, alive or dead, causing their victims to become the fodder of situations that didn't actually exist — a state of being that humanoids broadly termed *madness*.

The phantasm binding Colin and T'Strali resolved itself in Renee's mind. As a third party outside the binding phantasm, she was able to recognize as fantasy what, to the other two, was real. Doliv's earlier, truncated advice regarding dealing with telepathic bonds suddenly made a great deal of sense, leading her to wish that she hadn't cut him off the way she had.

On a planet not twenty light-years from Sol, there existed large, carnivorous, pseudo-reptilian creatures capable of sustained flight, utilizing the fine webbing strung between elongated arm and finger bones in conjunction with internal buoyancy sacs filled with helium. Like Colin's xelnhai, the creatures' teeth were composed of semi-metallics and stone picked up by them as young and obsessively worked into their otherwise-toothless gums.

Not only did all that rock and metal allow the creatures to rend their prey, it also acted to spark the helium released when the creatures stooped on that prey. This creature, the biggest predator on the surface of Berengaria Five, was actually — taxonomically speaking — a very large variety of exotic bat. Nonetheless, most of the tourists who flocked to Berengaria to see them liked to think of them as what Colin and T'Strali's combined phantasmagoria presented them as:

Dragons.

Which, Renee supposed, was far more romantic than thinking of them as really big bats that preferred their prey on the crispy side. Cooking was a remarkably effective method for keeping one's lunch from running off into the tropical undergrowth when one was a large, artificially toothy nocturnal hunter with no claws. Renee had seen them once, as a child on a field trip with her elementary school class. She did not recall that their skin was encrusted with telepathic crystals, like the hides of Colin's protective xelnhe, crystals that dripped from their ringing, chiming hides as though trying to escape the hot breath of what was not at all a bad-tempered, shuttlecraft-sized bat.

No; The thing that Renee now confronted *was* a dragon.

It occurred to her that she might be able to alter this particular phantasmagoria to the point where the creature Colin and T'Strali had dreamed up would let them loose from its crystalline hoard. She realized that the heat that threatened to melt and fuse the crystals was due to the fact that the pain of T'Strali's internal injuries manifested as heat, and had nothing to do with the phantasmagoric reworkings of a Berengarian bat. The beast, as with all hoarding-dragons of Earth-based mythologies found in latitudes west of the Black Sea and east of the Sea of Okhotsk, had no practical use for either Colin or the heaped-up treasure of psionic crystals, but the judge advocate general was its prey.

The dragon thrust a distinctly un-batlike muzzle toward the unconscious, tightly bound Vulcan woman once more, and once more, Colin threw a handful of azure sparks at its face. The creature roared and lunged at its tormentor, who twisted against the bed of psionic crystals that held him like a magnet, and roared back, letting loose another pyrotechnic burst. Renee could feel him weakening, his burn-lacerated body running with stinging sweat, his heart racing as though he'd run for miles...

This is not real! Renee was the only one who realized that this particular odd amalgam of reality and mythology existed only in the combined minds — the *fused* minds — of Colin and T'Strali. At the same time, she became aware of one of the working rules of the phantasmagoric scene that flowed around her; It was the tight binding of Colin's unconscious mind to T'Strali's pain that kept both of them bound to the imaginary hoard of psionic crystals.

She had to release them, had to somehow break Colin's concentration on the dying Vulcan, even though she risked both T'Strali's life and becoming locked into the rules of the phantasmagoria the two telepathic minds had created between them. She had to break Colin free — even if it killed T'Strali, even if in doing it she killed herself.

Even if it killed the whole world. Such a possibility existed here, in a place without boundaries, without consistent rules.

Without consistent rules. Into a world of myth, Renee cried out from the depths of her soul with the voice of her heart.

Leaving everything else behind, releasing her grasp on everything she had ever held dear, anything she had ever believed in, she shrieked a single word, the only word that had any meaning to her anymore.

COLIN!

With a sound like the chiming of a million bells, the angry beast shifted to focus on her. It saw her clearly. Again, it roared.

Colin, released from the pull of the phantasmagoric crystals beneath him, struggled to his knees. *No, Riana, get out! Don't...*

THIS IS NOT REAL! she screamed soundlessly, as Colin threw fire at the creature once more. The burst flew harmlessly off of its resilient, encrusted hide. The monstrosity opened jaws lined with stone daggers to engulf her...and along with a waft of heat intense enough to blister her skin even through her clothing, Renee was struck by a sudden, brutal realization:

It had been her own interference in this combined phantasmagoria that had altered its rules. The pain that T'Strali's unconscious mind had imputed to a fire-breathing Berengarian bat, and Colin's had imagined as a xelnhe not long removed from the volcanic vents in which they slept, had been transmuted by Renee Ingram's subconscious into a creature of human childhood fairytale. Unthinkingly (*again*, she reflected bitterly) she'd worsened an already-untenable situation. It was

now her responsibility to alter the ravenous monstrosity she'd unwittingly let loose into a more equitable form.

Ingram drew the water forth from her memory; a bottomless, icy pool without edges, whose cavernous roof glittered like noon from the phosphorescent excretions of billions of tiny plants. A lake in which she had experienced both the miasma of death, and the sweetest kiss she had ever known. She did this before it occurred to her to wonder whether T'Strali, child of a desert world, could swim.

Renee tossed that worry away, and instead reached out with her mind toward the creature whose mere breathing scalded like etching acid. She reshaped it using the force of her mind, using knowledge that Colin didn't possess but T'Strali almost certainly did, and passion that T'Strali denied having but Colin possessed in quantity. In response to Renee's memory of sudden icy waves rising from an abyss forever locked in darkness and cold, black water appeared, water whose undredged depths were a bed of ice, and whose touch made Ingram ache.

From its bed of ice, from the blackness that was despair and longing, a silky-scaled, wingless, serpentine dragon rose, and it looked at her with Demora Sulu's beautiful eyes. It ascended from the water of sleep and dreaming toward the air of enlightenment, and on its good luck back it bore both Colin and T'Strali. In those communal Terran phantasmagorias called fairy tales, there were two types of dragons, one an avaricious

brute that inspired fear, the other an awesome force capable of bestowing illumination and change.

She'd known the fear and the distrust. This time, *this time*, she would try to welcome illumination. And change.

Renee was exhausted. She couldn't swim anymore, not in such cold water, not having expended the strength required to change the phantasmagoria of the malevolent beast of Occidental mythology into the Oriental symbol of loyalty and prosperity. It didn't matter. She let her own phantasmagoria engulf her in drowning waves that might have been either sleep or death. It was her duty to protect others, to save them. T'Strali was safe. Colin was safe. And surely, he would reach down anytime now, to pull her out of the water.

Demora punched a code into the table controls, and the screen went dark. "Looks like your hunch was right, T'Dani. Computer, save this message to encrypted file Ingram-RNO, and allow no one but Captain Ingram future access to it, code Sulu Beta gold four-four-one."

