

TARNISHED REFLECTIONS

Book 1

Bloody Apparitions

©By Rosemarie Taylor-Perry 2020

Tarnished Reflections, Book 2, A Darkened Glass
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*(Actions in these this volume occurs from December
2297-July 2298)*

Chapter One

Captain John Harriman was on edge. Which wasn't surprising; they all were.

"You're certain this was a *real* transmission, and not another attempt to fry our insides?" the *Enterprise* B's human/Efrosian head tactical and chief security officer, Lieutenant Gabe Vi-bhoneh, inquired. His looks entirely reflected his mother's southern African ancestry, but his voice was pure Efrosian, a commanding, musical intonation from dual speech organs situated in chest and throat.

"It was too complex for it to have been malware," Renee Ingram, the ship's XO, replied in her soothing voice. She gestured at John Harriman, who had been pacing up and down in front of the viewscreen-windows in the situation room for the last fifteen minutes.

As she'd surmised he would, he read her body language correctly and fell into the chair she gestured toward. The skin around the captain's eyes was liberally smudged with the heavy cosmetic of sleeplessness, but then, everyone gathered around the glossy black table

looked like that, to greater or lesser extent.

"Malware that bulky would have been flagged before it even came out of subspace," the *Enterprise's* Hali'ian senior communications officer said. Yaelat still felt ashamed for having inadvertently allowed a viral piggyback into the starship's system recently, which had caused the computers to override his station and send this latest communiqué directly to the captain's attention.

"Also, it was Code Factor One, routed through Denobula," Harriman said.

Two Federation star systems possessed members who were not only genetically mind-blind, but whose presence could repress psionic transmissions. Denobula was in one of those systems; Huan was in the other. The Federation Council had lately taken refuge on these planets. Battle plans would be broadcast through whatever unaffected communications links still remained between those systems and the Federation's Star Fleet, if they were broadcast at all.

These were two of several Federation planets whose population had lately been enlisted en-masse as shields against encroaching madness. The captain of the *Enterprise* iteration *Beta* had spent nearly an hour debating the safety of opening the Denobulan information packet in question with his first officer. If the message hadn't come

from either Denobula or Huan, neither of them would have considered accepting it, much less opening it, at all; the viral piggyback which had accompanied the previous subspace message the *Enterprise* had received — from Betazed, no less — had very efficiently sought to take control of the ship's internal operating systems by posing as an internal operating system.

Fortunately, all modern fluidic, sub-quantum computer systems in the Federation used fallback safety hardware consisting of extremely old-fashioned Terran hard-drive units. These were appended to the mainframes that they backed up by on/off, toggle-sensitive electron drives, arcane creations that generally kept Federation computer-operated systems from being imposed upon by any sort of outside force. Most of the repairs still required on the *Enterprise* B consisted of data retrieval from these units, which no other species known to the Federation had ever utilized. Such retrieval had to be performed by personnel versed in the use of the ancient Terran technology, and this took time.

Renee had played devil's advocate for her exhausted CO and argued that the Denobulan postmark carried by the emergency-warp envelope sent by Starfleet's most covert branch might have been faked. More malware would strand them in this area of space for longer than might be

healthy, considering that more than one Federation vessel was said to have succumbed to whatever insanity it was that was currently trying to tear the Federation apart from within.

However, as she herself had just told the starship's assembled senior officers, the Denobulan transmission hadn't been faked. This wasn't more malware; it was a cunningly encrypted message which lay to rest all hopes that some sort of mass brain-infection with a potential medical cure had infested the heart of the Federation. What was occurring across the centerline of the Alpha and Beta quadrants was now known to be a psionic attack, and the Federation was experiencing a state of siege. According to the communiqué, an unidentified number of starships had gone rogue when their personnel had been exposed to these psionic attacks.

It occurred to Renee Ingram that it was unfortunate that the sentient individuals staffing Starfleet didn't come with old-fashioned Terran hard-drive units. The XO of the *Enterprise* scowled at nobody in particular. It had all begun suddenly, almost two Terran Standard months ago. Federation scientists and medical teams had, at first, been confident that some form of known pathogen, radiation, or communicable psionic syndrome was causing the onset of hallucinations capable of leading to global outbreaks of

violence.

The only psionic Federation race wholly resistant to it were the Betazoids. Nearly every citizen of that planet over sixteen and under seventy had been recruited to help in hospitals and armories. Now, though, the ultra-covert Starfleet section whose communiqué the *Enterprise* had just received felt that depending upon mere Federation citizens to stand in the breech of what were actually far-flung, unpredictable, invisible psionic attacks was roughly equivalent to erecting a sandbag wall in the face of an encroaching tidal wave.

"I'm assuming that since you gathered us together here, you're going to let us in on what the communiqué said?" Josi Felingaili, Lieutenant Commander of Operations, prompted her tired senior officers. She wasn't the type to waste time on pleasantries when action needed to be taken. Copper-skinned and dark-haired, her vivid aquamarine eyes were the only things that betrayed an Orion heritage which she otherwise took great pains to hide. Next to Josi, T'Dani Corrigan, the *Enterprise* B's part-Vulcan CMO, nodded agreement.

Considering her two best friends across the width of the computerized situation-room table, Ingram lost herself in memory for a split second. Neither woman had been present during the *Enterprise*'s shakedown cruise; indeed, a

third of the people currently sitting in the situation-room hadn't been present that day. This had been horribly unfortunate, since their presence might have saved lives. Of course, the presence of photon torpedoes and a tractor beam might have saved even more.

The executive officer of the *Enterprise* rubbed her tired eyes, forced her mind back to the present, and glanced at the captain, who raised a hand to rub at his own face before replying to Josi; "That's what we're here for, Commander. As it turns out, the communiqué provides empirical evidence that we're not up against microbes or nanites or radiation. As Section 31 supposed right at the start, it's an attack."

"Carried out how?" Thomas Marcus Johnson, the redheaded first-shift navigations lieutenant, who insisted that everyone call him *Marco* because the nickname *Tom* made him feel like a ginger cat being summoned to dinner, asked.

"According to Section 31, the attacks mainly appear to be carried out by cloaked, psionically- controlled ships in orbit," Renee replied. "They can be as far away as a system's outer planets, and still maintain these attacks. Or possibly even farther. Like the captain said, the information in the communiqué's empirical at best."

Seantie Voss, the lieutenant in charge of all of

Enterprise B's scientific personnel, sat forward in her seat. "How is that even *possible*? Psionic control at such distances would be...well, very difficult." As a Betazoid matron, Seantie customarily wore her exuberantly curly roan-colored hair up in complex plaits. However, the past few weeks hadn't left anybody a great deal of time to see to personal grooming, so like the vast majority of the other female crewmembers at the table, she had resorted to simply pinning it back in a tight bun in order to keep it from devolving into a mass of stringy snarls.

"The ships the aliens are in are partly made of some sort of..." Harriman cast an uncomfortable glance at Yaelat Qat, the ship's senior communications officer and first-contact expert, before going on; "psionic energy-enhancing crystals." The Hali'ian directed a look of horror back at the captain of the *Enterprise*.

"But they don't seem to be similar the ones your people use, Lieutenant Qat," Renee hastened to add; "They're different in some way the Section still can't determine."

"If they're using a psionic technology, we don't know anything about, how was what these aliens are doing determined?" the distress in the Hali'ian's tone was unmistakable.

Harriman sighed. "Empirical evidence is all we've got

to go on, Lieutenant. Nobody's even a hundred percent sure *who* is doing this, but the technology that's recognized in the remains of the attack craft appears to be Suliban."

The Suliban had never sent ambassadors to the Federation and were elusive at the best of times. Federation reports regarding modern Suliban were accurate whether they spelled that word using an i or an e in front; certain genetic alterations (including the ability to make oneself invisible by metabolically influencing the skin's surface to produce electromagnetic wavelengths incompatible with standard humanoid eyesight) were often passed to offspring epigenetically. Most Federation xenopsychologists hypothesized that a lingering sense of shame about the reappearance of such traits had kept the Suliban from requesting Federation membership, which they had been offered a number of times.

"Cabal," Renee clarified.

At the other end of the table, Demora Sulu wrinkled her nose in distaste. Hikaru Sulu had bestowed a great love of history upon his daughter. She had made Federation History her minor field of study in Starfleet. "Temporal-phase vessels?"

Ingram nodded. "Evidently. The shards are several thousandths of a microsecond out of real-time phase-space. Since so much of what Section 31's discovered is no more

than empirical, they can only offer hypotheses about why. They think maybe this fluctuation is either caused by the telepathy-enhancing crystalline structure of the ships, or because the ships or their pilots come from another space-time entirely. Or," she smiled humorlessly, "I suppose we could just throw caution to the wind and assume that it's all of those things concurrently, since we seem to be dealing with things we've never encountered before anyway."

"We've encountered the Cabal before," Demora pointed out.

"Which is why Section 31 wants us to begin with the mission to contact the Suliban," Captain Harriman said. "It's likely that they'd be in possession of old Cabal technology."

"And utterly new psionic technology?" the petite, blond chief medical officer of the *Enterprise* crossed her arms across her chest as though she'd suddenly become cold. "All of this sounds like something Section 31 should be handling itself."

"Section 31 constitutes maybe one one-thousandth of the manpower of Starfleet —" Yaelat began.

"And where are they?" T'Dani interrupted archly. Her Vulcan features stood in juxtaposition to both her coloration and her passionate nature. Her father had been human; she herself followed the teachings of *V'tosh katur*.

And like most people in Starfleet proper, she harbored a deep distrust of the ostensibly non-existent arm of Starfleet called Section 31. "Hiding out on Denobula? They've got technologies —"

"That are currently at the service of Halana and the Cairn, who're the only ones who've actually managed to bring down the ships that were tormenting them, and they did it at the expense of three-quarters of their populations and the ecological health of their planets," Ingram snapped.

She knew she should be more patient. Explaining the content of the damned communiqué was what they were doing here, after all. And none of the senior officers of the *Enterprise* iteration *Beta* were shy about asking questions or making their thoughts felt; John Harriman didn't run that sort of ship. Ingram drew a deep breath and tried to loosen the tightness in her neck and shoulders.

"*All* legitimate communication's being routed through Denobula and Huan," John Harriman clarified gently; "The Inspector General of Section 31 sent us this communiqué through Denobula from Halana two weeks ago. Unfortunately, that's about as fast as an encoded FTL communiqué can travel between those points before reaching this far into deep space. Our orders are to locate the Suliban, and to take any action we deem necessary to release the Federation from their control."

"Meaning exactly *what*?" Tamakari Phica, the *Enterprise's* Napean Chief Engineer, demanded loudly. "How is it that Section 31 has any authority to tell a Federation Starship's crew what to do?" Napean women were enormous, in terms of both height and girth, and though they were also as strong and nimble as Vulcans, they were generally soft-spoken and gentle. The woman whose friends called her *Tammy*, and whose non-friends avoided her assiduously, was an exception to this rule. She was also an excellent engineer. From across the table, Yaelat scowled at her, but remained silent.

"Inspector General's roughly the same rank as Fleet Admiral, Lieutenant Phica. They're not the bogeymen some make them out to be, except that when Section 31 says *anything*, they mean *absolutely* anything at all. And we're not the only starship they've sent that order to." Harriman sighed again; he'd been doing that a lot recently, Renee reflected. "Even the Section's not certain what the remaining fleet strength is. But they *do* know that Kazari'a, Hali'ia, Napea, Delta, Vulcan, Andoria, and Terra are under such siege that major institutions have been razed. Suliban or otherwise, these things know where the bulk of our psions are located, *and* how to get to the seat of the Federation."

"And they're determined to destroy it," Ingram

finished, her melodic voice flat and final, brooking no further argument. "This isn't some sort of conspiratorial ruse, folks. It's real."

"You can't blame us for wishing it wasn't," T'Dani murmured.

"No," Harriman said softly; "I absolutely don't."

Chapter Two

Roxanne regarded the desert planet spinning endlessly beneath the first sun ever tamed by Imperial photosphere-stabilizing techniques. Such techniques had, paradoxically, been developed from nova-inducing weaponry. Such weaponry was commonly used by the United Empire of Planets, to efficiently render the inhabitants of combative civilizations that spanned more than a single planet in any given star system either tame or dead.

She would be protected here, as she had always been protected. The newest Intendant of the astonishing planet scowled at its swiftly approaching, red- and gold -mottled surface. She suppressed a shudder the same way she had suppressed all tears of grief, with a skill born of practice and redirected pain. She harbored no illusions that she'd actually be in command in this place. Only one person commanded Minara Prime and all of its endlessly fascinating devices. Paradoxically, the thought of him also made her want to smile. She suppressed that, too. Minara Prime was about as far away from the heart of the ongoing uprising occurring in the UEP as one could get without

shipping off to another quadrant entirely. Alternatively...

"Our shuttle has been locked onto by planetary docking programs, Intendant," the Betazoid pilot said softly. "Shall I release control to them?"

Alternatively, Minara Prime was Sector 31 Special Security Force's bastion of power in the Alpha Quadrant, overseen by the Inquisitor General of that largely covert body itself. Sector 31 had been granted their charter after they had put down Romulan uprisings against the Terran Empire nearly two hundred years before. They had acquired such clout that the terms of their charter had expanded significantly in the years since. It was whispered that Minara Prime was a citadel of such horrors that not even the Imperial court...

Roxanne allowed that thought to wander away unsupervised. Why should she not accept this intendency? It had been extended at a time of duress and without the need to exert undue effort, and it was, after all, her own father who had won the place for the Empire, and her own lover who reigned there. "By all means, Lieutenant."

"Shuttle *Attila* requesting full docking rights by acceptance of security lock," the young woman intoned. The shuttle and its inhabitants lurched and bounced momentarily as its outer inertial fields kicked on, which allowed the gravimetric docking clamps present

everywhere in the stratosphere of Minara Prime to take over, docking clamps that could rend an uncooperative vessel apart as easily as Roxanne might electronically shred a computer flimsy into its constituent particles.

The voice that came back through the speakers at the shuttle's pilot caused the Betazoid to blanch and stiffen in her seat. Or perhaps it wasn't the voice; perhaps it was the psychic intent of the voice's owner. "Welcome home, my dear."

The newest Intendant of Minara Prime closed her eyes to the sight of the encroaching planet and her ears to the shaky drone of her pilot's answer. Roxanne's father had been in immensely powerful man, whose judicious use of reward and punishment had bred in her an overarching desire for powerful men, and the ability to pick them out of any crowd. The Inquisitor General of Sector 31 would have known that Roxanne was in the shuttle. She wasn't surprised to learn that he'd chosen to dock her shuttle himself, but as always, she had poor control over her visceral response to the sound of his voice.

She withheld that response from him by the simple expedient of not replying. He had his own weaknesses, of course; all mortal creatures did. She'd filed them away very carefully as she'd learned them, another vital lesson Roxanne's father had instilled in his daughter. Shane Kell,

Inquisitor General of Sector 31, had been Roxanne's first and, as far as she was aware, only mistake when it came to assessing an individual's personal power and their capacity to wield it.

She was, she knew, simply lucky that he'd found her more attractive than irritating. Shane Kell did not tolerate irritations; he skinned them while they were still conscious and screaming. He was particularly adept at keeping his victims alive, if not exactly comfortable, long enough that they might admire the various items of attire he liked to have fashioned from their hides. The first time he had left her breathless and quivering in the installation she currently orbited above, it had been in front of a fireplace on a silky rug of Chalnar fur, complete with that unfortunate pseudo-humanoid's head.

The sound and feel of physical docking clamps pulled Roxanne away from her reveries. She blinked through the transparent aluminum windows at the panorama leeward of the now-quiescent shuttlecraft. At this altitude, the vast majority of the clouds that swathed the northern pole of the desert planet were below them. Minara Prime's North Pole consisted of a rugged mountain range whose central peak rose twenty thousand feet into the atmosphere. The taiga and snowbanks that graced the tip of this peak, as well as the exotic semi-Minaran, semi-alien temperate and

equatorial rainforests that tumbled down its steep sides were, she knew, a carefully maintained facade.

The mountain upon which her shuttle was now virtually imprisoned was a metallic warren of offices, dwellings, slave-stations, and vigilantly-guarded hallways that ran from the private docking bays near its apex, spiraling all the way down to where the mountain's base contacted the underground karst that constituted the backbone of the desert. It was the most expansive scientific complex in the Empire, a three-dimensional, million- square -acre warren that housed everything from top-secret cloning and transport laboratories to slave breeding and disposal facilities. And it docked its shuttles, she noted sourly as the surrounding view flickered slightly then went still again, under a force field.

Probably, such security was warranted; no one was fully aware exactly what Shane Kell had spawned on Minara Prime. Rumor had it that not even he knew everything that went on in the complex he'd spent fifty years creating. Roxanne was understandably skeptical of these rumors. She'd been fourteen when she'd first met Kell. Young, impetuous, naively arrogant of her own power and contemptuous, she had attempted, in a fit of boredom and whimsy, to use him as a test subject for one of her hobbies.

That hobby hissed sleepily as she pulled its soft-sided, heated carrying case out of the shuttle's main storage compartment. The young Betazoid shuttle pilot didn't attempt to mask the raw fear that played over her face at the sound; instead, she stood and flattened herself against the panel furthest away from Roxanne and her pet.

Roxanne forestalled another smile. Forbidding as many of its laws could be, the Empire didn't generally see anything wrong with keeping pets, and nobody gave a more liberal range than the Empire did when determining what creatures might be considered pets. Roxanne personally knew at least four people who kept fully sentient ones. One of the remaining compartments on this shuttle hosted Roxanne's dart-lilies, cyanide ferns, and black-widow orchids; others held her blue-ringed octopus aquarium and her single remaining force field-nest of little Marizon fire-spiders. None of those creatures tolerated casual handling.

The animal in the heated bag tolerated handling by no one except herself. Roxanne crooned and clicked softly as she partially unzipped the bag to try and coax the shy little creature out.

A brilliant green snake half as long as her arm, the vivid blue stipple markings that outlined his scales proclaiming both his sex and his advancing age, regarded

her momentarily with lovely slit-pupiled pale eyes, before twining itself up the tips of her fingers and around her wrist. Bucephalus had never bitten the hand that had held his diminutive egg for hours to keep it warm and safe as he hatched; he had never had to bite anything in order to procure food. Baby snakes were usually ravenously hungry by the time they left the egg, but Roxanne had forestalled this eventuality by nursing the tiny reptile with droplets of her own blood throughout the torturous process of hatching.

The boomslang was utterly tame in her hands. The only time he bit was in play, and Roxanne scheduled his playtimes very carefully, in order to harvest his poison. She was largely immune to his venom by now, anyway. The same things might be said, she imagined, of the man she'd first tried out her pet's venom on. Unsuccessfully, as it turned out. She allowed herself the ghost of a smile at the memory.

"Aren't those things..." the Betazoid pilot gulped and tried to back up further, "ahm, extremely dangerous, Intendant?"

Roxanne nodded. "The most poisonous snake on Terra. Mostly because their venom's also a contact toxin." She stroked the boomslang's head softly. Replete with baby mice and still sleepy from the nap he'd been

awakened from, he didn't nuzzle her fingertip in return, seeking the droplet of blood she sometimes offered. "But Bucephalus is tame." She tucked her pet back into his travel bag; she could return to the shuttle for the rest of her belongings later. The shuttle pilot let out a shaky held breath and opened the main door of the shuttle into the airlock bay.

The sight of the man who stood alone and apparently unguarded in the bay caused the pilot to exhibit much the same sheepish behavior as the boomslang had. Of course, Betazoids were empaths. Probably the woman had already surmised...

"I've brought you a gift," Roxanne murmured, stepping around the appalled pilot and down the shuttle's ramp. Sharp dark eyes in a weathered face cast a glance as fast as a boomslang's strike over Roxanne's right shoulder. The sight of the shuttle pilot's discomfiture caused them to glint with amusement.

The Betazoids had capitulated to the UEP without a fight and signed treaties that made them subjects rather than outright slaves, as had the Napean race. The Hali'ians, Halana, Rumantians, Cairn, and various other psionic humanoids hadn't made the same wise decision, and their planetary systems had been razed. All of these races and their psionic toys were now part of the purview of the

specialized Sector 31 slave camps of Minara Prime.

Shane Kell's mouth dimpled when he smiled, pulling the multiple dark whorls of asymmetrical facial adornments, rank-insignia common to the special security forces who dominated and controlled Sector 31, into a rictus. "I've never had a Betazoid before."

The thrill that shot down Roxanne's spine blocked out the bleating complaints and pleas the pilot made as Shane's exquisitely-trained bodyguards, to whom Kell personally taught the art of hiding in shadows imperceptible to most other people, came forward and took her away. That smile and that voice had been what had first riveted Roxanne when, stepping out of the shower, she'd found the man naked in her bed playing with Bucephalus. Roxanne's fierce baby had bitten the stranger again and again before collapsing with exhaustion, at which point Kell had risen and deposited the boomslang back into its habitat, giving Roxanne her first full glimpse of his heavily self-scarred dancer's body.

A similar twinkle had lit his eyes then, as he'd licked and sucked blood and poison from a dozen tiny wounds in his fingers. She'd secreted the snake in Kell's bed. It had been an unsettling surprise to find Kell in her own.

He'd made it clear that he wouldn't be leaving for some time; "Come here and I'll show you what Sector 31

does to naughty girls," were the first words she'd ever heard Shane Kell utter.

She'd learned that his touch had the same hypnotic quality as his voice, when he'd caressed her with lacerated fingertips that possessed just enough remaining boomslang venom to make her tingle and, much later, retch. He'd taught her many things that summer, not the least being an ancient emperor's methods for making oneself immune to poisons by ingesting or otherwise introducing minute amounts of them into one's system over extended periods of time. She'd learned, as well, how stunningly powerful Kell's deceptive body was, and what sorts of things he usually did to those who crossed him. They didn't, he'd made plain, customarily include caresses.

She'd always been an avid learner. And she'd come here, this time, for more than a simple intendency, or to deliver Kell a unique telepathic gift to add to his slave-stables; she hadn't come just to show that she realized how deeply indebted she was to his mercy, or how fiercely addicted she was to him as a lover. Kell and his ilk made a game of vengeance, and she had a complex, multilayered game to offer him in the person of a turncoat named *Spock*.

She'd bet anything that anyone cared to name that Shane Kell had never had Vulcan genes to add to the psionic breeding farms or cloning factories that he would

be shortly touring her through, either. Of course, he'd be *helping* her whether he actually wanted to or not; he just didn't know that.

Yet.

Chapter Three

Enterprise was en route to Mu Crucis, a star system at the outer edges of Federation space, sixteen hours from their last location at warp nine, or a journey of about two hundred years at light speed. According to covert reports, the Suliban who had taken the system's harsh, rocky planets and moons for their own called Mu Crucis *Iltana-Li*.

John Harriman had ordered all his senior officers to use that time to sleep, eat, and perform necessary personal functions for the duration of travel to this star system. It had taken an hour away from those sixteen in order for T'Dani and Renee to attempt to convince, and finally order, the captain of the *Enterprise* to do the same.

Twelve hours of sleep, no matter how broken by worries flashing through her subconscious like ancient lighthouse beacons through fog, had been very welcome. Renee had just showered and eaten what felt like breakfast but which was, according to the ship's day, a very late lunch, and was in the process of coiling her wavy chestnut hair back into a loose chignon when Harriman's tense tones

came over the comm unit in her quarters. "Renee? You've got to get to the bridge and see this, *right* now."

"Yes, sir," she replied, darting out the door and fiddling with the hair clasp she'd chosen as she jogged to the turbolift two doors down from her quarters. Upon entering the bridge, she found to her chagrin that she was the only upper-level bridge officer not already present.

The fact that all first-shift personnel had rested and seen to personal needs for an odd number of shifts before returning to the bridge had thrown the shift-rotations completely out of whack. Ensigns and yeomen hurried in and out, retrieving or delivering shift-data padds and zip-chips. Everyone not directly involved in this bustle was ignoring it.

Renee understood why the second she laid eyes on the main viewscreen.

The *Enterprise* had automatically dropped down into impulse well away from the Mu Crucis system when the ship's forward sensors had determined an unnatural level of detritus in the system, capable of causing structural or temporal damage to a vessel in warp. Harriman had brought the starship to a full halt the moment long-range sensors had given them some idea of where this detritus had come from:

Where Mu Crucis's four rocky planets, seven moons,

and single gas giant had been was now a rubble-strewn asteroid field ringed with bad-tempered frozen methane comets. And where the system's cheerful yellow star had been was...

"It's an iron star, sir. This...Captain, the *Universe* is nowhere near old enough to have..." the Betazoid shook her head and turned her chair to face the captain; "Either a passage of time three times the current projected age of the Universe, or some sort of quantum-tunneling, would be required to cause iron-star formation. It's... I'm...I'm not even certain where to begin," Seantie said in a hushed voice, turning her chair back and frowning down at the science station board's constantly-repeating, constantly-updated flow of sensor information.

Renee scowled at the destruction on the screen before her as she walked down onto the main deck. Iron was the most dangerous element in the Universe. As far as she was aware, iron as the primary constituent in the fusion furnace of a star always caused slow stellar decay in the form of bloated red giants, or immediate stellar decay in the form of supernovae. Living stars contained traces of iron and heavier elements only because previous stars been spectacularly murdered by iron. The fact that such a fundamentally dangerous thing was one of the elements that drove the metabolism of all carbon-based living

systems was bizarre enough, but *iron stars*?

"Any indication of what might have caused quantum tunneling in this area?" John prompted as Renee walked to his side, squinting at the long-range scene of destruction displayed on the large forward viewscreen.

"That's one of the questions I *can't* answer from the available data, Captain. I can tell you that the orbital stability of this detritus doesn't show a single normal curve," the Betazoid looked over her shoulder at the captain and XO. "Whatever did this did it progressively, over the last fifty years or so."

"Any life signs?"

Seantie's mouth twisted, and she looked back down at her console. "Nothing above the amoeboid level. There's a lot of magneton and verteron radiation emanating from some of this detritus. Plenty of carbon-based lifeform remains and technological slag, though, on almost every asteroid larger than a house in the system. The decomposition curves of the remains are what give the roughly half-century progression of destruction."

"What's driving the magneton radiation?" Harriman walked across the deck toward the science station, obviously wanting to see the data for himself. The primary radiation-gradient native to the event-horizons of aging black holes, magnetons had an almost negligible half-life,

dissipating immediately in the grand scheme of universal constants. Though it had, long ago, been utilized in early terraforming efforts, direct exposure to magneton radiation was instantaneously lethal. Its mercurial tendencies and extremely short half-life made it difficult to study, though it had recently been theorized that magneton radiation in conjunction with the expanding fabric of space was one of the key effectors of the apparent linearity of time, largely because magneton exposure to particular types of energy-fields could alter that linearity, usually to horrific effect.

No one in their right mind utilized it for environmental enhancement anymore, but as an energy-damper or a weapon, magneton radiation could be pretty damned useful.

"Nothing's driving it, Captain. The sensors say it's all background. It's the sheer magnitude of that background that's allowing the sensors to pick it up."

Captain Harriman turned mid-stride and frowned at the viewscreen again, as though he might somehow see whatever it was that the sensors were neglecting to tell them. "Can an iron star drive magneton radiation? Because there's no known black hole anywhere near this system. Some kind of weaponry, maybe whatever caused the quantum-tunneling that destroyed the star?"

The science officer raised her hands palm-upward and

turned her chair so that she could look at Harriman directly. "No way to tell, Captain, but I *can* tell you that there are no more Suliban in this system."

"According to what the Federation knew about this binary, the Suliban had settled the entire system," Demora supplied from her station at the helm, sadly.

"What if the Suliban didn't cause this? What if whatever is right now attacking the Federation caused it, in the process of stealing every bit of Cabal technology the Suliban here had?" Renee said softly, to no one in particular, at about the same time as T'Dani emerged from the turbolift onto the bridge to stare wide-eyed at the scene of dark devastation that took up most of the forward bulkhead. "The Suliban requested that the Federation stay out of their business, and we did it so well that now we're blindsided."

Harriman stared narrowly at Ingram, an expression familiar to everyone on the bridge. John's crew knew that this expression meant that the gentle, conservative man who didn't like to draw undue conclusions was forcing himself to consider the likelihood of the scenario his XO had just woven out of the thin threads of insufficient data. Time had proven to him that her hunches tended to hit uncomfortably close to their mark. He reached into one of the numerous pockets of his teal, black, white, and

security-gold uniform nervously, as though checking on something he thought he might have misplaced.

Renee turned from the viewscreen toward Demora; "Do you know if there are any more Suliban colonies on Tandar Prime? I'd like to know if they're aware of any enemies of their people who'd do something like this."

Demora shook her head slowly. "I have no idea. I certainly hope there are," she chewed at her bottom lip for a moment, before adding aloud what everyone on the bridge was already thinking; "Because if there aren't, there are probably no more Suliban."

Renee's mouth thinned, and she looked over at Harriman. "What do you think the odds are that an encrypted message will make it to Tandar Prime from here?"

John went the rest of the way to the science station to inspect Mu Crucis system data directly. After considering it for a long stretch of seconds, he shook his head. "Commander, if what you theorize is true, I'd imagine that these people may have been trying to send a message to Tandar Prime or even the Federation for the last fifty years. How well did *that* get through? But since you might be mistaken, I suppose we should try." He looked to his right, past Seantie, toward the communications console:

"Mr. Qat, we'll need an encrypted message warped to

Tandar Prime through..." he paused and thought for a moment; "Denobula. Let them know what we suspect has happened here, and request information about potential enemies of the Suliban from any Suliban who might remain on Tandar."

The Hali'ian nodded. "Immediately, Captain. Shall I use the same modality as the one found in Section 31's last communiqué?" Yaelat inquired.

Harriman nodded back. "As you see fit, Lieutenant."

Renee turned to T'Dani, who had moved to stand next to her. "Was there something you needed, Doctor?" She didn't usually refer to her best friend by title except in the direst of circumstances or when she was exceptionally irritated; this situation fit both of those parameters.

"I'm sorry to bother you in the middle of something like this," T'Dani's eyes hadn't left the viewscreen; she kept her voice very low. "But I thought you might want to know that I just had to perform transporter-surgery on your sparrow."

Renee's brows flew up. "Excuse me?"

Had Renee not been in Starfleet, she might have spent her life as a wild bird rehabilitator, something she did as much as practicably possible anyway. She kept several of her birds on the ship. The one T'Dani referred to was *Hey Hey*, a name that had been bestowed by T'Dani's own

great-nephew. That had been the half-alarmed, stuttering comment that the child made when his great-aunt had placed the freshly-hatched (and decidedly ugly), pink hatchling into his incubator-hot hybrid hands and insisted that he carry it all the way from Nisus University of Arts and Letters, where T'Dani had found its crushed nest, back to Ingram's adoptive parents' home.

"I put him back in his cage," the CMO said. "You need to stop feeding him synthetic string. It completely blocks up his crop."

Ingram groaned softly, and said under her breath; "*String?* Oh, jeez, he's sneaking out of his cage again." The silky little trickster did this periodically, when nesting instincts became intolerable and Ingram didn't have either the time or the inclination to play with him, or to feed him enough coconut custard to divert his attention. The ship's computer didn't seem to be up to calculating all the possible permutations of avian antics. "What did he rip apart this time?"

"Your pillowcase may never be the same. It's good you have monitors and auto-handling setups in their cages, or you'd be out one very sweet sparrow." T'Dani turned back toward the lift; "I'll —"

That was as far as she got before the bridge of the *Enterprise* became the stage for a scene of havoc. As

people both in and out of the Federation were wont to joke, all that was required for havoc to ensue was a single Andorian.

This, however, was neither a typical Andorian, nor a joke of any kind. Crucial seconds passed before anyone realized that gentle, friendly Aenar Records Ensign Injaa'ch'Riss bal'Craathaen was wielding the lethally sharp dagger called *hrisal* in Lesser Andorian and *flabjellah* in Greater. The ceremonial dagger was such a common adornment among Andorian Starfleet personnel that it was largely ignored by crew of other races, though its ubiquitous presence was well known to have saved more than one landing party, ambassadorial entourage, and once, an entire station crew from kidnapping, murder, or worse.

However, within the space of ten seconds, the unlikely wielder of this particular dagger left Gabe Vi-bhoneh without a head, and one of the junior systems engineers on the *Enterprise*'s bridge choking to death in her own blood.

The hue of the collimated beam that caught ch'Riss beneath the sternum gave visual proof that the phaser it came from it wasn't set on stun. The first killing blast screamed harmlessly against the phase-resistant induction mesh that was part of the uniform of all Andorians in Starfleet. All it accomplished was to give the records officer a new target, which he started toward at high speed

as nearby personnel scattered.

The second blast shorted out the induction mesh, then went on to tear away much of the ensign's uniform top as it passed across his thorax, ripping him open with horrid efficiency. It took another crucial second for Renee to comprehend that what John Harriman had been feeling for in his pocket not quite five minutes previously had been the phaser that Starfleet personnel above the rank of Ensign were permitted to carry while aboard ship.

"*Stop!*" the captain of the *Enterprise* cried, discharging his weapon again.

Neither the lethal phaser setting nor the damage it caused had any apparent effect on the Aenar *chan*. The records officer seemed to take a deep breath from the bottom of phaser-torn lungs and continued implacably toward the captain of the *Enterprise*. Nearly everyone else on the bridge had taken cover, and bal'Craathaen's path was unimpeded.

It occurred to Renee that whoever or whatever had wrought the demolition of the Mu Crucis system must still be present. The message Yaelat had sent out before ch'Riss went mad would have been enough to cut through any potentially shielding effects that magneton or verteron radiation had given the *Enterprise*, allowing a psionic enemy to home in on the ship. Ingram knew that what

Ch'riss was doing was exactly the sort of behavior that the current psionic invaders they were fighting caused a sentient individual to exhibit.

To see it in action was horrific.

The Aenar's pallid antennae flattened back so far that they were all but hidden in his hair. He lowered his torn body into a fighting crouch, and instead of replying to Harriman's command and the knowledge that there was a phaser set on kill leveled at him, ch'Riss opened his mouth and made a sound the likes of which Renee Ingram had never imagined. Part hiss and part growl, underlain with a keening snarl that she wouldn't have thought even semi-humanoid speech organs could produce, it brought every small hair on her body to immediate attention with a sense of dread that held her rooted to the spot, as though it carried an electric current in its wake.

The mortally-wounded, maddened records officer sprang at the captain of the *Enterprise*.

A *hrisal* blade sang through the space that John Jason Harriman had occupied.

His killing pounce threw ch'Riss off balance for a fraction of a second, and T'Dani used that fraction to lever herself away from where she'd tackled the captain, to kick the wickedly sharp ceremonial knife out of ch'Riss' left hand. The part-Vulcan woman was well-versed in martial

arts. She was also the only individual currently on the bridge with the strength or dexterity to fight an Andorian hand-to-hand.

Supple bone cracked under the force of T'Dani's heel; nevertheless, ch'Riss grasped her foot and tossed her bodily back toward the helm the way Renee might toss a crumpled flimsy sheet toward a replicator's recycling chute. Marco and Demora ducked beneath their consoles as T'Dani turned the uncontrolled hurtle into a back flip over the astronavigation stations, finally coming to rest ungracefully against the captain's chair.