Acknowledge, Lieu — the computer began blandly, in its newest male-ish, Starfleet-approved, simulated tones. It was overridden by Navigation's tone followed shortly by Marco's voice over the Comm; "Positive for transporter signatures, Demora. *Full impulse?*"

"Unless you know a way to enter warp this close to a star. Yaelat, open me a channel." She jogged out of the staff room

onto the bridge with T'Dani trailing behind. “*Enterprise* to landing party,” Demora called out as she reached the bridge; “Landing party, please respond.”

The pseudo-Fleet Admiral Halsey answered with a snarl. “*Enterprise*? What is it that you’re doing here? You aren’t authorized — ”

Demora fought to keep her voice level; “The game is up, Fleet Admiral.”

The only response was the sound of a communications channel cutting off. Demora turned to lean over Marco where he worked both his post and her own simultaneously; the navigator’s presence made her feel both reassured and nervous; “Transport everyone out of there!” They weren’t quite past the orbit of Salem One, but the defensive station ignored them completely.

They could deal with the pseudo-Halsey once Renee Ingram was safe; that was her mission, and nothing else.

Marco worked the controls adeptly, then shook his head and told Demora what Demora herself could obviously see; “They’re all too close to the Guardian, I think, Lieu — ah, Captain. Their signatures are muddled.”

Demora reached over Marco’s shoulder to manipulate the controls herself. Nothing. “Yaelat,” she said, as she tried to pick biological signatures out of the morass the multiphasic

energy that the great machine on the planet below put out ceaselessly, “I thought I asked you to open a channel?”

“To...erm...to *where*, Lieutenant?”

“Every available receiver in the vicinity,” she snapped back. The sound of open channels whined through the bridge as Yaelat did as she requested. “Marco, keep an eye on those readings; the minute they clear, beam everyone back.”

Demora rounded, next, on the half-Rumantian, half-Kriosian bridge ensign currently overseeing the tactical board; “Tactical, call heavy security to the transporter room! Communications, I want a constantly repeating message; *Stand well away from the Guardian so we can beam you up.*”

Ignoring the intense and unwelcome sense of *déjà-vu* that came with the words *constantly-repeating message*, so powerful that it felt like a nest of wolf spiders scurrying around underneath the flesh of her scalp, she ran a hand back through her long ebony hair and turned to the ship’s CMO, who stood by the captain’s chair, hands balled into fists and face pinched white with worry. “T’Dani, I have *no idea* what’s going on planetside! You need to prepare for multiple potential injuries occurring in every species of person who might be down there.”

T’Dani’s nodded wordlessly and turned toward the turbolift at a run.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Renee? Can you hear me?”

The woman who had captained the *Enterprise* B through part of what the Federation had come to call the Psionic War drew a deep breath. She wasn’t drowning after all. Or, if she was, the CMO of the *Enterprise* was drowning right along with her. If one must drown, she mused sleepily and philosophically, to do so with one’s best friend was probably preferable. She squeezed T’Dani’s hand.

“Colin?” she whispered.

“He’s sleeping. *No!*” Corrigan gently pressed Renee back against the bed as she tried to rise. Ingram noted that blinking fiercely nearly, but not quite, made the room stop spinning. The human woman gave in to the gentle but utterly irresistible force of the part-Vulcan doctor’s hands and arms. “Both he and T’Srali will be perfectly fine. You’ll have plenty of time to fret over your friend later. You need to rest now.”

“Who’s running the ship?”

“Demora. And I don’t want you worrying about that, either. I want you to have something to eat and drink, then I want you to *rest*. No arguing, either, or I’ll put you back to sleep with a neuro-tranquilizer. How do you feel?”

“A little weak and dizzy.”

“Just the way an overstressed empath should feel. What would you like to eat?”

“I’m not an empath.”

“You saved Colin and T’Strali by linking with them and interjecting yourself between them empathically. Pretty good trick for a non-empath, I would say. What would you like to eat?”

Renee considered for a minute. “Everything,” she replied finally. She felt like she was in the grip of the worst hypoglycemia attack in the world.

T’Dani laughed and made her way to the replicator. Renee knew that her oldest friend was aware of what she liked to eat, and T’Dani also knew which recipes Renee most loved that a replicator simply couldn’t do justice to. Sheryl Ingram had been a celebrated chef, and her husband Paul a goodwill ambassador for Federation interests to non-Federated planets in Federation space. Renee had spent all of her teens traveling with them from port to port, until her stepfather was taken ill with incurable Cantaran progressive demyelination syndrome and they were forced to return to Nisus. Renee Ingram knew what good cooking was supposed to taste like.

With a pang that Renee was pretty sure was at least partly hormonal imbalance brought on by low blood sugar, Renee missed her adoptive parents. She missed her long-dead Orion husband. She missed —

“Eat this, and you can go next door and see your friend.” T’Dani wheeled a tray fragrant with the aroma of freshly baked bread, bacon, tomato, and orange juice to Ingram’s bedside, causing her musings to cease as if they’d run into a brick wall and been knocked unconscious.

Renee wolfed half of the sandwich, used all of the orange juice to wash it down before she hiccupped it all back up, then leaned back with a sigh, feeling the ache in her head and the quivering in her limbs begin to subside. The sensation of longing, not unlike a tiny, determined creature with dull claws trying to gouge its way out of her chest from the space between her right lung and her heart, remained. If she concentrated on it hard enough, forced herself to admit that the sensation was a construct of her brain and not at all a physical sensation actually in her body, it would go away.

She knew it would. She knew it from long, numbing practice sessions that had, ultimately, been her only solace when tears had ceased to be enough. She only realized that she’d closed her eyes to perform the function of banishing longing again when the sound of a glass clicking against the tray in front of her caught her attention. T’Dani had brought her more juice. The CMO nodded down at the tray.

“Finish all of this, then I’ll let Sphiph know you’re coming.”

Renee gently stroked the copper-streaked auburn hair over Colin’s forehead back and said his name again. She could feel the presence of his mind — and was fairly certain that he was

awake — but resisted giving herself over to the pull of it; there was, after all, someone else in the room.

He opened his eyes a crack and directed them, not at Renee, but at the Vulcan woman standing on the other side of his medical bed, which was still connected, in case of unforeseen complications, to the regeneration tank they'd removed him from a day earlier.

“You might have *told* me that you have an internal carapace and multiple hearts somewhere to the left of your lungs,” he admonished the JAG. His voice was unsteady from nothing more perilous than long hours lost in sleep. Renee smiled, and continued caressing his hair.

T'Strali shook her head somberly. “It would not have made any difference. I owe you my life.” She half-bowed to Colin and backed out of the room slowly — the deference she would have showed to an elder *Kolinahru* of her own race. The man on the bed sighed softly, then looked up at Renee Ingram.

“You know,” he husked softly, “you became quite irritated when I did that to you, a long time ago, on a planet far, far away.”