Renee pulled out her own phaser and shot a heavy-stun blast directly into the record ensign's face.

Battle had widened the gaping wounds that high-phase beams fired at close quarters had torn into ch'Riss' chest and abdomen. The heavy white-walled sacs that protected his organs were in full view, sagging and blistering the way ghelnoid structures did under the effect of phased weapons; without treatment, they would dissolve entirely. Not that it ought to matter. From the waist down, the ghost-pale records ensign was a dripping mass of blue-black, cobalt-based globulin mixed with various other bodily secretions. Reason insisted shrilly that Injaa'ch'Riss bal'Craathaen should be lying dead on the bloody carpet, not crouching down once more and reaching backwards with inhumanly

fast reflexes to pick up the knife that had just been kicked out of his broken hand.

Renee had just enough time to change the setting of her phaser from heavy stun to kill before the undead Andorian turned its attention toward her. Not even T'Dani could move fast enough to block ch'Riss' movement this time, and though Renee sought quarter by vaulting over the half-railing that separated the command section from the ramp leading up toward the tactical board the minute the Aenar's blue-shot, sightless gray eyes and searching antennae had turned toward her, still the *hrisal* nicked her throat before she had a chance to discharge her weapon.

Her phaser expediently disarmed ch'Riss by blowing his left shoulder, clavicle, part of his left deltoid, and much of the left primary lung and transverse aorta off his body. Everyone on the bridge flinched away from the violent beam and the load of flaming gore it carried. As far as Renee could discern, however, ch'Riss didn't even feel the effects of the killing shot. His right hand lifted toward her throat. As his fingers began to close around her trachea, she noted, as though from very far away, that what should have felt to her human skin like the touch of a fevered hand was cold, and no indication of an Andorian's fierce, multi-stroke heartbeat was present in them.

Before what remained of the junior records officer

could strangle the XO of the *Enterprise*, he disappeared in a wave of molecular fire that blistered Renee's neck where the Aenar's fingers had been. Renee blinked away the blinding effect of nearby phaser fire combined with heavy doses of adrenaline and looked around wildly. To her right on the upper level of bridge, Josi Felingaili blinked back, as greenly ashen as Renee imagined she herself was. The Orion woman had set her weapon to disintegrate and shot the records officer from where she huddled behind the Ops console seat. Everyone on the starship's bridge, with the exceptions of Ingram, Harriman, and Corrigan, were similarly crouched.

The entire incident had occurred within less than a minute, scarcely long enough to spur the panic-waves of adrenaline that threatened to send Renee's heart into fibrillations. From where he still half-lay near the science console, the captain of the *Enterprise* snarled; "Computer, control override command, authority code Harriman beta six seven six four two. Lock all ship-command systems to my chair and nowhere else, Stardate..." he threw a wild glance at the chronometer at the science station; "9856.39. Lock all sickbay, engineering, and core command centers away from the use of anyone below the rank of lieutenant commander."

"Confirmed, computer. Enact the control override

command given by Captain John Harriman, Stardate 9856.39, authority code Ingram beta eight nine four five zero," Renee added weakly, fighting a combination of vertigo and nausea, before the computer had a chance to request her code as well. Starfleet had long ago learned never to hand control of one of its ships over to just one individual, but Renee doubted they'd have enough time for the back-and-forth confirmation cycle Starfleet Command was so enamored of.

Had Ingram not been on the bridge, the computer would have required the codes of the ship's captain, the chief tactical officer, and the chief medical officer. Vi-bhoneh was dead, and T'Dani was only on the bridge at the moment due to the antics of one of Renee's birds. Ch'Riss, or whatever it was that had animated the Aenar's dead flesh, hadn't chosen his victims and intended victims randomly.

Chapter Four

The blue-ringed octopus was a tiny creature. Roxanne's was actually one of the larger specimens of the species, measuring nearly nine inches long from the tip of its deceptively delicate beak to the furthest reach of its geometrically patterned tentacles.

"I'm told one can't perform progressive toxin immunity with the blue-ringed octopus," Roxanne offered, pulling the enormous frosted glass on her side of the table nearer and regarding the blended drink in it with some trepidation. "Is that true?"

"You've learned some restraint," Kell said. "That's good to know. A Vulcan might be able to gain immunity to blue-ringed octopus venom. Whether or not any progressive toxin immunity can be performed with animal venom appears to have something to do with the blood-base metal possessed by the toxic creature in question. Terran mollusks have copper-based blood. Terran sentients have iron. Not compatible for progressive-immunity buildup. It also can't be done with alcohol, which," Shane grinned and lifted his glass to her, "is what's in your glass.

It's a margarita, darling."

Roxanne returned his smile. "Not, say, a mughato margarita?"

The Inquisitor General lifted a brow. "What an intriguing idea. I'll have to try that." He took a drink from his own glass. "But not right now."

Roxanne considered removing the glass from his hand and replacing it with her own for a split second, then discarded that potentially fatal idea and sipped at the beverage she'd been given. Painful tingling, numbness, and dizziness did not ensue, although she imagined that by the time she'd downed the entire tequila-drenched goblet of sweet-sour crushed ice, that last would no longer be applicable. And anyway, there were any number of fungal poisons whose first effects didn't appear for half a Terran day, abated quickly, and wouldn't kill until later. Those toxins were some of her favorites; a person could be a star system or more away from their murderer before they succumbed to a tasty gravy they'd eaten days earlier.

She leaned forward to admire Kell's face as he looked down into his own drink, frowning at the frosted rim as though it had somehow offended him. "I called you here because I need help," he admitted finally. "One of my experiments escaped. Five years ago, now. It wasn't so worrisome then, but..." Kell let the comment drift off and

took another swig of his drink.

Roxanne blinked in disbelief. "Five years?"

Kell leveled a grim look at the new Intendant of Minara Prime. "It was a successful experiment."

"Do I even want to ask how?"

"The non-psionic natives here once possessed a metamorphic capacity. Genetic studies revealed that it's actually this that the psionic abilities of what used to be their ruling classes evolved from. You know I developed a quick-grow capacity for desirable offspring so we wouldn't have to actually raise them?"

Roxanne shrugged. *Shane did this crap all the time; never answer a direct question directly* was one of his most cherished personal mottoes. "What the hell does any of that have to do with an escape?"

Kell ignored that question, too, and plowed on. "This one had everything I wanted; Telepathy, telekinesis, metamorphic traits, and it was tame. I implanted it with a control crystal..." Shane scowled forbiddingly; "*The crystal* was untamed, but there was no way to know that until the implanted subject was grown and out of the tank. He's damned dangerous, in other words."

Given that this comment had come from a man who liked to play with toxic snakes and daggers smeared with poison, Roxanne imagined that was probably something of

an understatement. "It wasn't possible to determine the enslavement-level of the crystal beforehand? Isn't it possible to...I don't know, ameliorate an agony booth to make crystalline entities play nice?"

Kell continued to avert his eyes, as if the goblet he held commanded his attention. "Our mistake was in believing that they were just inert gems until they're linked with a humanoid host. It was the first implant. I wasn't aware at that time that I could virtually test the psionic bond's effects before directly implanting the crystal and accelerating the growth of the host." The Inquisitor General sighed; "The problem's inherent in the crystals. To tame them, it's necessary to alter their native molecular configurations. Too much alteration destroys their psionic amplification capacities. We're still working on that."

Roxanne shook her head. "So, your prize specimen escaped five years ago. What did you do to find the thing then, and why did you wait so long to contact me?"

"To be honest, I thought he was dead. There are some damned scary animals on this planet, and although not all of them are composed of meat, that doesn't mean they aren't hungry for something that is. I didn't want..." Kell bit his lower lip and looked up, his gaze hooded. "Look, Roxanne, I didn't want the Empire to get wind of the fact that I might be losing control of this thing. That's why I

disposed of the previous Imperial Intendant. I can't allow the Empire to get wind of this —"

Roxanne interrupted Kell's nervous ramblings with a tart summary of the obvious; "Though of course, your reports stated that you killed your last Intendant because he didn't carry out Imperial orders correctly. I *think* I can verify those reports." Roxanne offered Kell a sloppy, teasing salute, then sat back and sipped at her own drink. Actual leverage over the man she was fond of; she hadn't expected that sort of windfall. She'd be sure to keep a weather-eye out for more. "Of course, you trust *me* to keep your secrets from the Empire."

Kell grinned. It wasn't pretty. "Much as you trust *me* not to kill you offhand."

"Ah, the delightful wiggle-room of qualifiers. I'm in good enough standing to be able to help you keep the Empire's favor, in much the same way you've got enough power to help clean up the rebel mess in the Babel system for me. But if I help you hunt down your stray experiment, I want *you* to help me hunt down the rebel factions whose leader killed my father and deliver them to me. It sounds as though you might have some extremely useful technologies here we can use in order to do that. Also, it would put the Empire in both our debts. However, I don't believe I understood exactly why you're suddenly

interested in this ostensibly dead, and therefore not terribly damned dangerous, test subject."

"I didn't say why I'm suddenly interested. But I can show you."

Chapter Five

The Suliban might not be present in this system, but whatever was tormenting the Federation certainly was, and it had just attempted to kill all senior-level officers on the *Enterprise* in the person of Injaa'ch'Riss bal'Craathaen. How it could plan for such a thing was beyond comprehension. Ingram cast another horrified glance at Vi-bhoneh's gory, neckless head, feeling blood from the cut on her throat cooling where it was absorbed by the lining of her uniform.

Not for the first time, she understood the unstated reason for these damned bulky turtleneck-thermal uniforms everyone complained about so much. Their material had been designed to resist most edged weaponry and ballistics. She praised these qualities silently and fervently, while waiting the interminable seconds it took for the computer to confirm the override she and John had just ordered.

Bridge chair override lock in progress, the computer replied sluggishly at last, in its newly instituted, male-ish, Starfleet-approved, simulated tones. That sluggishness told Renee that Harriman hadn't requested a command

override even a second too soon.

"Raise —" Harriman had begun to add *raise shields*, though according to the communiqué Section 31 had recently sent them on the subject of this psionic attack, neither starship nor planetary shields appeared to have any more effect on the ability of their unseen enemies to function than the bodily death of their hosts did, when Yaelat jumped up from near Seantie's station and ran at Harriman, roaring. The captain of the *Enterprise* spun around toward the Hali'ian's station, but hesitated.

His science officer did not. She leaped out of the niche that separated the science section from the turbolift, and tackled Yaelat before he could get halfway down the walkway that separated the upper bridge from the lower. She was no match for the larger man physically, but she was psychically. He thrashed against her grip as she literally dug her fingernails into his face to access the psionic nerve-junctures that all humanoids, even non-psions, shared. With her other hand, she dug for the crystal that she knew he kept in one of his inner uniform pockets.

Ingram tracked them with her phaser. It was a meaningless gesture, and she knew it; she, too, had hesitated to kill Yaelat. She damned well wasn't going to kill one of the only two Betazoids remaining on the *Enterprise* along with Yaelat, and he and Seantie were so

heavily intertwined that there would be no way to single out either of them.

Yaelat ripped Seantie's questing hand away from his body. He was too late — it emerged holding the Hali'ian's psionic crystal— but the movement was vicious; Ingram could plainly hear some part of the Betazoid matron's arm give way. Both Seantie and Yaelat screamed, but the science officer didn't release either Yaelat's face or the crystal she'd managed to wrest out of his pocket. That Hali'ian gem suddenly bloomed with a fulgent radiance, and both psions released one another.

A breathless moment passed before Yaelat moaned and lifted his head, his eyes clearing of madness little by little. Lines of empathically driven pain replaced the madness twisting the dark-skinned man's ashen features. Seantie, shuddering, curled helplessly around her wounded arm, her own eyes haunted. Both officers seemed incapable of blinking at all for a long stretch of seconds. T'Dani hurried to Seantie, while Ingram and Harriman warily approached Yaelat. The *Enterprise's* exec allowed herself a crucial moment to reset her phaser to *dematerialize* as they did so.

"The head of her humerus is out of the socket, and her wrist's broken." T'Dani raised the medical tricorder that she held in her hands in frustration, as though offering it as a symbol of her current inability to heal the wounded

woman. "I need to get her to sickbay. She needs osteoregeneration and..." the CMO's mouth twisted, "some kind of neural —"

A horrid ripping, moaning sound emanated from the back of the bridge, and everyone present, most of them still crouched in defensive positions, turned alarmed faces toward it. It took several seconds for Renee to recognize the sound of a turbolift being forcibly removed from its tracks by electrowelding equipment. She shot a glance at Harriman, appalled, and snapped; "Computer, seal bridge turbolift doors."

Main override in progress, the computer responded emotionlessly. All electronic and computerized access overrides from the bridge have been disabled.

Renee looked at the power reading of her phaser. *Kill* and *disintegrate* functions ran cerium-cell phased weapons out of energy with horrifying alacrity; a phaser capable of functioning for four hours on stun possessed no more than half an hour of power when set to kill, or ten minutes of power when set to disintegrate.

However, she didn't need any of those settings for what she was about to do. Switching the setting to *heat-weld* with a flick of her thumb, she directed the weapon at the upper part of the central seam in the turbolift doors, intent on melting the duranium leaves that composed the

bridge side of the doors together. Josi rose, reset her own phaser, and began the same process from the bottom. It was slow going, wouldn't hold very long against phased or photonic explosives, and the doors could be removed from either side of the shaft using the same basic electrowelding equipment used to knock the turbolift off its minute superconducting channels to hurtle away to who-knew-where, but it would give the officers on the bridge...

How long?

Renee had no concrete idea. She also wasn't certain that it would ultimately matter. The *Enterprise* B had been designed with the same flaw that every *Enterprise* up to this point had possessed, namely, a single turbolift with a single control-system as the only point of ingress to or egress from the starship's bridge. Ingram had complained bitterly about that flaw to John until at last she'd gotten tired of the Cheshire-cat grin he always offered her whenever she complained. Starfleet Command was no more responsive when she'd complained about it to them. Harriman, she knew, would laugh at her if she accused him of passive-aggressive behavior. She doubted Command would have such forbearance, so she'd quit bringing it up.

By the time the turbolift doors were turned into an impromptu bulkhead, every flag officer on the ship would be sealed into the bridge with no more than three phasers,

which would possess maybe ten minutes of power left to them on the only setting that seemed to work. This was assuming, with what was surely unwarranted optimism, that two of those phasers hadn't been rendered inoperable after heat-welding the turbolift doors together.

Their psionic enemies, on the other hand, using the minds of a starship crew as tools, would have free run of the remainder of the *Enterprise*, including the turboshaft-access ladders. This meant that it was only a matter of swiftly shortening time before the potentially terrible control the captain and exec had locked away into Harriman's command chair was given over to whatever it was that threatened the Federation.

Given an armada of *Excelsior*-class starships, it wouldn't take that threat fifty years to completely raze a star system; it would take fifty minutes. And Section 31 might have inadvertently set wheels in motion which would create just such an armada.

Chapter Six

The Minaran slave-complex was not significantly different from those found on Babel or Nisus, where Roxanne had been Intendant until just recently. The Empire had learned long ago never to give its slaves or potential slaves access to the outside. Over generations, they would forget that there was such a thing as *outside*. The slave-encampment would become their world, and should they be taken from it, their reaction would be a fear and overawe that they would turn to their keepers for solace from.

Imperial slaves were broken before they even knew they were broken. Otherwise, they were discarded. There were exceptions, of course. In Roxanne's experience, those exceptions were the same sorts of things Shane was attempting to create here; hybrid creatures with an awful vigor, who should never be allowed to exist.

She tried to hide her irritation and mounting concern as Shane toured her through the metal-blue, sterile, mazelike hallways of the slave-breeding complex. These were lined with one-way, bulkhead-wide viewscreens that

opened on living and breeding quarters that were equivalently sterile. Imperial law mandated this for the same reason it declared that slaves should never have access to the outside world unsupervised. Make the world hard and cold, and breeder slaves would turn to one another for soft solace, and not have to be forced to breed. However, Shane's complex constituted the strangest breeding station Roxanne had ever seen.

All of the slaves were female.

"Where are the males?" Roxanne inquired. She'd be the one overseeing these slaves and wanted to know all the particulars about what it was that Kell was trying to accomplish here. She also had trouble telling the species of most of them apart. Many of them appeared to be of that one-size-fits-all type that so often tended to occur among red-blooded humanoids.

The Hali'ians were fairly easy to pick out, due to the vestigial pit-viper-like slits present in their swollen, bifurcated foreheads, which Kell had explained were connected to brain areas in Hali'ians that were particularly well-suited to interface with inanimate objects capable of enhancing or increasing psionic capacity. The thought of being among so many potential telepaths made Roxanne more than a little nervous; she would have to make it very clear very early that she rewarded loyalty lavishly, and

punished disloyalty, of even the most insignificant sort, with something rather worse than death.

"Hali'ian and Rumantian DNA has a great deal of useful finessing material for the psionic warriors I plan to ultimately produce here, and they're excellent gestators as well, better in fact than the Minaran psions themselves were," Shane said. As per Shane's usual method of responding to direct questions, this explanation merely confused Roxanne. She sighed, then set herself to wait patiently; he'd get around to it eventually, particularly if she prompted him with extraneous and trivial side-issues. "Minaran required three genders to breed —"

"Like Andorians did?"

Kell turned and swept her with a narrow-eyed gaze that, if she were to put a name to the expression, looked like hatred. He followed this with a death's-head grin. "Who knows? Who *cares*?"

They'd reached a formidable airlock door whose flashing colors told Roxanne that it opened into one of the many laboratory sections of the vast complex. Shane waved the master-key that had been surgically implanted into his left palm in front of the control plate on the door, and it hissed open. The air inside was cold and synthetic smelling; no one had passed this way for some time.

"We're straying off topic," Roxanne chided; "All I

really want to know is why there are only females here. Are the males housed elsewhere?"

Shane closed and locked the door behind them. Before them was a long hallway webbed with stark white laser beams that almost certainly possessed phaser banks behind them. Shane thrust his keyed hand into the beam of the nearest laser sight, and all of them winked out. A large digital chronometer embedded in the airlock at the other end of the hall winked to life at the same instant, informing them that they had three minutes to cross the quarter mile of hallway. The master of the Imperial Secret Service continued his labyrinthine explanation as he and Roxanne jogged smartly down the phaser-mined passage. He didn't become breathless. It was difficult indeed, Roxanne knew, to render Shane Kell breathless:

"The most powerful unameliorated telekinetic capacity in the known galaxy was the purview of a species whose females were sterile until infused with the spores of a male analogue and inseminated by a male. Aggressive bastards, Minaran male analogues. No telepathic abilities to speak of, but they're mean as psychotic Klingons, and are useful in keeping the xelnhai off the mountain; I've got stables of them spread out in the foothills to perform that function.

"They're the only Minarans still living. The knowledge that they live only at my whim, while the rest

of their breed exists only in test-tube form, tends to keep them in line; I haven't had any problems with them at all lately. Unlike their male analogue relatives, male and female Minarans were both exquisitely psionic, and exquisitely touchy to keep. Any pain or distress or sadness drove them mad. Their sole desire was to fix all those bad feelings in each other. Any embryos the females were carrying were negatively affected by this tendency, in such a way that it burned the psionic capacity right out of them.

"So *now* we create the embryos from cryogenically-frozen eggs, sperm, and the male- analogue spores that function to switch on chromosome-sequencing in the reproductive cells, and introduce the traits of any other psionic species that we want to experiment with into the blastocysts epigenetically afterward. Maybe it has something to do with the triple-sex thing, but the development of Minaran embryos, or even semi-Minaran embryos, are odd. They can't be force-gestated, but after birth, the child itself can be speed-grown without the brain or tissue damage you tend to see in speed-growth chambers. Embryos from dual-sexed species are exactly the opposite sort of —"

"Didn't someone once try to alter Andorian DNA to a more standard male/female format for similar reasons?" Roxanne interrupted as they neared the airlock at the end

of the hallway.

Kell offered her another indecipherable look, this one accompanied by a particularly forbidding scowl. "Now who's off-topic? I suppose that was tried. Why, I can't imagine. We ended up obliterating the bastards."

Roxanne shrugged in reply as the skin-crawling laser sights snapped back into life behind them when Shane held his hand in front of the door. "I think if it had been successful at all, it might have created..."

Roxanne bit the words back. She had been about to tell him about the spurious human/ Andorian fusion who'd lately tried to kidnap or, failing that, kill her, but some impulse that was less than a hunch, but more than simple discretion stopped her. The creature, who had neither an Andorian male's cloaca-like organs or internal pouch, but was instead possessed of more standard humanoid male reproductive equipment, at least for a short while after she had captured him, had been carrying an intriguing piece of hardware buried deep behind his left eye. The likely provenance of that hardware was not something she wanted to share with anyone, particularly not Shane Kell, even though he'd probably be amused by the existence of something as unlikely as a human/Andorian hybrid.

Shane walked through the airlock into another interminable hall, the walls of this one composed of glossy

black digital touchscreens interspersed with the occasional transparent- aluminum portal, and blessedly free of mines, at least ones that Roxanne could detect. He didn't react to her aborted comment. He was too busy going on about his precious psionic breeding-slaves:

"I keep the female Rumantians and Hali'ians around to implant the embryos into for gestation. Of course, since the first experiment's escape, I've been reticent to implant the embryos we're developing from that stock. Rumantian and Hali'ian females are the best breeders that there are among psions. Deltans were worse than useless. Too bad for them, I suppose, because our inability to use them here made them useless in general. Whatever became of their planet, once Imperial forces sterilized it?"

Something had made this powerful man nervous. Roxanne knew that he only rambled to this extent when he was nervous. She'd encourage him to go on; he might accidentally reveal what it was that was causing his anxiety if she did. She didn't like all these mines and viewscreens and airlocks to which only Kell held the key and wanted some sort of key of her own that could get her out of this place if she needed to go. Of course, there was always the thing that her hybrid attempted kidnapper had carried, but she'd have to alter its circuits to her own metabolism somehow before she could use it successfully.

She paused and peered through one of the laboratory windows. The laboratories in general were circular and set below the level of the hallways that led to them, as though they were ceremonial kivas. This one held banks of instruments Roxanne recognized immediately — old-fashioned agonizer controls, mind-sifters, veracity monitors — and three humanoid-shaped creatures that she did not; Gray-pink, tall-headed aliens whose dark robes, which glistened even through the matte stasis fields of the chambers that held them suspended on the walls, proclaimed them sentient species.

"We gave it to the Betazoids," she replied distractedly. "What are *those*?" she pointed through the window at one of the three humanoids.

Kell, as usual, ignored her direct question. "I look forward to adding Betazoid genes to the mix here. That species is largely resistant to telepathic damping or mind-control from outside, isn't it?"

"That's what I'm told. It's why I thought she'd be useful to you." In actuality, Roxanne had been paid handsomely to disappear the woman, the only daughter of the First House and a thorn in the side of the myriad daughters of the Second House. Instead of killing her outright, however, Roxanne had taken her on as personal chauffeur, via a forged order from her father, who had been

in line to take the Imperial throne; the girl had hardly been able to decline an order like that. The Empire found the pseudo-imperialism of the Betazoids to be an entertainingly droll soap-opera, and nobody in the upper echelons would care one way or another about the disappearance of one self-proclaimed Betazoid princess.

Kell continued along whatever Escheresque path he was taking, toward his point; "Of course, Rumantian and Hali'ian men brought their own reproductive problems. As Intendant of the Babel system, and especially after needing my forces to quell your little uprising there, I'm sure you've learned firsthand what a problem males in general can be to keep, and I don't need to bore you with specifics. So, what we ended up with is what you see here, second- or third -generation, slave-camp broken Hali'ian and Rumantian women eager for a chance at a very soft life. And now you want to know what those are?" Kell inclined his head at the creatures in stasis in the room below them, then added, without waiting for Roxanne to reply; "including epigenetic splicings from *those* things in the mix was the worst mistake I ever made."

Your little uprising. Roxanne forced herself not to show any umbrage at Kell's snarky comment, allowing it to pass instead, as though it had simply been so low and so stupid that she hadn't been able to perceive it. "Then why

keep them? And you still haven't managed to explain what they *are*."

"What they are is why I keep them. They're immensely powerful, able to manipulate space-time directly. I wanted...no, I *want* to be able to harness that. I thought at first it had something to do with the semi-sentient machines they create, but that's only part of it. They're somehow symbiotic with the damned machines."

"How did you ever gain enough control over them to put them into cryogenic cells?" Roxanne was careful to keep tones of skepticism or condescension out of the question; he wouldn't ever answer it at all, if she did that. He had taught her a great deal about obtaining answers that people were reticent to give, using both psychological manipulation and through torture.

Kell shrugged, his attention on the quasi-humanoids in the room below. "It's not cryofreeze. I still don't know exactly what it is that they're suspended in, but if you were to watch closely for several years, as I have, you'd come to see that they're breathing and squirming about in those tubes with exquisite slowness, almost certainly in pain.

"Your father did this. I don't know how. He left me enough of their body parts that I don't need to tamper with the retaining tubes themselves. If we were nearer, you'd see that the creatures are missing various digits. He

warned me never to attempt to tamper with the tubes. He didn't merely capture them; he obtained vital information from them, hence the interrogation machinery in the room where they..." Kell shrugged, "*sleep*. And the information he obtained led him to believe that they're incredibly dangerous."

"My father did *this*? How, exactly?" as if the Inquisitor General of Sector 31 would tell her even if he knew, Roxanne thought acidly, but it was worth a try. "Whatever it is, it certainly would be useful as a large-scale restraint, or as a component of the new agonizer booths they're developing."

"Perhaps he used the Tantalus device. He told me years ago, before you were even born, that he'd learned that it had abilities beyond the simple expedient of disappearing people, though he was never forthcoming with what those were, or how he ever worked up the nerve to experiment with something like that device. Of course, your father always was something of a daredevil. He's the one who put me in control of this place." Kell turned his attention away from the cryotubes and toward Roxanne. "I can see he never shared that piece of information with you. Did he ever tell you that I was the one who led him to the Tantalus device in the first place?"

Chapter Seven

The phaser grew painfully hot in Ingram's hands, then its safety-override kicked in and it sputtered out altogether. Josi had set her own drained weapon down nearly a minute before. The bridge was filled with the ozone stink of molten metal, but the doors still remained partially unwelded. The sound of maddened crewmembers attempting to access the bridge using both electronic equipment and main force was clearly audible on the other side.

Renee tossed the weapon down and turned. Harriman's attention was on T'Dani and Yaelat where they hunched over Seantie, obviously trying to ease the Betazoid's shock and pain with the efforts of their minds. "John, we can't let these things have the *Enterprise*."

Both the captain and Yaelat looked up at Renee; the Hali'ian was weeping. "It's the undoing of so many people," he said hollowly, neither to John nor Renee specifically; it was as though he was speaking to someone who wasn't in the room with them. "I was...I couldn't...I didn't...hundreds of people, on *Enterprise* alone." Yaelat

fell back to sit cross-legged on the deck, his head falling into his hands. T'Dani blinked slowly, as though she was coming out of a deep sleep, and Seantie moaned, trying to turn over.

"Let's not be hasty, Commander," Harriman said softly. The look in his eyes said that he knew exactly what Renee was thinking about; The self-destruct option was one of the capabilities that they had locked into his chair. He held up one hand, palm-out, to forestall any response, and pulled out his phaser with the other, motioning Josi toward him with the weapon. "I don't think Yaelat or Seantie are in any shape to hold the bridge, Lieutenant Commander Felingaili. This has four hours on stun, nearly half an hour on kill, and not quite ten minutes on disintegrate. You absolutely *have* to use the disintegrate setting. Understood?" his soft blue-gray eyes flicked back toward Yaelat, and his mouth went hard; "I'll send somebody back with an armory and better medical equipment as soon as I can."

"Forget the medical equipment," Seantie, who had finally managed to turn onto her back, husked. The Betazoid rubbed at her face with her good hand. To Ingram's horror, the science officer's eyes were bleeding. She blinked ferociously until tears had cleared her vision, while adding; "Just bring us..." she cast a sideways glance

at the Hali'ian rocking back and forth, his head in his hands, and her lips twisted, "what we need to guard the bridge."

Josi looked back and forth between Seantie and Harriman, her expression a war between determination and disbelief, and motioned back vaguely toward the turbolift. "How exactly do you intend to go *anywhere?*" she demanded of the captain.

"Let me worry about that. I'll send somebody back as soon as possible." John stood and handed Josi the phaser. She took it with a "*Yes, sir,*" that managed to convey intense concern regarding the state of her senior officer's mind.

"Where the hell are we going to get an armory?" Ingram hissed into Harriman's ear as he herded the remaining people present on the bridge toward his Spartan ready room. She'd long ago given up trying to grace it with gifts of plants or artwork or textiles; John Harriman had distinctly ascetic tastes. The only ornament his ready room contained was a viewport window that took up the entirety of one wall.

As soon as the door had hissed closed behind them, John went around his desk, sat down, and pulled a compadd-sized phase-disinhibitor out of a drawer. These were used when it was necessary to remove any small,

non-integral module of the computer from the main core in order to make upgrades or replacements, as was common when adding recipes to a replicator in one's personal quarters. The captain of the *Enterprise* attached this to the drive-core of the computer on his desk and switched it on, effectively removing his ready-room computer from the starship's dual mainframe.

Renee, Marco, Demora, T'Dani, and three junior officers whose names currently escaped Renee's frazzled mind watched him in puzzlement. The computer monitor on the captain's ready-room desk, and the desk's own semi-holographic display, went dark when the phase-disinhibitor switched on with a soft pulsing sound. If the looks on the faces around Renee was anything to go by, the growing bemusement felt by everyone in the room matured and began to flirt shamelessly with concern for their captain's sanity when Harriman knelt down without a word and slid his rawboned frame ungracefully half-under the desk, as though searching for something on its underside.

"Sir..." Demora began, haltingly.

Whatever it was she was about to say was subsumed by surprise when the wall-sized viewing window starboard of John's ready-room desk slid seamlessly into the ceiling. While all starship windows had to be, to greater or lesser extent, shift-variable viewscreens, still nobody had

expected this one not to be anchored to the floor, or to have anything other than the vacuum of space behind it.

Ingram blinked. This explained the Cheshire-cat grins her CO would give her when she'd complain about the potential tactical nightmare of the lone bridge turbolift. This explained a lot. An electronic lock flickered complacently in the center of double doors where the pseudo-window had been.

An electronic lock on the doors of a turbolift.

John levered himself up from beneath the desk, strode across the room, and applied a key to the electronic lock. This key had obviously been concealed beneath the desk, along with whatever phase- disinhibition -reactive device it was that had retracted the fake-window viewscreen.

"I *do* listen to you, you know," Harriman bent his head to mutter into Ingram's ear as the doors hissed open and he herded them into the lift.

It was a small lift. Nine people made for the most intimate fit Renee had ever experienced in a starship's turbolift. She found the squishy closeness enormously reassuring. This was undoubtedly a false and potentially dangerous sense of reassurance, but she enjoyed it while it lasted. "Praise any god you care to name and pass the ammunition. Anyway, I'm *assuming* this thing takes us to the armory?"

"Part of it I can guarantee you've never even seen. We need to establish control of every area of that anybody can take main control from."

"Bridge, engineering, and the main sickbay," Renee clarified somberly. Nine uninjured people against potentially six hundred and fifty bloodthirsty, mind-controlled automatons. Of course, it might not be quite that dire; Only one hundred and fifty people aboard the *Enterprise* possessed any traceable level of psy capacity. She'd checked that number after having read the Section 31 emergency communication from Denobula. But Yaelat had said *hundreds...*

The Section 31 communiqué had also hinted that those in possession of normal humanoid sympathetic action-reaction response, who were in close contact for an extended period of time with a psionic individual maddened by the mind control, could also succumb to it. Section 31 had not attempted to be more specific with the qualifiers *close* or *extended*, suggesting to Ingram that they really didn't know.

"Sir," she turned her face up to her senior officer, "I've got weaponry on the deck just above the armory. Assuming we get out of the armory, I'm going for that. It only stops working if you break it or neglect to retrieve its active parts." Also, the thought of being in possession of a

recurve and broadheads comforted her in a way that being in possession of a weapon with a finite power cell, or having to hope that some significant portion of the *Enterprise* crew was just psy-resistant enough to withstand the encroaching effects of sympathetic madness, did not.

Harriman nodded grimly. "Fine. I'll work my way down; you work your way up. That gives me engineering and you sickbay. Listen, if one of us secures their area before hearing from the other —"

"Understood," Ingram interrupted. Nobody would have to go to the computer core areas; When either the bridge or engineering was locked down, as she and John had done, internal force field-ameliorated blast doors literally locked the computer cores away from casual entry. It would require all of the *Enterprise*'s bridge officers and either a subspace or a real-time interface with somebody at Starfleet Command to unlock those doors again. "And if by any chance any of us suddenly do what ch'Riss or Yaelat did..." she shared glances with everyone on the lift. The XO of the *Enterprise* was certain that everyone in it understood what was left unsaid before the lift stopped moving.

Armory banks existed along every fourth bulkhead wall in the security section of the *Enterprise* B, deck fourteen in the heart of the ship. There was a total of sixty

of these, each one quipped with enough weaponry to arm a ten-man platoon with multiple weapons. Only specific commands sent from a captain's chair-console, or an electronic key which the chief tactical or the senior security officer were given, could unlock the armory banks without using electronic or manual intervention.

The sound of people literally tearing at the walls echoed through the hidden shaft that the alpha-shift bridge officers emerged into. If these sounds were anything to go by, the psionic mind control negatively affected cognitive ability; Anyone in possession of a communicator or 'padd and the right electronic pocket-toolkit could, ultimately, defeat the controls that sealed an armory locker. Renee tucked that fact away for future reference.

The hidden turbolift opened into a space made between the inner and outer layers of the starship's hull, just outside the armory. Both walls of this claustrophobic space were lined with compartments. Captain Harriman wasted no time; Using the electronic key he'd taken from Vi-bhoneh's body before leaving the bridge, he opened one of the secret armory lockers and began handing out the assembled weaponry.

"I'm impressed," Renee admitted, standing on tiptoe to peer over John's shoulder at the assembled phaser pistols and rifles, stun-grenades, mortars, and small, efficient

photon-mines.

"I've impressed Renee Ingram? My life's work is done," Harriman said dryly, handing her a phaser rifle. His eyes twinkled. She smiled and handed the bulky weapon back to one of the junior officers, accepting a phase-pistol and two palm-phasers for herself instead. The captain began loading Demora and the three junior officers down with as many hand weapons, grenades, and mines as they could carry. Considering that all of these weapons came with slings capable of being attached to both humanoid and non-humanoid anatomies, this was a lot. The captain of the *Enterprise* stopped only when Sulu began to show signs of discomfort and difficulty breathing.

"Yeah, in about seventy years, John. Listen; I'm going to try to get to the main sickbay after I retrieve my bow. The quarantine rooms there are just begging to be taken over and turned into control bridges. T'Dani, you're with me. And you absolutely *mustn't*," Ingram admonished to everyone within hearing range, while directing the comment to T'Dani in particular, "let anybody taken over by whatever the hell this is touch you."

The doctor was only mediocre with phased or ballistic weapons, but she was excellent at hand-to-hand combat. This was one unspoken reason why Renee wanted edged weapons at her disposal; T'Dani was Vulcan-strong, and

the thought of her being taken over by this mind-control...

Renee sighed. This was her best friend she was thinking of ways to murder. T'Dani nodded in response to Ingram's admonition. The look in her eyes made it absolutely plain that she understood exactly what it was that Renee had left unsaid. "I'll do my best."

"That leaves engineering to me," John reached into the depths of the armory wall and pulled out a pair of photon-mortar backpacks. He tossed one of the bulky, dangerous contraptions to Marco. "You're with me."

Harriman walked back to Demora and carefully slid the straps of the second mortar backpack over the gear she already had precariously slung on her back. "Take the lift back to the bridge. If the sounds coming from the hall are any indication, they're already using the turbolift tube and are probably also using the Ventries and Jefferies tubes to try to gain access." He held up the key to the hidden lift door and scanned the helmsman for empty pockets, hands, fingers, or folds of clothing. There weren't any unoccupied by weaponry. Harriman shrugged; "Open your mouth."

Demora complied. Harriman slid the tiny electronic key under her tongue.

"Go!"

The junior officers snapped to attention as well as they could under crushing loads of weapons and responded in

the affirmative. "Mmf frrr," Demora managed, turning and reeling ponderously for the lift that would take her back to the electronic door set into the false wall behind what Renee had erroneously assumed to be a transparent aluminum viewscreen.

"Of course, there's only one *common* method of ingress or egress from the bridge itself at the moment, which helps," Renee grinned optimistically at John, who shook his head dourly at her in return. The XO motioned toward what was obviously another false-bulkhead wall, this one set with a one-way egress monitor, with her phase-pistol. "We'll all need to go at once; when they learn we're here, it's not going to be pretty. Remember, people; Disintegrate runs a phased weapon out of energy in about ten minutes, eighteen *riagh*, twelve *aafkai*, or whatever time-counting method you prefer. *Rearm whenever possible.*"

Harriman caught his XO's arm. "Here, Renee; You take this." He handed her a second automatic electronic key. "It'll open the hidden doors both here and in my ready-room, and it —"

Ingram gave her commanding officer a narrow glare. "What about if you need to get back?"

"Don't worry about me. I know where more of these can be found, anyway. Send reinforcements to the bridge

when you get a chance."

Chapter Eight

"*You* led my father to the Tantalus device?" This was one hell of a revelation. Assuming, of course, that Kell was telling her the truth. "Why would you do something like that? He told me once that there was no more powerful device in the galaxy!"

"Other people can be powerful in ways that you, my dear, are not, and in ways that I am not. Appealing to the power of others gains you advantages you might not be able to access otherwise. You never found the Tantalus device again since the rebels took it, have you?"

Roxanne bridled with an unpleasant variety of emotions; Rage at the thought that he would think she'd lie about something like that — if he knew she had possession of the Tantalus device, she would be elsewhere than the cold, locked heart of this man's private little empire right now — and a frisson of fear at the thought he actually believed she *was* lying about that, or at least withholding information.

Because she was.

"You *know* I haven't. It's one of the reasons I want you

to help —"

"Here's the one thing *I* learned about the device: It's broken. Incomplete. It will never lead an individual who holds it to a good fate. Can you wonder why I'd ferreted it away in a lunatic asylum?"

"As far as I could tell, it was meant to be some sort of quantum inclusion/exclusion field that had lost its inclusive capacity. I've always wondered, since energy can't be created or destroyed on even the quantum level, exactly where all the people that broken device was used on ended up." He tossed his head at the frozen creatures in the interrogation room; "Apparently, your father became skilled at making them end up just exactly where he wanted them."

"And yet, although you thought it was broken, you still told him about it," Roxanne hissed. Love and hate, rage and fear warred inside her until she was dizzy. Kell merely shrugged and motioned her to follow him further down the hallway.

"And yet," he said, assaying an enigmatic smile. Shane Kell, Roxanne knew, was nearly a hundred years old, and had been embroiled in Imperial intrigue before her own father had begun nursery school. He was an incredibly dangerous man to cross. But at that moment, had she possessed any sort of weapon at all, she would

have tried to kill him there in that hallway, regardless of the thousand unseen eyes that she knew rested on them both. "He wanted the device. He'd made it plain he'd..." Kell bit his bottom lip and shook his head at her, as though divining her thoughts.

Knowing him as she did, Roxanne realized that Kell would probably consider such a passion-driven action as the attempt to murder him adorable. He was quick and strong all out of proportion to what he appeared to be; any number of enemies from any number of worlds could have averred just how difficult Shane Kell was to kill, were they still alive to do so. Roxanne drew a deep breath and throttled her emotions. He was playing her. Shane played people when he was trying to redirect their attentions.

From what?

She couldn't imagine, but she was damned well going to find out. She made a mental note to review everything that had been said or done in the last half hour; The answer was there, somewhere. "Were the slaves or the cryotubes what you were planning to show me, or the Tantalus device what you were going to explain to me, in order to describe why you're *suddenly* worried about an experiment that's gone missing for years? Or is it another subject entirely that you're trying to evade?"

Shane tsk'd at Roxanne. "Always so impatient, dear.

You'll need to know all about the breeding and the experimentation currently being done here; it's where my intendance for you lies. What I want to show you is one of the machines I just described." He nodded into the chamber they still stood in front of. "Your father said it's what those things in that room used to lure him here, much to their regret."

"One of their machines is *here*?"

"Which is how *they* were here. Your father told me that the creatures, which called themselves *Vians*, tried to play a game with him and his crew over the possession of Minara, one of compassion versus destruction. What you see here is the outcome. Powerful they may be, but believe me, they are composed of flesh. Beings of flesh require vehicles to pass from place to place, or even to pass from one time to another. I believe that this machine is just such a vehicle."

A chill shot through Roxanne. "I'm surprised he left the planet in one piece after they pulled something like that on him. He didn't with the Talosians."

Roxanne had idolized her father. He was the one who had procured her the post as Intendant of the Babel system, home of the Empire's overarching slave repository and deposition stations before that system, too, had become a hotbed of uprisings. Before her father had been murdered.

Because of who she was, she also stood in peril from the surprisingly well-organized resistance that had risen against the Empire.

She'd needed to get away from the Babel system; the resistance had tried to kidnap her. Kell had been only too happy to send teams of his own highly-trained Special Security Forces to hold that system in her behest, thereby effectively making the system part of his own holdings, at least for the interim of this uprising, and offer her the position of Intendant of Minara in return.

The human/Andorian hybrid the resistance had sent to either capture or kill her had been an exquisite, novel creature whom it had been Roxanne's pleasure to try out various concoctions and instruments on until he had ceased breathing for the fourth, and unfortunately last, time. She'd been so livid with rage about the attempt on her life that it hadn't occurred to her to wish, until later, that she'd had him fitted with various psychogenic force-restraints in order to keep him as a pet.

Roxanne clutched suddenly at one the many hidden pockets of her uniform, a tight-cut, ochre-red leather creation with pearly-golden satin bodice and thigh panels that possessed tiny hidey-holes sewn from flagrantly expensive, sensor-resistant cloth. The Imperial staff of every station she'd ever spent any time at always laughed at

her, in the beginning, for the severity and envelopment that she preferred in her uniforms, assuming that the choice was mediated by fear; In their estimations, a self-assured officer required no such armor. Most times, their laughter abated quickly, turning to terror of untraceable poisons that might suddenly appear anywhere.

To her relief, the little device she'd plucked from the roughly cauterized remains of spongy sinus behind the ruined left side of the fusion's face was still in the pocket she clutched. It was a cunning, electrochemically-stimulated bit of hardware that she'd taken to keeping it in various places; Hidden behind the dangerous folds of a dart-lily's stamen, nestled at the roots of the plants in her boomslang's habitat, quiescent in a specially-constructed niche of her personal tricorder, or, as now, upon her own person.

Beings of flesh require vehicles to pass from place to place, or even to pass from one time to another.

Kell chuckled. "Yes, the Talosians learned better than to try and manipulate your dear departed daddy. But *he* learned restraint as time passed. And *these* aren't Talosians. Some things are more valuable than simple retribution."

Roxanne pulled herself forcibly back to the present. "What are you talking about?" She'd been so intent on her

memories of uprising, her own attempted kidnapping or, failing that, murder, and what the creature she'd tortured to death had carried, she scarcely realized that she and Kell had taken a lift down to another part of the complex.

This section was composed of glassy and pearly-pale walls that seemed to emit light from their very framework. This was merely another version of the laser-web backed by mines; she knew this because she'd had annexes exactly like it outside her home and offices on Babel Four. Its sensors didn't need to be turned off; Indeed, they couldn't be turned off. They would be triggered by any sort of sudden, unexpected motion made by anyone in the area except for the person who had placed and triggered them. Roxanne fingered the device in her uniform pocket once more, moving slowly as though to ease an itch.

The fusion who'd carried this device had passed untouched and undetected through just such a protective screen. Could she, while carrying it? She wasn't certain, but she planned to find out.

Kell nodded toward the blank wall they faced. "I'm about to show you."

With his master-keyed hand, Kell touched the wall and it became a door. When this opened, she found herself confronted by a great slab of semi-crystalline metal, of what type or sort she couldn't guess. Its color and

reflectivity were utterly different from the crystals Kell was trying to unite with his treasured embryos in order to create powerful psionic cannon-fodder for the Empire, both glassier and more aggressively metallic in conformation. And it was enormous; As Shane Kell descended the steps that took him toward the thing, he looked like a gracile doll in comparison to it. Roxanne followed tentatively.

Kell touched the object, then snatched his fingertips back as though they burned. For a microsecond, fear and pain laced across his features. Roxanne had never seen those particular emotions express themselves on that particular face before, and it might have fascinated her, had the object itself not...

Pinning a description on exactly how the apparently inanimate object altered in that moment was difficult. Roxanne stepped back against the far wall, not wanting to be as near the object as Kell was. The thing seemed to move, to breathe, to alter shape or form in some indescribable way, while concurrently remaining entirely still on its rhomboidal base.

The object finally adopted a form similar to a mass of sharp-sided, curdled black volcanic glass, frozen in the midst of flowing and incapable of reflecting light; Depending upon whether one looked at it directly or peripherally, it possessed absolutely no depth, or limitless

depth. The first apparent state gave the impression that the thing might fall off its base and crush you beneath it at any moment. The second gave the impression that, if you stepped too close and fell in, you would never cease to fall into the image that lay frozen across its main flat face.

"It works by somehow manipulating high-resonance superstrings to reveal images of whatever the nodes of space-time the strings are attached to. Just lately, though, the image it reveals has altered."

"Just lately?" Roxanne narrowed her eyes at the object, which displayed a murky pool of water, streaked and blurred as though pictured in the act of movement. As far as she was able to perceive, the thing that displayed this uninviting view might simply be some sort of cunning hologram, with which Shane was testing her current level of gullibility. He'd done similar things before.

Kell nodded at the face of the object. "What you see there appears to be static, but it's not; It's trapped in the same way its makers are trapped, and like them, it moves, if only with imperceptible slowness. I know because I've been monitoring the thing since about the time you learned to walk. Although the same image seems to be frozen on its face, that image's relative frequency has begun to fluctuate by just a tiny bit. Now, to the Vians, machines like this are more than just image-producing units; they're

actual doorways in time and space."

Roxanne snorted. "That's ridiculous. You're saying that this..." she groped for a term; "*machine* can somehow allow you to travel along the superstring that's relaying these images and literally take you to the place it's displaying, like some sort of transporter?"

"A mere three hundred years ago, Terran scientists were absolutely certain that such a thing as a transporter couldn't exist. But transporters can and do exist, and this machine exists for similar purposes."

"And you somehow think that a frequency shift in a machine that's so advanced — be honest, here, Shane, this is me you're talking to! — that you can't even begin to comprehend it, has something to do with the escape of a sentient experiment that you were stupid enough to put the genes of creatures capable of creating something like this into?"

Kell turned hard, dark eyes toward Roxanne. "Well, that's the whole problem, isn't it? We think the creature used this machine to effect his escape."

Roxanne blinked at the image frozen on the face of the object once more. "And how do you know where he escaped *to*?"

"The beings in the interrogation chamber used this machine to come here. What you see on that screen is

some sort of underground pool. The desert here is full of those, so full that if the sand and stone that you see from orbit was removed, this would be a watery world. *This is an image of Minara Prime.*"

"How can you be certain of such a thing?"

"I'm not. But after five years of agonizing over it and watching the changes that have taken place in this image over those five years, I'm more sure than I am unsure, and that has to be enough." He offered her a cold smile; "Rather in the way that you're *certain* that it's Spock who's currently got the Tantalus field device. Some sort of change has taken place in this device, and I'm also more sure than I am unsure that my missing experiment in the breeding of psionic cannon-fodder has something to do with it."

Chapter Nine

The recreation deck on *Enterprise* B, above the main sickbay, was fitted with any number of relatively small, cozy rooms that individuals were free to use for private activity or storage, as they saw fit. Renee kept her archery equipment in one of these. She possessed the only key to its electronic lock, which she kept the way she kept a number of small but potentially vital items; by affixing them to searchable electronic loops and wearing them on a breakaway chain around her neck beneath her uniform. The door was otherwise continuously locked.

There were no maddened crew on this deck currently. They had begun to congregate in areas of the ship that gave them some opportunity of taking it over and were being severely tried by the larger part of the crew, which hadn't yet succumbed to madness.

Ingram suspected it was only a matter of time.

The first thing she did when she entered the storage room was to punch the comm channel toggle switch set into the wall. This old-fashioned setup was still in use on the rec deck in order to keep the numerous, largely

inadvertent variety of sounds made there from triggering either the comm or the computer-interface systems. She didn't try to regain breath from their mad dash here before punching in her own personal shipwide transmission code:

"Attention, unaffected *Enterprise* crew. This is Commander Renee Ingram. Do not, repeat, *do not* engage affected crew hand-to-hand if you can at all avoid it. Hand-to-hand combat can spread the..." she shook her head, and took refuge in the simplest, quickest explanation; "the *illness*. Only phasers set to disintegrate can stop those affected by this madness. If you possess a phased weapon capable of disintegration, attempt to access the ship's bridge, sickbay, or engineering when opportunity arises, and hold them against the affected. Be aware that the affected are probably attempting to take these areas en masse. Otherwise, try to access phased weaponry, or barricade yourselves in the nearest safe area and await further instruction. Ingram out. Computer," she announced to the air, closing one toggle and flipping another open, "repeat that message every three minutes."

Affirmative, the computer replied.

Renee's unstrung recurve and longbow hung from ornamental hooks set into the wall. The longbow was a hand-carved creation of yew and Osage orange. Ingram bypassed this and took up the recurve, which was less

accurate at long range, but packed more of a wallop at close range. It had occurred to her that she'd have to hit carotids or jugulars, cut spinal columns entirely, or take aim directly at the center of a face in order to stop anybody taken over by the psionic mind-control that was trying to turn her people into zombies.

She had arrows capable of performing these tasks, as long as her aim was true, and she could force herself to do such a thing. They were sword-sharp duranium broadheads with the width and heft to bring down an elephant. T'Dani herself had bought them for Renee on Andoria, years ago. They had once been in common use there, to defend against the depredations of vicious ice-lizards. Renee had never actually used them for hunting, though she'd shot them once out of whimsy, just to see if they were still viable. They were, though since then she'd regarded them as a collector's item; they possessed unique and colorful vaning and decorated the walls of the cubbyhole where she kept her equipment.

T'Dani treated the ancient missiles with the respect they were due as she took them down and placed them into the most modern quiver Renee possessed. There were only sixteen of them, the standard Andorian archer's compliment of arrows. Renee would have to be certain to retrieve them as she used them, if at all practical.

Considering what they'd seen so far on the security deck, and on their upward trek through the ship's warren of accessway tubes, such a feat might not be possible. However, maddened crewmen would not be able to snatch the broadheads away from the executive officer of the *Enterprise*; 'Dani was able to load the hip-quiver, but she could neither unload nor wear it, because it was keyed to Renee's genetic profile, and it maintained a low-level force field against anyone else who might try to wear or remove missiles from it.

The same could be said of the armory storage lockers, yet another modification that John Harriman had made on the *Enterprise* B that Renee hadn't been privy to but was grateful for. The maddened crew had managed to hammer several of them open, but that violent tactic had spurred retaining force fields, similar to the ones utilized by a Starfleet vessel when a hull breach occurred, to seal the weapons inside the moment that the weapons lockers were forced.

This did not, however, keep the psionically enslaved crewmembers weaponless. A replicator would not produce weaponry, but it could produce glass, dermasculpels, and sports gear in quantity. In the proper hand, a scalpel, broken glass, or a golf club was a deadly weapon.

Whoever or whatever was perpetrating these attacks

had made certain that every hand it affected was the proper hand, and many of the affected people Renee and T'Dani had encountered on the way here had sought to use their hands as their primary weapon. Ingram understood, now, exactly what *exposure to affected individuals for an extended amount of time* meant. A number of unaffected crew had sought to stop those who were affected, and when the attempt was performed hand-to-hand, the unaffected became susceptible to the mind control. This was why Federation scientists had first considered the psionic madness to have been caused by a communicable disease or psionic syndrome. Renee could not understand why the touch of the record's officer on the bridge had left her unaffected.

T'Dani, upon seeing the transfer occur firsthand, assured Renee that it wasn't a disease. It was, the part-Vulcan woman explained, more like the transfer of a *katra*. Ingram was worried about T'Dani. The *Enterprise*'s CMO had begun to tremble and sweat half an hour earlier, as though she was experiencing an attack of very low blood-sugar. As a girl, she'd suffered an experience of what she told everyone was pon farr-related madness. Several doctors and the staff of Mount Selaya had been required to haul her back from the brink of it. Ingram desperately hoped that trembling and sweating — a physiological

reaction that the doctor had inherited from her human ancestors, since Vulcans did not sweat — wasn't one of the signs such madness displayed.

Renee shook her head; she didn't have time to ponder all of this right now. She turned her attention back to her weapon, a recurve that was as much a work of art as the arrows. It had been made on Rigel Seven, from red marizon acquel wood with Terran purple-heart laminates and dove-gray Arizona sycamore flexors. Its backing consisted of the horn of an animal that no computer of any starship or star base she'd ever been on could identify, a delicate gold- and lavender -traceried, ivory-like substance. The relatively squat bow shot an odd fifty-six point seven pounds, which meant that, as long as the brace height was set at its maximum and the synthetic bowstring was pulled to the curve of her jaw, bodkin-tipped arrows would be able to pierce quarter-inch plate steel at fifty paces.

It should have no trouble taking a humanoid head off. The thought of having to do this to her crew made Renee feel sick, but experience had shown that the only other option would be to allow the creatures that had enslaved her crew to take control of the *Enterprise*. She sighed heavily and pulled the recurve off its rack.

Traditional bows were not stored while strung; such a habit would perpetually curve them, destroying the bow's

flexor bracing and the delivery force of the arrows. Renee strung her bow using the reflex-stringer which was part of the string-keeper that held her string at the proper brace-height while it was loose on the bow. She could, at need, have strung it manually, a potentially dangerous maneuver that required an archer to firmly seat the bowstring in place on the tip of the left limb, secure the center of that limb firmly against the inner left calf, step into the brace of the bow — the space between the bow itself and the still-slack bowstring — with the right leg, rest the back of the riser diagonally across the right thigh, and take a firm and even grasp on the top of the upper limb with the right hand.

A slow, firm twist of the torso to the right would then, theoretically, allow the archer to slide the bowstring into place on the tip of the right limb with the fingers of the left hand. This was dangerous, because a sudden or asymmetrical motion could cause a stressed bow to crack, or a frayed bowstring to snap. Depending upon the weight of the bow and its level of flexion, that sort of accident could break bones or flay flesh right off of them.

Considering that the *Enterprise* was currently full of homicidal psionic humanoids, semi-humanoids, and non-humanoids that biological death didn't slow down much, the potential danger of manually stringing a bow wasn't a concern that even crossed Renee's mind; the reflex-stringer

simply accomplished the job faster. The entire process took roughly three minutes. It didn't escape Ingram's notice that the computer hadn't repeated the message she'd requested of it.

It would hardly be the first time that a records officer had bollixed up the functions of a Starfleet computer, but it might just be the most dangerous situation in which such a mutinous act had been performed. The repayment for mutiny on such a scale was dire, but poor Ch'Riss had already paid the highest possible price.

Renee threw down the stringer and took up the freshly strung recurve. Turning to pick up her hip-quiver, she found that T'Dani was still sliding arrows into it with shaking fingers. Renee reached out and caught the CMO's hand.

"Are you going to be able to go through with the rest of this?"

T'Dani raised wide, silver-flecked denim-colored eyes toward Renee, then swallowed hard. "I... you know I take medications still, sometimes? They...it's the medications, I think, that are causing the reactions I'm having. Renee, I can *feel* the effects of whatever this is pressing against me, like a slimy tentacle trying to get under my skin. It can't, and I think it's the medication...it's just...the touch is terrible."

Ingram had been prepared to tell her best friend to stay here, where it was safe, where she wouldn't have to endure more scenes of madness, but T'Dani's words made her reconsider that offer. "You think a *medication* can block the effects of this? Would you know how to...I don't know, maybe aerosolize it and introduce it into the environmental controls from sickbay?"

The *Enterprise's* CMO nodded slowly. "Psilosynase. I'm pretty certain it's the psilosynase. Maybe in conjunction with..." T'Dani's pretty mouth formed a thoughtful moue; "theragen and kayolane, it would work as a gas. We could at least try."

"And then we need to get away from Mu Crucis. I suspect these psionic things are still mining the remains for further Cabal technology." Renee set her bow down on the room's single bench for a moment, reached out for the final two arrows T'Dani held in one trembling hand, and jammed them into the quiver. The quiver made a mild electronic complaint against sharpness and force that Ingram ignored, buckling it firmly around her hips. Her own hands, she noted, were shaky, a perfectly normal reaction to adrenaline that couldn't be controlled, only acknowledged, which was exactly what she did as she took up the bow again.

She kept the compact phaser nestled the palm of her

right hand. Renee Ingram could hold two arrows ready for stringing even as she shot one. She could see no reason why she wouldn't be able to hold a palm-phaser while she used the bow. She'd already had to ditch one palm-phaser, after having been forced to disintegrate several people, as well a goodly part of an inner bulkhead and half of an ascending Jefferies tube junction, in their hair-raising climb from the security deck to the rec deck.

Traversing the access tubes had been the most dangerous part of the journey, largely because unaffected crew had been keeping affected crew busy in the main hallways and public rooms, and the affected had taken to the accessways in order to try to move through the ship unimpeded. And as time passed, the number of unaffected crew dwindled.

The rec room that held Ingram's archery equipment was in a blind curve of hallway, which would allow them to leave the room unseen, assuming there weren't people already in it waiting to ambush them. "Computer, institute internal scan; who or what is in the hallway directly outside public-use room thirty-one on deck nine, and in the adjoining hallways?"

Main electronic and computerized scan capabilities have been disabled, the computer replied blandly.

Renee fought against the urge to strike the wall with

her recurve, which would accomplish absolutely nothing besides ruining the bow. "From where, computer?"

Records junction six.

This might actually be good news; Ch'Riss had been the chief of junction six, which was located one floor directly below the bridge of the *Enterprise*. Had the mind-controlled Andorian begun a control-override cascade from that record junction immediately before hurrying onto the bridge with his hrisal? This wasn't to say that a skilled records officer, which ch'Riss had been, couldn't put a significant crimp in the running of a starship. However...

"Have equivalent override commands been set up from elsewhere in the ship?"

Override commands have been made from the bridge, Stardate 9856.39.

"And no further override commands have been made elsewhere since then?"

No.

"When was the request made from records junction six?"

Stardate 9856.36.

That was good; it meant that no one else under the influence of invisible psionic enemies had yet gotten a chance to fiddle around with the internal controls of the ship. However, it was also very bad; it meant that Captain

Harriman had not yet accessed engineering.

Renee drew an arrow out of her quiver and set it on the string, holding it in place on the riser while carrying the bow in her left hand. "Be ready for anything out there," she warned T'Dani. She didn't have to key the door to make it open from the inside; she only had to walk toward it. She and T'Dani did this together, Renee walking slightly sideways and leading with her left, T'Dani doing the opposite at her back. Their caution didn't go amiss. Even as Renee drew the bowstring with her gloved right hand and raised the bow, her mind railed against what she knew she needed to do to the handsome Rumantian man who came barreling toward her with a heavy spanner upraised.

Disintegration by phaser came almost as a surprise to the person who shot the phaser, since once the setting was chosen, no further conscious thought had to be given to what that setting would actually do. By contrast, Renee had to aim very carefully at the man's face before releasing the arrow, three seconds of agony during which she had to do what she had been trained from birth never to do; willingly kill another sentient being. The arrow sent the man's body hurtling backwards, though at only a fraction of the speed as it sent the top of his head. The body struck the curve of the wall and sagged against it; the top of the

man's head, and the arrow, kept going.

By pure coincidence, the arrow struck a Gree female, who came running tentacled arms akimbo around the corner of the adjoining corridor. She was carrying several viciously sharp shards of metal ranging in size from paring knife to epee, torn from gods-knew-what implement or bulkhead. The pseudo-reptilian snarled at Renee like a bad-tempered bear, yanked the arrow out of the left side of her thorax along with a section of reproductive organ and a gush of brilliant orange blood, and loped toward Renee ready to kill.

Renee half-opened her right palm and discharged her phaser at the Gree — a fresh cadet who had only recently joined the crew. Renee wasn't even aware which department she had been working in — at roughly the same time she heard T'Dani discharge her own. Starfleet phasers set on disintegrate made a horrible yowling noise, the sound of internal circuitry being eaten up by the pure power that flowed through the weapons. T'Dani had flattened herself against the wall near the door they had just come out of, and Renee took up position against the other wall.

No more immediate attacks were forthcoming. Renee retrieved her first arrow only to find that the ancient shaft had snapped raggedly through. She put the end with the

broadhead on it back in the quiver nonetheless. No point in giving people more weapons. Then she set a fresh arrow on the string and motioned T'Dani slowly down the corridor toward the nearest tube junction that would take them to sickbay.

Upon removing the access hatch, however, they were confronted with another crewman. Renee aimed her phaser at the man; a crawlspace was no place to use a bow and arrow, unless of course you were striking someone with the first or stabbing them with the second. The dark-haired fellow wisely cowered against the other side of the Jefferies tube and held up his hands. His face was bloodstained, his eyes terrified.

Chapter Ten

Roxanne stretched. She ached in various places, but the bed she was in was a thick, luxuriant mass of rainbow-refracting black Tholian silk and firm but yielding memory-foam. Half asleep, she gave herself over to its embrace, turning onto her left side and curling into a ball with her hands folded under her chin. This was one of the few rooms in the rambling complex with a viewscreen that looked out on the mountain itself. The green-hued light from the floor-to-ceiling faux window on the far side of the room was what had awakened her; the scene was replete with mist and hanging moss, tiny flitting birds and large, heavy tropical flowers.

Her gaze fell on the man asleep beside her, atop the rumpled, stained coverlet. His long, tousled salt-and-pepper hair lay tangled around the fine planes of his face. His hair was one of his more endearing vanities; had he allowed it to follow its natural course, he'd probably be bald by now. It was a wonder that he didn't infuse it with color, as well. Inured to unpleasantries as she had become as the Intendant of a slave-station, and regardless of the

fact that she was Shane's lover, the sight of what he did to his flesh still made her shudder when it was revealed in the light of day.

His body was utterly hairless, but it was far from smooth. Many poisons, he'd explained to her the first time she'd run her hands over the patterns of scars that whorled and laced and latticed his back, were rendered inactive by the digestive system. A true resistance to them could not be had by ingesting them. But to inject or otherwise introduce them into the bloodstream, preferably a tiny bit at a time and in such a way as to stimulate one's own immune system to their presence, could bring true and lasting resistance.

His entire body, from elbows to knees, was a canvas of poison. He possessed an arsenal of tiny, decorative knives — bone, stone, metal, glass, shell, crystal, synthetics — that he used to facilitate these carvings. He could not, of course, reach certain parts of his own body. His many lovers, over the years, had aided and abetted his taste for this masochistic practice.

His willingness to submit and to trust in such a situation was a sign of just how powerful Shane Kell was. Roxanne had never deluded herself that their assignations were ever truly private, or that she would retain more than a microsecond's life should she sink a blade too deeply.

Nor was she entirely cognizant of who else it was who had helped scarify him so heavily. He had, she'd noted with a sense of bitterness that surprised her, taken to burning as well as cutting.

Roxanne had been the one who had suggested he utilize dyes, to track the effectiveness of his experiments, intimating that it would make his pale body resemble the stained sword-hilt of Imperial Security. He had loved this suggestion and followed it with gusto. Patterns in purple and green laced his arms, blue and gold dotted his chest and banded the flesh just above his knees. His thighs were delicately scabbed in red from the most recent ones. They would remain red even after they healed. Shane had a lot of red stippling from the waist down. That color, which would otherwise mask the reactions of immunity in an iron-blooded humanoid, indicated that no poison had been used. Red, he had decided, was for play.

Kell very much enjoyed it when Roxanne, or apparently anybody else convenient to hand, was rough with particular parts of his anatomy. She sighed and turned over onto her back, pushing away the bad humor that wanted to lower itself over her like a funeral shroud. She stretched once more, feeling the small of her back complain. She noted that the obsidian knife she had used with such exquisite precision not an hour before lay on the

glossy black bedside monitor-table, whatever dye and blood that might remain on it gone as black as the blade and the table themselves. Then another edged weapon, in this room decorated with edged weapons, caught her gaze.

Over the bed hung a framed, hand-painted portrait that represented the might and majesty of the United Empire of Planets, all surrounded by the ancient Caesarian logo of the golden laurel wreath anciently bequeathed to Terran conquerors. Its sword was beautiful; an artist's impression of an ancient Scots bastard-longsword, with a gold-laced, stainless-steel basket-style hilt and mother-of-pearl grip. A single, improbably large humanoid handprint stained the grip. The handprint glistened rusty red and tarnished blue, with just a hint of green. Etched beneath this bloodstain were the words:

United Empire of Planets...In Division Is Conquest.

The twin pommel-tips of the imposing weapon consisted of twin globes, the blue-white world of Terra, and the lovely ochre-russet orb of Vulcan. Beneath this, the damascened blade pierced the torn, bleeding hearts of two other planets. The cold white-teal sphere of Andoria hemorrhaged sapphires, and the misty world of Tellar bled garnets and rubies. Only the sword of the Terran Imperial

Security's Covert Forces that controlled and administered to Sector 31 was so intricate; other forces made do with a simple dagger-type weapon thrust through the heart of the Empire, Earth itself.

Andoria and Tellar had been the first jewels of an Empire forged by the union of humans and Vulcans, though the craftiest race were humans, wielders of the sword and backbone of the Empire. Sector 31 had arisen at a force during that time. They were the ones who had made certain that Andoria was now little more than a lump of sub-zero slag. The colonies of Tellar, once wiped clean of their repulsive sentients, had been given as gifts to the Vulcans, bases from which they had ultimately ravaged the Klingon Empire, while Section 31 went on to deal with the Romulans, whose technologies were so like the Vulcans' own that they were difficult for the Terran Empire's allies to crush. The races of the worlds that remained after the Empire was finished with that particular round of conquest were slaves of the Empire, neither particularly valued nor ever fully trusted.

This latest uprising, which had begun in the slave-stations of the planets circling Wolf 424, was proof of the wisdom of never trusting one's subordinates and slaves. Or, wiser still, of simply never trusting.

Lying below the sword's unblemished tip were the

shattered, scattered remains of long-forgotten Tellarite *magskanu* and Andorian weapons of innumerable make. Andoria's truculence had been the Terran-Vulcan League's impetus toward forming the United Empire of Planets. The nasty ice-moon had fielded unlikely hordes of warriors who'd been expensive, in terms of both life and treasure, to crush. They'd been led by a conniving *thaan* who'd died spitting curses and blood, not all of it his own. His name was still spoken of in hushed tones by mothers in the Empire as a way to instill the disciplines of fear and loathing into their children.

"What are you thinking?"

Roxanne had long ago learned not to allow herself to jump when startled; still, her heart pounded in her throat. She'd thought Kell asleep. She made her reply as casual as possible. "Just now? I was trying to remember the name of the bastard who led that ragtag Andorian- Tellarite- Romulan fleet against the old Human-Vulcan League a century and a half ago."

Kell's eyes narrowed into slits as hard and unreflective as the facets at the tip of the obsidian knife on the bedside table. "And before that, what were you thinking?"

"That you look like hell naked."

Shane Kell produced a rare actual laugh, which rang pleasantly off the multiple slick surfaces in his bedroom.

"Frightening, isn't it? I've found it can be a better truth-serum than *xelnhe* newtwo *g* slime."

Now Roxanne laughed. "Is that something you just made up?" he was quite good at making things up at the spur of the moment; this was, he'd confided once, one way he'd kept from being killed out of hand before he'd risen far enough in the Imperial Secret Service to merit his own surveillance teams. Making up things, particularly when they promised alluring bonuses to those willing to believe them, was also a nifty way to get others killed. Roxanne had done plenty of that, herself.

"Well, the fact is that the Minarans call the metamorphic young of a *xelnhai* *zhollncarrha*. But that's inaccurate, too, because the Minarans wouldn't *call* anything much of anything at all, even if there were enough of them left alive to. Unaltered Minarans can't speak. It's what they *think* of the young of *xelnhe* as." Kell reached over and twined one of the long chestnut curls that cascaded from Roxanne's temple around his index finger.

She took his hand, then turned over in bed, pinning him half-underneath her. She was a good-sized, muscular woman; she ended up more or less nose-to-nose with him. He allowed her to press him down into the bed. He was a small man, but that was part of his facade; he could kill her

with one hand as idly as she might snap a frond off a cyanide fern to add to a potion. She nuzzled his nose with her own. His scarred body might look hideous, but the warm roughness of his flesh felt horribly arousing. The huskiness of her voice betrayed what she was feeling when she whispered in his ear:

"All right, I'll bite; What is a *xelnhai*?"

"You promise to bite?" he husked back. She giggled and did so; he liked love to leave marks. So, to some extent, did she. His elderly body responded with the alacrity of a much younger man's, and she slid away from him.

"If you're making this up, I'll be disappointed."

"Obviously, I'm not making this up."

"About the poisonous pollywog-newt things, you madman!" a wave of awful tenderness threatened to drown her, and she railed against it, raking the nails of her right hand down the front of his body. Tenderness could get you killed, or at least thrown away like last week's garbage.

Kell shuddered with pleasure. "Oh, *that*. Xelnhe are semi-siliceous predators of the karst plateaus. They mate in volcanic vents, becoming more and more siliceous over time until, finally, that state kills them. They're also telepathic with one another after their first mating; apparently, the buildup of crystals and metals in their

bodies causes this to occur, and that's how they know when to go to the vents. Their young aren't siliceous at all but are entirely carbon-based. The xelnhe lay their eggs in underground pools, and their young mature there."

"Like tadpoles?"