Renee chuckled. “Where did you learn how to make bad jokes about old holovids?” she inquired.

“From the same person who taught me how to fly a shuttlecraft,” he husked back, then cleared his throat; “You don’t actually think they kept me locked up in that awful place as a

prisoner except for the short times they wanted me to annoy you, do you?"

"I'm glad you weren't really a prisoner," she replied humorlessly. "You should always be free." A tingle of mingled confusion and pain flared inside her. Shouldn't she give him the opportunity to be free of her, as well? She didn't know — but, she realized suddenly, she *had* known that this moment, with its attendant question, was coming. She'd known it from the first time she'd awokened in his arms.

As it usually seemed to be, it had been a tossup between that, or death.

Colin released her hand and sat up abruptly. The biobed gave a squeal of protest. He reached out to her, swaying, the color draining from his face. Renee reached back, taking him into her arms to try to keep him from falling and hurting himself, just as four feet of irritated Alpha Centaurian stomped into the room, followed by human orderlies who disentangled Colin and helped him lie back down.

"Hey, there, you stop aggravating my patient! Go on, now, get out, he needs to rest! Shoo!" Sphiph Doliv motioned Renee out of the room like a mischievous child caught by her father poking her hand into the carefully manicured frosting of a wedding cake.

Awards ceremonies like the one T'Strali had told them was planned were usually enormous, outdoor affairs attended by

anyone who desired entry, but the Vulcan JAG had stipulated that this one be attended by only ranking Starfleet officers, board members and jurists for the Psionic War interrogation team, Federation Council members, and individuals directly involved in the *Enterprise*'s actions, in deference to Colin's sensitivity to crowds.

As though enough people to pack one of the boardrooms of the Palais de Concorde somehow doesn't constitute a crowd, Renee Ingram thought to herself, as she took Doliv's advice and shooed. That was easier than dealing with the turmoil she now had to face. Colin did, indeed, deserve to be free, and would now receive that opportunity. An old adage popped into her head about setting the things you love free. But Colin wasn't a *thing*. And how could she ever bear to let him go again?

She wrestled with herself mentally all of that day and throughout the next two, alone in her townhome, bereft of even her birds, under the sincere belief that Sphiph would shortly declare them his own. Even the fearsome Jynx rode on his shoulder now and begged him for treats, apparently enamored of salty green meat and cichlid paste.

Renee asked herself over and over, until she was dizzy with trepidation, the same questions half her crew was surely asking the other; would she resign her commission to stay with Colin? She would like to stay with the man, but who had even asked her to? Not Colin, certainly. And since that was so, shouldn't she just let him go, to find his niche in the Federation? Perhaps someday he might come back to her, then.

And after all, she didn't even know if she still *had* a commission.

Besides, there was a Minara Prime in this Universe free of the Terran Empire, one that had been released from the terrible enslavement of its star by creatures whose temporal meddlesomeness was considered beneficent by many, inappropriate by others, and purposefully cruel by a few. The real debriefing papers that Starfleet had uploaded to her personal computer hypothesized that the unknown segments of Colin's chromosomes almost certainly belonged to those creatures, and that the rest was a combination of Terran, Hali'ian, Rumantian, and Minaran. Colin should have the opportunity to make a life on Minara Prime, or on any of the other planets that had birthed the psionic amalgam that was the rest of his chromosomal complement.

This was the conclusion Renee Ingram came to as she put the finishing touches on her dress uniform, then stood back to scrutinize herself in the ancient full-length standing mirror in the corner of her bedroom. She shook her head slowly at the Starfleet officer in the mirror, her dark cascade of hair pulled back severely from her face, highlighting both the hawk-like shape of her gray eyes and the despair in them. She would have to try to hide that. She slid a telepathic damper behind her ear, reached to turn it on, and instead pulled the thing off and threw it forcefully against a wall. She'd need to dig good humor, even a sense of humor, out of some old trunk in her psyche tonight, somehow.

She was more composed as she beamed into the highest, furthest corridor of Earth's Federation Congressional Building, European Branch, and set out to take the mile-long walk to the chamber where T'Strali planned to hold the ceremony, the same one in which her pseudo-inquest had been held. Exercise always had the effect of calming her mind.

That was, until she turned a corner and found the man whose existence she hadn't been aware of eight months before, but whose existence plagued her mind now, waiting for her at the only turbolift junction on this end of the complex. He was wearing a Starfleet uniform whose cut and shading said *Science-Ops Yeoman Grade One*, with an odd black neckline which, in basic Starfleet color-coding, meant absolutely nothing at all.

"I see Doliv gave you permission to leave his hospital for the ceremony," was all she could think of to say; he had a damper on behind his ear, for which she was grateful.

"Actually, he's put a leash on me you just can't see, to yank me back in there at a moment's notice." He smiled slightly and motioned at the turbolift. "Come with me?"

She laughed, stepping toward the turbolift graciously and wondering if he could hear the false, hollow note in her laughter. "You know, you think you just made a joke, which only proves that you don't know Sphiph as well as you think you do!" she motioned toward the uniform he was wearing. "Nice threads."

Renee felt Colin's mind brush her own, and flinched. He shrugged and pulled away, leaning against the side of the turbolift across from her, tapping at the damper behind his ear. "Threads?"

"The uniform. You're a Starfleet Yeoman now?"

He shrugged. "Something like that. T'Strali said she wanted to talk to both of us about that possibility after the awards ceremony." He considered her silently for a moment. "You're angry with me. Why?"

Renee shook her head and averted her gaze. "I'm not angry at you, Colin. I'm..." she let the comment peter out, not at all certain what to say.

"Afraid to accept something for what it is, making it more complicated than it has to be."

"Says the man who creates xelnhe-dragons. What the hell is that uniform supposed to represent anyway, *Yeoman*?"

"We can talk about the uniform later." Colin reached out and touched the toggle-switch that caused the turbolift to halt. Renee felt a flash of trepidation flare through her like a dying star.

Whatever it was she thought he might say, what came out of his mouth wasn't it; "Did you have the opportunity to read the report that Dr. Duquesne submitted for review yesterday?"

"I didn't." Renee's mouth went dry. "Why?"

“According to him, the Guardian recalls seven hundred and seventeen separate outcomes, not just one, from our visit to Tres Two a week ago. In seven hundred and fifteen of those, we *failed* to stop the things trying to take over the Federation. The other two outcomes appear linked, but the occurrence of one cancels the other out.”

Ingram shook her head at the man she had gone through the Guardian to find. “What...” she drew a deep breath, “what does that *mean*, exactly?”

“It means that...” he looked away from her. Her desire not to become enmeshed in his thoughts, and his desire not to cause her to become so enmeshed, be damned; She could *feel* what he was thinking, what he wanted to say, what she was reticent to accept. But she wanted to, damned if she didn’t.