"If you can imagine a tadpole the size of a great white shark with a frilled gill-fringe. Their gills are the first thing to become quasi-metallic. As this occurs, the xelnhe develop lung tissue and migrate to the karst. The gills become the deadliest telepathic-sensory organs you can imagine. The ancient Minarans used to make both weaponry and musical instruments from xelnhe organs."

"If the young are that size, how big are the adults?"

"Big as damned shuttlecraft. They have no teeth as young; their teeth develop from the metals in the rocks they swallow to digest their prey, and the blood- and bone-minerals of the prey itself."

"And what do they eat?"

"Anything. Anyone. Garbage disposals extraordinaire, xelnhe. We need to keep our spacegoing vehicles, and the dock itself, in a force field-shielded dome."

"I noticed that. Are you telling me these animals —"

"Would be altogether thrilled to get at all of that metal, yes. The Minaran sub-males I've allowed to live have been

tasked with keeping the xelnhe away from here. They've been quite effective at it. The development of the crystalline and metallic structures that ultimately kill them is the driving force of xelnhe metabolism. Ironic, isn't it?"

"Are all of the animals on this planet like this?"

"Most of the animals on this planet are extinct; the steady worsening of the system's star took care of much of that, and I took care of the rest. The xelnhe and the Minarans themselves are two of the very few species that survived as long as they did, because they're of use to me. Minaran sentients possess some of the same metabolic tendencies as the xelnhe; the bones of both, for instance, are latticed somewhat like Terran bird bones, showing that both of them arose from water-breathing ancestors that required light bones to swim, but contain metallic elements that make them very strong, a metamorphic trait.

"That trait gave me the idea to unite Minaran-bred cannon-fodder with psionic crystals in the first place, to increase their psionic capacities. And the xelnhe are the source of the psionic amplification gems. As far as we can tell, they're sort of like the crystalline byproducts made in humanoid gall bladders or kidneys, but a xelnhai first forms them in its dermis, which performs a function equivalent to a mammalian liver. The ancient Minarans used these things as religious icons, which was how I

figured out to use them in the first place."

Rambling. He was rambling again. He'd been rambling almost from the point that he'd first spoken to her. What the hell in this conversation could have possibly made him nervous enough to ramble like this? "But Minarans don't...what, slowly turn to stone, the way these big steel-chomping desert amphibian-things do?"

"No, but like sentient Minarans, the xelnhe also require three sexes in order to breed. And speaking of sex..."

Nervous, and trying to change not just the subject, but the activity of intellectual intercourse altogether. Roxanne pressed one hand against his chest as he reached for her. "And this truth-serum thing you were saying the young possess?"

He grinned at her impishly. "Now *that*, I made up."

Chapter Eleven

T'Dani grasped for Renee's hand before she could fire. It took Renee a half-second longer to recognize the cringing crewman. When she did, she didn't bother saying anything until she and T'Dani were also inside the access tube with the hatch replaced. Ensign Rafael Buonarroti

pressed one hand against his chest and murmured; "Mannaggia!"

Ingram agreed wholeheartedly with the Italian profanity. Rafael, raised on Alpha Centauri Four but proud of his Neapolitan heritage, had been assigned to the *Enterprise* after winning an award for discovering a method to increase warp/time tolerance in propulsion systems. Nevertheless, engineering had not been his major in Starfleet; his major was law. He was running from something, or so the rumors went. But he was an excellent engineering tech, and what he might be running from, or why, Renee couldn't possibly care less at the moment.

"Sorry about that, Rafe. But what are you doing here?"

Rafael cleared his throat, but his laconic Centaurian accent was still quivery with terror when he replied, "The captain said you were here. He...he sent me back. He doesn't think he and Marco will be able to get into main engineering at all. Tammy's in there, and she's gone crazy!"

Renee winced. She hated to think of a seven-foot-tall, seven-hundred-pound woman going crazy. "Ah, well, it's not like my day's not already been spoiled. We have to get to sickbay, Rafe. T'Dani thinks she can drug everybody asleep before this gets too much worse. But we have also

got to take control of engineering. I want to warp the hell away from here just as soon as possible." Ingram sighed. Constant stress was exhausting. Of course, this was one of the very first things you learned in Starfleet, so it was also not an excuse. "I need you to find yourself a gas mask and make your way back to engineering. Stay hidden in the accessway if Tamakari's still raising hell in there. When she stops, warp us out of here." Renee held her phase-pistol out to him. She had another palm-phaser tucked into the top of her boot but was starting to regret not having taken a couple of phaser rifles when she'd had the chance.

Buonarroti considered the phaser for a moment before accepting it. Renee didn't think he would balk at the duty he'd just been given. She'd known the man for a year and knew that Rafael wasn't that sort of person; he did, however, think before acting. Ingram wouldn't have offered him the weapon, otherwise.

"I'll do my best, Commander," Rafael replied, accepting the phaser with a grateful nod and worming back down the accessway tube the way he had come.

Ingram glanced at her wrist-chronometer. It had taken them a careful, frustrating two hours to make it nearly to the main sickbay from the armory, and still she hadn't heard from John. She used the bow's extensive string-keeper to loop the weapon awkwardly across her back, and

motioned T'Dani down the accessway.

After about fifty meters, they reached the environmental accessway hatch that opened directly into the ceiling above sickbay. Access through the hatch would require some sort of manual override, since ship's systems weren't working. Renee considered the override panel above the hatch for a long minute, then opened it slowly, concerned about potential booby-traps. When the panel came off without incident to reveal the circuitry behind the wall, she carefully removed an arrow from her quiver and used the slender, deadly head to break the laser-controlled lock circuit inside the manual-override access panel. To her horror, an alarm began to sound.

"Damn you, ch'Riss!" Ingram snarled. The circuit she had just broken was blue; on a Federation Starship, all lock circuits were blue. She squinted at the bright interior of the manual-override box until she saw the pulse of a red circuit deep within the assembly; on a Federation Starship, all alarm circuits were red. As she had expected, none of the green infraship circuits that might have enabled an override from elsewhere were present. Renee inserted the arrow carefully into the assembly until the wide broadhead broke the path of the red beam, stilling the alarm. Leaving the arrow in place, she turned her attention to the subprocessor chips that controlled the entire environmental access hatch,

yanking them out of the assembly until the hatchway opened.

Probably, she thought as she turned her face away from potential backsplash and shot a blind, prolonged burst of fire through the crawlspace hatchway and, thus, through the artificial ceiling of the main sickbay, having spent crucial seconds cutting off the alarm had been a waste of time; everybody knew where they were now, anyway.

Direct disintegrator fire wouldn't leave pieces of people behind. Indirect disintegrator fire, on the other hand, could. A quick glance downward revealed that the smoking, heavily charred duranium deckplates of the elegantly carpeted main sickbay were littered with smoking, heavily charred remains. The metallic backsplash caused by steadily-decreasing energies passing through multiple layers of starship infrastructure had largely blocked the passage between the floor of this crawlspace and the ceiling of sickbay, forming a jagged, artificial wall of melted, fused metallic and crystalline components. The sound of bodies sliding through the accessway toward them, and the sound of feet heading toward sickbay below them, completed the alarming tableaux.

Renee desperately hoped that Rafael had made it out of the rec/sickbay Jefferies junction before that alarm went

off. "Jump, T'Dani. Do not touch the backsplash walls, they'll burn your fingers off. *Go!*"

An agreement long ago reached by T'Dani's Vulcan mother and human father was that their psychologically-stressed daughter wouldn't be forced to undergo the psychologically-stressful training given to young Vulcans beyond learning to utilize her inborn telepathic skills unless she chose to, but she'd absolutely had to receive Vulcan physical strength training. Had she not had Vulcan strength, they probably wouldn't have mandated Vulcan training for her in that, either.

Renee was grateful that they had. The *Enterprise's* CMO didn't hesitate; she rarely did, in physically challenging situations. She was firing her phaser before her feet had fully hit the hot deckplates and continued to fire it as Renee turned her gaze away from the main sickbay and looked upward, hopefully. If there wasn't a projection, she'd damn well make one...

"I'm sorry, baby," she said softly, before hooking her recurve's upper riser and its connecting string over one of a series of jump-hooks she was gratified to see on the accessway ceiling. Ingram carefully lowered herself down out of the accessway along the bow's length, until she was hanging by one hand from the lower riser, the string cutting cruelly into her fingers even through the archer's glove on

her right hand. The bowstring sang with unaccustomed stress. It would break soon; she weighed more than twice the amount of force this bow was accustomed to handling.

She reached up with her left hand and manually pulled the accessway hatch closed until it touched the bow, the tendons and ligaments in her hands and arms aching and pinching in protest. Ignoring them, Renee flicked the setting of her palm-phaser to weld and fired it at random points along the circumference where the round hatch met the access plate, closing her eyes against the shower of brutal sparks this produced. Lines of fire tore into her body and into the bowstring like a swarm of angry wasps, and she released her hold on the recurve before the string snapped.

That should, she hoped as she tumbled down next to T'Dani, hold off anybody coming at them through the access hatch, at least long enough to get into one of the quarantine rooms. The *Enterprise's* CMO had ceased firing, since no one else was coming through the main door. She hauled Renee to her feet and began pulling her toward the entryway to the nearest quarantine chamber.

As they stumbled through the quarantine doorway, the computer asked what was required.

"Seal —" T'Dani began.

"Wait," Renee said; "Computer, confine all access

controls for all quarantine rooms into *this* quarantine room per Starfleet Intruder Code, section one, subsection —"

Request denied, the computer interrupted complacently. Ch'riß wouldn't have needed to do anything to produce this effect, Ingram realized belatedly; the computer recognized no intruders on the ship, and so refused to enable intruder controls from a sickbay quarantine room. Yet another thing, she thought wearily, she was going to have to beg, plead, and kick Starfleet into changing.

"Son of a..." she swallowed the rest of the curse; they didn't have time for it. She reached over and plucked the phaser out of T'Dani's hand.

"What —"

"Stay here and make that sedative-medication thing happen, T'Dani. I'm going to engineering." Ingram hopped back out of the quarantine room.

"But —"

Renee held up a hand. "Just do it, *now* if you can't manage it yesterday. Computer, seal quarantine room one."

To her intense gratification, the force field went up in a shimmer of light. *Quarantine room one sealed*, the computer droned.

"Excellent," Renee hissed under her breath. She

hurried to the control panel for quarantine room one. "'Bye," she whispered, turning the phaser set on weld at its panel. She'd fried its main controls before a sound at her back made her whirl around.

There was nowhere to retreat.

The thick shard of glass the man carried sliced through the upper right arm of her uniform top and the flesh beneath it, making her drop the phaser she'd been using to weld the quarantine room controls with. A human man, she had time to note, not currently in uniform, whose own right arm was missing from the elbow down. Once a heart stopped beating, wounds like that ceased to gush. Blood loss and death had left his face a sickly gray green, and his eyes, nearly all pupil just barely rimed with blue, had begun to cloud. Nevertheless, he offered the XO of the *Enterprise* a gruesome smile as he raised the glass that had cut the tendons of the palm of the hand that wielded it into ribbons, preparing to drive it into her heart.

Ingram shot him with the phaser she had taken from T'Dani and had been holding, tightly and nervously, in her own left palm. He disintegrated in the same wave of proximate heat that ch'Riss had. She scanned around wildly for anyone else, but there was nobody there. She tentatively flexed her right arm. It hurt like hell, but it wasn't gushing blood and no major tendons seemed to have

been cut, so she did what senior officers in Starfleet were trained to do with minor and sometimes not-so-minor inconveniences; she ignored it, picked up her own phaser in her largely-numb right hand, clumsily reset it to disintegrate, and scanned around the room for...

There. A glassy shelf to her right held biomimetic masks. These were usually reserved for emergencies concerning personnel who breathed non-nitrox atmospheres, for extreme respiratory allergies, or as support for victims of advanced respiratory diseases while waiting for medications or lung transplants to kick in. Renee reached up to the shelf, grabbed all six of them, stuck them ungracefully into the back of her uniform pants, then hurried around the shelf to the other side of the room and pressed her back against the wall, a phaser in each hand, as blood dripped down her right arm and fell to the floor in thick droplets.

She had to get out of sickbay and to the other side of the hall in order to access one of the more swiftly navigable Ventries accessways leading downward toward engineering. While it would be a tiring, vertiginous, but relatively quick fifteen-minute climb to the main engineering deck through a Ventries accessway, it'd take her an hour to squirm toward engineering through a maze of Jefferies tubes from here.

She tried not to think about the fact that both of the phasers she carried had no more than maybe a minute each of power left to them on the settings they were at, or that the slash in her arm and the burns she'd sustained in sickbay had weakened her, and hurt like hell. She absolutely had not meant to leave her bow jammed halfway through an accessway hatch, but as her Academy Tactical instructor had been wont to say incessantly, to the point of driving half his class into fits of hysterics when they would attempt to say it ten times fast after drinking a few too many Rigel sunsets:

One did what one had to do with what one had at hand when one had to do it.

Renee darted out of hiding, intent on getting across the hall as expediently as possible and ran right into the arms of a Vulcan. They were neither living arms, nor a sane Vulcan. This being the case, he was momentarily surprised by her sudden appearance, and recoiled slightly. Renee, on the other hand, had been more or less expecting one or more zombie-puppets the hallway. She bounced off the man's body before he could get a solid grasp on her.

The fact that the Vulcan had attempted to grasp her at all was enough impetus for her to shoot at him, but her footing was precarious. The disintegration beam struck the juncture between the inner bulkhead wall and the ceiling,

leaving a deep trail of melted, twisted metal and frayed, fried photonic cable in its wake. Splayed on her back, Renee raised both phasers and took aim at the maddened Vulcan reaching for her.

Neither of the phasers she held fired.

Renee kicked at the dead man whose icy fingers reached toward her face. It wasn't dissimilar to kicking a boulder. Vulcans were three times stronger than humans of equivalent size and sex, with stony bone reinforced with flexible-membrane struts. Shaking her head wildly in a vain attempt to keep him from obtaining a mind-meld, she tried to use him as a fulcrum by which to push herself backward. He grasped her uniform blouse in his left hand and sought the psi-points on her face once more. She struck him with one of the now-useless palm-phasers, to no effect, then reached down hoping to unsheathe one of the broadheads from the quiver she carried.

Renee could hear more footsteps pounding down the hall from both directions, and a fracas coming from the Ventries junction she'd been attempting to get to; shouts and the sound of phased weaponry. She squeezed her eyes shut and finally dragged one of the arrows out of the quiver. *His eyes, go for his eyes*, some far-away voice at the back of her brain advised coldly, as the man finally got a grip on Ingram's head.

When the Vulcan's fingertips made contact with her face, the effect was like needles of fire drilling into her skull. As she noticed that unpleasant sensation, that same far-away part of her mind also noticed that her nostrils were suffused with the stink of burning synthetics, and that the Vulcan had released the front of her uniform.

"Commander?"

Renee's eyes popped open. The *Enterprise's* Benzite Chief of Operations, Turath vrr-Nnt, stood holding a distinctly non-regulation, antique Benzite Grand Army laser-pistol aimed at her. He collected arcane old Grand Army items, and had explained the alarming points of the old laser-pistols to her once, in return for a lesson with her longbow:

Such weapons possessed no setting except disintegrate, and their bulky, boxy forms were composed of multiple auto-regenerating sub-phase cells that would allow the weapons to operate flawlessly for days. Their regenerating cells weren't based upon the relatively volatile element cerium, which made Starfleet phasers, in the minds of any number of races both in and out of the Federation, about as effective as cigarette lighters. Turath had sworn to Ingram at the time that his was a *non-working* replica, since the real thing was banned for use in the Federation outside of Benza'rri. The nitrox atmosphere

inside a starship made them dangerous to use, as they were built for combat in non-oxygenated environments, hence the ashy state of the outer layer of her uniform top, the pinpoint third-degree burns on her face, and the tiny smoking hole in the deck where the Vulcan had knelt down next to her.

Some part of Ingram's mind recognized that the Benzite had lied to her. She was too shell-shocked at the moment to consider which Benzite deity she should thank for that serious insubordination. Turath was one of two Benzites aboard the *Enterprise*; Renee hoped that Qlrr', a free-yeoman xenolinguist, was equivalently well-armed.

"Are you all right?" a voice thick with the accent of a life spent on Mars panted anxiously from behind her. Still punch-drunk from the horrifying attempted takeover of her mind, she let her head fall back until she could see the individual standing behind her, a pale-haired human ensign in possession of a machete.

"I am now," Renee managed, letting the arrow fall out of nerveless fingers, and moving slowly to lever herself up. She was dizzy and took the cadet's proffered arm gratefully. Though Turath was wearing a contact-suit, she was loathe to touch the Benzite, who had also offered his assistance. The skin secretions of nitrox-breathers burned Benzites like acid. The metabolisms of Benzites could be

altered to tolerate such closeness — nitrox-breathing humanoids had been known to marry Benzites, after all — but it could potentially cause a severe allergic reaction and was never done casually. Benzites were as mind blind as Denobulans or Huanni, though their very specific environmental needs had kept Starfleet from recruiting them en masse.

Renee pulled out two of the biomimetic masks and handed them to the human ensign; "Put one of these on!"

She had no idea when T'Dani would begin to flood the ship with gas, but she definitely hoped it would be soon. The ensign donned one of the masks without stopping to ask her why he should do such a thing. The biomimetic mask automatically fit itself to his face, read his species and personal metabolic requirements, and set about providing them for the next Terran half-hour, the life-limit of such a mask. Biomimetics were in great demand by unsavory individuals bent upon illegal cloning techniques, hence Federation-imposed limits on the life cycles of anything made from them.

The XO turned to her chief of operations. Nitrox atmospheres were poisonous to Benzites, so since he already possessed his own sulfone-based rebreather, he wouldn't require an additional mask. "Turath, ch'Riss was taken over on the bridge and killed people. I didn't know

this at the time, but there's an emergency turbolift in the captain's ready room. There's a hidden access door to this lift in armory bulkhead forty-nine aft. This is its key." Ingram yanked at its tab, where she'd connected it to the chain around her neck, and it came right off. "Kill anyone, and I mean *anyone*, who tries to take it from you. Before ch'Riss went nuts on the bridge, he reset Records Six to override any commands from anywhere except Records Six —"

"So you want me to go to the Records Six and undo whatever the Aenar did, then attempt to help hold the bridge," the Benzite finished for her, finally moving the barrel of his alarming weapon away from her general direction. Benzites found both chaos and delay intolerable, a tendency that caused people who didn't know them to believe that they were arch and condescending.

Renee nodded. "Exactly. I want..."

Suddenly, Ingram was much dizzier, her vision blurred by a sparkling fog that seemed to rise up out of the floor. When she regained her senses, the sparkling fog remained. The cadet who had caught her and eased her down to the deck had placed one of the rebreathers she'd given him over her face.

Chagrined, Renee said, "Thank you, ensign...?"

"Mirin, Commander. Arthur Mirin."

"Mr. Mirin, please go with Chief vrr-Nnt." Once more, she levered herself up from the deck, this time refusing the help of the solicitous ensign. She hated it when she forgot that the laws of physics that applied to everyone else also applied to her. Not that it was *forgetting*, exactly, more like...

Renee Ingram shook her head to clear it of exhaustion, stress, horror, and medication-induced cobwebs, and forcibly pulled her mind back to the situation at hand. "T'Dani's flooding the ship with a narcotic gas. I need to get to engineering."

"You require a working weapon," Turath pointed out bluntly. Renee shrugged, turned to Mirin, gave him two more masks, and held out her hand for the machete. The ensign handed it over. He would make an excellent officer one day, she reflected tiredly, unlike so many youngsters she'd met, who would argue for the vainglorious effect of hearing their own voices. She doubted that, at this juncture, many individuals of such a bent remained alive on the *Enterprise* B.

The Benzite shook his head. "Inadvisable," he noted dryly.

"Just make sure you take good care of him from here on in, Turath, until you can get at some weapons yourselves. There are stocked lockers inside the hidden

bulkhead at forty-nine armory aft." She honestly preferred that the human not be armed; Arthur was far more likely to be taken over by the psionic madness sweeping the ship than Turath was.

So are you, a tiny voice announced in the back of her mind. A glance at her chronometer told her ten more minutes had crawled by. *Too long!* another part of her mind yammered.

Yammering was not ever helpful. She mentally slapped her anxiety away, turned the machete over in her hand so that the vicious blade lay along the back of her forearm, and strode purposefully toward the hatch that opened the accessway from the main sickbay down to engineering. She'd have to climb upward into the Ventrices tube, then climb down nearby accessway ladders for a long distance. Swallowing bile, she levered herself up onto the lip of the accessway, careful of her slashed bicep, numb hand, and the heavy blade she carried. Renee Ingram peered up and down the inside of the accessway shaft in trepidation.

What she saw made her flinch. The levels above and below each laddered tunnel possessed a shallow shelf. Below her, a woman and two men, their limbs tangled as though in congress, lay limply part-on, part-over this shelf. The very low lighting in the accessway, and sparking

conduits cut into the walls by phaser crossfire, colored their skin an unhealthy hue for any humanoid who wasn't Orion, which none of these were. She glanced upward. The two women collapsed on the shelf there were breathing, at least.

Renee worked her way carefully down the ladder. The three people lying at the base of it were not breathing. These crewmen were not unconscious, they were dead. Ingram tried valiantly for three full seconds to comprehend how it was that gaseous sedatives should knock already-dead people out, then gave up; the concept itself was a study in contradiction. Hard enough to comprehend how psionic creatures took over living individuals from vast distances, keeping them functioning even after death.

She could worry about that later. In any case, at least the Federation now had one tool, rough and final though it might be, with which to try and stop rampaging madness on a planetary scale, at least for a while. Of course, she'd need to get that information to Section 31 somehow...

She'd worry about that later, too, provided that such a thing as *later* ultimately existed. Prodding one of the corpses with the tip of the machete until she was fairly certain that it wouldn't be getting up to come after her, she began the journey down toward engineering.

Chapter Twelve

Shane had been suspicious of Roxanne for some time.

Though he certainly couldn't let her know that he'd brought her here to keep her under his own personal surveillance, he suspected that surveillance was what she was submitting *him* to. He'd heard rumors that she might be harboring part of the Tantalus device that her father had blackmailed him to obtain.

Shane Kell didn't want to have to relive that experience, terrifying and wearying by turns, ever again. *You have some very infamous ancestors, and you know how the Empire views a suspicious pedigree. I can make it so you live out the rest of your life with a collar around your neck in the Imperial menagerie, unless you play very, very nice with me, Mr. Senior Security Officer. Assuming, of course, that you are a mister.*

It wasn't by accident that Shane had become adept at manipulating DNA. He had begun that process on his own body not long after those words had been thrown in his face. If Kell had been anywhere near the Tantalus field device when they had been spoken, he wouldn't be facing

the possibility of similar words being said again now. He'd have killed that damn man before he'd had a chance to breed, or at least before he'd had the chance to grow attached to any of the whelps he'd sired.

Unfortunately, Kell hadn't been in possession of the device. He'd secreted it with the lunatic who ran the Tantalus colony for lunatics, and so had no leverage over Roxanne's brutal father when he'd come nosing around Shane's territory. No leverage, no *trust*. There could be no trust without leverage. In Kell's world, the two were one and the same entities.

So, in return for Tiberius Kirk's patronage, Shane Kell had told him about what came to be known as the Tantalus device. It wasn't as though Kell had any intention of keeping it for himself, once he'd learned of its treacherous nature. As far as he was concerned, the thing should be forever locked in a lunatic asylum but relinquishing its whereabouts had earned Shane the man's *trust*, as well as his single publicly acclaimed daughter. If the rumors of everything Kell was teaching Roxanne had ever gotten as far as her father's ears, however, the man had never seemed to care.

Rumors. Shane had long ago taken to killing people when they carried rumors inferring things that hit entirely too close to home, the way many of the questions Roxanne

had suddenly begun asking did. Of course, those questions might just be an innocent coincidence. Then again, the word *innocent* wasn't usually found within a parsec of the woman he had come to wish that he hadn't granted such leniency to after she had so rudely introduced him to her boomslang.

Kell paused to calculate. Thirty years? Had it actually been *that* long ago that they'd become lovers? The Inquisitor General of Sector 31 shook his head slowly, feeling himself blanch. Yes, it was getting on time to remove her from his life. He had no firm idea exactly how long that life might be, assuming of course that he would be allowed to see it out to its natural conclusion.

Genetically ameliorated hybrid vigor was a wonderful, frightening thing.

The trouble was, he honestly cared for Roxanne. That, too, was a wonderful, frightening thing. Rather in the way that the Tantalus field device had been (or still was, assuming that Roxanne had even a part of it). Kell had known that the device would be the destruction of her father well before he'd handed its location over. Oddities and losses had filled the man's life from the moment he claimed the device as his own, and it was as though he'd been unable to see it:

Strange visitors from elsewhen nearly taking over his ship,

his consort disappearing and leaving a previously-unclaimed thirteen-year old girlchild as wild as a le-matya in her wake, his crew mutinying en-masse, Romulan slaves attacking the fringes of the Empire in warships somehow taken from under the Empire's own nose, and finally his XO killing him and absconding with his beloved exclusion device, which had put Spock into the center of the Imperial web.

Kell was absolutely certain that the Tantalus device wouldn't do the traitor Emperor, whose spies had become the bane of Sector 31, any favors, either. Assuming, that was, that he still had the thing, and simply hadn't pulled it to pieces to see how it worked or if it might be fixed.

This was the other face of Kell's great fear; that Roxanne might have actually sided with someone key to this uprising or even with the turncoat Spock himself, in order to determine the real uses and capacities that the alarming alien machine had. He couldn't help but wonder, too, if her purported desire for vengeance against the man who'd killed her father wasn't, in stark actuality, simply a way to peel Kell off Minara Prime, the one place in the Empire where he was utterly safe, to present him in the Imperial court for what he actually was.

"How the hell can you know the thing you're searching for is even on Minara anymore?" Roxanne groused at him

now, manipulating the sensor settings on the interface to the supercomputers that ran the Minara Prime complex. The computers on all slave-stations possessed similar programs and conformations, though the ones on this planet had a number of added features that she expressed her dismay over by whacking the instrumentation panel with a balled fist.

"Go gentle, woman," he chided. She turned a sour face toward him.

"*Gentle?* You've asked me to help you solve this problem, so here it is, Shane; you're trying to find something that's got the same genes as you've got scattered cryogenically or growing in various iterations throughout this complex, including those creepy time-lapse crystal-creatures —"

"Vians," he clarified, watching her face tighten into an unattractive fist. "And the creature I'm searching for should be somewhere *outside* the complex."

"I don't *care* what they're called. My point is that this needle you've created, assuming that it's actually still on Minara at all, is somewhere on the fringes of a very large stack of needles about which you're making unfounded assumptions. My *other* point is," here she slapped at the mainframe console again for emphasis, "that the non-standard shields you've got set up above and around and

throughout this place bleed energy like a gut-shot bear, and the pathetically standard sensors you're requesting that I use to find your escapee can't scan through them.

"You don't even have a craft on Minara that could scan through the shielding you have wrapped around the planet, assuming we went on the ill-advised camp-out you seem to think we're going to go on in order to find your experiment. Before I'll do any such thing, you'll need to damper down or shut off some of the damned shielding, and transfer some of the more high-tech sensor capacities you use inside the compound to whatever craft —"

"No." Shane said flatly. He was absolutely not going to give this woman that kind of power on Minara Prime.

Roxanne shrugged, sat back, and crossed her arms. "You're right about the subsurface water on this part of the planet. There's so many underground caverns and lakes and ponds and rivers that it makes me homesick for Nisus. Now I see how you maintain all that damned forest on the mountain. All of that is big and obvious enough to see even through the screaming noise of your paranoid shields, if blurrily. But beyond that...well, I just can't help you, Shane. Not unless you're willing to trust me the way you seem to think I ought to trust you."

Kell drew a deep breath and held it for a moment. No one knew that he couldn't perceive color — no one he'd

ever left alive, anyway. Nor did anyone know of the exquisitely sensitive capacities of his sinuses. He could literally smell fear, deceit, anger, or any number of other emotions, and these did possess color, or at least they possessed what he imagined color must be like. He perceived deceit from Roxanne, certainly, but not about this; she was simply frustrated, in the way that someone who couldn't perform any simple task became frustrated. That she both loved and hated him was apparent, too, but these were emotions he shared; They had colored his world from the moment he'd first met her.

He felt his mouth twist as he considered what amounted to the words of a woman declaring a simple fact. "Then you'll have to give me specs relative to exactly what it is you'll need," he conceded at last.

Her own mouth thinned as she considered that, her gray eyes taking on a far-away look. "If we go scouting around Minara in a hoverer, it'd need to be outfitted with the same sorts of scanners you use in the complex itself, sensitive to living heat, motion, and biological function as well as species. And you've absolutely *got* to damper the main planetary shields down by seventy or eighty percent. If what you're looking for really has taken refuge among the underground pools, then even such a hoverscanner would be useless, which means we'll also need hand-

scanners capable of performing the same functions. Most geological formations contain ores that skew or otherwise fuzz up scanners."

"You're saying we're going to be walking around looking for...? That could take years!"

Roxanne turned back to the mainframe's interface terminal and keyed in a series of commands. "I doubt it. Particularly if you trust segments of your staff enough to equip them to help with the hunt. Even through the noise of all the shielding going on around Minara, the extent of the underground river system is more or less mappable; It takes up far less area than this complex itself, no more than about fifteen hundred square acres. It's self-feeding and self-filling, reaching from the sewage and water-supply aqueducts you've got watering and draining your base, to the aquifers in the foothills of the karst range east of here. Fifty miles in diameter, give or take. If this thing's alive, it's got to be somewhere near it; Living creatures need water.

"Also, if you have it, you need to somehow download your experiment's exact chemical-genetic makeup into whatever sensor program we end up using, or we'll have hell's own time separating him out of the general mass of humanoid DNA similar to his in the complex."

Kell scowled. "I don't have a sensor program capable

of genetic scanning."

Roxanne scowled back, then heaved a sigh, appearing to have come to some sort of decision. "I might, but you'll need to give me direct access to the sensor matrix we end up using. It's a proprietary program, and I don't feel like sharing it in its natal form. You said your experiment left DNA on that Vian machine you seem to think it escaped you through?"

Kell nodded tightly. "It was bleeding by the time it had gotten that far."

Roxanne smiled thinly. "Then I'll need private access to that, too, in order to load up my program with the exact DNA data I'd need to transfer to the sensor matrix."

She was right, of course. Just because she wanted direct access to the pseudo-metallic Vian space-time effector device didn't mean he wouldn't have her watched, however. And he could put a watchdog trace into his own sensor programs before allowing her to download this vaunted proprietary DNA-tracking program into them. Still, it wouldn't do to capitulate too quickly. "I don't like this idea."

She shrugged. "Then I don't have any alternatives for you. I mean, you can send teams to scour the pools and the areas around them at random, but like you just pointed out, *that* might take years. I'd rather not wait years to have

your help against the man who killed my father, so you need to believe me when I say that my intent in possibly revealing proprietary information to you is sincere. You've made me Intendant of your little house of horrors; you're going to have to trust me with them sometime."

Roxanne was far more subtle and persuasive than her father had ever been. It was one reason, no doubt, why he had feelings for her. It was, however, also why he didn't trust her. He allowed his conflicting feelings to show on his face. "Don't make me regret this, Roxanne."

She stood and moved close. "When have I ever made you regret anything?" she murmured in that sultry voice that caused unlikely parts of his anatomy to tingle. The rush of human and alien pheromones that was his unpleasant birthright tried to influence his thinking, tried to tell him that he was wrong to suspect her of anything.

It all just made him suspect her more.

Chapter Thirteen

John Harriman possessed two maddening personality traits that Renee Ingram didn't: A tendency toward over-analyzing situations, and a tendency toward people-pleasing. He'd learned both of them as self-defense techniques, as a child dealing with an overbearing, demanding father. When the first cancelled out the second, things didn't tend to fall apart. But when the second cancelled out the first...

Ingram pushed down the all-over ache of her body along with a sense of incipient nausea, and chewed at her already-ragged right thumbnail, noting without caring that she was still wearing her stained and stiffening archery glove, as thoughts and memories cascaded unbidden through her mind. These tendencies of John's were, of course, the reason why Command had paired her with him as XO; she could usually either talk him out of or run right over these traits of his when they rendered him blind. He could do the same thing for her, when her tendency toward brusque action and the drawing of abrupt impressions — what the Captain of the *Enterprise* iteration *beta* jokingly

referred to as *tripping over a conclusion* — became a liability.

Captain Harriman could also be extremely short-tempered when nervous or angry, a trait either learned or inherited from his father, a Starfleet Admiral whom Ingram had once seen her CO personally banish into a starship brig. On the *Enterprise* B's shakedown cruise, which she had begged and pleaded John not to undertake because the ship and crew simply weren't adequately prepared, he'd been both nervous and angry, a state in which he could barely function.

He was angry at Renee for showing up in a yeoman's uniform. He was angrier still when she explained that this was because the dry goods replicators aboard ship had begun to malfunction, and her only other option had been appearing in civvies; Her personal stores and tailored flag uniforms hadn't been scheduled to arrive for four days.

The kind, humorous man who Ingram privately called *JJ* had attempted to limit his ship's myriad issues by placing his brand-new, embarrassingly misclad XO at the environmental-ops console and ordering her to keep internal functions running at any cost. Ops was not her specialty (her minor in Starfleet had been medicine), but a third of the bridge crew wasn't scheduled to return from shore leave until the following Tuesday. Fortunately, a

person couldn't possibly be promoted to Commander on a Starfleet vessel without knowing how to operate all of its bridge stations.

The event with the energy-ribbon had eliminated any impetus she might have had to remain at enviro-ops. She'd dragged a wounded Marco into the turbolift to go looking for Commander Chekov and two of the useless media drones who had, only a few minutes previously, been commanded to perform the functions of medical staff by Admiral Kirk. Had she not known that John Harriman was overwhelmed by having been just given command of an incomplete, inadequately staffed, malfunctioning starship (leaving him no time to review his staff dossiers), she'd have been enraged by the fact that her own CO wasn't aware that his new commander had medical knowledge.

Neither Marco nor the bewildered little group of surviving El-Aurians had been badly hurt, and Renee had gotten back to the bridge in less than fifteen minutes. She knew that John had never noticed that she'd disobeyed direct orders, and she'd never enlightened him. Later, a grieving Captain Chekhov had told the Starfleet inquest panel, which had convened to investigate the incident that culminated in the death of James Kirk and a number of the *Enterprise's* crew, what the El-Aurians had told him; That being trapped inside the energy-ribbon was *like being*

inside joy.

This situation most assuredly was not.

John and Marco, backed by a number of other unaffected crew members collected along the way, had finally entered main engineering by sheer force. Photonic mines had turned the door, bulkhead, and all stations near them into smoking, spitting craters. Tamakari had been injured by the explosions, but not badly enough to keep her down.

After Renee finally got to Engineering, she'd had to beam Marco to the secondary sickbay with a broken arm and a concussion. T'Dani had assured her that he'd be fine in a couple of days. The violently hallucinating Napean woman had left most of the other crewmembers who had dared to broach her territory dead.