“It means that we’ve done this before. At least seven hundred and fifteen *times* before. And each of those times, we *failed*. There haven’t been extensive teams sent to Guardian Alpha to study it since a slaughter occurred there thirty-eight years ago.” He looked back into Renee’s eyes. “There will be extensive teams there soon. Trying to figure out the parameters of each failure, and the parameters of...” he shrugged, “*this*. We succeeded this time, and Starfleet’s sending three hundred multi-disciplinary scientists to Tres Two to see if they can figure out why.”

Renee gaped at Colin. “I... we...you’re saying that we’ve...?”

“If all the iterations of this that the Guardian’s revealed have actually occurred, we’ve known each other for over a thousand years. In one of the two interlinked iterations in which we succeeded, the ones that put us where we are *now*, we’re so closely linked to each other that we were able to form a Chua Bubble that helped lay down the quantum singularity that seven hundred and some-odd recursions of the same damned occurrence *caused*.”

Renee swallowed damn but you look good for a two hundred and thirty-year-old man! And instead asked, “But we have succeeded this time?”

Colin laughed, and flushed. “Obviously.”

“So, then, the failures are really just academic? I mean, considering how the Guardian can manipulate time anyway.”

Colin raised his hands to his face and rubbed his eyes as he answered. “Academic. Sure. And the uniform...I don’t think I’m only going to be working with Starfleet. Or maybe, depending upon what I ultimately choose, with Starfleet at all. Certain people have a lot of interest in my ability to walk through solid objects; they think it might come in handy,” he shrugged, “sometime.”

Renee regarded him with horror. “*Those* people don’t let you go, Colin!”

He tapped at the telepathic damper behind his ear, turned toward her, and hesitantly took her face between his hands. As

though someone had been waiting for this moment, her communicator chimed. Renee pulled it out of her pocket awkwardly; Colin was still cupping and stroking her face.

“Ms. Ingram, are you delayed?”

“I’m afraid so, Judge Advocate. Can you give me fifteen minutes?”

“Certainly. Do you require assistance?”

Renee smiled, and her face went warm. “No, Judge Advocate, but thank you for inquiring. Just...fifteen minutes.”

“As you wish.”

As Ingram closed her communicator, Colin took it out of her hand, put it in his own pocket, and again took her face between his own hands. Touch enormously facilitated both communication and empathy; both thoughts and feelings ran through her in a deluge, but touch made it a stream she could both trace and return.

His touch made her burn.

Colin’s fingers actually trembled; the combination of trepidation in his touch and his perception of her as something precious sparked an instinctive response of arousal in Renee’s body that was so strong her knees nearly buckled. It was a perfect, circular reaction that made Colin concurrently forget to breathe, and slide his arm around her to hold her up.

I love you, he told her psionically, bending his head to nuzzle her face with his — pure instinct that was actually driven by an innate desire for psionic union, which it was now theorized that humanoids in general evolved with and had only lost the capacity for late in their evolution. It had taken most humanoid cultures millennia to formalize that facial-nuzzle into a kiss, and some of them never had. Formality be damned; the instinct was exquisite, was turning her into a creature of pure liquid, a single sweet ringing tone.

She raised herself on her tiptoes and kissed him hungrily. *Oh, gods, Colin, I love you too!*

She could understand now what he'd been going through for years on that planet, what she had brought to fierce wakefulness with her presence — the one presence in all the Universe that complemented his own like a corresponding puzzle-piece. However, what he was currently doing to her was also unfair and vaguely spiteful, considering that they were two good-sized people in a cramped turbolift, and she'd only requested fifteen minutes.

Colin didn't respond in words. He gave her emotion instead, so strong that it was a sensation, like fingers running down her spine.

I think we can be cited with a crime for doing something like what you're currently thinking about doing in a turbolift, she thought at him, and anyway, it'd take more than fifteen minutes. The scent and feel of his breath, the warmth and

strength of his arms, their heartbeats — one single pulse, a torrent of sensation that her brain had no other term for but sweetness, an irrepressible craving that the humanoid organism was biologically programmed to pursue at any risk, even death...

He broke the kiss gently. “Not everyone wants to be let go of, Riana,” he murmured, pulling away and requesting that the turbolift continue. “Particularly not now. There are a lot of people here!” He turned his psionic damper back on, and reached for her hand. She reached back happily and entwined her fingers with his, not letting go even after the turbolift doors opened.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The large boardroom on the ground floor of the Federation Building, once known as — and often occasionally referred to as — Palais de Concorde, *house of unity*, was absolutely stuffed with people, filling all the tiered hall space. Spectators had arrived early. The entire crew of the *Enterprise* iteration *Beta* would be seated at a computerized table specifically designed fit to the dais upon which it sat. The table was a clever series of sinuous curves that allowed every individual seated at it to see any other by turning their seat a mere thirty degrees. This setup maximized space while minimizing crowding, as long as certain protocols were followed while mounting the dais to sit down. Renee and Colin, at the head of the table, were among the first group in, and would be the last to leave.

Nearly all of the awards announced at this ceremony would be physically received at a later date. What promised to be a four-hour ceremony would be trying enough, without handing out an interstellar shipping crate full of ribbons and medals and awards that could easily turn it into a twenty-four-hour one. Starfleet Command had also determined that the thousands of other individuals deserving of medals, awards, and commendations for their roles in this conflict would receive those things privately; This semi-public meeting was for the *Enterprise*, whose captain and crew had been instrumental in fulfilling the mission that had brought an end to the Psionic War.

Renee drew a deep breath and pushed both her happiness with Colin and a constant low-level worry about John Harriman, something that she knew would nag her like a toothache for either the rest of her life or until they somehow managed to rescue him (whichever came first) to the back of her mind. Keying on the voice enhancer at her place in the table, she stood and began the speech that would open this awards ceremony:

“When I broke Federation law and stepped through the great machine at Guardian Alpha, I expected there would be repercussions. I expected, I suppose, that I would be led to some technologically-advanced empathic civilization that would come storming en masse to the rescue, after which I’d probably be arrested, if I wasn’t killed first.”

She looked down at Colin where he sat beside her. She’d already had to telepathically admonish him not to sit staring at the table, but to try and make eye contact with the individuals in the room. Not prone to any sort of fear brought on by public speaking or relatively tight spaces full of people, she tended to forget that most other humanoids possessed a sizable aversion to those things.

“Boy, was I surprised,” she added, deadpan, prompting most people throughout the hall to chuckle. She looked back up towards the nearest tier of people. “However, the bald truth is this; were it possible, it would have been better if someone had killed me before I was born.” She plowed on, through the disturbed murmur of everyone present in the room, and Colin’s disavowal echoing in her head. His damper might attenuate the

noise of others' thoughts for Colin quite well, but it didn't stop psionic capacity between the two of them much. *Two hundred and thirty years...* "Because I was what brought this telepathic plague on all of you. It marked where I had gone, and when it was determined that it was ready, it followed me here."

A Vulcan whose name Renee could not call to mind, though she knew he worked in Engineering, stood up from the table and keyed on his voice-enhancer. "I beg to interject. Such a disputation would violate Faye's Law, which states that even though time does occur as a single dimension in the Universe, as non-omniscient, non-omnipotent, corporeal beings, we cannot live in any time but that which we perceive to be the present. To the sentient beings of the Universe, neither the past nor the future was written at the time of your birth — there was no *omen*, as your people would call it, to predict any such calamity. Therefore, you cannot be held responsible for an occurrence, or even the repeated oscillation of an occurrence, for which no one save our enemies alone possessed foreknowledge.

"To state otherwise would be what your people call 'hubris', would it not? And according to your own debriefings, at the time the Federation was being attacked, you saw no other alternative but to do as you have done. It seems to me that this might simply be a case of what my people would call," the Vulcan man shrugged elegantly; "*fate*."

The Vulcan engineer received an ovation for this impromptu speech. Renee was grateful that he had made it. After the

individuals at the table had recomposed themselves, she went on:

“While I mourn the losses which the Federation, and every one of you, have suffered, a great gift has been given. Not only has the man sitting by my side freed the Federation, he’s rejuvenated technology we’d considered to be a dead end. My belief is this; That whatever you see that is new or improved for the next hundred years that *doesn’t* come, to some extent, from Colin’s mind and hands — well, those things will be rare indeed.”

“No pressure!” one of the media attendees seated nearby, equipped with full-broadcast micro-headgear, joked. To Renee’s relief, the barricade of Starfleet and Federation officials who were running this ceremony had only allowed three media outlets to attend this ceremony — one each from the Federation News Service, the Rigellian Syndication Network, and the Associated Times. Renee opened her mouth to respond to the joke, but Colin beat her to it.

“None at all, I assure you.”

The room went as still as if some kind of sound-reduction switch had been thrown. It occurred to the Renee that, although the vast majority of everyone in the Federation knew damn good and well what Colin had done for them, very few of them had ever heard his voice, or even seen him. Renee motioned him up, and sat down as he stood.

“Is it true that you’ll be refitting ships of the line with new technology?” the sleekly descaled, professionally-attired, golden-skinned tyr-Rigellian newswoman representing the Associated Times had gotten her foot in, and obviously had no intention of pulling it back now.

Colin merely gazed at the media woman mutely.

What is she talking about? Renee wondered.

Later, Colin replied to her unasked question.

“Can you tell us what that technology will be?”

Colin shook his head, equally mutely. The audience laughed. Colin was dismayed. *I think they just want to hear your voice, really*, Renee explained.

Colin threw a startled glance her way, then turned back toward the tiers of onlookers and sighed. “I feel strange accepting awards from you for what I’ve done. You are my award,” he gestured around with both hands, an instinctive humanoid gesture of acceptance. “This is my award, as is the freedom to go anywhere I wish and meet whomever I please. I have my reward; I require nothing else. I am here only because I wanted desperately to be here, and there’s nowhere else I want to be,” he cast a glance at Renee and smiled, “but here.”

T’Strali stood up from the table. “Colin’s sense of appreciation notwithstanding, we have awards to bestow. There are some among this august company who do not know the

meaning of what it is they are about to receive; therefore, explanations will be given. Admiral Henn," T'Strali turned to look toward the head of the table, nodding politely toward a portly older woman, "will proceed first, with the Starfleet commendations."

Renee took Colin's hand. *You can sit down now.* He was nervous; she could feel it as though it was her own emotion. She did not, this time, seek to push Colin's psychic nearness away. She never wanted to have to do that again.

I'm sure there will be plenty of times you'll need to, the big telepath replied, squeezing her hand. Renee smiled.

The admiral inclined her head to the Judge Advocate General and stood to make her announcements. "The first Starfleet distinction that I have the privilege to bestow on Renee Ingram," the woman motioned Renee up, "is the full rank of Starfleet Captain, not given under any situation of duress, but by the full and sound knowledge of Starfleet and the United Federation of Planets, by whose charter it functions and whose overarching aspiration it supports — to seek out new life and new civilizations, and through the all-embracing creed of infinite diversity in infinite combination, to boldly go where none have gone before, in order to peacefully study and hopefully welcome new civilizations into our assemblage.

"Renee Ingram is hereby fully obligated with all responsibility and authority that pertain to the rank of captain aboard a Starfleet vessel. These duties and privileges will

commence aboard the starship *Enterprise* B, once that ship's battle damage has been fully mended and necessary upgrades have been carried out, that date being given by the Utopia Planitia Fleet Yards to be Saturday, January 22, 2298 CE, seven am Terran Standard Time.

“Congratulations, Captain Ingram,” the admiral added, with a roguish smile; “you really know how to beat up a ship!” Henn spend at much of her free time singing for jazz ensembles as was practical; the fleet admiral had a smoky, penetrating tenor that might have reached every corner of the room even without the aid of a speaker system.

Renee did not laugh along with everyone else at the table as Henn produced and pinned to her uniform one of the few physical ceremonial tokens that anyone would actually receive that evening — her captaincy insignia. She was glad that the ceremony required another person to put the pips on for her; her own hands were trembling. What she honestly wanted was to be able to hand the *Enterprise* back over to the command of John Harriman. She closed her eyes while the Admiral applied her rank insignia. She hadn't wished on anything since she was a child, but she did now:

I swear on the heads of every god that never was and on the spin of every z-particle in this quadrant, John; I will find you and bring you back! And then I'll retire, and I'll...we'll...

Renee reopened her eyes to find Colin directing a bemused look in her direction. Before she could explore the emotions

behind that look, Henn was speaking to her. "I will announce the group commendations first, Captain, if that pleases you."

Renee turned her attention away from the man she considered to be the handsomest in the Quadrant. "It would please me, Admiral; my crew deserve their commendations first. Please carry on." She sat down.

Henn inclined her head at Renee, and began; "*Combat Action Ribbon, with Cluster.* This is awarded to those Starfleet enlisted and non-enlisted personnel whose vessel has been boarded by a hostile force, who have fought for their lives, the lives of their crewmembers, and the security of their vessel. Receiving this award are:

"R. Ingram, J. Felingaili, T. Corrigan, D. Sulu, T. Johnson, S. Voss, Y. Qat, R. Buonarroti, T. vrr'Nnt, A. Mirin, C. Cooper, W. Orr, G. Aldritch, R. Kanchumurthi, M. Anderson, Q. Sh'sld, N. DeVaan, P. Wilson, U. Morell..." the admiral continued reciting names for three minutes, before adding; "And postmortem; J. Harriman, T. Phica, G. Vi-bhoneh, R. Injador, D. Willis, I.C.B. Craa'thaen..."

Renee gritted her teeth, to hear the CO she had been known to refer to as *JJ* lumped onto the postmortem list. No one had been able to say conclusively what had become of Harriman, but Ingram was composing a monograph regarding where she was pretty damned certain he'd been taken. The postmortem combat action award constituted a long list of names; Starfleet Command had determined that those whose minds had been

taken over by the cruel psionic creatures that had started the conflict were innocent of what they had done, and it was necessary to honor them, since that was the only comfort anyone had to offer their loved ones.