And John...

"Commander?" the voice of the woman who was *Enterprise's* field-trauma surgeon, Uta Morell, broke into Ingram's musings. She and two medical technicians had been slated to care for the captain to the exclusion of all else. Though all *Excelsior*-class Federation Starships possessed three sickbays which hosted a medical team of CMO, field medic, three physicians-in-training, three medical technicians, and six to twelve nurses, still T'Dani and the rest of the medical staff were swamped with

injured. All of the *Enterprise's* sickbays were overflowing.

Renee pulled herself out of the mind-rambling that inevitably occurred when she was exhausted. She knew what Morell was going to say before the doctor said it. She'd personally tried to give John Harriman as much first aid as she could when she finally got to engineering; Blood-staunching and filtering kits, protoplasers and dermasuture tools, pain and anti-shock therapies were present in all starship first aid kits. Maybe if they hadn't spent an hour fleeing the desecrated system that countless billions of slaughtered Suliban had called *Iliana-Li* before daring to revive Morell, if it hadn't taken Turath and Mirin the better part of that hour to reset ch'Riss' tampering and get T'Dani out of the damned quarantine room, or if...

"The damage was extensive," Morell said softly. "I'm afraid he'll be in a regeneration tank for the better part of the next six months, unless we can get him to a planetary—" "

A thrill composed of equal parts gratitude and disbelief swept through Renee. She held up a hand to stem Morell's commentary. "You're telling me he'll *live*, Doctor?" Nothing else mattered to Ingram at the moment; The fine details would be in the report Morell ultimately filed, and anyway, she was going to have to go over John's status with T'Dani personally.

She'd been certain that Uta Morell was going to tell her that her CO and dear friend was dead.

The surgeon nodded. "He wouldn't be if Rafael hadn't disintegrated Tammy, and you hadn't gotten to Engineering when you did. Marco reported that the captain was trying to keep her away from other crewmen, and away from the core controls, and he mostly succeeded."

Renee drew a deep, sobbing breath, closed her eyes, nodded, and took a firm grip on herself. Her head spun, and Morell caught her by the shoulders. "You need your own injuries seen to, Commander."

They had learned from this horrible experience that the enforced mind-control caused some humanoids and nearly all sentient semi-, pseudo-, and non-humanoids, such as the *Enterprise*'s Tenebian Security Chief and the starship's Lemnorian Transporter Chief, to suffer strokes severe enough to rupture major veins and arteries in their brains and throats. Ultimately, setting the *Enterprise* on a high-warp course into the outermost reaches of the galaxy, away from those planets most strongly affected by their unknown, unseen, merciless psionic enemies, had banished the violent illusions.

Ingram reopened her eyes and shook her head at Uta. Her duty to the safety of the ship and crew fulfilled, her duty must now turn toward the safety of the Federation,

and particularly to those innocents who would be killed out of hand by the continuing encroachment of...of...

Of whatever the hell this was.

The *Enterprise's* current tally of woe included ninety-seven dead, forty-two unaccounted for, and one hundred and two seriously injured, including the captain. Nine-tenths of everybody else was battered, lacerated, or burned. Teams of the less-sorely-injured were scouring the hundreds of miles of Jefferies tubes and Ventries accessways possessed by the *Enterprise*. For reasons not entirely clear to Renee, the computers were still obstinately refusing to perform internal scans.

She shook her head again, more forcefully, and wished she hadn't. "I'm okay."

The older woman frowned. "You look like hell. You've got infected gashes in your neck and arm, infected second-degree disruptor burns on your face and throat, and second- and third -degree metal burns everyplace else. You *don't* want to make me drag T'Dani in here. She doesn't take well to disturbance when busy."

The true level of attention that Morell and Renee were giving one another and their varied concerns was revealed when a soft voice behind them made both women jump. "You're right, she is busy, but she's here anyway. I need to verify your findings on the captain," T'Dani said somberly.

"I can take care of Renee as well. I'll take main sickbay from here on in; two and three need your presence more, now."

Morell released Ingram, "Of course."

T'Dani leveled a serious gaze at Renee. "Are you up to this?"

"I was up to patching what was left of him back together in engineering," she snarled, and regretted it immediately.

T'Dani merely nodded. She knew all the vicissitudes of Ingram's temper, just as Renee knew Corrigan's. Someone else might think that T'Dani had retreated to her mother's people's emotional control in order to hold herself together in the face of the agonies and horrors she'd had to face over the last few hours, but Renee knew her better than that. The reason behind her apathy was how Vulcans taught older, uncooperative children the rudiments of emotional control; worked past exhaustion, she hadn't strength left to squander on emotional expression.

"I know that. That's why I'm asking if you're up to this, or if you'd rather wait until your own injuries are seen to."

Ingram swallowed. "I'm up to it, Doctor." In truth, she felt absolutely horrible, but the bald fact was that it didn't matter how she felt; She had no choice regarding

what duties she absolutely must perform next. It was rare for a Starfleet crewman who couldn't put their own desires or hurts, physical or psychological, behind their avowed duty to rise to any command level above cadet, and even that level could be taken away if the cause was sufficient.

The decor of the main sickbay was a thickly carpeted, restful mixture of transparents, off-whites, earth tones, and greens, mostly in glass or transparent aluminum. The large rectangular room's corners contained semicircular walls that partitioned off office, laboratory, quarantine, and regeneration suites. Between office and quarantine suites, and laboratory and regeneration suites, transparent walls boxed off several surgical suites and private recovery rooms; these walls, like the transparent walls of the semicircular suites, could be darkened as needed.

The main focus of any starship's sickbay, however, were the three-walled bays that filled the central area, each supplied with crash-carts and shelves of medical equipment. These were taken up by not just one crewmember each, but as many as three per available biobed. Sounds of pain and grief, muffled but not silenced by the opaque walls of the bays, greeted Renee and T'Dani as they entered the main door, skirting the laboratory suite and its appended private surgical rooms, whose walls were darkened and whose interiors bustled with activity.

John Harriman was in one of regeneration tanks in the suite given over to that process. The walls surrounding the regeneration suite had also been darkened to deep teal-green, and sound-dampened from inside in a way that the bays composing the main room could not be. The captain of the *Enterprise* looked smaller to Renee, suspended in the regeneration tank. His face was peaceful, but the horrid map of livid, crushing bruises that she had seen upon kneeling beside him in engineering had scarcely begun to fade. The large stereotaxic screen connected to his regeneration tank gave a continually updated readout of Harriman's metabolic functions and the ongoing repairs his body still required.

All that was needed was for the CMO and XO, in unison, to explain exactly what it was that had culminated in such terrible injury. If either of those two had misgivings, or if their accounts differed, a shipwide hearing would be convened. Renee walked over and touched the tank with the tips of her fingers, the way she might have surreptitiously touched John's hand or arm in a tense situation in order to divert his attention to some crucial matter. The tank was as warm and pulsing as the human body inside it.

The full-body-immersion regeneration tank currently in use aboard Federation starships was a modification that

T'Dani herself had constructed, with the help of various other Federation scientists and engineers. It was a revampment of the neuro-regenerating stasis field developed by her own father and grandfather years before. An actual transparent-aluminum tank, the modern version was magnitudes less limited and sensitive than the original force-field stasis unit, and didn't require the presence of Vulcan or other telepathic healers in order to complete the full range of functions that it could be programmed for. It was also magnitudes more flexible in range-of-use than the original design.

However, this style of regeneration possessed its own drawbacks, the main one being that its effect on the humanoid metabolic system was the polar opposite of its precursor's. For every hour spent in it, a person aged approximately two hours. Also, it could not be used on humanoids either over or under a certain age; those ages were exquisitely race dependent. Nonetheless, considering the magnitude and variety of injuries it was capable of ameliorating, and the relative swiftness with which it worked, the Federation Council and Starfleet command had decreed that its usefulness more than compensated for its limitations.

The screen's projected time-to-removal made Renee grimace. If he was kept solely in a starship sickbay,

relying on the regenerative powers of this tank rather than receiving the multiple-concurrent medical techniques available at major hospitals on all Federation planets, John would lose half a year of his life recovering from the injuries inflicted by Tamakari Phica. Nonetheless, the captain of the *Enterprise* was alive.

Also, according to the faithful recordings kept by the screen which was, for all intents and purposes, part of the regeneration tank itself, the only actual surgery Harriman had received had been one to repair his skull and keep his brain functioning. According to the readings, this surgery had been as slapdash as any cranial surgery Ingram had ever heard of, but she understood the reason for the necessary swiftness with which Morell had performed the surgery, in order to get Harriman into regeneration. Renee had known without a doubt that John had been in incipient or ongoing circulatory, neural, cardiac, respiratory, hepatic, splenic, and adrenal collapse from the moment she and Uta had laid him on the surgical bed.

She was overjoyed that he had lived long enough for the regeneration tank to perform its marvelous function, but she wasn't unduly surprised; Harriman's gentle, tolerant demeanor belied a toughness and a core of steel she'd witnessed more than once in six years as his executive officer. Now he floated, naked and helpless as an unborn

infant, in the constantly regenerated fluid of the tank, which could be formulated in a variety of ways, to provide the optimal healing environment for any level of injury in any species. The screen that constantly monitored the tank and its occupant had been thoughtfully positioned to allow the insensate captain of the *Enterprise*, and anyone in the room with him, to retain as much personal privacy and dignity as possible.

Renee drew a deep breath and began the litany that would accomplish the transfer of deep-space captaincy on a Federation Starship. She wondered, fleetingly, if any Federation entity would ever receive the transmission, then mentally pushed away that pessimistic musing using the lever of duty. "Computer, transmit the following to Starfleet Command and the Federation Council via the following

channel:

HELMCOORDINATELOCK/Denobula.RSP.Huan/SD989
6.63NLTIME/ USSENERPRISE1701-B/FTL-
EMG.WP/UFPSCCS31, and shipwide for the record —

"I, Renee Ingram, Commander of the Starship *Enterprise* 1701-B, verify the wholly incapacitated state of Captain John Harriman of the Starship *Enterprise* 1701-B, per medical findings of incipient multiple organ collapse in Captain John Harriman and the subsequent requirement for full-body-immersion regeneration, begun Stardate 9896.63,

sixteen hundred oh seven hours ship's time." She drew a deep breath and continued.

"Due to the incidents leading to the complete incapacitation of the captain of this ship, and pursuant to the communiqué postmarked 43.12.88.00+-09;Halana.RSP.Denobula/SD9894.327765/UFPSCCS31/F TL-EMG.WP/USSENERPRISE 1701-B," — she had spent so much time, not very long ago, scrutinizing this extensive, convoluted postmark with such care that she'd memorized it — "I, Renee Ingram, Executive Officer of the Starship *Enterprise* 1701-B, declare that an act of war resulting in the grievous injury and loss of life has been perpetrated upon this vessel and her inhabitants, property and citizens of the United Federation of Planets, by enemies as yet unknown.

"Furthermore, pursuant to Starfleet Order 104, Section B, Paragraph 1A subsection gamma, I declare myself temporary captain of the Starship *Enterprise* 1701-B as of Stardate 9856.91." The inclusion of the word *temporary* filled her with another wave of gratitude for John's life. This brought another splash of dizziness in its wake, and she reached out to steady herself against the bulwark of the regeneration tank. "I hereby accept and acknowledge all authority and responsibilities which pertain to that rank. The *Enterprise's* last orders from the Federation Council

through Starfleet Section 31 were as follows; Make contact with the Suliban colonies on the planets of Mu Crucis system, determine their level of knowledge and/or..." she paused for a moment, as exhaustion drove the term she wanted right out of her head;

"...*complicity* in the attacks currently occurring in Federation space, and perform any action required to stop them. Incidents leading to the grievous injury of Captain John Harriman have proven that the Mu Crucis system and all of its inhabitants have been destroyed. Therefore, my intent is to fulfill the remainder of the order previously given, to wit; *Perform any action required to stop them*, in this instance *them* being the unknown enemies who have, directly or indirectly, caused the injury and incapacitation of Starfleet Captain John Harriman, and the death of over fifteen percent of the crew of the *Enterprise*."

Renee found herself shaking, whether from exhaustion, incipient infection, shock, grief, hunger, dehydration or, more likely, a mixture of those, and leaned harder against the regeneration tank. Sudden hot, buzzing gray darkness threatened to drown her. She bit her lower lip, hard. Little by little, as she fought to concentrate on T'Dani's words, the nauseating faintness began to clear.

"I, T'Dani Corrigan, Chief Medical Officer of the Starship *Enterprise* 1701-B, concur with all conclusions

made and resultant actions performed by Renee Ingram, Executive Officer of the Starship *Enterprise* 1701-B. I state for the record that Uta Morell, Auxiliary Medical Officer and Field-Trauma Surgeon assigned to the aforementioned starship, has performed her duties on behalf of Captain John Harriman to the best of humanoid capacity, utilizing the most modern medical technologies currently to hand. I state for the record that severe multiple organ injuries, caused by blunt-force trauma bestowed by crewmen under the control of unknown psionic enemies of the United Federation of Planets, were the precipitating factor in the long-term incapacitation of Captain John Harriman on Stardate 9856.91, sixteen hundred oh seven hours ship's time.

"Furthermore, pursuant to Starfleet Order 104, Section B, Paragraph 1A subsection gamma, I declare Commander Renee Ingram interim captain of the Starship *Enterprise* 1701-B as of Stardate 9856.91, and declare to the best of my knowledge and experience that her mission parameters are correct as stated. Computer, cease transmission and close infraship channels.

You," T'Dani levered Renee's uninjured left arm away from the regeneration tank and over her head, half-carrying the new interim captain of the starship *Enterprise* toward one of the private rooms between the regeneration and

laboratory suites, which hosted the only empty bed remaining in the main sickbay, "are coming in here whether you like it or not, and letting me take care of you."

Ingram was muzzily surprised by this. She hadn't been aware of the CMO walking around the regeneration tank to stand so close beside her, and wondered momentarily if she had, indeed, passed out. Dizziness and nausea threatened to overwhelm Renee again as T'Dani gently laid her down. She wasn't given time to either plead a state of wellness that she wasn't altogether certain she'd be able to pull off, or to become actively sick; the stinging hiss of a hypospray against her neck was the last thing she was conscious of for some time.

Chapter Fourteen

She was rudely awakened by the unmistakable sounds and sensations of collisions against the energy shields of a spacegoing vessel. The pale ecru wall and cabinets she was facing spun and warped even as she noted the wash of red that pulsed over them. Renee Ingram was having trouble disentangling herself from the arms of whatever Morpheus her CMO had put her into. She moaned, a sound more of frustration than pain. A cool tingling against the base of her skull sent fibrils of cool, tingling wakefulness up and down her spinal column.

"That's the last of the cordrazine," T'Dani intoned from behind her. "We're also fresh out of psilosynase and theragen, so I really, really hope nobody comes down with any insane telepathic invasions anytime soon."

Renee groaned again, turned over, and sat up as quickly as she dared. She was stiff from sleep, and ravenously hungry, but otherwise much better. Sometime during her enforced slumber, her archery glove had been removed, and she'd been sonically sponge-bathed. "What the hell's happening?"

"We're being hunted through the Pelican nebula by the *Surak*, the *Malinche*, and the *Crazy Horse*."

Renee levered herself half-off the bed and grasped at her CMO's shoulders. "We're being shot at by three other Federation starships in the heart of Federation space?" she was a veteran of deep-space exploration, but always, regardless of how untracked the path the *Victory* had trod, there had been a Starfleet and a Federation, sane and stable and immensely powerful, at her back. *This*, though...

T'Dani released herself from Ingram's grasp and took the *Enterprise*'s newest captain by one arm. "We *were*, but you slept through all of that. I'm told there's a lot of proto-formation debris in the interior of the Pelican, and Josi's looking for a field of stuff stable enough that we can anchor to something and shut down all non-essentials for a while. The ship's been whacking against meteor bits on and off for the last half hour. Josi said to tell you when you woke up that we've already shut down all long-range communications fields, changed our access codes, and nutated the shields."

"How the hell long did you put me out for?" Renee demanded, chagrined. What the woman who was, by default, now the XO of the *Enterprise* was doing made sense; there was more than enough ionization noise in the Pelican to hide a starship's essential-energy outputs and

vector trails. Still, hiding from what was going on was a short-term option, at best.

"Three days. You were one big dehydrated microbiology picnic, Captain. The first officer concurred."

Ingram winced. *John.* The memory of his awful wounding flooded into her refreshed, if hypoglycemia-aching, head. T'Dani applied pressure to the arm she held and, as if by magic, Renee found herself back in the biobed, but sitting up this time. T'Dani went to the room's replicator and ordered a relatively indecent pizza and a large pitcher of ice water, then turned back to frown at her friend forbiddingly; "Once you fulfill this prescription, your CMO will let you out of here. Not before."

Renee forced herself to eat very slowly. T'Dani, as was her wont, did not. Roughly three-fifths human, the part-Vulcan woman appalled large swathes of her family and acquaintances with her eating habits and food choices. As far as Renee had ever been able to ascertain, this was one of her hobbies. "What else have I missed?"

"One of the first things Josi did when you left her in control of the bridge," T'Dani began, around a mouthful of sausage and peppers, "was to raise the shields and alter their frequency. She said she hoped this might stop whatever was happening."

Renee picked up her ice water. "The communiqué the

Section sent said no sort of shielding known to the Federation can stand in the way of this. Excellent idea, though."

"You're telling me. *Crazy Horse* might have blown us out of space when it showed up in our warp vector and started emptying what was left in its torpedo tubes at us, otherwise. Its shield codes hadn't been changed, so we forced their shields down and drove them away. The *Malinche* was a different story when it showed up, but by then we were nearly to the Pelican." T'Dani finished her slice of pizza and applied herself to licking her fingers clean.

"Damage?"

"Not much, since Josi'd also increased shield amplitude." T'Dani helped herself to another quarter of the pizza. "Of course, the other starships had already been in a brawl with somebody else, which helped us out."

As always, Renee was amazed at how much the tiny woman not only could, but needed, to eat. She took a healthy bite of her own slice of the savory pie. "Any idea how many starships might have been affected by this?" she asked semi-distinctly around the food in her mouth. If the behaviors of the crews of the *Surak*, the *Crazy Horse*, and the *Malinche* were any indication, the use of psilosynase had been integral, and simply running away from Mu

Crucis system wouldn't have been enough to break the psionic hold on the crew. Renee was frustrated that they were currently on silent running; It left them no way to inform Starfleet about the effectiveness of the drug combination they'd used to free the *Enterprise* crew of mind-control.

"Not a clue. Which is why Josi felt we should enact the better part of valor for the time being. We've also altered the ship's operational frequencies and command codes, except for yours, of course. You'll want to do that just as soon as you can. We're still having internal scanner issues. Apparently, it was the passive-reactive nature of the psilosynase we released into the ship's systems that's causing it. Nobody's ever been sure if the activity of the drug was active or passive. Now we know."

"Great. If we get out of this, you can write a monograph on it. I'm assuming that's also why it affected the..." Renee set down the crust of her pizza, pushed her plate away, and wiped her hands clean on the biobed sheeting, which was far more effective than a napkin; "ahm, *dead* the way it did?"

T'Dani nodded wordlessly. "If my father's old partner saw what you just did, he'd've taken a lirpa to you."

Renee smiled, surprising herself; she'd thought this particular mission might have kept her from doing that

again in her life, ever. "And what's the status of the crew?"

"Everyone accounted for now. One hundred and four dead, about fifty still in sickbay if I don't include you. Conservatively, seven more people might die. There's been a great deal of neural and empathic trauma; the regeneration tanks are in constant use, which I've never done before, and it makes me a little nervous. We're obviously away from...well, whatever the hell this is, now. I should be able to heal most of the ship's surviving psions if we can manage to *stay* away from it."

Renee closed her eyes. Sixteen percent of her crew dead, within the rough half an hour it had taken to reach Sickbay and begin producing the gas. At that sort of rate, the population of the Federation would be obliterated by this time next year. Something needed to be done about this, preferably yesterday. "How many active psions are included in that number?"

"Discounting myself, we had sixty-one people on board with a working level of psionic capacity. That includes the delegation of monks from Rumantia we were in the middle of shuttling out to Bajor when all of this started. Two of the original sixteen of them are in sickbay, though only five were very badly injured. One of them is dead. He died trying to attack..."

T'Dani set down her pizza and made a point of wiping

her mouth very carefully clean with a napkin. "Well, he tried to attack *you*, and..." she sighed, and continued; "Of all the psions who are *Enterprise* crew, twenty-seven are dead. Five of the other eighteen are in sickbay. Two of those might not make it, and I've got half of the rest on suicide watch. They remember what they did under the influence of whatever it is that's doing this, and they blame themselves. So that's twenty-eight people, fourteen of whom aren't in psychological condition to function, in my medical opinion. Of that fourteen, nine are crew."

Renee was so appalled she couldn't find words capable of describing the feeling. The *Enterprise* had been travelling to the recently discovered, warp-capable, deeply religious world through uncharted space in order to drop communications-relay beacons in its wake. This had been fortunate; the *Enterprise* wasn't caught up in the first waves of madness, and the brand-new beacons had carried undisturbed communications between Starfleet, the Federation Council, and the *Enterprise* long after other communications channels had turned into malware sinks.

Killing monks had never been on Renee Ingram's bucket list. "I can't let this kind of sacrifice go unanswered, T'Dani. I've been commanded to do *anything* I need to in order to end this, and not just for the *Enterprise*."

Renee leaned back against the biobed and rubbed viciously at her eyes. The sterilizing sheets had removed even the scent of food from her fingertips. "How do you fight against something you can't even *perceive*, when it's trying to control your mind?" the recollection of ch'Riss' madness washed over her again, all the more horrible because this time it came with accompanying memories of past overtures of friendship made with impromptu lounge performances on the Tellarite *li'dswed*, which the records officer had played with some skill. She wondered fleetingly why she hadn't been infected by his touch, or the touch of the Vulcan outside the main Sickbay, then brushed the thought into the back of her mind as unimportant.

"I would think that giving in to despair would just make our unseen enemy's job easier."

Renee dropped her hands and narrowed her eyes at the *Enterprise's* CMO, who was considering her slumped shoulders and bowed posture with a look of trepidation. "There are four ways to deal with any situation. You can give it your all, you can give in, you can give up, or some combination of those three.

"Sometimes giving in is the choice that offers the most options. And despair's actually a wonderful teacher. If you let it overtake you entirely, and live with it for a while, you'll find that it dissipates, and that *you* are what remains.

That's an example of giving in. It is *not* the same thing as giving up." Ingram crossed her arms, drew a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "We've given it our all, and that's not enough. We *need* to give in and ask for help, to locate..." she reopened her eyes and threw up her hands, "*something* that we can use against these...whatever the hell they are."

"Most of Betazed's been abandoned to fight these things, and it's not making a lot of difference. Where do you think you're going to find something better?" the CMO replied combatively, finishing off the last of the pizza.

Ingram let loose with a snort of frustration and threw up her arms. "That's the entire problem, damn it! I don't have that kind of knowledge!"

"Who does? *What* does? It'd seem to me that *that* is what you'd want to find now."

Renee brightened. "That's right! Yes, that's exactly right. I need something with the knowledge of...what the Federation needs in order to fight these things effectively. Whatever that is." She scowled; "How do you ask for what you need when you don't even know what that *is*?" the answer came to her hard on the heels of the question, and it threatened further waves of despair.

The answer was that when she found whatever might be capable of fulfilling the Federation's desperate need, then she'd know what questions to ask.

T'Dani stood up and stretched. Renee wondered if she'd allowed herself to sleep at all. Near-Vulcan strength, near-Vulcan stamina, and a pair of perfectly functional inner eyelids caused the *Enterprise's* CMO to treat herself as indestructible. Ingram knew very well that T'Dani's mulish stubbornness wasn't a Vulcan inheritance, however. "I can see that you're better, Captain. Go help your XO hide your ship."

Chapter Fifteen

She had been at the same thankless task for seven hours. She had decided not to bring any of her senior officers in to help her with it; She was too afraid that somebody would balk at whatever option was finally revealed, and Ingram hadn't the time, patience, or energy for long, drawn-out arguments that she'd have to end with a statement like *this is not a democracy*. She disliked having to make such statements, and anyway, she needed what

energy she had in order to solve this dilemma.

Assuming, of course, that it could be solved. Some dilemmas couldn't.

The *Kobayashi Maru* scenario existed to teach Starfleet cadets who had recently graduated from midshipman status that not all situations were resolvable. Though more than one cadet had worked out at least a partial solution to the painful conundrum that had faced Jonathan Archer nearly one hundred and fifty years ago now, it was also a test of character, designed to begin the sometimes-painful process of wringing useless arrogance out of fresh cadets.

A potential solution to the *Maru* scenario had come to be called *51/49*, in reference to the way the modern computer that ran the scenario scored the possible potential outcomes of decisions made during the run of the simulation. It was a brutal and difficult simulation and thinking up a *51/49* was a roughly half- million to -one possibility. Only three cadets had ever legitimately scored over fifty percent in the *Kobayashi Maru* scenario.

Renee Ingram had been the third.

However, though she had developed an elegant solution to the scenario that might have saved the lives of others, she had failed to save her own — the true crux of the character-analysis inherent in the *Kobayashi Maru*.

Ingram had managed to rescue the crew of the ship being dangled like bait by using a combination of gravitic and psionic spectra to force communications with the Romulan warbirds surrounding her ship.

The *Maru* scenario never used Klingon forces anymore; a truce with the government and citizens of Qo'Nos had rendered such a scenario absurd. Ingram had assumed that the Romulans in the simulation wanted what the Romulans in the actual historical conundrum had wanted; Control of a Terran starship, in order to untangle the alien mysteries of its hard-drive systems.

Renee had explained to the commanders of the Romulan warbirds surrounding her ship that the *Maru* itself, a Terran hauler, possessed information regarding the construction of Terran ships, as well as the same sort of drive-system as her own vessel. She had promised to deliver both herself and the *Maru*, which at the time of the actual historical occurrence had been replete with stores of raw dilithium, to them personally, if they allowed the starship she was captaining to return unharmed to Terra with the *Maru's* crew.

Ingram had appealed to the vanity of the Romulan commanders, again assuming that the program was historically accurate and the Romulans were facing fierce infighting between their own ruling factions. She'd cited

her knowledge of Starfleet, both the hardening of their vessels and their battle plans against the Romulan Empire, and the worth of a Starfleet captain to the Empire as a hostage.

Finally, she'd implied that her ship possessed secret hardware known as *the blast trigger*, which could automatically destroy both the starship she was captaining and the *Maru*, if her offer was refused. She set the imaginary hardware into a fake self-destruct countdown by discreetly entering a request for the audible reverse-count of functioning blast-triggers on the ship's photon torpedoes into the arm of her command chair. As she'd known it would, the computer helpfully replied to this request with the audible comment: *Blast trigger countdown — two hundred, one hundred ninety-nine...* thereby adding the mind-addling stress of an all-or-nothing, time-sensitive ultimatum to the choice she had offered the Romulans.

The simulation had ended there. The computerized program had determined a 66.735 percent chance that the Romulans commanding the warbirds surrounding both the *Maru* and the starship would accept her overture, and possibly even fight among themselves, for either the right to take Ingram and the *Maru* hostage, or about the veracity of the self-destruct capacities of her starship. Since the chances of getting her crew and the *Maru's* crew out of the

simulation alive had been greater than fifty percent, and since the simulation had never been programmed with holoprojections that would allow it to bring about such a conclusion as a full crew transfer and the kidnapping of a Starfleet officer, the simulation simply declared that Ingram's solution had met with success.

That announcement had brought Renee Ingram in front of a tribunal of Admirals, Fleet Admirals, Commodores, and every other higher level of brass that Starfleet possessed. She'd only heard of one other person who'd been dragged in front of a tribunal for successfully thinking up a *51/49* to the *Maru* scenario before, and that had been for flagrant deceit when he'd accessed and changed the program parameters themselves. Renee's first comment to the tribunal had been to aver that she hadn't done this.

That comment had brought on what Renee had considered an unwarrantedly long display of incomprehensible levity among the tribunal members. She'd assumed this was because every one of the very few individuals who'd scored well on the *Maru* made the same comment. When the guffaws and chuckles had filling the room had finally ceased, it had been made clear to Ingram that what the assembled dignitaries wanted to know was:

What choices would she have made from that point at

which the simulation had ceased?

Renee had shrugged, mystified, and replied: *It depends. Is this scenario considered to be in the real timeline the Maru existed in? If not, I'd legitimately try to self-destruct the ship I was on at about that point somebody towed it close enough. Of course, in the Maru's real time, Starfleet vessels didn't have that option. In which case I'd just have to say, were I taken prisoner, that where there is life there's also hope. Sometimes you just can't know what you'll do in a given situation until it happens, which frankly isn't the case in the Maru scenario as you've got it set up. I've no doubt Captain Archer could score a hundred on your fifty-one, forty-nine program if he had the chance to redo it in the year 2276.*

The roomful of brass had decided that Renee Ingram, a twenty- eight year -old fledgling cadet, should be burdened with a lieutenant's pips and sent on her way to her first posting, the *Victory*, which had gone on a ten-year long, deep-space jaunt and found anomalies like the Taranis Rift in the beta quadrant, as well as utterly new civilizations, including the Bajorans and the Cardassians.

Now, eighteen and a half years after the *Victory* had first set out on that deep-space mission, Captain Renee Ingram shut eyes that felt like they were full of sand, allowed herself to recline back onto her pillows, and

inquired; "Computer, what is there in the known galaxy capable of..." she chose a verb from an ever-dwindling selection; "*deflecting* psionic energy?"

Magneton rays and — the computer began. Renee'd already been through the semi-metaphysical effects of magneton rays with the ship's computer again and again. She snarled: "No, computer, do *not* reference magneton rays again. I require something capable of deflecting or otherwise blocking psionic energy that's not hazardous to carbon-based lifeforms and *doesn't* punch holes in the temporal fabric of space." This was, after all, the entire reason why the Halana and the Cairn had found their people and planets in such dire straits. "Are there any other sorts of..." Ingram trolled her cordrazine-insomniac mind for a question she hadn't asked yet, or some way to rephrase a question that she had; "*things* in the known galaxy that are capable of deflecting or altering the psionic spectra in any way at all?"

In order to get the answer she sought, she knew, it was imperative to ask the right question. This was why captains and execs usually posed their questions to a committee of officers or, sometimes, simply to whomever else might be present; Sentient minds could extrapolate, explore, and tweak questions that a computer was designed only to answer. For the past several hours, her obviously

poorly crafted questions had sent the computer winging away on tangents ranging from the geometrical constants of origami to the percentage of big-bang background radiation present in salt crystals. None of these were particularly helpful. One nice thing about a starship's great brain — you could scream and swear at it at length, and it took absolutely no umbrage.

Psionic spectra is a constant in the known Universe; as with other forms of energy, it cannot be created or destroyed, only changed in form. Its deflection or blockage requires either an output of energy harmful to carbon-based lifeforms, or the utilization of a sentient or semi-sentient non-carbon-based lifeform capable of influencing either its wave or its particle emissions, and thus influencing temporal phenomenon.

Renee sat upright. *This* was new. "Non-carbon-based lifeforms such as...?"

The chiroscaya of Axanar Seven, the computer suggested. Ingram couldn't help but imagine that there was a hopeful tone to its soporific tenor. She shook her head and grimaced, though it wasn't the computer's fault that chiroscaya were sub-sentient, mountain-sized, fire-hurling lumps of very sharp crypto-crystalline silicates that the Federation's Star Fleet had learned to leave well alone. It was said that they communicated their animal needs to one

another using the quantum-temporal component of psionic waves...

Wait. *The quantum-temporal component of the particles that travelled via psionic waves.* Hadn't Seantie been going on about something like that after coming back from a shore leave she'd taken in order attend some Federation-Klingon science symposia? Damn, now *what* had the name of that thing been, again...?

"Computer, recite a list of the presentations given at the Pan-Galactic Physics Research Symposia held..." Renee shook her head, rubbed at her gritty eyes, and immediately regretted it; "I can't remember where, but it was roughly six months ago, computer."

Working, the computer replied, as it always did to requests containing multiple variables or unknown quantities. It took the computer so long to finally reply to the request that Renee had begun considering calling Seantie over the intercom to ask her directly, but she nixed this idea upon looking at the chronometer on her bed stand.

There were seventy-six separate presentations held at this symposia over the course of ten Terran Standard days. Did you wish to specify a particular branch of physics or variety of presentation? The computer replied at last.

"Yes, I would like to specify; Please recite a list of all presentations relating to the psionic spectrum or any of its

components, known or hypothesized."

Do you wish the names of the authors and speakers of the presentations to accompany each presentation?

"That's not necessary, computer. Proceed."

Studies of the Hormonal Effects of the Psionic Spectra upon the Central and Peripheral Nervous Systems of Psy-Capable Humanoids; A Reproductive Overview. Continued Research into the Grand Unified Theory of Spectra: Psionic, Electromagnetic, Gravitic, and Variance. Quantum-Temporal Activity in Psionic Spectra Relative to the Potentially Symbiotic Function of Sentient Psionic Matrices. Psionically-Active String Theory; Energy Ribbons and —

"Computer, what is a sentient psionic matrix? And summarize, in fifty words or less, the conclusions found in the Pan-Galactic Physics Research Symposia presentation that talks about sentient psionic matrices."

This hypothetical construct, as presented by Xenoarchaeologist T'Sara, states that the exact composition of sentient psionic matrices must remain largely unknown, due to the infinite and ultimately sentient variable-set with which they are programmed, in much the same way that the humanoid brain is programmed for its functions by the DNA from which it formed. However, though these matrices were once considered machines, the

aforementioned theory posits that they are living creatures created by an ancient race of humanoid individuals extinct or otherwise absent in this space-time continuum. The cited presentation extrapolates the hypothesis that humanoid individuals are considered beneficial symbionts by these matrices; Thus, the matrix alters real or apparent space-time by altering the flow of particles along the psionic quantum-temporal waves that fill subspace, in order to fulfill the needs of its humanoid symbiont.

Now Ingram sprang directly out of bed. Did the Federation ever have a need to put to something capable of doing this! "Are there any sentient or semi-sentient psionic matrices in the alpha or beta quadrants of the Milky Way Galaxy?"

*Such a matrix is known to exist on the planet known to the Federation as *Guardian Alpha*. The name and identity of this matrix is still under study...*

The computer droned on. The chill that struck its way into Renee Ingram's heart was one she was certain would remain at her core for some time. *Guardian Alpha*. How could she have forgotten that somewhere within the outskirts of Federation space there existed an unimaginably ancient, apparently indestructible living machine capable of what some people might call *answering prayers*?

Now the question remained, *where* was *Guardian*

Alpha? That, she knew, was a question the computer not only would not, but could not, answer. Only forty or fifty people in the entire Federation were privy to that knowledge, and most of those were covert operatives. Ingram frowned down at her chronometer again.

It was late, or maybe early, depending upon one's own personal metabolism. The individual whom she was thinking of contacting, in hopes that he might help her determine which star-system the planet unhelpfully called *Guardian Alpha* was located in or near, was well-known for rising at about four am, ship's time, and splitting his shift in order to take an extended nap after lunchtime. Extended daytime napping was common practice among Hali'ians, but if she was betting with somebody else, she'd wager that he was currently in the shower. She shrugged; there were comm units in Starfleet showers — one of the reasons why *infraship* comm units were audio-only.