The blood of *Enterprise*'s dead and injured had stained floors, walls, and cushion upholstery so badly, or leaked into electronic equipment so thoroughly, that nothing less than complete replacement would remove it. When Colin had first walked from Transporter Room One into the wide hallway that led to the primary sickbay, his eyes had widened as his sensitive olfactory nerves were bombarded by the memory of that carnage. Renee had grown used to the constant low-level background fetor in the time they'd spent playing hide-and-seek in star-spawning nebulae, but after weeks of breathing the air of Colin's home planet, she'd smelled it, too — the flagship of the Federation had become an abattoir.

As the admiral tirelessly recited the names of the dead, Renee also mused that sometime within the next six months, while upgrades were being performed on the *Enterprise*, she was going to have to make time to select four new tactical officers, three new systems engineers, first- and fourth -shift records officers, a second shift science officer, helm and navigation personnel for all shifts but the first, an armory officer and a head of security — after what had just occurred aboard the *Enterprise*, she'd prefer that to be the same individual — engineering officers for second through fourth shifts, a third-shift maintenance officer, fourth and second-shift transporter

chiefs, and a protocol officer. She would also be making the upward movement that some individuals had made in their careers permanent, but she wouldn't do that until she had a refurbished starship under her command.

The non-commissioned free-yeoman posts that were empty would also eventually need to be filled, and she wasn't going to be able to be picky. Starfleet Academy was unlikely to be matriculating cadets anytime soon, and *Enterprise* hadn't been the only starship to have been turned into an abattoir. There was usually a long list of non-commissioned individuals awaiting starship assignment. Because the general caliber of individuals suited for starship posting were also the sort of individuals who would have made it their business to fight the rising tide of madness that had invaded the Federation, that list had ceased to exist.

"All remaining individuals aboard the *Enterprise* for whatever reason at the time she suffered psionic attack will receive this battle ribbon, sans cluster," Henn finished at last. "Furthermore, all current *Enterprise* crew, including those of free yeoman status, will receive Outstanding Unit Citations, for having distinguished themselves by exceptionally meritorious achievement in the accomplishment of combat operations against an armed enemy of the United Federation of Planets. All commissioned crew present at the time of the attacks will also receive Starfleet Extended Tour Ribbons for having exceeded an obligated tour of duty." The rotund woman turned her gaze away from the list before her and back to Renee with a smile,

but waited until every last bit of applause had died down before continuing:

“You, Captain Ingram, have received the Wounds Ribbon with Heart, for grievous injury sustained in the line of duty. This ribbon, sans heart, is also awarded to Mrs. Barda Troi and to Colin.”

It was the first time in his short life that Colin had been awarded anything, and the rush of endorphins he felt made Renee smile despite herself. The commendations he received in this room tonight would hardly be the last thing Starfleet ever awarded him. What the admiral came out with next rooted Renee to the spot — she wasn’t sure with exactly which emotion.

“Captain Renee Ingram, Starfleet has awarded you the Solar Cross Medal of Mercy, for risking...” Henn paused and pursed her lips, shaking her head; “I suppose I should say *giving* your life in order to ensure the continued survival of innocent souls in the face of a clear and present danger to the United Federation of Planets, since I’m told you had to be rather roughly resuscitated.

“Furthermore, you have been awarded the Starfleet Medal of Honor, the highest commendation bestowed to those who go above and beyond the call of duty in their service to the Federation by a willingness to sacrifice all to preserve, defend, and protect the lives of other sentient beings.” Obviously seeing the mixture of anguish, disbelief, and concern that Renee could

feel fall over her features like a sweaty bandanna, Henn went on gently:

“These honors are given for your actions in fighting an enemy present and waiting to strike since before you were born, in order for it to have had time to destroy the Suliban and take the technologies of that unfortunate race to turn to its own use.”

Even knowing that it was bad form, Renee opened her mouth to argue, but Henn’s next words caused Ingram’s rebuttal to die aborning from sheer surprise:

“And, since we are speaking of psionic technologies, I am pleased to announce,” Henn half-turned her head and directed a pleased look at him, “that Colin has been honored with the Daystrom 2300 Award in Psionics Research and the concurrent Zee-Magnees prize in Psionics Instrumentation Development.”

Colin rocked back slightly in his chair. Renee knew that he was groping for excuses with which to cover his visible amazement that the people who had put him into the black turtleneck he was wearing had kept every one of their promises. “But...this was never...*my* research or development. We...I stole it from the Empire, just before we escaped.”

The admiral chuckled throatily. “In this space-time continuum, it most certainly *is* your research and development, Colin!” Henn then turned further toward Colin and smiled at him, waiting until the shuffling and murmuring at the table had abated. Not everyone present was aware that Colin had come

from any other space-time continuum than the one they themselves occupied, and not all of those who were aware that he had were entirely sanguine about the concept. Henn added:

“These are Federation awards, not Starfleet ones, but as I understand you have a desire to act in the capacity of yeoman on *my* starships, I was chosen to present them to you. Anyone in possession of either — much less both — of these awards is encouraged to use the technological largesse of any Starfleet vessel or Federation station for the furtherance of their research, save in time of war. You, Colin, have been assigned to the Federation vessel *Enterprise*, but are in no way limited to it, for the duration of your research.”

Renee knew he felt her reaction to this; A consternation of terror and joy that flashed up her spine like a splash of cold, clean water. He smiled. Admiral Henn turned away from Colin, in order to cast her gaze around the other occupants of the architectural wonder that was the dais table.

“To officers, personnel, and non-commissioned members of the starship in question, who have demonstrated superior combat abilities while in active operations against an enemy of the United Federation of Planets,” Henn went on indefatigably, “Starfleet awards the Combat Readiness Ribbon. This ribbon is awarded to both the *Enterprise* personnel who directly participated, and to the Federation governments that those individuals call home, many of which were aggravated targets in this conflict. The personages receiving this award are:

“V.S. Th’raess’Aen of Andoria and Terra; S. Voss of Betazed; M. Ezriel of Hali’ia; Y. Qat of Hali’ia; K. Kooar of Kazari’ia; W. M’arBana of Napea and Delta; B. Troi of Betazed; K. Rellvalen of Rumantia and Kriosia; S. Chz’vaar’nkai of Vulcan, and Colin, who tirelessly and in disregard of personal loss or injury successfully eradicated Federation enemies who had rendered themselves otherwise imperceptible to Federation technology, and thereby impervious to Starfleet weaponry.” The individuals present applauded once more, with far more gusto this time, and Admiral Henn held up one pudgy hand to bring their approbation to a halt. She hadn’t finished. When the applause had smattered away somewhat, she continued:

“Attendant upon the Combat Readiness Ribbon for all involved are the following Planetary Citations: Kol-ut-Shan Medallion, Vulcan, *Protector of Infinite Diversity*; Citation of Rem, Betazed, *Gratitude for Gallantry*; and the Award of Injaa’Maah, *Bestower-of-Grace*, Andoria, with appendant Andorian Battle Star. These citations hereby grant all of the individuals who have been awarded the aforementioned Combat Readiness Ribbon the rights and freedoms enjoyed by naturalized citizens of these planets.

“The next award Starfleet wishes to present is usually limited to Starfleet personnel, but since it is an award given to individuals who have performed conspicuous acts of valor and heroism,” she turned to beam at Colin again, “it has been determined that you merit this award in thanks from the Federation’s Star Fleet, whose mission you have and will

continue to facilitate with your endeavors. As a civilian yeoman, you have been granted the rare honor of receiving the Starfleet Medal of Commendation.”

The assemblage burst into another round of applause. Henn allowed it to follow its enthusiastic course and completely subside before half-bowing to Colin and announcing; “I have neither the rank nor the authority to bestow your final award, but it has been an honor.”

Colin nodded in return, and one of the few male humanoids in the room able to match Colin’s stature stood and cleared his throat for attention. A handsome bronze-skinned man with eyes as blue as T’Dani’s and flowing white hair and mustaches, he smiled widely at Colin, fixing the telepath with a transfixing gaze.

Renee knew him; She also knew that this was the final term of office allowed the half-Deltan, half-Efrosian United Federation of Planets President Ra-ghoratreii. Rumor was rife that Judge Advocate General T’Strali was being considered by the Federation Council as one of the incumbents chosen to run for office as his successor.

“It appears that I have something to give you,” he said to Colin, who stood to greet him as he walked around and, due to its unusual architecture, through the open spaces of the table.

Ra-ghoratreii pulled a black box out of one of the expansive pockets of the flowing tunic he wore, opening it and displaying

its contents to the table at large. No person currently living possessed one of these, and Renee supposed that was why Raghoretreii had decided to bring it along with him; a great gold and sapphire pentacle reversed over the IDIC symbol that represented the Federation's Star Fleet, suspended from a blue ribbon that sported the star-spattered Great Seal of the United Federation of Planets.

No blood. No sword. No conquest. Colin lowered his eyes in the face of something that was so much greater than himself. Renee sighed softly. *Now, she mused, I think I can hang that plaque up again.*

“While the Starfleet Medal of Commendation is an award granted to Starfleet personnel for acts of conspicuous bravery in the face of direct attack, this Federation Medal of Honor is the highest commendation bestowed to Federation citizens who have performed actions that show a willingness to sacrifice everything they have ever possessed, in order to preserve, defend, and ensure the continued survival of innocent souls in the face of a clear and present danger to the United Federation of Planets.

“You, I believe, are one of only two people who have received this honor while still living.” The half-Deltan man grinned wickedly down the table at the journalists seated there until they squirmed; “No pressure!” he added. Badly muffled laughter flowed like a wave through the hall. The half-Efrosian man snapped the box closed and handed it to Colin, careful to avoid any casual touch that might pull both psions into one

another's minds and away from the professional business at hand, even through a telepathic damper. He went on:

“While, usually, one must be a member of the United Federation of Planets and of Starfleet for a minimum of a year to receive this award, the latest breaking news is that, in the quantum sense, you've probably been a member of the Federation in sort of an on-again, off-again sense, forever. In an attempt to finally end the feelings of remorse certain starship captains and yeomen in this room are currently feeling, I'll endeavor to explain what that means.” He drew a deep breath; “According to composite meta-analysis calculations of a quantum singularity that the Guardian retains knowledge of having occurred when you, sir, were last on Guardian Alpha, but which no one present on the planet at that time is able to recall, it seems infinitely likely that such a scenario as the Psionic War in which the Federation was recently embroiled has occurred a quanta of times.

“I'm told that this is where the *forever* comes from relative to your membership in the Federation, Colin, and that what we in this room so prosaically consider to be *now* is but one of seven-hundredths of one-percent of those quanta of times, perhaps even the *only* time, that the attempt to destroy the invaders was successful. If that doesn't make you feel better, then the further confusing news that there were three discrete quadratic points that could have led to failure *this* time should. One of those points gives a failure level so high — ”

“*Which* points?” Colin cut in. The UFP President’s information wasn’t something Duquesne’s report had revealed.

Ra-ghoratreii snorted. “You can read the entire arcane synopsis later. I sent a copy of it to Captain Ingram’s personal computer. Besides, *you* are half of a psionic Chua Attractor — perhaps you should tell us!”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Renee looked down at the data on the compadd in her hand, and sighed. There were so many unanswered questions, untied knots, and literal missing pieces scattered around in the aftermath of this struggle, she wondered if they would ever all be answered, tied, or found. The link she'd opened from her personal computer held a meager list of suggestions given by the Admiralty for an updated crew roster.

"A Tellarite protocol officer," she mused softly. Not that she had a lot of options; the next batch of Starfleet midshipmen wouldn't be matriculated cadets until 2404.

Colin looked up from the 'padd he was perusing and smiled at her. The office they sat in was the Judge Advocate's, the complex at last shut and quiet. Before he could comment, T'Strali entered the small room where Renee and Colin sat. The Vulcan woman nodded at the couple waiting for her behind the old-fashioned desk. The JAG was carrying a large valise, which she set on the floor, and a large compadd, which she set on the desk prior to sitting down behind it.

Like any Vulcan properly trained to the standards of her culture, T'Strali got right to the point; "It is imperative, Colin, that we discuss your future plans as concerns the refitting of our ships of the line." T'Strali nodded briefly at Renee, "I'm already aware of your ideas. Perhaps Captain Ingram would like to hear them as well."

Renee held up one hand. “Before we talk about Colin’s plans for our ships, Judge Advocate General, I’d like to submit a few of my own. I haven’t had time to draw up any sort of specs, but — ”

“You want multiple sites of ingress and egress from the bridge and other control-sensitive areas of the ship, and phaser and torpedo banks capable of covering all areas of the ship in all directions which will result in an approximately thirty-five percent increase in firepower. You request additional storage bays fitted with direct-transportation links, fully holographic-capable tables and viewscreens throughout the ship, a committed energy-sink for the psionic alternator, and you wish to reinstitute direct-contact hull plating.

“Furthermore, I have been advised that all ships we construct or refit from this point forward should be purposely separable into modular units.” A smile lurked around the edges of T’Strali’s eyes; “Have I forgotten anything?” the Vulcan’s gaze moved from Renee toward Colin.

Renee narrowed her eyes at Colin, who shook his head and held up his hands, palm-outward, in the manner of a child accused of ransacking a cookie jar. “She got this from your logs. Except for that last thing. I thought it might be kind of helpful, in case part of the ship is ever taken over by the living dead again.”

You think you just made a joke.