"Computer, connect me with Yaelat Qat, emergency *infraship* priority."

She'd been right; the sound of running water was musical in the background when Yaelat replied. "Qat here, Captain. What's wrong?"

"Actually, Lieutenant, something *might* finally be going right. I need your help. That message the Section last sent us was a thick palimpsest, and I'm hoping against

hope that it includes an undercover map of the Alpha and Beta quadrants. I need you to see whether you can pick something like that out of the rest of the information that's digitally sewn into the message."

The sound of water ceased. "You want a Section map? I think I've got one. I mean, it's about twenty years old, but if what you're looking for —"

"Oh, that would be excellent! Can you send it to my personal console?"

"Right now, Captain. Call me again if it doesn't have what you're looking for."

"Thanks, Yaelat. Ingram out."

She sat down at her desk and activated her console. By the time she'd gone through the protocols required for a Starfleet captain to activate an interlink on a previously quiescent personal line, the map was there. Each star and star system received its own color-coded, information-dense data chip that could be drawn out from among all the others, and the map itself was searchable. Renee opened the core menu, just out of curiosity, to see how much space something like this took up on a personal interlink.

As she had half-expected, the core menu stated that absolutely nothing was open on her computer or any of its many potential interlinks at all. Ingram felt her mouth twist, whether out of a sense of respect for Section 31's

abilities or a sense of concern about Section 31's abilities, she wasn't altogether certain. The interim captain of the *Enterprise* entered her request into the map's search engine.

Obligingly, the map took her right to the Tres Two system, near Deneb. She re-entered the request differently five more times; still Tres Two. That was enough for her scientist's mind. Next, she called up all the data available on Guardian Alpha. As she'd expected, much of it was damned scary; three tries had been made to destroy both it and the planet upon which it...well, *lived*. Depending upon one's apparent quantum reality, these attempts had all been both successful and, ultimately, fruitless, because Guardian Alpha remained, unassaulted, orbiting Tres Two. She then called up what unclassified reports there were concerning the use of the Guardian by Starfleet personnel, but hesitated when the screen displayed an unexpectedly high number. Setting the terminal on scroll, she sat back, crossed her arms, and took in as much as she dared.

She wasn't very far into the accounts before she ordered them erased from the screen. Delving too deeply into depositions spanning the entire history of Starfleet, all of which testified to the need to recover timelines that had become more snarled than a skein of yarn presented to a kennel full of cats, would do very little to buoy her

courage. Instead, she committed the system's coordinates to memory, and dismissed the Section star map. Her console performed an odd execution it had never done before; Rather than remaining quiescent until she requested a fresh tab, the entire personal computer unit shut down.

She wondered, briefly, if it would ever come on again, or if she would need to replace it, though in fact she didn't care; She had the data she needed. As she paced the confines of her quarters watching the vivid hues of the nebula they were currently hidden in play over the walls as her chronometer ticked off the minutes between the dead hours and alpha shift, she was finally forced to come to the conclusion that it didn't much matter what became of her personal computer console, the starship she was in command of, or her in general, as long as the machine that was no machine at all granted the supplication that she was prepared to put to it.

Chapter Sixteen

As Intendant of the many slave-stations in the Babel system, Roxanne had become quite the connoisseur of duress. She'd long ago come to find the agony booth both impersonal and time-consuming, and preferred more efficient, and vastly more intimate, methods of subdual and inquiry.

Certain toxins were efficient at killing. Others were efficient at reviving. It was all in the timing and the dose. Before she had requested Kell's merciless minions to scour the rebel-infiltrated slave-system clean, her final act as Intendant of the Wolf 424 system, of which Babel and Nisus were but two of no fewer than nine inhabited planets and moons, Roxanne had tied her exotic (and badly burned) erstwhile kidnapper down using an intricate web of razor wire. After scanning him thoroughly, she'd removed a particularly fascinating device lodged in the frontal sinus behind his left eye with meticulous care, utilizing a boning knife, shards of white-hot iron, and a set of dissecting tweezers. Finally, she'd relieved his awful pain by killing him, then reneged on that promise and

revived him, to force him to tell her what the thing was and what it did, as well as why and by whom he'd been sent.

She intended to experiment with the veracity of at least one of his responses now. She was being watched; the tricorder in her hand told her so. Roxanne would have expected nothing less. Her tricorder also held the program she'd told Shane Kell about, which would tease out the trail of the DNA left by Kell's humanoid experiment on the Vian crystal, letting them know if the thing had actually used the crystal.

Concealed in the guts of the tricorder was the cunning little device that she hadn't mentioned. She'd learned before she'd even gotten to Minara Prime that it possessed a tiny electrochemical transceiver that functioned as an on/off switch. It had taken her some fussing with the device to finally determine that it reacted to a particular combination of neurotransmitters produced by the Andorian *eadilium*, the flat fan of tissue at the apex of a ghelnoid brain that responded to sensory input from the creatures' antennae and possessed most of the motor nerves servicing their eyes.

The particular neurotransmitters needed to turn the thing on must have required the fusion who'd carried it to attain a meditative state free of pain, stress, and the need to utilize vision. The potentially dangerous, adversarial, and

brightly lit atrium of her private residence would then have acted to turn it off. Careful experimentation had revealed that the neurotransmitters used to activate and inactivate the transceiver could be altered in any fashion she desired; Alarm, arousal, relief, hilarity, incipient death. She planned to choose a relevant set of neurotransmitters for herself soon, and to use Kell's extensive medical laboratory facility to implant it into her own body, just in case.

It would offer her an unparalleled means of escape. Her interrogations had uncovered the fact that the fusion she'd finally managed to bring to heel — at the expense of an entire nest of fire-spiders and second-degree burns to her own palms — had teleported in a fashion wholly undetectable by any method available on Babel Four from elsewhere in the system, using the device she had carved out of his face. It needed to be implanted somewhere near a major cranial nerve, but otherwise, its means of activation might be left up to the whims of its user.

The program in her tricorder that she had mentioned to Kell was capable of both searching out and mimicking tens of thousands of molecules, including neurotransmitters and whole or partial ribonucleosomes. It was the work of a moment to key in the electronic equivalent of the neurotransmitters required to turn on the tiny device that had been implanted in the frontal sinus behind and just

above the left eye of the man she had killed by inches not once, but three times. His circulatory system had finally degraded, in the fashion that Andorian circulatory systems did shortly after death, or she would have lengthened the session for the pure pleasure of it.

When the tiny device switched on, the multiple sensor arrays that were inspecting her actions while she was in the room with the Vian machine whited out completely, as though overwhelmed by the same shield-noise she'd complained to Kell about earlier. Roxanne smiled down at her tricorder; it was true, then, that this device had rendered her own personal sensors inactive. She'd blame the noise of Kell's draconian shields for this particular occurrence when Kell and his people got here, which they surely would within minutes. But before they arrived, she wanted to see if the device in her tricorder could take her into, say, another part of this complex, if she —

What is it you wish from me?

Roxanne stumbled backward in surprise that verged on terror, and gaped up stupidly at the incomprehensible, suddenly active Vian machine. The still image that had been smeared across its face was gone. In its place were multiple images, which cycled so rapidly across what was obviously a viewscreen that looking into them brought a sense of vertigo intense enough to cause bile to rise into the

back of her throat.

"Stop!" she gasped, her dismay and shock rendering her unable to key in any further functions on the device she'd activated using the program in her tricorder. The Vian pseudo-crystalline machine — or something *in* the machine — had spoken in a horridly loud, booming voice that was neither male nor female but *other*. "Stop, please just stop, just go back to the way you were before I turned this...this *thing* on," she begged. "I can't let them see what I've done, I can't let *anyone* know I have this device!"

To her amazement, the machine, or whatever entity resided inside the machine, complied with her request; its face filled once more with the blurred image of a pool, frozen in time. At the same moment, the device hidden inside her tricorder shut down. Roxanne fell to her knees before the crystal, trembling and trying to control the intensity of her reactions before...

"What in *hell* are you doing in here?" Kell's voice was a skillfully handled bludgeon. Roxanne turned what she was certain was an ashen face up to him. The young girl who had learned to lie to the face of an implacable, demanding man took over, and produced a sincere sounding, if unlikely, scenario:

"I went to take samples and...and I could see that you were monitoring me, and then suddenly, it's like you

weren't *there* anymore, like nothing and nobody in the complex was *there* anymore, and I couldn't...I didn't..."

Ten men with phaser rifles had surrounded her as she babbled out this string of what was, even to her own ears, nonsense. Shane held out a hand, his lips thinning to nothing, his composure bloodless. "Give me the damn tricorder. Now!"

She would pay for this; For trusting in anything that damned half-Andorian monstrosity had said as he was dying, she would die, too. She held out the tricorder with trembling fingers, and he ripped it from her hand. The device he raised to scan it with was Sector 31 microscanning equipment, capable of sensing the chips and wires, programs and data possessed in a tricorder down to the subatomic level, able to suck out and physically reconfigure any bit of data that a storage-and-retrieval device contained, no matter how skillfully hidden or encoded.

Kell considered the information that his own hardware revealed. "This is a molecular-recombinant program you have on here?" he snapped finally. Roxanne nodded wordlessly; that was exactly what the program she'd developed from various other related programs had been designed to do, and this was the program she had promised to turn over to Kell.

"To...it can break down the components of a poison, or build up the...ahm, the helix of a chromosome. I wanted to...to electronically tag the DNA that thing of yours —"

"And there's nothing else on this device?" Kell inquired coldly. Roxanne returned his gaze with one of confusion. She didn't have to fake that confusion, or the accompanying fear; *what* had the Vian's machine-entity done? If the Tantalus-like device she'd carved out of the fusion's face was still inside her tricorder, the Sector 31 instrumentation should have revealed it already.

Shouldn't it?

Roxanne shook her head wordlessly. She wasn't sure what sort of trap Kell was trying to set for her. "I... I don't know what happened. I thought..." she went with what would have moved her father, at least enough that he'd merely black an eye or break an arm, rather than tossing her out the nearest airlock; "I thought I had lost you. That I was somehow alone here. When I touched the Vian machine with the tricorder to take a DNA sample off it, the thing..." she shrugged; "It *changed*, somehow."

A cold smile crept onto Shane's face. "It does that, sometimes, when you touch it. Never known it to block sensor transmissions before, though. Maybe it doesn't *like* you. I told you that you shouldn't come in here alone. Now you see why?" he handed her tricorder back and

motioned at his men to point their phaser rifles elsewhere. "Take your damned sample. And I want a copy of that program of yours; I've got uses for it."

Roxanne nodded a little too eagerly down at the program-diagnostic screen of her tricorder. "I can...I can make you one right..."

It was still there.

The information regarding the device she'd taken from the fusion was splayed all over her tricorder's main screen. Why would Kell play with her about something like that? Did he imagine that she'd give him a copy of the fusion's device, too? She fought wildly to control her physiological reactions to all this by biting the inside of her lower lip until it went numb. Swallowing hard, she babbled on:

"I mean, I'm assuming you'd like a copy of the program right now?" he could have obtained one for himself with the equipment he held. Roxanne pushed back her confusion and terror and computed likelihoods wildly; anyone in her position in life in the Empire who couldn't do such a thing would find themselves dead, deposed, or both very quickly.

Kell returning her tricorder unmolested and actually *requesting* a program that he possessed both the power and the authority to *take* from her was the equivalent of an admission of...what, guilt? Remorse? The possibility that

he believed her ridiculous assertions? She peered up at him again, sheepishly.

He shrugged and shook his head. "Later's fine. But you shouldn't be in this room alone ever again. I don't think I've ever seen you so frightened." The concept appeared to both please and fascinate him. Of course, she thought bitterly, he'd known just how soul-deep she'd been frightened when he'd walked into the room. He always seemed to have some way of knowing exactly what anybody was feeling in any given situation. He'd never been terribly skilled at working out the whys, hows, or whats of other people's deceptions without resorting to blackmail or torture, however, which was what had made him such a skilled teacher in these arts.

Perhaps he'd try those on her later. The thought made her blood run cold, but she didn't have the luxury of considering that likelihood right now. If there was a later...well, she'd make damned sure that she possessed a way to elude torture then. Because the ridiculous fusion *hadn't* lied, had he?

Roxanne programmed the tricorder to take DNA samples from the Vian object; her hands, she noted with disgust, were still trembling. She'd already keyed Kell's own DNA, and the DNA of the Vians themselves, into the program. As far as the Inquisitor General was aware, only

he and those creatures had had touched the object. Assuming her father might have touched the thing, she'd keyed in her own DNA for good measure; the recombinant program was instructed to ignore these particular nucleic acid strings.

"Could..." she hedged, "could the weird sensor block have somehow been bleed-over from all the heavy shielding you've got in this area? I mean," she swallowed, wanting to insert as much meaningless, but potentially factual, drivel as she could think of as a safety-wedge between what had really just occurred and what she wanted him to think had occurred. "I really don't like to think a damned chunk of pseudo-crystalline metal can do such things."

In reality, she knew that once the shock and terror her body was still responding to had passed, she would have to work very hard indeed to hide her sense of triumph at what this room held; a powerful entity responsive to the reworked Tantalus device she alone possessed. Meekly, she printed out a zip-chip of the chromosomal information the sensors would use to track Kell's experiment and handed it to the man. He took it and regarded it with a thoughtful expression for a moment.

"Considering what you said about the shield-bleed earlier..." he pursed his mouth and shook his head; "No, it's

never happened before. But this thing," he motioned toward the object, "is a different matter. I don't trust it. And I don't trust *you* around it. Do I make myself clear?"

Roxanne felt her face flush and assumed an attitude that would justify such a physiological reaction. "I guess that's what I get for giving a damn whether or not you, or your little kingdom here, had just been destroyed wholesale by your precious Vian machine."

Kell had the grace to flush, himself. "All the inanimate psionic devices we're working with here have the capacity to change people's behavior. Did I not make that clear when I told you that it was the crystal I'd implanted in the fellow we're going to be tracking down that made him go rogue? Is it clear to you *now* what sorts of effects the psionic devices here possess? Like I said, I've never seen you so frightened." His tone and stance had softened.

Roxanne looked away again. She didn't have to try to veil her sensation of victory anymore; His words had been as close as Shane Kell ever came to a direct apology. She *should* feel as though she'd accomplished something.

Now all she needed to do was to figure out how to use the surveillance-blocking capacities of this tiny device, a sort of Tantalus field capable of performing both exclusion and inclusion at one and the same time, in order to get back

into this room undetected. That, she had no doubt, would take some doing, and would certainly work better from outside the complex, at a time when no one present had cause to suspect that she was inside it at all. Kell himself, in his search for his missing psionic slave, would provide her that pretext.

Roxanne very much wanted to possess control over the object in this room. It would give her absolute control over Minara Prime — and probably, she imagined, the Empire in general, if she worked it right.

Chapter Seventeen

"You know that this constant shut-down, restarting, and high warp is tough on the dilithium matrix...?"

It was neither exactly a question nor exactly a statement. Renee looked up at Rafael Buonarroti obliquely and bit back several sarcastic replies, *wait until you see what the defensive station above where we're going could do to the dilithium matrix* being one of them. The CO of the *Enterprise* wished vainly that the transwarp concept, for which *Excelsior*-class starships like the *Enterprise* B had been created, actually worked on the *Enterprise*. If it had been functional, they wouldn't need to spend two weeks at warp eight-point-nine bouncing between periods of system shutdown in friendly nebulae, in order to elude the starships hunting them. *And* she wouldn't have to keep fielding comments like this.

All that remained of the original transwarp installation in any *Excelsior*-class vessel were millions of microscopic, ultra-pure, lens-cut Lonsdaleite crystals embedded in the walls. In certain parts of engineering, the inclusions caused the bulkheads to glitter and, during ion storms, to

glow with an eerie black light. *Excelsior*-class starship crews made fun of the exquisitely complex, sweeping geometric patterns that these crystalline implants were given in non-engineering portions of such ships; Turbolift and bathroom walls inspired the most jokes, though Renee had also heard temporary passengers compliment the vining, fern-like patterns they were occasionally given on bulkheads between observation windows and viewscreens in the large main lounge. The crystalline implants were pretty, an aesthetic touch left in place by the engineers who revamped the *Excelsior* fleet after the transwarp fiasco.

"You have to be joking," Demora had choked out after Ingram had announced her intentions to alpha-shift's senior officers, on the bridge.

The *Enterprise*'s newest captain had tuned the timbre, volume, and pace of her speech down a notch to reprimand her helmsman; "Do I *look* like I'm joking, Lieutenant?" Renee possessed a gentle voice that she'd had to learn while in Starfleet to use like a whip against the loud, bullying world that would rather not let her speak.

Demora had drawn a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment. "I'm sorry, Captain, I didn't mean to sound insubordinate. What I meant to say is that unauthorized vessels aren't allowed to dock at Guardian Alpha."

A docking station for authorized scientific research on

the planet, and a relatively new defensive station, there to deter any and all unauthorized 'research', orbited above the single lonely planet that orbited Tres Two. The defensive station was the largest known automated weapon in the galaxy, the size of a small moon, programmed to destroy unauthorized ships that it couldn't deter, hence the reason for the blanching of Demora's face.

"Warp eight-point-nine, *Lieutenant* Sulu. Coordinates y-73, z-9, d-96, mark 12. Or does the *Enterprise* require an alternate first-shift helmsman capable of performing this function?" Renee had offered Demora a hooded, unflinching gaze that spoke a great deal more loudly than Ingram usually ever did.

Demora had flushed and looked down. The letters that specified the relative sector, Standard time in days at a given speed or in a particular sort of vessel, parsec distance, and simple directional vector of any warp coordinate were commonly given only to the very rawest of midshipmen, who might otherwise forget which dimension of space-time those coordinates referred to. Renee had been gratified by this body language; it meant that Demora understood what Ingram was implying; Demotion, should she question direct orders again.

"I had no intention of questioning your orders, Captain Ingram. I'll enter those coordinates immediately."

"Very good, Lieutenant Sulu. Lieutenant Johnson, I need *you* to find as many viable nebulae between where we currently are and Tres Two as possible. As soon as that's done, kindly work out a course to Tres Two using those nebulae as temporary hiding places, and transmit that course to myself, tactical, and helm."

"Aye, Captain," Marco had replied. At the tactical board behind and above Renee, Josi had sighed audibly.

Of course, this entire plan might just end up being a slow-motion farce. There was a rather high likelihood that they would all end up dead, blown to smithereens by Guardian Alpha's defensive station, or tracked down by the *Surak*, the *Malinche*, and the *Crazy Horse* either before or after they arrived at their destination. Renee had striven to hide her worry.

She did the same thing now, looking up from the ready-room desk at the senior engineering technician who had, by default, just become the chief engineer of the *Enterprise B*.

"We're being hunted by other starships, Ensign. It's imperative that they don't find us, because if they do, they'll try to destroy us. The only way I can see to help the Federation against enemies who're tormenting it lies at a planet guarded by covert technology that might also destroy us, and *you're* worried about the overtaxing the

dilithium matrix?"

Buonarroti directed a worried look at his erstwhile captain across the ready room desk but didn't respond. Renee sighed.

"You're right, Ensign, there really isn't any good way to respond to sarcasm. And it's your job to be worried about the dilithium matrix. You're also not the only person aboard at the moment who thinks I'm off my rocker, but that's the nature of *my* job. You can all file a batch of complaints with Starfleet if we get back. And look at it this way," Renee offered Rafael a bright and patently insincere smile; "at least the propulsion system's still up and running. All I really care about is that we make it there in one piece."

It was exceedingly rare to run a starship for more than a few days at any warp above seven. Extended, uninterrupted running of a ship at higher warp for longer periods of time, particularly when interspersed with unscheduled periods of complete system shutdown, caused the multidimensional dilithium matrix — which channeled energy from the matter-antimatter reactors in order to form an interdimensional warp bubble around a vessel — to decay at an accelerated rate. A dilithium matrix required constant replacement with such use. This was why, until wholly-reliable, relatively inexpensive android units could

be produced that were capable of system repairs, no sleeper-ship would ever be sent into the Delta or Gamma quadrants, or out to any of the several tiny satellite galaxies that orbited the Milky Way, for purposes of research.

Matrix decay had rarely been a problem before, since the interfaces of a starship's propulsion system had been prone to giving out long before the matrix itself could begin to decay. From Mu Crucis, Guardian Alpha was something over a week away at a constant warp of eight-point-nine, a leap from one edge of Federation space to the other, a distance of nearly thirty thousand light-years.

The fact that the *Enterprise* was being tracked like a wounded animal leaking blood would make this trip take longer. Travelling such a distance at such speed hadn't even been possible twenty years before. Renee imagined that, in a hundred years, such travel would probably be both commonplace and entirely safe for a starship's engines.

This helped them not one whit right now.

"I'm assuming you also want to get back sometime *this* millennia, Captain, or maybe the next?" Rafael said.

"You're telling me the warp core is about to give out completely?" Renee leaned back in her chair and considered the *Enterprise's* newest chief engineer down the bridge of her nose.

"I'm telling you that we won't be able to get back at any warp faster than five, unless we find some sort of replacement for the matrix."

Renee shook her head at Rafael. Since a dilithium matrix wasn't even required for a starship to travel at passive warp speeds of less than four-point-eight, she supposed the short answer to her question was *yes*. "Let me rephrase; *how* much further will the current matrix take us at eight-point-nine?"

"We'll make it to Guardian Alpha, and maybe halfway back to the Cygnus system. *Maybe*. *If* we don't keep shutting down and restarting the cores on the way back. Anyway, I'm assuming you'll be wanting to take us back toward home?"

Renee considered the plans she had made so far. If they worked, that should be just about enough. If they didn't, the defensive station above Guardian Alpha would very neatly blow them out of space. Of course, she didn't know what would be forthcoming even if she reached the Guardian. For all she knew, she'd have to bring sixty thousand chiroscaya back with her if she wanted to aid the Federation, and then where would she be?

One catastrophe at a time. Of course, this was a saying beloved by individuals who weren't in a position where multiple catastrophes regularly occurred all at once.

Nevertheless, it was something to strive for.

Chapter Eighteen

Shane Kell rounded on Roxanne, grasping her by the front of her black-on-black Sector uniform and shoving her bodily into the nearest available chair. The acrid reek of cyanide clung to the sensitive lining of the Inquisitor General's sinuses, making him rather more short-tempered than the situation warranted:

"I imagine you must know something about this. She was, after all, your *gift* to me. Where in hell's name did she come by a suicide capsule?"

"I'm surprised one as cowardly as she seemed to be had the nerve to *use* a suicide capsule," Roxanne replied blandly, as though Shane hadn't just handled her hard enough to bruise her solar plexus and sacral spine. He didn't move away from her and didn't blink. She shrugged as well as she was able in a uniform suddenly made a size too small, all extraneous material it possessed currently balled into his fist. "She might have raided my stores at any time. As you might recall, we *trust* the Betazoids. The *Emperor* has called for a great outpouring of trust. You see where that's gotten us? Perhaps *now* you understand why I

want you to help me unseat the bastard."

"And replace him with who? *You?*" Kell hissed. Roxanne laughed into his face.

"Oh, hell no! You think *I* want to deal with putting down uprisings led by slaves, or betrayal plots hatched by ostensibly loyal subjects? I have other plans for my life. The Terran Vaults —"

"What do *you* know about the Terran Vaults?"

Roxanne pushed her entire body against Shane's bruising fist, to sit upright and bring her face closer to his own. Her voice was breathless and rough when she answered him. "That would be where you took all your excellent cloning and genetic recombination equipment from. I'm not an *idiot*, Shane. Nor am I a traitor to the true Empire. But what we serve now is hardly the Terran Empire anymore, is it?"

Impressed as always with her fortitude, and alarmed as always by her seemingly endless knowledge of what should be highly classified information, he released her. He was agitated, on edge from what the mind-sifter had sucked out of Roxanne's Betazoid pilot before she killed herself.

It was standard practice, since the uprisings had begun, to mind-sift individuals whose genetic material would later be prepared for harvest. What was usually squeezed out of

his subjects was useless, meaningless, or some combination of both. Not since the destruction of the Deltan homeworld had he come across anything like *this*. He pulled out the Sector tricorder onto which he'd uploaded the impressions the Betazoid's brain had released to the mind-sifter, before she'd somehow caused a suicide capsule cunningly implanted in the sublingual sinus common to her people to release its contents.

He turned the tricorder around and thrust its screen into Roxanne's face, forcing her to subside back into the chair again in order to see the video-equivalent images it displayed. "What *are* these creatures?" he demanded, studying his lover's face.

Roxanne watched a platoon's-worth of bony, gray-skinned humanoid aliens clad in obvious paramilitary gear make their way furtively into the grand courtyard of the House of Riix on Betazed. Kell had already watched this recording at least a dozen times himself and knew what she was seeing.

From behind the imposing, sculpted trees and flowers, along varicolored, geometrically-arranged paths, came the full entourage of both the First and Second house to greet them. The extensive groups of people retired to one of the large pleasure-gazebos sprinkled throughout the garden and arranged themselves around a holographic table that had

been a gift from the Emperor to his Betazoid allies. From the table, the woman who had been Renee's own personal pilot pulled up some sort of extensive program. This was only present on the screen for a second, before the tricorder cut out in a flash of blinding white brilliance followed by the velvet blackness of a blank screen.

Roxanne frowned. "I... have no idea. What's that they pulled up, a game?"

"Hardly. Watch it all again, and again if you have to, at quarter speed." Kell handed over the tricorder and took a seat of his own across from her. He watched patiently as she ran and reran the video, seeing her face first blanch, then flush, then harden dangerously.

"What has this bitch gotten me inadvertently embroiled in here?"

Shane smiled coldly. "What does it look like?"

Roxanne rose, gazed around herself languidly, yawned and stretched while walking toward Kell, then sat down on his lap, looping her arms around his neck and nuzzling at his ear. He stiffened. "It *looks*," her voice had risen in pitch, and he could literally smell the emotions she was feeling; Outrage and fear in unlikely union with excitement, "like the Betazoids are plotting with an unknown alien race to overthrow the Empire. Can you imagine what sort of leeway a *real* Emperor would give us

if we —"

"Real Emperor?" he murmured back.

"The Emperor sleeping in the Terran Vaults, darling." She pulled back and smiled. "Only..." her face grew somber, "I have no idea what creatures those are that the Betazoids are plotting with. Or more importantly, where they come from and what sort of military strength they possess. But the Betazoids would know. I seriously doubt my pilot had any chance to erase any codes or anything else she might have secreted in my shuttle's computer. You should check that, maybe send out some people to lift a few of those luxurious royal Betazoid scalps."

"I *should* do to the Betazoids what I did to the Deltans!"

"I thought you wanted telepathic cannon fodder? That makes sense, in the face of an uprising."

"Until the people plotting against the Empire figure that fact out," Kell snarled, pushing Roxanne off his lap. He still had no good idea of the true scope of her covert knowledge, where he stood with her, whether perhaps she wasn't just reporting on him back to the Empire in order to somehow preserve her own skin. Or whether she'd been working with that damned Betazoid.

He would have to find out, when the time was right. And the way things seemed to be headed, that might have

to be much sooner than he'd planned.

Chapter Nineteen

Captain Renee Ingram tried for a comfortable position in the jury-rigged command chair at the center of the battle-scorched bridge of the *Enterprise* B. The struggle that had gone on for possession of it had, paradoxically, rendered it lighter and airier by exposing weapon-polished swathes of zinc-pale duranium in the dark olive-green walls of the starship's stress-bearing bulkheads. The bridge smelled of the hasty electro-welds that interfaced pale, shiny new consoles and mainframe-linkages to existing circuitry, of singed blood and flesh and hair.

The bridge also reeked of the nervousness of the crew currently occupying its stations. To reach the tiny docking port that hovered in the lee of Guardian Alpha, one first had to get past her bullying big sister, which Section 31 had dubbed *Salem One*. The root of that title was *salaam*; Josi had, moments earlier, attempted to break the tension on the bridge by joking blackly that whoever had named the station had called it 'one hello!' because that was all anyone trying to get past it, in order to illegally access the Guardian portal, would probably receive before being

blown out of space.

The defensive station orbiting three hundred thousand kilometers away from Guardian Alpha was roughly fifty times the size of the *Enterprise*, and it moved at impulse around the planet like a well-choreographed little moon. It was more or less round, like a moon, capable of firing multiple varieties of weaponry from any of its thousand or so ports. Besides weapons ports, it bristled with sensor antennae, shield generators, and deflection dishes. The moment *Enterprise* came out of warp at the edge of the system, easily half a parsec away from the planet itself, Guardian Alpha's horribly responsive humanoid-made satellite began scanning them. Renee brought the ship to a full halt. She'd checked, and the station's defensive response wasn't set to such a hair-trigger that it would start shooting at ships at the far outskirts of Tres Two's extensive Van Allen belt.

Salem One was, however, entirely able to tell Federation ships from non-Federation ones at such a distance. Once its scan had finished, the station ceased putting out a constant drone of what amounted to *stay away from here or else*. "Salem One's automated system is asking for our docking authorization, Captain," Yaelat announced somberly.

Renee drew a deep breath and let it out sharply, taking

a death grip on the arms of the hastily installed command chair. "Let the station have it, Lieutenant." If this didn't work, she wasn't certain what her next move would be.

The Hali'ian man entered a series of commands into his console. The great station's roving antennae-eyes and swiveling pod-ears ceased their constant roving, and the pugnacious defensive station above Guardian Alpha came to a sudden stop approximately twenty degrees longitude and eighty-six degrees latitude, ventral-northwest of the planet's southern pole. This much was visible on the main viewscreen.

Ingram had no idea how long she had to decide whether the packet of alien malware her communications officer had just sent to the defensive station above Guardian Alpha had gummed up its works enough that they would be able to sneak in under — or, in this case, just over — its guard, or if the station stopped its hyper-vigilant, asymmetrical orbiting before gearing up for attack. There was no way to scan the internal workings of *Salem One* to know for certain. She spent a silent half-second cursing Section 31 and its capacities; *anything*, they'd said. And now she had to face a station that Section 31 itself had provided the covert technologies for, and probably, assuming this worked at all, she'd end up facing an inquest, if not a downright court martial, for what she

was about to do.

Lovely.

"Raise shields. Marco, how fast can we warp into this system without becoming part of any asteroids on the way in?"

The entire bridge crew heaved a collective sigh.

"Two point two, Captain. The vector's pretty jinky, though. There are a lot of temporal-distortion waves in the area, which are probably what turned the rest of the bodies in the system into asteroids. We're going to want to avoid those, too. And then we'll have to drop out of warp and shift down into full impulse at about fifty thousand kilometers from the Einstein Dock. All told, it should take us not quite two minutes."

Renee made a face; the defensive station's perimeters covered everything outside thirty-five thousand kilometers from the docking ports. Either it would either be the roughest, fastest trip any of them had ever taken in order to reach a docking bay, or Marco had just told them how much longer they might have to live. "This whole thing's pretty jinky, Lieutenant. Demora, upload that course and take us in."

"Yes, Captain."

"Tactical, keep all weapons trained on the defensive station."

"I'll do my best." Josi's voice was slightly hoarse with fatigue. Whatever enemies had targeted the *Enterprise* for psionic takeover had performed a very thorough job decimating security and tactical crew; Those who weren't currently in sickbay were dead. Felingaili's minor concentration wasn't tactical, but she was currently the only individual besides Renee still standing who possessed the most familiarity with a starship's tactical board.

"Time to arrival?"

"One minute, forty-six seconds," Demora said, all her attention on the helm readings before her, fingers darting over the console as though she was playing a particularly complex Vivaldi concerto on it. Beside her, Marco watched the effects of her input on his own board, occasionally adding a correction or modification to the superluminal course she was tracking through a field of bodies in erratic supraliminal motion.

Passive warp drive basically amounted to the formation of a stable virtual wormhole through regular space; It was imperative that they avoid pulling anything more massive than the starship itself into their warp field, or they would run the risk of adding a very unwelcome, and very real, unstable wormhole to this system which would swallow the *Enterprise* whole. The multidimensional dilithium matrix carried by all Federation

ships, which increased their capacities to warp regular space, acted as a shield against such occurrences, but only when a vessel was travelling above warp four-point-eight.

Renee wished, vainly, that her advanced *Excelsior*-class vessel possessed the archaic addition of low-warp hull plating. Every time a tiny asteroid or bit of debris struck and vaporized against the shields, or the starship brushed the thin edge of a temporal distortion, the bridge crew winced. Low warp magnified the effects of these minor collisions, which at sublight speeds were handled by the deflector dish, scarcely noted by the sensors of the starship or the senses of the individuals gathered within. At high warp, the vessel's active field pushed such detritus away. At low warp, however, the effect was like a particularly rowdy session of bumper cars, even with the shields raised.

"Shields down seventeen percent, but holding," Josi said.

"*Salem One* is still quiescent, Captain," Yaelat said. The comment was unnecessarily, really, since the main viewscreen was trained on the station, and the station still hadn't done so much as twitch.

"Shields down twenty percent, Captain. Forty-four seconds until we're inside the station's reach," Josi said.

Renee shuddered. If all the information she had

managed to dig out of the computers about Guardian Alpha and its installations was up to date, the one thing the defensive station above Guardian Alpha would *not* do would be to fire toward the planet. The docking station was well inside the perimeter patrolled by the defensive station, and therefore merited the appellation *toward the planet*. As long as they could get to within thirty thousand kilometers of the dock before...

The electromagnetic sensors, feelers, and reception dishes on Salem One suddenly sprang back to life, wriggling and writhing as though they were in some sort of existential pain. Renee leaped right out of her chair. She doubted that there were evasive maneuvers to be made while directly in the thing's crosshairs, particularly not at warp this far into a planetary system. "Josi, how long before we're inside *Salem One's* perimeter?"

"Twenty-nine seconds."

The antennae and other sensory apparatus on the station ceased their erratic, agonized movements and became still again — all of them directed right at the *Enterprise*. The great spherical station pirouetted like an impossibly bulky ballerina, and directed another set of sensors at the starship, as though it couldn't believe what its hardware had told it the first time.

The station fired a single torpedo, a lanky, strangely

violet-shifted thing that hovered like a hummingbird on the viewscreen before peppering their shields with a rain of directed subatomic particles that made the *Enterprise* lurch sickly. An eerily melodic, disembodied voice filled the bridge as the ship's internal comm system switched itself on with the painful squeal of internal systems attempting to override outside control, and failing.

Unauthorized Federation ship, you are commanded to leave this area. Another warning burst will not be forthcoming.

Ingram grabbed at the arms of her command chair and missed, as the *Enterprise* dropped out of warp all at once fifty thousand kilometers from the docking station. *Warning burst?* she thought from where she ended up on her rear on the deck. A shot across their bow? She wouldn't have thought Section 31 had that sort of gallantry in them.

One hello. Somebody somewhere had a sense of humor. Or mercy. Or both.

As she pressed her palms to the floor and levered herself back to her feet, ignoring the twinge in her back where it had struck the edge of the command chair, the viewscreen — at high magnification in order to concentrate on the nodes and hubs of the defensive station — was suddenly filled with the red-downshift light of a vessel

dropping out of high warp. Behind Renee, Josi manipulated the tactical board to allow the people on the bridge of the *Enterprise* to see what was going on. The screen pulled back from its obsessive scanning of *Salem One*, to show the *Malinche* roaring straight toward them.

"They're less than forty-thousand kilometers off our aft, Captain!" Marco cried.

"Five seconds to docking station perimeter!" Josi added.

The *Malinche* fired all phasers. Renee fell into her chair and tried to prepare herself for heavy, close-range barrage against the *Enterprise*'s shields, hoping that the maddened crew of the *Malinche* hadn't thought to use the Starfleet codes that would allow them to force those shields down.

The barrage she was expecting never came. It, and the vessel that had discharged weapons toward Guardian Alpha, disappeared in a blinding flash the likes of which no one on board the *Enterprise* bridge had ever seen. The viewscreen, thankfully, dimmed out the worst of the hyper-irradiative explosion, in order to keep the sentient beings staffing the starship's bridge from losing their vision or other sensory capabilities.

Section 31 possessed technologies not in general use in Starfleet; this station had apparently been fitted with

some of those. The pressure of the expanding shock wave of subatomic particles that had been the *Malinche* made the *Enterprise* buck like a bad-natured horse, causing it to spiral sideways at accelerated speed toward the dock. Both Demora and Marco worked their consoles feverishly, trying to drain off some of the shock wave's energy through the shields, in order to keep the starship on course; It would hardly help their cause to smash into the docking station, or to be caught in the planet's gravity well.

All that was left on the screen once the horrid lightshow faded were the approaching dock and the retreating defensive station. *Salem One* rearranged its multifarious sensors like a bird might rearrange ruffled feathers, then began its ponderous, erratic dance around the ancient, blasted planet once more. Outbursts of held breath were the only sounds on the bridge for a long moment.

The defensive station possessed no program that would lead it to imagine that it had just been tricked. *Now that*, Ingram mused, *is more in line with the rumors of technological bravado I've heard about Section 31*. She'd been betting heavily on those rumors. She hadn't bet on the likelihood that one of the vessels that had been looking to destroy the *Enterprise* would end up saving it, at terrible cost. Another thing to deal with later; Renee's later-locker was ponderously full. "Dock us at Einstein Station,

Lieutenant Sulu," she commanded, her voice quivering slightly, as was the rest of her body.

"Aye, Captain." The helmsman's voice was no more steady than her own.

The dock hosted three other ships, all Federation science vessels, all smaller than *Miranda*-class. Renee smiled wanly at the sight of them and opened a channel to engineering. "Rafael?"

"Here, Captain. Did we make it?"

"So far, we've made it. There are three science-scout vessels docked here. If you were to, say, break into them and abscond with their dilithium matrices, then reformat the dilithium for our use, do you think we'd have enough to get back home with at maximum warp?"

"Break into them?" Rafael's voice rose a notch.

"I'm sorry, Ensign; that *wasn't* the operative part of that statement. In an emergency situation, we're authorized to do things like this. I'm not in the mood to try and cough up the exact Starfleet reg numbers, and I'll ask this only one more time; Will three scientific vessels smaller than *Miranda*-class give you enough dilithium to allow our engineering labs to reconfigure or refresh our matrix in order to get us back to zero sector at maximum warp?"

"I...um, I think they will, yes."

"Good. Then take a security team and an engineering

team with you onto those scouts and tell them that I and Section 31 said you could commit grand larceny. I have no idea how long I'll be on the planet —"

"You can't go down there alone!" Josi and Demora announced, in tandem and in stereo, as though they'd planned it. Which, Renee reflected mordantly, maybe they had. She'd worked on and off with Josi for ten years and with Demora constantly for nearly five; both officers knew her pretty well.

On the other end of the open channel, Rafael muttered something in Italian she didn't catch, appending it with; "Right away, Captain."

Renee closed the engineering channel and turned her chair to consider Josi for a moment, then turned it the other way to consider Demora. She thought about capitulating to their admonition.

"No," she said. "This was my idea. Should it work or fail, I'd rather as few people as possible be caught in the backflow. If I don't return..." she shook her head; she had no idea what sort of time-limit to lay on something to which time was as malleable as noodle dough:

"If I don't return, then it's up to you to decide how best to guard the Federation from this psionic misery. If you want to *help* me, beam every individual out of the Elison Research Outpost, and find them quarters. You won't want

to let them know what we plan to do to their ships unless you're in the mood to help people fill out lots of complaint forms that might never end up going anywhere. Apprise them instead about what's happening in the heart of the Federation, and see if they have any good solid advice as to how we might very quickly let Section 31 know about the potential defensive weaponization of psilosynase, theragen, and kayolane."

Chapter Twenty

Behold, many journeys are possible. Let me be your gateway...

Renee Ingram stared in confusion and wonder at the images cycling over what seemed to be a great quasi-metallic screen, at the heart of the entity that was the only construct still wholly standing on the blasted ruin of a planet that the UFP called *Guardian Alpha*;

A snow-locked mountain range surrounded by a bastion of sculpted gray towers beneath a brace of multicolored moons; an alien blue-sand beach caressed by lime-green waves under a lilac sky; red-gold karst desert dominated by a dormant, ice-capped volcano; a cold steel metropolis suspended on lightning-webbed clouds, over an endless opaline ocean that seethed and boiled like acid; a jewel-toned world inhabited by bizarre quasi-organic machines...

The captain of the *Enterprise* was nearly overcome by the fear that was awe. "Guardian, is this all the same place?"

It is all the same to me, but to you and to creatures

like you for whom space and time are separate entities, all things are different.

This big hollow rock was distinctly unforthcoming.
"Meaning what, exactly?"

You must exercise the power of choice. All that exists is the sum total of all choices ever made, and all choices lead down a different road.

Renee was appalled. "How do I make the *right* choice?"

Without choice, including the option to refuse to choose, there can be no progression in the Universe of creatures such as you. I can only serve you. I cannot choose on your behalf.

"What if I make the wrong choice?"

There is no wrong choice. There is only choice, like the ripples that spread over a pond when the surface is disturbed; whether that disturbance comes from above or below, from agency or coincidence, it does not matter; Still the ripples flow. As though to underscore its point, the Guardian flashed the image of ripples in a pond. It seemed to Renee that this pond was composed of some liquid other than water, but the image was too fleeting for her to be certain.

She felt desperation rise up inside her, forcing her voice into a shrill cadence. "Guardian, I *need* something

that can help the Federation against these psionic monsters!"

This is what I have felt you wish for. All of these choices possess the angels you seek. Concurrently, all of these choices can spawn monsters of their own. Such is the nature of choice. Such is the nature of my service.

Now the tenor of her voice, and her heart, dropped. "You...can't you just choose one for me?"

I am my own beginning, my own ending. Choice is not my function.

Ingram wasn't certain that she was either prepared for, or fully cognizant of, what the Guardian appeared to be saying. Should she find whatever it was she was so desperately seeking, how in the name of every Klingon deity ever torn into pieces would she be able to get back here again? "Are you telling me that some of these places are in other *dimensions*? How can you cause such a thing as interdimensional travel to occur?"

These places are scattered throughout time and space. Time and space include all dimensions, whether known or unknown. The twining tendrils of the multiverse possess many buds. I am but an insect capable of accessing those buds; I am not the gardener. I cause nothing to occur.

Renee gave in to the urge to stamp her foot. She doubted that the poetically-waxing, pseudo-crystalline,

semi-sentient machine would care. "Why do you refuse to choose a destination for me, even though you're a doorway to that destination? I don't understand!"

The freedom to choose is a power I do not possess. I am only a doorway. It is only in the power of my makers, creatures not unlike you, to choose. Such is the nature of my service.

Living machine, she reflected. She closed her eyes and drew a breath. The *living* concept had so overawed her that she had forgotten that this was, ultimately and finally, a machine. "Fine. All of these places you say possess the help needed for the Federation to fight what's attacking it now...cycle them. Just...randomly cycle them across your screen."

The venerable space-time matrix supplied an affirmative response. Without opening her eyes again, she reached out tentatively, to touch the boundaries of its portal. *Pick a number, any number...*

Renee Ingram counted to twelve, and stumbled through the portal.

If there was one thing that she did not expect when she stepped through the Guardian portal, it was to fall into water. Deep water. Deep, cold water.

Perhaps it would have been a good idea to have

opened my eyes before I took that first step, she thought drollly. Ingram had no fear of water. John Harriman had gaped at her in horror when she'd told him about how she'd learned to swim, at six years old, after her overprotective adoptive parents had denied her the opportunity to take swimming lessons with the rest of her class:

She'd snuck out of the house alone very early in the morning, made her way to the nearest public pool, snuck through the thick and prickly twelve-foot hedge of blackberries surrounding the complex, mounted the diving board, and jumped off.

The drollness lasted only as long as it took Renee Ingram to realize that this particular deep, cold water was full of...things. Great prowling shadows. And those shadows bit—not hard, nor deeply, but persistently.

She crested the top of the pool and took a desperate lungful of air. She had absolutely no desire to end her life as fish bait. The only point of egress visible from the water was a slick, vertical wall of stone adorned with bouncing shadows, bereft a single handhold that she could identify. And this was no little pond; That single slick wall visible to her, thanks to a sparkling light not unlike a great swarm of fireflies somewhere overhead, was easily a hundred yards away, and any other edge was subsumed by darkness and the limited angle of perception she had from the surface of

the water.

"*Help!*" she cried, then immediately swallowed a mouthful of water as a tug on her leg, nearly hard enough to dislocate her humerus, pulled her downward. A bone-deep stinging that ran from her knee to the top of her big toe told her that she had lost a significant strip of skin to the prowling shadows of the pool, but she was grateful for that pain; It meant that her lower leg hadn't been pulled off her body, as the white-hot flash of agony that had run through it at the brutal tug had made her first suspect.

Renee struggled to the surface again, this time lying flat on her back in the water. She cried out for aid once more. Her voice bounced back from dripping, cathedral-high, multihued limestone cavern walls, as warped and unrecognizable as a reflection in a carnival mirror.

This time, whatever it was that was avid for her blood, which was staining the milky water a delicate rose color, got a mouthful of her long hair. She knew, theoretically at least, that long hair could be a liability in the field. But something like what happened next had never crossed her mind.

The creature or creatures attempting to dine on her swallowed her hair. She screamed helplessly as they dragged her down into the darkness that began not two feet from the surface of the apparently bottomless cavern pool.

The Guardian at the Edge of Forever mused to itself for a moment as its portal slowly grew dark once more from the sheer speed and number of realities, possibilities, histories, and choices screaming across its face. *No cycling is truly random*, it commented at last, to no one in particular. It had long ago learned that its comments were valid whether or not any other being was present to experience them.

Chapter Twenty-One

This much Renee knew, from somewhere in the center of a consciousness as scattered as dandelion fuzz on a breeze; Fire consuming wood in a class-M atmosphere made the same sounds no matter where in the galaxy you were when hearing it. She clung to that knowledge with one virtual hand; It seemed, somehow, to be the answer to the elusive secret of the Universe that great thinkers had always sought.

Riana?

That was not her name. But of course it *was* her name — it was the name she'd come out of the womb knowing, how could she possibly have forgotten? She mentally put that bit of knowledge into her other hand, and now she had good ballast to hold onto; the secret of fire, and her name. Prometheus, she must be Prometheus, the one torn apart...

Torn apart by monstrous creatures.

That image was smoothed away nearly as fast as she thought it, the way her mother used to smooth crumbs out of her bed as a child when she'd been sick and finally was well enough to nibble dry toast. No, wait, not sick —

something far worse than simple illness. That thought, too, was smoothed away, and she followed the hand that smoothed it this time. The hand was no dream or hallucination; she could feel it. Now, if she could only just open her eyes. Before she tried that complicated maneuver, the living warmth around her resolved itself into what appeared to be strong arms and a lap.

Riana?

The reply she tried to make came out sounding something like a lamb caught by the throat in a barbed-wire fence. She attempted vainly to open her eyes.

A waft of energy entered her blood. Where it came from, she couldn't have said. It was as though she hadn't eaten in a week, and someone had hooked her up to a glucose drip. She'd had that experience before, on Arantia Nine as a cadet. The doctor who had rescued her had known the antiquated medical procedure well. But no needle sat in her veins, as far as she could tell. *This* energy seemed somehow to have...personality. She was now strong enough to feel unsettled.

She opened her eyes.

It was almost an anticlimax to look up into a humanoid face, or it would have been if the state of her mind had been less distorted by...*something*. Male—that came through clearly enough. Either the firelight played tricks

on her sight, or there was something wrong with her vision; she couldn't really tell what shade his eyes were — looking into them was like looking into a kaleidoscope, and it made her queasy. Her wits were distinctly muzzy. Colorful eyes aside, she was confused as to whether she was being held by a living being, or by one partly carved from polished jasper and carnelian.

The vision center of her brain grew progressively more disobedient, and suddenly she wasn't staring into humanoid eyes at all, but into a mirror's reflection of mirrors set over a bottomless abyss. Renee swallowed hard, closed her eyes, and tried again. This time his face came into concrete focus — a man with luxuriant auburn hair tied back in a loose queue, and a frank, strong-featured, oval face bolstered abruptly by a square chin. She thought he might be Hali'ian at first, since he seemed to have an Hali'ian's bifurcated forehead, but that was where all resemblance between him and any Hali'ian she had ever seen ended.

The alien's eyes widened in surprise. *I have never seen my own face! followed shortly by; I am old!*

Her ears wanted to deliver an opinion on his voice, but she realized suddenly that he hadn't actually spoken. Hard on the heels of that realization came the awareness of how mundane her current thought-patterns were. The uncanny

plight of the Federation, the whole reason why she found herself in her current predicament — and certainly, being held so intimately in a stranger's arms could be considered something of a predicament — came rushing toward her like a medicine ball she wasn't prepared to catch.

Renee struggled to sit up and get away from him and his telepathic engulfment, and passed out. Back into his arms she subsided.

When she came to again, it was to feel him still stroking her hair. It was as though he'd never felt another person's hair before and was fascinated by it. She reined in the urge to slap his presumptuous hand away, and immediately he withdrew it.

“Are you reading my mind?” she croaked, determined not to think about the fact that he was holding her like a child, and she avoided using his name. She realized at that moment that, in the same way that she knew where her feet were relative to her knees, she knew his name, knew other things about him, too.

“I. Had...no choice,” his voice was a raw, hoarse, unmelodic grate that he had to force past his lips... “You...were...very. Badly. Injured.” He stopped and cleared his throat viciously. It hurt him to talk; the pain was like the worst attack of laryngitis she'd ever experienced...and it wasn't *him* who was talking, not

really, not at all.

Like a thick obsidian gate, a wall slammed down in Renee's mind. With breathtaking force and speed, she was sick and weak and cold again. She whimpered.

"I don't...mean. Pain for you. You're well...enough now." He let it go at that, and with considerable strength — for a person sitting on the floor to lift someone larger than a small child up and away from their body was difficult at best, and Renee was not a small woman — he gently lifted her off his lap and laid her down in a soft nest of something that wasn't exactly fur. She whimpered again. Again, that vicious clearing of his throat.

"I have broth. You'll eat." His words were as cold and clipped as any Vulcan's, but she knew him better than that, knew the gentleness of his hands and the warmth of his mind. And she longed for them the way a drowning man longed for dry land. That yearning frightened her, and she tried again to turn her mind to the reason she was here, the thing she'd asked the Guardian for, the thing...the thing...thing...

Chapter Twenty-Two

Renee Ingram realized, as one realizes things all at once in dreams, that it was pure coincidence that the individual of whom she was dreaming had known his first conscious thought at the diminishing *xelnhe* population's Time of Emergence. His first thought had not been pleasant, and it had not been — had never been, would never be — wholly his own. It was a thought of rage and grief, of escape and eventual retribution; Such a thought was not entirely, Renee realized, unlike the emergent-sentient thoughts of a *xelnhai* itself. The being that put these feelings and thoughts into the man's newly awakened mind, and now into Renee's dreaming consciousness, was itself a fully-sentient, non-carbon-based creature long known as...

Even her dream had trouble with the name. *Kyhln*.

Thus, the individual whose life she was dreaming considered himself to be *Kyhln*, too. The man who called himself *Kyhln* understood that he and the silicon-based intelligence were one being now, inseparable, hence the depths of the symbiotic gem's despair. It had been

permanently implanted into the tissues of his throat where, in another soft-fleshed carbon-based being, some organ of acoustical speech might reside. This sentient psionic gem, of whose despair Renee was now dreaming, had been relegated to the slavish duty of being a psionic energy-enhancing vocal organ, and Kyhln had roared out a sense of distress and humiliation with his first conscious breath.

He must have done something else, too, but what that might have been was never clear to him, and so was no clearer to Renee as she dreamed Kyhln's past. The carbon-based Kyhln's next conscious memory was one of stumbling through incomprehensible corridors, of the sensation of weapons scoring flesh and bone that regenerated instantly, each regeneration sapping more and more of his will and energy, while other people — what the crystal in his throat called *humanoid* — fled in his wake. The crystal helped him understand that this wildly enhanced regenerative ability was his only for as long as the chemicals of the growth-chamber he had just been plucked from remained in his system; He must get away, far away, before that ability waned, or both of them would die.

The gem did not explain the exact meaning of *die*, but the carbon-based creature into which it had been inextricably implanted inferred that such a state would be

something even more terrible than living. Since neither the man who called himself Kyhln nor Renee were able, in that instant, to imagine a state of being more terrible than this *living* that was currently occurring, he followed the symbiotic crystal's directives, and fled.

After finally finding a way out of the cold maze of cruel hallways and laboratories where he'd been bred, Kyhln the man, exhausted and starving and terrified, not entirely cognizant of even what he was, fled away from the terrible steel mountain through endless underground grottoes filled with water. That water and what was in it restored some of his energy. He fled further, at last stumbling half-conscious into a xelnhe breeding and development den on the lower slopes. These dens were the only places where the creatures regrew cool carnal structures, in order to mate and to care for their newly lunged young, which they did at their Time of Emergence.

He lay trembling with hunger, terror, and fatigue on the pro-symbiotic lichen that made up the bulk of the labyrinthine passageway of interconnected nests, and the alarmed, curious xelnhe gathered around, nudging at him gently with psionic emergent-sentient feelers. At first, they considered that he might be there to provide their young with the nourishment of blood and meat. They were carnivores after all, predators whose telepathic capacities

had evolved to aid in the hunt, attracting and paralyzing prey as effectively as any poisonous snare.

However, this trait was evolving into something else among the xelnhe, something that, if they survived the cruel takeover of their planet, would ultimately lead to true sentience rather than the emergent-sentient symbiotic relationship they had with psionic skin-crystals like the one in the stranger's throat. Their skin-crystals offered them a semblance of conscious intelligence. The fact that this strange being also hosted a gem of the sort favored by the xelnhe made him their kin, to their way of reckoning.

When the humanoid became sick in the night, they helped him, in their simple animal way, to learn how to rechannel his uncontrolled telepathic and carnal urges using the symbiotic crystal that was part of him, the way they might have helped one of their own young as it neared the Time of Emergence into the Age of Air and desired to devour everything nearby that moved, including its own nest mates. They fed and watered Kyhln, sustained and entertained him with haunting psionic lullabies played on their resounding pseudo-metallic, crystal-encrusted hides, telling him tales of all that had transpired above and beneath the crust of the planet since their first ancestors sang.

Semi-carbon, semi-silicon metamorphic animal

lifeforms were the first creatures to communicate with the man who called himself Kyhln, to teach him the meanings of myth, metaphor, rumor, caring, and concern. Kyhln's carbon-based mind had no firm feel for the amount of time that passed in the company of the xelnhe, and the crystalline entity that also called itself Kyhln did not care; It only knew that it was safe among them.

By the time the engineered, part-crystalline humanoid experiment that was Kyhln finally left the xelnhe dens, he had formed empathic links with every xelnhai living below the knobby knees of the low ranges that knelt before the snow- and cloud -capped metallic mountain to the north. It was the lullaby-memories of the xelnhe that helped him understand what his flesh-body was or might be; Some remnant of the angry, lonely bands who had once inhabited the foothills, before hungry emergent xelnhe had been forced to hunt them for food. Those alien semi-sentient lullabies also taught Kyhln, and Renee as she dreamed Kyhln's life, just what sort of other creatures inhabited this empty land besides himself and the xelnhe.

Heartless, mind-blind sentients who had taken Minara Prime to squeeze dry of every last bit of life except their own. They had hollowed out the great mountain and turned it into a veneer to cover a cruel madness. To these arrogant humanoids, an angry and confused xelnhai was a

nightmare creature that must be avoided at all costs, though they sometimes poured from their steel mountain in droves, in order to kidnap a xelnhai or two and break away their beloved skin-gems, without which a xelnhai was stupid and mute and condemned to die. The presence of the xelnhe, which the mad mind-blind sentients considered to be nothing more than telepathic predatory monsters useful only for their symbiotic skin-gems, acted to damper Kyhln's psionic signature.

He had become a part of the lullabies which composed the flesh-memories of their young; To their minds, he was the true master of Minara Prime. And as the flock grew under his care, no sentient being in their right mind, at least not one that wished to continue breathing, would have knowingly entered their — *Kyhln's* — territory.

Until Renee Ingram was thrown headfirst into it.

Something warm and fragrant touched her lips; just moist, not enough liquid to choke her. The touch of the implement that held the...food, yes, this was food...was at once rough, vitreous, and smoky tasting.

A vivid mental picture came to her of Kyhln working clay — bowls and spoons, he must have made dozens. The adobe of this cabin had been made in a similar fashion, but not, she understood implicitly, by Kyhln. He had, however, figured out how to fashion sandshoes from

flexible reeds that grew near some of the underground pools. These reeds had also furnished him with fire. Sunhats. Mats. Baskets. The memories of him making these life-necessities were much nicer than the nightmares of what Kyhln knew of his past, even if they were lonely memories.

Renee reached up to forestall the raku spoon and opened her eyes.

She had no idea how much time had passed between her last awakening and this one. The light, diffuse and breezeless through t-shaped slits near the adobe ceiling, which could be stuffed with padding to keep out the night's cold or have their porous, recessed sills doused with water to provide an archaic form of air conditioning in the heat of the day, hadn't seemed to change at all from that awakening to this.

"Colin." Renee Ingram intoned solemnly.

"What did you call me?" the man holding the spoon returned it to the bowl and set the bowl down. His voice had absolutely no depth or timbre; it was a grinding, mechanistic monotone, even when presenting a question.

"That's as close as I can come to pronouncing your name. Or would you prefer I call you something else?" she winced as she tried to sit up. She was going to have to take this slowly; she was so stiff that it felt as though she was

tied down.

He lifted his unique brow at her. "Ah. I... suppose I can be Colin. For you."

"You're quite..." Renee Ingram swallowed the word *formidably* down along with what remained of the flavors of seafood stew and smoke on her tongue, "telekinetic." Her stomach rumbled demandingly, and she took another bite of the thick, lukewarm broth.

He nodded slowly, "If it's important enough." The man who had accepted the name *Colin* from her looked around them at the walls, at the massive stonework that made up the fireplace in the center of the cabin — built on a round design, like the ceremonial *hogans* that Navajo people built on Earth. "Not for something like *this*."

That creaky, computer-like monotone of his, Renee knew, wasn't produced by any sort of vocal apparatus at all; Those of his ancestors who had evolved on this planet hadn't possessed them. The sound that passed for a voice came from the crystalline entity implanted in his throat. His flesh was as metamorphic as the flesh of the xelnhe, capable of uniting with and subatomically influencing siliceous and metallic elements. This sort of ability was why the horrid human interlopers in Colin's dream had considered creating crystal-controlled cannon fodder in the first place.

Renee had learned that much in her dream, but now a psionic obsidian wall lay hard and cold between them. She seemed to recall that basic esper sensitivity consisted, simply, of being a very good reader of minute environmental clues and body language. The sense of smell was involved in some way, too, but the carrier and effector of all true psionic forces was the psionic spectrum itself, which was part of (or interwoven with; Federation physicists still weren't entirely in agreement on the matter) the electromagnetic and various other spectra. Renee also knew for certain that she had no true telepathic, empathic, or telekinetic ability — a high esper sensitivity, yes, but that didn't make someone a psion any more than having white skin made someone a snowflake; Psionic capacity and esper sensitivity were not considered to be similar abilities.

For a non-psion to be touched by a psionic mind was usually a wrenching, potentially lethal experience, much as being touched by a previously unperceived part of the electromagnetic spectrum could be. Most non-psions avoided psionic touch as avidly as they would avoid unprotected exposure to gamma or microwave radiation, but that sort of hurtful injury certainly hadn't been what she'd received from Colin, at least not that she could recall.

And he had, without a shadow of a doubt, done more

than simply *touch* her mind. For some period of time, he had...*possessed* it. Ingram shuddered.

He nodded shortly at the mostly empty bowl she now held in her own lap. "Would you like more?"

Renee was in fact quite hungry. Why he'd been nursing her the way he had escaped her; she felt utterly fine now. "Yes. Thank you." Her mind was waking up, pushing her emotional nature aside. She handed him the bowl, then stretched, and felt her joints twinge from the movement. She slapped her left hand over a sudden, searing pain in her right shoulder, and only then wondered...*where was her uniform?* She was wearing a long, soft, thin leather shirt. She could feel a fine, fur-like layer on the inside rub against her skin as she touched herself. Ropes of scar tissue, where none had been before, crisscrossed their way down her shoulders; similar scars met her gaze when she pulled up the light blankets covering her legs. "What happened to me? Where's my uniform?"

He returned with the bowl of stew. He'd ladled it from the smaller of the large, steaming kettles set over the fireplace on hooks, metal kettles, which told Renee that the cruel humanoids who had appeared to her in Colin's dreams (her dreams?) had indeed either built or stocked this place, or both. Why, she couldn't imagine.

Colin handed her the bowl and sat down near her cross-legged on the hand-split rock that comprised the floor. The stone of the floor was of a different sort than the fireplace; these were joined together at the base of the fire pit by a third, probably catalytic, type of rock in such a way that the floor would remain cool during the day, and draw heat from the fire pit at night. Vulcans still utilized similar construction materials in their personal residences.

“The creatures that attacked you are my guardians. You know what it is they guard me from just as well as I know why you came here to get me. They very nearly did kill you.”

Renee touched the aching, deeply scarred joint between her right shoulder and clavicle again. “You...you did this?”

He nodded once, somberly, resting his lower arms on his crossed legs and leaning forward. “I had to. It was why I had to go into your mind.”

“How can you do that? I’m not a telepath!”

Colin frowned — he appeared to be master of that particular facial expression — and dropped his gaze to his lap. “I truly am sorry about the scars, but your body tells me the scars are normal ones for the level of injury you sustained, and that exercise will —”

“My body *tells* you? How does that work?” Renee

finished her food and wanted to stand up. Mostly, she needed to ask him where exactly he went to the bathroom in this place, but she had no concrete idea just how low the thin shirt went, since she was sitting on similar skins and also had them over her lap. Although, considering what they were discussing, modesty seemed a tad unwarranted; it appeared that he'd already seen everything there was to see about her, from the inside out. She pushed down a wave of nausea with a hard swallow; she shouldn't have eaten so much, or so fast.

He looked back up at her. In the wan light from the high windows, his irises glistened like shards of stained glass dropped on a mosaic floor, before he turned his head to look at, and address, the cold fire pit. "I never healed a humanoid before. And you're the first female one I've ever seen. There wasn't anyone else for me to ask. And the *zhollncarrha* did eat your clothing. I've seen them eat boulders just because there was blood on them. It was the clothing that gave me the opportunity to get you away from them. I let them keep it. I feed them usually, and —"

Nausea doubled her over. Colin reached out and grabbed her before she could give back the stew. "Forgive me, that was my fault, I..."

The nausea abated instantly, and she looked up at him in amazement, astounded by the accuracy and power of his

mind. His face had gone ashen, covered in a light sheen of sweat. She'd heard of individuals who could heal or remove pain using the force of their minds. A psionic capacity that was neither telepathy, empathy, nor telekinesis, but some mysterious combination of the three, they performed this feat by taking another's physical pain or injury on themselves and altering it into a sensation, ultimately passing it through themselves as an emotion and allowing it to abate, the way an emotion abates over time. As if drawn by some hidden magnet, she reached up to touch his face, but stopped herself before her fingers made contact.

"How could you have...*tolerated* that? *Why?*" she whispered, pulling her hand back and rubbing at her mouth with the back of it. He shook his head and swallowed hard. He knew that she wasn't talking about a little psychogenic nausea; She was referring to being torn apart and drowned. The very concept that he was capable of such a thing was beyond her comprehension.

"*I had* to. You came here to free me, in return for what I can do; I saw this in your mind. What matrix sent you here?"

"I..." she shook her head, "I'm sorry, I really don't know what you mean."

His mind reached out to hers again — it was a caress,

that touch, one that she could learn to like very much, given time — to explain what he meant or to find the explanation he sought, but the touch was transient.

“Let me show you where to go to the bathroom, then I will try to explain.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Upon leaving the cool of the adobe structure two mornings later, in order to work the horrible stiffness out of muscle and tendon mauled past the point repair, and subsequently repaired past the point of belief, Renee asked Colin why he appeared to be selecting and discarding items from his abode.

His reply was characteristically straightforward. "We must move from here; your arrival has undoubtedly been noticed." He picked up what looked like some sort of medieval crossbow composed of crystal struts strung on knobbed metal wire, frowned at it considering, and then set it atop a large squared-off boulder with the smaller of the two piles he was making out of everything he'd dragged out of the adobe cabin before Renee had wakened.

She used this opportunity to take a good look at the man before her; as muscular as an Hali'ian but taller than that race averaged, he also sported what looked like the beginnings of an Hali'ian's bifurcated forehead. His arresting face was entirely devoid of either mustache or beard, however, and his coloring was utterly unlike that of

any Hali'ian she'd ever known. Exercise had turned his sweaty face ruddy, but otherwise he possessed the unwavering olive complexion of a Vulcan. His hair was a matted, dreadlocked mass of dark auburn and molten copper, the sort of almost artificially vivid color Renee had only seen in Rumantians of the royal line. His eyes were unlike any true-humanoid eyes she'd ever seen. Unusually wide, they were a flurry of jewel tones that seemed to shift and alter with Colin's mood. Scratches on his hands, probably made as he'd sorted through his belongings, revealed that his blood was iron-based, with the neon-crimson tone common only among humans.

"By the other people on the planet? How?"

"They possess..." he paused and pursed his lips, apparently selecting and discarding descriptive terms; "methods of...seeing? Sensing?"

"They have sensors?"

"Yes, and other...mmmm, tools. Which they use to monitor the surface of the planet."

This revelation was upsetting; she'd been hoping for at least a couple more days to recuperate. "Why didn't you just move me someplace underground before?" Colin had told her that she'd spent over a week going in and out of consciousness. He'd had to nurse her throughout all of her brief contacts with wakefulness, at the very least in order to

keep her from dying from dehydration or infection.

"You have seen your scars." Colin replied in his grating monotone. Renee had heard something similar to his voice once, as a child, when visiting an exhibit held on Terra one Federation Day. The exhibit had been dedicated to advancements in medicine. Like many citizens of the Federation, she'd been appalled by some of the so-called *advances* that had existed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, when medical technology had lagged more than a century behind technologies utilized for war, or even just for simple play. One of those medical 'advances' had been a sort of vocal-chord-replacement system used by those few fortunate survivors of throat cancer. The semi-siliceous humanoid's voice reminded her, poignantly, of that exhibit. "I took you from underground. Until your body had healed itself enough, I could neither move you again, nor allow you to fully waken. You needed the warmth of fire and the things I had here."

Indeed, Renee was quite familiar with her scars. She was only just now able to raise her right arm, which, if the scars were any indication, had been torn directly off her body. Her left thigh and right ankle bore similar deep tissue scarring, and numerous, relatively minor dermal scars crisscrossed her entire body. Any interrogatory questions regarding exactly how Colin had saved her

before she'd bled to death had been met by the presence of a psionic wall composed of the telepathic equivalent of duranium. The healing he had performed, psionically, was impossible according to every law of medicine and physics that she had ever heard of.

This went only a short way toward quelling her other concerns. She had been made aware that there were no other individuals currently on the planet anything like Colin. As far as she could tell, the Guardian had sent her here to obtain the aid of one single man, and that one single man had somehow known she was coming ahead of time. The captain of the *Enterprise* was not happy with this state of affairs, but she'd be damned if she knew what to make of it.

She determined to focus on something she could converse intelligently about. Psionic ability, or lack thereof, wasn't one of those things. She nodded at the weapon he'd put down on the boulder. "That looks awfully delicate for a crossbow." It wasn't much longer than Colin's own forearm; its crystalline structures glistened as brilliantine as the man's own eyes in the relative cool of dawn. He picked it up in his left hand and held it out to her.

It was obscenely heavy, fifty pounds, at least. Renee had to transfer it quickly so that most of its weight fell on

her uninjured left arm before she dropped it entirely. Colin hastily took it back, and she was unaware of his abashed bewilderment at how heavy the weapon seemed to her. Attempting to push away the psionic aura that surrounded him everywhere was even more difficult than dealing with the crossbow. Suddenly aware of that discomfort in her mind, too, she felt him mute and withdraw it, his abashment and bewilderment increasing exponentially and remaining for a fleeting instant, like the buildup of tidal foam in the wake of a retreating breaker.

"I dislike having to make you travel in your state, but I truly think we have no other choice. Still, you should know how to use this. What it is, is a reworking of part of a few smaller xelnhai bones and ligaments. You see, the end-crank is a toe-stub; you maneuver it up and down." He did so, drawing the thick band of relatively flexible metal that composed the crossbow's serving back along semi-crystalline struts. "The retention-springs are split, foreshortened minor ribs of the xelnhai, and they ratchet back along this little length of ground-down neck-spine. The longer stubs at the end, here, compose the trigger. The fore grip and cocking stirrups are metallicized eye-bones.

"All of these take a great deal of grinding into shape and polishing before they're the right size and exactly the right shape to use. I did not make this; those who came

before me did." Colin released the tension he was holding on the latch slowly, allowing the serving to slide harmlessly back down the flight groove. She didn't ask how he knew what it was composed of if he didn't make it. She already realized that he understood a lot of things that should be significantly beyond the capacity of anybody who'd been alive for only five years. She was also not looking forward to meeting any creature composed of such substances. Colin went on:

"This is a quarrel." He picked up one of three carefully polished, nine-inch-long stone shafts, pointed on one end and blunted on the other. The shafts were polished to a high sheen, slightly barrel-shaped, nearly an inch thick at their centers.

"It must have taken someone years to make these," Renee said, awed. "Do you only have three?"

"I have five quarrels. These three were here when I came, two others I've been working on myself. They're still rough, but they serve."

"Why didn't you just send the xelnhe out to get you food?" she asked. Colin winced, then pulled a couple of what looked like back frames made of reeds from the pile of belongings he had been sorting through and began to pack them.

"I did that for some time, actually. Unfortunately,

xelnhe aren't terribly particular about what they eat, or what condition it's in when they eat it. Anyway, I could not continue to survive on just meat, particularly not the half-rotten offal, bone, and stone that xelnhe favor. Do you think you will be strong enough to travel?"