Which only proves that I don't know the living dead quite as well as I think I do? Colin reached over and took Renee's hand.

"Colin is correct. And the refits you have requested are being drawn up as we speak. Enough of the fleet's *Excelsior*-class vessels require refit that these alterations will ultimately be performed on all of them."

Renee sat forward suddenly. "I'd been so damned busy..." she shook her head. "What's the status of the other vessels in the fleet? Is...is Demora's father all right?"

T'Strali inclined her head. "Hikaru Sulu sustained only minor injuries in the skirmish between the *Excelsiors* and the *Dreadnoughts*. According to the data retrieved, the *Eagle* and the *Repulse* had been firing only to disable, never to destroy. The fleet has suffered the loss of two of its *Dreadnoughts*, four of its *Excelsiors*, one of its *Constitution*-class vessels, two *Odysseus*-class vessels, and thirty-seven allied Conjunctions.

"Considering the scope of what our enemies had attempted to accomplish," the JAG actually sighed, "our losses might have been significantly worse. Not including the destruction of the Suliban-settled system, for which we possess no census, the most recent mortality tally states that fewer than thirty million people lost their lives, though the scope of injury both physical and mental, as well as the scope of environmental and property damage, is rather more considerable. Had our enemies been able to continue their depredations..." T'Strali's face grew grim,

“the level of death, injury, and damage would have expanded exponentially.”

Renee sat quietly, trying to take that all in, but T’Strali went on.

“As I previously stated, I wish to discuss your future plans, Yeoman.”

Colin nodded somberly. “Those plans also hinge on future defense, Judge Advocate.” Sitting back in his chair and folding his hands across his midsection, he expounded:

“The crystalline lattice Starfleet has in their *Excelsior*-class ships is an excellent psionic conduit. As we demonstrated with the *Enterprise*, it’s entirely possible to enhance it, and tie it into the general operations of the ship itself, so that the presence of psionic individuals isn’t required for it to power up. When I’m finished, the capacities of that conduit could be used to supplement starship defensive shielding, or as a communications tool capable of extending the natural abilities of any telepath or empath. The working range of unameliorated psionic communication is limited to a few dozen miles, and Federation ships attempt communication over vast distances, with beings that aren’t always friendly.

“If you’d had a telepath or empath using such a system when these attacks had first begun, you would have been able to realize much sooner that what you were dealing with was cloaked single-person ships, manned by creatures able to

produce violent hallucinations. Trained empaths may also have been able to help individuals overcome, or at least modify, the telepathic hallucinations somewhat, as well. Your starships could have freed the besieged planets, or at the very least gotten away from the alien ships — which were built for anything but speed — and formulated an attack plan in relative safety.” Colin’s gaze grew earnest.

“*Every ship you design from this point on should be so equipped, Judge Advocate. Trained empaths available to the crew in the stressful situations in which I’m sure they find themselves would, in any case, be of great value for morale, and the Federation possesses some outstanding ones, particularly those from Betazed and Rumantia. A post for such individuals should be created and maintained by Starfleet from this time forward.”*

I was agonizing over them sending you back to that damned empire of swords, and you were going to Betazed and Rumantia? Renee badgered the chatty telepath silently.

Colin flashed a grin at her. Minara Prime, too. It is much altered here! Most of the time you thought I was in custody, I was on Vulcan, where I spent some time working with the SCE and the analysts of Section 31. Like I told you before, they’re very interested in several of my abilities, and want to try to reproduce them using something similar to a miniature electromagnetic-psionic converter.

Blinking at Colin, Ingram was about to ask him to explain exactly what he meant, when T'Strali, also sitting back comfortably in her chair with her arms crossed, pulled them both back into the present. “*All* of our ships of the line? That sounds like a great deal of work, Colin.”

Colin smiled. “I’m entirely amenable to refining and extensively testing the abilities of the Lonsdaleite network aboard the ship whose lattice I’m most familiar with, Judge Advocate. What we determine to be of use could then be extended to other ships.”

“Would such extensive refining of your ship be amenable to you, Captain Ingram?”

Renee selected her words very carefully. “Judge Advocate, I do believe that Colin would be quite valuable as...” she thought a moment, “an Advanced Technologies Operations Yeoman tasked with enhancing the communications and sensory capabilities of the *Enterprise*. But only,” she added, turning back to Colin, “if that is *really* what he wants to do.”

“I want my life to have meaning. What more could anyone ask than that?” Colin replied softly. He directed this hypothetical question to the judge advocate general.

Renee thought for an instant that T'Strali might actually smile, but she didn't. The Vulcan lowered her smiling eyes, instead, then sat forward and began to enter data into the large compadd on the desk in front of her.

“Colin,” the judge advocate began in a soft tone, still manipulating data on her ‘padd, “you need to understand that a yeoman aboard a starship is *not* constrained by the same regulations as the rest of the crew, because they *aren’t* crew. However, if any yeoman contravenes the regulations set in place for the functioning of that ship, including infringement upon command decisions or morale, they *are* subject to the same penalties.” T’Strali finished her work with the ‘padd, and looked up at Colin, her eyes now as sharp as laser scalpels. “Do I make myself clear?”

Colin considered this for almost a minute, not looking away from the Vulcan’s keen gaze, sitting forward in his chair once more, his position mirroring Renee’s own. “I believe you do, Judge Advocate General,” he replied at last. T’Strali handed him the compadd.

“Hold that in front of your face, press the button in the lower right-hand corner, and the device will take a retinal scan that will bind you to these agreements.” Colin had told Renee that he had been made a Federation member two days before, Doliv hovering over him anxiously as he used the compadd in the hospital, so he was familiar with the process of retinal scanning. The JAG added; “You should also know that the work you have already performed and the awards you have been granted have made you a highly-regarded figure in the Federation. There are many other options open to you, should you ever desire other posting.”

Colin's compelling gaze lingered on the Vulcan before he used the compadd. "I have trouble seeing how people can admire me for having brought them destruction."

Renee nodded in silent agreement.

T'Strali shook her head slowly at both people seated across the desk from her. "Valiant as you are, still neither of you are responsible for the quantum-entanglement of this Universe. If Renee had not entered the Guardian, still the Imperial impostors were here. The Suliban people gave their all attempting to halt this advance; Nevertheless, it was the ships and technology that the Suliban themselves unadvisedly kept which the creatures ultimately used for their purposes. If the data I possess regarding this conundrum are correct, then the Empire's psionic shock-troops were here before either you or Renee existed. If that is so, then the reason for your existences was to defeat them, was it not?"

"At any rate, we're here to celebrate the destruction of a Möbius strip, not to determine its proximate point of connectivity. Only the Guardian knows that point, and I for one have no desire to probe it further."

The man Renee had brought out of a tarnished-mirror Universe in order to save her own offered the Vulcan woman a wry smile, then held up the compadd, allowing it to shine a laser into his eye and seal the agreement that made him part of the non-enlisted crew of the *Enterprise*, iteration *beta*.