"Don't worry about me; I'm strong enough. You seem quite anxious to leave this place."

"If the people I feel are coming do come..." he shook his head. "We need to get to the matrix stone before that happens."

"A matrix stone? Like the one I came here through?"

Colin shrugged and handed her a non-sequitur, "It's in the hollow mountain to the north."

Finished arranging items in the packs, Colin lifted another object. It was some sort of wide metal chest plate, with the incorruptible sheen of pure gold but the untouchable look of brushed white duranium, set along its edges with finely cut gems in asymmetrical patterns. It looked, Renee thought, like a metal Japanese dinner tray on chains; if her eyes didn't deceive her, there was even some sort of utensil, also artistically gem-encrusted, holstered somehow to the bottom of it. Colin affixed these chains around his shoulders and across his back, then hefted the larger of the two pack frames and the crossbow.

"How did the matrix get there?" Renee tested the

second pack frame, found it mercifully lighter than the crossbow, and lifted it to secure it across her shoulders.

"It was brought there by..." a look of mingled confusion and grief flashed across his face, "ancestors of mine."

"And it can take us back to...to where I came from?"

"Yes. But not if we're caught." Having noted her interest in the odd item he'd just put on — she was having difficulty understanding why he'd want to burden himself with ornamentation so obviously heavy and potentially hot, and she was aware that he probably knew exactly what she was thinking — he laid down the crossbow, and reached down and pulled the utensil, its hilt made of the same metal as the chest plate and decorated in the same manner, out of its sheath in the breastplate.

Renee had imagined that it was a knife; what she hadn't imagined was the size or the grace of the thing. He laid it down on the boulder, then picked the crossbow up again and tapped the butt of it gently against the breastplate, making it wordlessly obvious that the plate was a type of guard against the kick-back of the bow.

"These people you think are hunting us," Renee asked, tentatively hefting the knife that looked like an overlarge dagger in Colin's hand but which looked like a short sword in her own, before handing it back to him; "what will they

do with us if they catch us?"

"Things like the *zhollncarrha* did to you, only much more slowly, and I might not be able to stop them."

"Let me get this straight; we're running from people who are hunting us *to* the place where these people come from?" her faith in Colin was dwindling in great geometric chunks. She closed her eyes and pictured a face. What would *he* say?

Let's not be hasty, Commander.

Okay, John, she thought. I'm going to follow your lead on this one. That, at least, made her feel as though she had some sort of choice in the matter. All the philosophical semi-sentient machine's musings aside, she felt as though she'd abdicated all choice at the foot of the Guardian on Tres Two.

"That mountain is where the matrix is located," he said once more, with the exaggerated patience of someone repeating a simple fact for the second time. "I know a..." he pursed his finely-shaped, sensuous mouth again, "a back-way in." He retrieved and holstered what was, for all intents and purposes, a machete, and hefted the crossbow again.

A picture flashed across her mind of vast subterranean tunnels, filled with the light of strange plants and the voicelike murmuring of water. She shuddered; he had

pulled her in pieces out of a place much like that.

Colin nodded at her discomfiture; "Yes. We must use the underground caverns. Something in the rock helps to disguise things from their..." his mind touched hers again, briefly, a touch as deft and gentle as the fingertip of a surgeon; "*sensors*." The thought of what Renee considered to be everyday technology was as exotic and unlikely to him as his psionic — telepathic, empathic, telekinetic, other things she didn't think any known Federation race had a name for — capacities were to her.

Some great team we make, Ingram thought dourly.

Chapter Twenty-Four

To Kell's great relief, along with the molecular-recombinant program Roxanne's tricorder had released to him, the instrument also let him know that his test subject had not escaped through the Vian machine, to some place where it would be impossible to trace him. Follow-up scans made with the remarkably useful program he had taken from Minara Prime's newest Intendant, whose usefulness to him was dwindling as his suspicions about

her motives increased, showed that the creature had, instead, exited the complex somewhat more prosaically, which would make the process of following merely difficult.

Kell and Roxanne were now cozily ensconced in a hovercraft, flying sinuous trails back and forth through the badlands of Minara Prime. To keep his new Intendant from becoming bored, or from imagining that his motives toward her might include anything other than requesting her help in locating an escaped experiment, he'd allowed her to be in control of the scanning process. To his surprise, they'd found biosign traces almost immediately. His last Intendant, whom he'd disposed of far more prosaically than he'd planned to dispose of Roxanne, hadn't managed that. Kell sighed to himself and made the conscious decision to avail himself of her assistance and her sweet body just a little while longer.

"This isn't one humanoid biosign trace, it's two. Could it be your..." the scanner offered up a new palette of information, and Roxanne's brows rose. "This says one of them is *human*. Have you put shuttle teams on the ground already?"

"No," Kell replied tightly. "What's the other?"

"The scanner seems to be having some trouble..." before Roxanne finished the comment, the scanner screen

altered conformation again. A wicked smile touched her mouth. "Oh look, Shane; Confetti. Is this your experiment?"

Shane yanked his communicator out of his field suit. "Hover One to Shuttle Base; scramble to the location I'm about to..."

"Shane?"

"...send over your emitters. Traces of our..."

"Shane!"

"...target are here and..."

"Shane!"

"*What?*" he snarled, releasing the toggle on his communicator.

"These are biosign *traces*. They're not necessarily the actual individuals who *left* the traces. Can we please see if the cake and decorations are down there before giving the party?"

"You obviously haven't a very good feel," Shane purred dangerously, "for what this thing is capable of. It can tear you into your constituent parts with its mind; I've seen it do that with my own eyes. It can walk through walls as though they weren't there; I've seen that, too."

Roxanne wisely decided not to argue with him, and instead busied herself with landing the hovercraft. Once she'd fought it down against the heavy updraft that the hot

desert hardpan blew against the cooling twilight sky, she turned to Kell. "What the *hell* were you thinking, creating something like that?"

"I was told we wanted invincible cannon fodder. It seemed like the right direction to take the project." He sighed and ran both palms back over his hair, tied in a meticulous knot at the nape of his neck. "Look, I think now that I can actually meld some of these capabilities with adult Imperial troops, to minimize the risk of..." he shook his head and pulled a wicked-looking disintegrator from one of the many pockets of his suit. "But that's neither here nor there. We have to destroy this thing utterly; that's our task now."

Roxanne powered down the tiny hoverer and popped the hood. An oddly humid hot wind seemed to follow Minara Prime's bloated red-giant primary as that star sank toward the horizon seven degrees north of magnetic west. She frowned around at the ruins of a tiny village built of crumbling orange adobe and pine-green thatch. "You built the thing a *town*? Or were you planning on making more and siting them here?"

"This is where the remaining Minaran sub-males should be."

"The ones who keep the...what the hell did you call them? *Xelnhe* away from your base?"

Kell nodded distractedly, looking down at the information scrolling over the screen of his own tricorder. "Yes. But they're not here. Haven't been for some time, if this information's correct." He shook his head; "We need to look for signs of where our prey's gone. If the mix of biosigns I'm reading is right, *he's* the one who's been keeping the xelnhai at bay."

Roxanne raised a brow. "He? Your person-disintegrator who walks through walls? Does he chew on steel, too — think maybe he eats them?"

Shane manipulated the settings of his tricorder for a long minute, ignoring Roxanne's blatant mockery. "Feeding them. Keeping them like pets. This is bad; Keep an eye out. You go upslope, I'll go down. Look for any biosign or physical trace that looks like a trail. The shuttle will be here in about fifteen minutes."

She shook her head at him. "That's stupid, Shane. We should be able to scan the entire place from here."

The Inquisitor General motioned upslope. He tried more than casually to imbue the motion with unspoken threat; "As so often happens, you're both mistaken and out of your depth. You'll see why as you go about doing what it is that I've told you to do. That's an *order*, my dear, not a suggestion." The Inquisitor General of Section 31 had no intention of allowing the xelnhai to remove the potential

danger of another Intendant from his life, since the Empire didn't usually accept the same excuse for the same mistake twice, but a little enforced humility wouldn't hurt Roxanne a bit.

A suddenly chill burst of wind whipped up a dust-devil in the distance. It shed scarlet, copper, and gold veils as it danced in the long rays of the red giant sitting on the western horizon. Roxanne, irritated, turned away from the sight and focused her attention on the ground before her instead. She'd just begun to hunt for signs of where Kell had taken off to; she doubted that they should be wandering around this place at night. The roofs of the huts they'd been inspecting for signs of habitation were at least partly composed of some sort of inflammable, metal-containing reed that skewed her tricorder's sensors just enough that she'd lost track of the Inquisitor General.

Rounding the corner of a series of huts, intent on Shane's footprints, Roxanne's senses were suddenly assaulted by a pungent funk that somehow managed to hover between decomposing fish, weasel musk, fly-blown lamb, and humanoid excrement. She literally flinched and cowered at the smell, as though it had awakened a part of her mind endowed to her by some small, tree-dwelling hominid.

"What the *hell* is that?" she demanded of nobody in particular. To her great horror, her question was answered by a low, almost subsonic growling sound. She went with her tiny-hominid instincts and wedged herself into the shadows of a half-fallen woven-reed roof nearby.

The creature emerged from the depths of one of the larger fallen structures five hundred feet away. Its muscular, semi-encrusted body was roughly the size of an African elephant's. Roxanne had once had the honor of seeing just such a cloned creature in the Regnant's personal zoo when she was a child. Like another long-extinct denizen of Terra, this animal possessed a flaring, triceratops-like armored ridge along the circumference of its head. This was where all resemblance with any creature from Terra ended with horrifying abruptness; the ridge that adorned what was obviously a predator was at least partly composed of metal, and its edges glittered like sharpened knife serrations in the long scarlet rays of the setting sun.

The thing produced a coughing sound that made Roxanne's ears ring as though an old-fashioned projectile weapon had been discharged nearby, and began to work its way slowly down the slope in a slow lollipop, tossing its head back and forth, tumbling already half-tumbled dry stone walls and half-fallen adobe structures as it came, on three sinuously muscular multi-jointed legs, two fore and

one aft, that ended in six wickedly-clawed prehensile toes.

The creature turned a face like a slatted folding door in Roxanne's general direction, but she had no real idea of whether it had sensed her or not. Nothing that she could recognize as a respiratory organ was visible anywhere on its body, but above a cleft mouth like a rack of poorly-stored, obsessively-sharpened machetes, each slat that travelled across each side of the creature's face hosted three squid-like eyes, giving the terrible thing a visual acuity that Roxanne couldn't even begin to imagine. She didn't move; she didn't even dare to breathe.

"*Xelnhai.*"

To Roxanne's credit, Kell's breath in her ear scarcely caused her to start. She did, however, clench her teeth together so hard that something cracked, and a sensation like an enormous fist squeezing her chest took her attention off of everything else for nearly three seconds, during which she amused herself with visions of doing to Kell what she'd done to the fusion on Babel just slightly over one Terran month ago, now.

"Charmed, I'm sure. How the hell do you *kill* something like that?" she hissed back, trying valiantly to communicate without making any sort of significant sound.

"That? Hell, that's a *toddler*, scarcely old enough to breed yet. See the soft patches on its thorax and rear leg?"

Like anything or anybody else, darling, you have to hit it where it's most vulnerable." Kell's rich, vibrant voice almost did seem to make no sound, a physical impossibility that Roxanne simply wasn't in the mood to examine more closely at the moment.

"Sounds like a job for Sector 31."

"All right, then; this should get its attention." Kell maneuvered Roxanne back into the darkness near the gritty wall down which the prickly thatch was sliding, aimed his disruptor, and fired it at the xelnhai purple-skinned, unprotected rear ankle. The beam made contact with a sound like a phased-energy beam directed at rock, and something in the creature's leg popped. It whirled toward the source of attack, leaving part of its rear leg behind it, and leaped forward two hundred feet or more with the alacrity of some sort of horrendously enormous jumping spider.

Shane had explained that xelnhe were extremely metamorphic, which metal acted as the primary oxygen-snagger in their blood at any given time was entirely dependent upon what they were eating. The foul black circulatory fluid that sprayed from the stump of the creature's disruptor-severed third leg defied Roxanne's millisecond attempt to pin a description on it. Kell's next shot sizzled along one of the thing's ascending rows of

eyes. This brought it to an instantaneous halt. The xelnhai threw back its armored head and screamed, a sound like a steel saw blade slowly grinding its way through a slate floor.

Kell was right; this xelnhai was a baby. The mass of them that came loping up the other side of the slope like stone trolls given life, pushing before them a waft of scent that was like every open grave that had ever existed in the galaxy, to see what all the noise was about...

Roxanne made a sound; it might have actually contained legible words. Beside her, Shane Kell laughed and flipped open his communicator, speaking into it with an unconcerned, conversational tone that made Roxanne want to scratch his eyes out.

"Let's get rid of this damned place, shall we? Consider anything within fifty feet of this communicator sacred ground, but otherwise scour every millimeter of it clean for a mile in diameter."

"Understood, Inspector. We'll give you ten seconds to set your field."

Kell manipulated the touchpad of his communicator. Suddenly the air shimmered, as though extreme heat waves had risen all around them. Almost as suddenly, everything went dark; Not as though the Minaran sun had finally set, but as though it had winked out of existence.

"*Shane!*" Roxanne squealed, panic making her grasp at him.

"Wait. Watch. Maybe you'll understand why I called in the shuttle before we landed the flitter."

"*Watch?* There's no —"

All at once, everything was bathed in a light that appeared to be filtered through flowing green water. The xelnhe pack, Roxanne noted as though from very far away, had in the few seconds that had elapsed since they'd appeared over the crest of the hill, gathered around the young wounded xelnhai. They tossed enormous bladed heads to and fro, searching for the source of the young one's pain. Every last one of them was armored in metal or stone from head to rear claws, and they were all from two to five times the size of the screaming, bleeding youngster they surrounded. Roxanne imagined that the relative puniness of the humans hiding under the remains of a thatch roof might hide them entirely from the senses of the Minaran monstrosities.

Whether or not this whimsical hope was true would never be clear; As she watched, the predators grouped two hundred feet away began to dissolve. The effect was so sudden that the animals didn't have time to react. The muffled sound of a full-sized Imperial shuttle screaming overhead made her look upward, through whatever

shielding Kell's communicator was putting out. The shuttle's weapon's-bays glistened with the telltale sickly-green pulsations of ultra-short-phase magneton radiation.

By the time Roxanne returned her gaze to the group of xelnhe, they were gone. The organically-active radiation had also effected the reeds and even the carbon-based constituents of the adobe, turning the area around them into a killing-field of ash, dust, and lumps and shards of steaming rock and metal in the general shape of large animal bones. Only the wall behind them and the thatch around them, protected by the force field Kell had activated, remained.

This would entirely obliterate the genetic signature of the hybrid psionic fellow they were hunting for. Roxanne kept her mouth firmly clamped shut over this fact; surely Kell would work that out for himself soon enough. It was too bad, she reflected, that he hadn't mandated a larger diameter of destruction; they might have caught the thing in it. Unfortunately, a single shuttle like the one that had been trailing them wasn't large enough to sterilize a greater area, and in any case, it was necessary not to involve any segment of Sector 31's vast hidden laboratories and slave facilities in the flush of killing radiation.

Kell switched on the illuminating function of his communicator, removed the pack he wore around his waist,

sat down on the ground cross-legged, and invited Roxanne to do the same with a gesture. "We've been outmaneuvered here. May as well sit. We'll be here awhile."

"Outmaneuvered?" Roxanne sat down carefully next to the Inquisitor General of Sector 31, careful not to introduce a mass of dust into their tiny radiation-proof atmospheric dome. "You imagine that somehow your creation knew we were looking for him? Today? And that he somehow knew we'd be here now, and sent those things after us? Sorry, Shane, but that's kind of farfetched."

Shane shook his head at her. "I'm sorry, my dear. I obviously haven't been clear about what it is we're hunting, have I? It's telepathic and empathic. With *everything*. If a planet's internal core could think, he could hear it. If a magnetic pole had an opinion, he could *change* it. He's both telekinetic and telemorphic; the only reason he can't move mountains is because he doesn't *have* to, he can pass through them. And what I did to that little xelnhai? He could have fixed it. Perhaps, at some time, he did — kind of like the story of the lion pulling a thorn out of a mouse's paw."

"You mean the story of the mouse pulling a thorn out of the lion's paw," Roxanne replied distractedly, fishing through her own pack for something to eat. Kell reached out and plucked the pack away with one hand, taking her

face ungently into the other and turning it toward him.

"No. You mistake the true nature of things. Those xelnhe? Mice. What we're hunting? Lion. It's why I'd hesitated to hunt him before."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Rain had driven them up out of the extensive grottoes and caverns beneath the desert of Minara. According to Colin, it rained roughly once a year for several days straight in the lower elevations, but more often in the higher ones, which the people who were tracking them had appropriated for their own use. To Renee's horror, he had explained, as emotionlessly as a child might pull the wings off a butterfly, that those people had simply performed mass genocide on the planet's own native population in order to take it for themselves. The planet was called *Minara Prime* by its overlords, a name that struck Renee as familiar, but she chalked that up to the time Colin had spent in her mind while healing her horrible injuries.

The rain was acrid and hot, undrinkable until it had leached through layers of stone into the grottoes far below their feet. Travel on the planet's surface required both rain gear and sand-shoes, all of which Colin fashioned out of the glowing purple reeds that lined the banks of the shallower underground pools where they had filled water skins before heading to the surface. The reeds turned green

and became astonishingly flammable once they were pulled up, probably because of whatever molecule caused them to glow. Though leery of the lightning that occasionally accompanied the rain while wearing them, Renee was grateful to have them against the unpleasant, metallic-tasting droplets. She hoped the flammable molecules in the reeds and the heavy metals in the alkali rain would help disguise their biosignatures to anyone looking for them.

The nature of the rain aside — or perhaps because of the very nature of the rain, Colin wasn't certain — the desert bloomed with fungi. Colin did know that the fungi were integral to the frail web of life that clung to existence on Minara, and he felt that, since he and Renee had been driven up out of the grottoes anyway due to the very real danger of flash flooding, they should collect some. Rather than attempt to explain the uses of them all through the noise of driving rain and wind against clattery wilted reed, Colin simply placed the knowledge into Renee's mind, as though her head had become a collecting basket.

The images grouped themselves into Renee's memory with no effort of her own. *Now this I could get used to*, she thought with satisfaction. It was a series of images of a certain mushroom; Scarlet, what her own mind classified as *ascomycotina*, vaguely hexahedral in shape and filled

with gray spores. The gray spores were what Colin was after.

Ascomycotina? Colin inquired psionically, bemused. The word sounded to him like nothing so much as a protracted sneeze. He rifled through her mind with a soft, feather duster-like whirr, to find the information.

That, Renee didn't like so much. Not because it was uncomfortable, or because she thought the man doing the riffling was untrustworthy, but because when he withdrew, she felt lonely. Incomplete. Disappointed. Provoked. No; *provoked* wasn't exactly the correct term or sentiment. In any case, she preferred to have some sort of handle on her emotions, but when he did this, it was as though he grabbed handfuls of them and flung them around at random through the streets and alleys of her mind like some kind of psionic parade confetti. She reached through her reedy rain gear and rubbed at the back of her neck where it had suddenly gone warm.

Ingram sighed and tried to push both the telepath's too-closeness, and the knowledge that nobody else could choose your emotions for you, away — they were, after all, searching for mushrooms. The exercise of travel had helped to ease the stiffness and weakness in her muscles by warming and stretching the nasty scars that made her joints feel as though they had been sewn closed, but in

comparison to her usual facility of movement, Renee felt like a slow, helpless old woman.

The thought of collecting mushrooms cheered her all out of proportion to the situation, particularly considering that she would be doing so in slimy pouring rain that stung the skin, using arms that felt like they were encased in water-soaked burlap. She couldn't help it; She loved foraging rambles on any planet, and had a talent for them, though she usually also had the help of a tricorder able to analyze the molecular makeup of unknown plants and compare them with known species. The talent came in knowing just how often a tricorder was mistaken, and when, by using the full range of humanoid senses that a tricorder didn't possess, though, in Colin's case, she'd have to throw another sense or two into the mix. Obtaining information about something as potentially dreadful as unknown mushrooms directly from another person's mind was, she had to admit, magnitudes easier than spending the requisite couple of years asking him questions and following him around.

Colin finally finished his foraging ramble through Renee's mind. "The puffball and cup type grow around some of the underground springs. The gilled sort are rare. I've only seen them once, during a week of very high rain, but some of them were larger than me. There are also

several vitreous types here that make excellent soup stock.

"All of the mushrooms on Minara are either medicinal or edible. There are no poisonous or hallucinogenic mushrooms here, as I suppose are common on other planets, though there are plants around the springs whose blossoms have those qualities. Perhaps from interactions with the zhollncarrha. You would *not* want to accept a bouquet of flowers on this planet."

Renee grinned up at Colin. "But you *could* accept a bouquet of mushrooms? And will you explain to me how a *vitreous* mushroom spreads spores?" It would be the first time she'd hunted for mushrooms in an environment this arid. On Earth or Nisus, her most familiar foraging grounds and the site of her personal and family homes when she wasn't in space, not even something as heat-hardy as false stalked-puffballs would fruit in such an environment, although Vulcan, easily as arid as Minara, hosted some of the most delicious mushrooms in the galaxy.

What little she'd seen of the flora of Minara Prime fascinated Renee. Colin's bathroom walls and waste pit had been covered in a fluffy, silky, ecru-colored lichen that apparently lived solely off of nitrogen-rich waste products; it was sweet-scented, harmless, and could be torn from the walls in chunks to use as toilet paper. It would be back by

the next day, and the waste would be...well, not so much *gone* as turned into more lichen. The pit from which it spread could be exhumed using boiling water, which turned the lichen into an odorless, gummy gray goo that heavily chinked the adobe walls of Colin's living spaces. This lichen could not grow in constantly lit areas, didn't grow except in areas high in animal waste, wouldn't grow on living tissue, and was obtained, to Renee's great disgust, from xelnhe nests.

Colin considered the woman next to him for a moment, then grinned back; "If what I get from your mind is correct, most people where you come from would be taken aback if given a bouquet of mushrooms. And vitreous mushrooms largely are nothing *except* a mass of spores, which spread by shattering."

"I, myself, would be delighted with a bouquet of mushrooms," she replied, pokerfaced.

"Then we must find one." He stepped out of the relatively sandless, exceptionally hot and sticky cover of the overhang they'd stopped beneath for a rest, back onto the rain-pocked sandpack that somehow contrived to be a trail in Colin's mind, trackless and featureless as a whiteout to Renee. He was much better on sandshoes than she was. A clown in big shoes, she reflected, would have been better at this than she was, but as long as they were on the surface

of the planet, hiking Minara Prime demanded them.

It was fortunate, she reflected, that one of the innate qualities looked for in a starship captain was a tendency to neither withdraw nor lash out in situations that a person might perceive to be absurd; he'd already had to pick her up out of dunes twice. Never in her life had she been quite so gritty. *I could always just carry you*, he'd teased the second time. Renee knew he didn't even realize he was teasing her. She'd need to point it out to him sometime.

She waited four more days to broach the frightening question of not being able to return to the *Enterprise*. They'd just eaten dinner, and were sitting near a fire they had made in one of the many nooks in the limestone caverns that spiraled downward toward the underground pools, drinking mushroom-spore tea in a silence that she'd come to learn was never really either completely silent or uncomfortable in Colin's presence, which in itself was uncomfortable for her to contemplate. Renee could hear the wind scream and howl through the shallower caverns above them with hurricane force, the common evensong of a cloud filled Minaran night, muted into a soft moaning. At least, she thought grimly, it had stopped raining.

"Colin," she came at the subject more or less obliquely; "what are matrices like the guardian?"

He gave her a look that said he couldn't believe such a complex woman was asking such a simple question. "They're a form of transportation. Doorways. Your own people make doorways through space by warping its energy-fabric, and they also move from one place to another by altering the electromagnetic flow of matter. You call these things *warp* and *transporters*. Psionic matrices are no different, except that it is somewhat easier to warp time than it is to warp space using the psionic field. Those two mediums are largely intertwined, however, so where one goes, the other is apt to follow." He shrugged:

"What you came here through seems to be some kind of sentient psionic matrix. Such a thing also exists in..." he stopped and sighed. She knew he didn't like to think about the confusing, terrifying episode of having awakened as a semi-siliceous being. He did it anyway; "Where we're going. You are worried about the excessive passage of time, but you should realize that to psionic matrices, time is..." he shrugged, frowning, "not irrelevant, exactly, but extremely pliable. Do you know where the matrix you came here through is located? The more accurately its location can be determined, the more easily the matrix in the mountain will be able to manipulate the temporal dimension leading back toward it."

Renee shook her head slowly. "You've kind of just

explained why I couldn't tell you where a single thing is located at the moment. We *might* be in another dimension." This was what she chalked up the vast majority of her emotional discord to. She was utterly lost, completely dependent upon the person into whose purview she'd been thrown. "Though I suppose I could at least give it a shot. Do you ever have clear nights, at least, that I could see the sky?"

You want to see the sky? I presume you want to see the layout of the stars?

Renee sighed. Logically, she supposed this was the easiest way to do it. She looked away from the big man and at the pounds of colorful antimicrobial and edible mushrooms drying on strings twined around their back frames, turning the constructs of prickly woven purple reeds, which dried a brilliant green, into unlikely little Christmas trees.

"Yes," she muttered; "the stars. I need to see if anything in their layout gives me any idea..."

A great silver swath infused with violet-red laid itself over the darkness that lived in the depths of her mind. Amid the enormous path of hurtling suns that formed the edge of an impossibly enormous disc, the upper middle section was utterly, impossibly black, while the lower section spewed golden ions that made the frigid desert

night dance with pastel colors, an aurora of immense intensity.

"We're somewhere near the axis of the galaxy here!" she gasped. The vision was beautiful. She wished fleetingly that all of Colin's visions had been like that.

Colin leaned forward and pulled a burning log from the fire, about as nonchalantly as Ingram might have pulled a compadd off a desk. He inserted the flaming brand between two fitfully smoldering ones, then brushed his sooty fingers off absently on the suede of his pants. Renee flinched just watching.

"How do you do that without burning yourself?" she'd been there for what she figured was two Terran weeks now, not counting the week that, according to Colin, she'd spent slipping into and out of what repeatedly seemed to be full consciousness, but wasn't. This was the reason he had nursed her so carefully, because he was uncertain until after she'd fed herself and stood up for the first time whether or not she was finally fully cognizant. Even after that passage of time, he still occasionally did things that absolutely stymied her. He qualified as the most imposing man she had ever met, what Josi would have called *high wattage*.

Colin grimaced, shrugged, and, in his customary manner, handed her a non-sequitur. "Which galaxy?"

Renee sipped her mushroom tea, which he had insisted that she drink constantly to ward off infection, even though its scent had repelled her at first, and answered him in kind. "I think this tastes a little bit like Earl Grey, which usually I don't like. As far as we know, the Guardian doesn't send people outside of the galaxy it's in." Colin had fed her this tea all the time he had worked to heal her, and he'd used it to wash ripped and torn muscle remnants that she didn't like to think about. She still couldn't figure out how he had healed such injuries telekinetically without killing himself in the process.

This constant use of the tea had entirely sapped his dried supply of antibiotic mushrooms, hence their recent foray. "You're certain about this?" he prodded.

"About the tea, or the Guardian?" she won a half-smile for that quip. "You know, I haven't heard you laugh since I've been here."

"Perhaps later we can discuss the many things there are to laugh about on Minara Prime. Are you *certain* that the matrix you call the Guardian is limited in its scope to one galaxy?"

Unable to give him any sort of certain answer about the enigmatic space-time machine she'd used to get here, she gave him a question instead. "You know of one that isn't?"

Renee desperately hoped that his reply would lean toward the negative, though she was fairly certain that the concept of *galaxies* was still as novel to him as the concept of *female*. As she had noted before, she wasn't even entirely certain they were even still in the same *dimension* as the one she'd come here from, an issue so thorny that she really didn't feel competent to face it at all.

He yawned, stretched, rubbed his eyes, and drank the rest of his own tea thirstily before replying. Having healed her, he had opened himself up to the same potential for infection possessed by her own healing body, and so guzzled the stuff himself. It had, she'd noticed, the propensity to make a person somewhat sleepy. "Until I spent time in your mind, I didn't know what a galaxy was. So. Where, roughly speaking, is the Guardian from here?"

"Significantly far away. Here's the problem with space travel," which was also, Renee knew, the reason why starship viewscreen-windows were designed to alter any real- time warp -flow of space during FTL travel into something much simpler than what was actually occurring, so that it would be comprehensible to the humanoid mind:

"There's standard space, there's warped space, and there's subspace. I won't even get into the four hundred or so other variations of space that are theorized to exist within or beneath the multiple dimensions of reality. Now,

while warp space and subspace are, to greater or lesser extent, contiguous with one another, they don't *have* to be; that sort of loose interconnected nature makes them *variable*. In any given space, one can move up, down, backward, forward, and sideways. In normal space, *sideways* is exactly what it appears to be. In variable, loosely- interconnected states or spaces, *sideways* consists of a minimum of seven dimensions, each of which is theorized to answer to different quantum —"

Colin held up a hand to stop this hemorrhage of information. She felt him touch her mind again. "So, what you're saying is that...you seem to think you've somehow fallen into some...sideways interdimension?"

She nodded silently. She'd been in the man's mind; he seemed to understand most complex concepts intuitively. For instance, although he had never personally experienced warp travel or been aboard a starship, he was aware (simply because Renee had just been thinking about it, and their minds always appeared to be in loose contact, which irritated her even though Colin couldn't seem to help it) that without the standard sensory-filters applied to interstellar vessel windows and viewscreens, what really occurred during warp travel actually looked, and *felt* to the one perceiving it, like an extremely detailed mind-altering drug experience. Furthermore, that perception was

hypothesized to be a more accurate representation of reality than the one usually perceived by standard humanoid senses.

Renee had come to realize that Colin's perplexity over simpler concepts, like galaxies, was a function of unfamiliarity, not a lack of intelligence.

He stared meditatively into the fire for some time, while she tried, as inconspicuously as she could, to remove her mind from the proximity of his own, watching the fire spark responding fire from his dreadlocked hair and brilliantine eyes. The man was, she had to admit, beautiful.

"I cannot say how many tries we'll have at this. The people who..." he chewed at his bottom lip meditatively, flushed, and shrugged; "the people who created me are evil. They have no compunctions, and they will try to stop us." He looked across the fire at her; "It would be more correct to say that they *are trying* to stop us."

Renee found herself caught on one concept, in the way burrs caught in fabric. "*Evil?*"

"Yes. It's what Kyhln..." he paused, discomfited, then continued; "It's what the crystalline entity that's part of me...*knows of them*."

"Evil's a strong word, Colin. Some where I come from would argue that such a thing can't truly exist in pure form.

It implies knowingly and willfully striving for the harm of others. Most people who consider others their enemies..." Renee shook her head; "really, different people sometimes just have much different life ways or needs that stand in conflict. But calling that *evil* -"

"This is not of what I speak, Riana. I'm talking of a... a *life way* that destroys or enslaves everything that doesn't bow before it, and even some that do. It is not the actions or inactions of a few select individuals, it is the driving impulse of an entire Empire."

It was Renee's turn to stare into the fire for a while. *Riana* was his name for her; she supposed, if he could be *Colin* for her, she could be *Riana* for him. That wasn't difficult. What *was* difficult for her was comprehending such a place as he was talking about, after having been raised in a place whose beliefs were not merely benign, but actively compassionate.

She realized, intellectually at least, that the Federation itself was the fruit of various humanoid species banding together against an empire concurrently so splintered and so expansionist that it would entirely destroy planets it coveted, rather than see them fall into what it considered to be enemy hands. However, she also believed that the Romulans had honestly feared the expansion of other species into Romulan territories, and were afraid that if

they didn't destroy those planets, the coalition which ultimately became the Federation might use them to set up beachheads from which they could take over the Romulan Empire.

She was also, intellectually, aware that she was viewing all of that through glasses tinted any number of pleasant shades by a United Federation of Planets that had a firm charter of peace and tolerance a hundred and fifty years old, strengthened by nearly two thousand member or allied systems. Still...

"If a group of people has motives that are driven by extreme selfishness, fear, or greed, it's more than possible for that group of people to believe that everyone else they encounter is driven by those same..." Ingram's mouth twisted, "goals, I suppose you could say. That will make them react with distrust to such an extent —"

"What you speak of is the action of..." Colin licked his lips, his semi-Hali'ian brow furrowed in thought, "children, perhaps, who've known only harm all their lives and so only know how to react by causing harm. But children can still learn that other ways of being bring more merit.

"These are *not* children, Riana; they aren't reacting to a misperception of another's intents. These people knowingly laud greed, cruelty, hatred and mistrust, slavery and..." he shook his head. "Everything *you* perceive as

having merit, they would consider...not bad, or even in opposition to their views, but maudlin, impotent, even shameful. They would view you as..." he paused, searching for a term.

"I think the term you want is *pushovers*." Renee smiled tightly; "That would be a very grave mistake." She shifted, trying to find a happy medium between the icy wind off the desert that filled one part of the cavern, and the direct searing heat of the fire that filled the rest of the cavern, wishing that she possessed a phaser with which they might warm up a circle of rocks for a gentler, steadier heat. It was difficult to believe that the same climate that could produce such intolerable heat during the day could also produce such numbing cold. "True power is patient, merciful, and gentle, Colin."

He regarded her for a long moment with the great dark, soulful windows of his pupils. "You say that because you come from such a place."

"You've seen that place in my mind. Can you wonder
—"

"Why you would die for it?" the psionic man finished for her. "No. What I find difficult to imagine, after having been here for all of what amounts to my life, is how such a place as you come from could even *exist*."

The wind hissed through minute passages in the rocks

around them, and Renee shuddered. It sounded like the evocative voice of the Guardian; *All that exists is the sum total of all choices ever made, and all choices lead down a different road. Without choice, including the option to refuse to choose, there can be no progression in the Universe of creatures such as yourself.*

Choices. Was she making the right choices now? How could she even know?

"There's always more than just two choices, so much more than just right or wrong, good or evil. Life's more complex than that, Colin."

"And yet you would consider this place you are willing to die for *good*, even though sometimes its leaders make the wrong choices?"

She smiled wanly. "I would say so, yes. But it's...more than good. Or even *other* than good. It's all more complex than that."

"It's not so complex here. Here, it's eat or be eaten, kill before you are killed, take before everything you possess is taken."

How was one to tolerate the intolerable? This was the conundrum that every tolerant individual or culture ran up against, sometimes in bloody fashion, at least once. "That's very bleak," Renee offered, more a reflection of her own state of mind after talking about this than anything else.

Colin nodded. "Just as you are feeling now. Wondering if your choice to come here was the right one, if I will have what is required to help you at all."

Renee averted her gaze from his, into the fire. What she perceived as a telepathic wall between them wasn't even there for him. Was *this* what she'd asked the Guardian for? She'd asked for help, she remembered that, and this man was a powerful psion, which she would agree was what the beleaguered Federation needed.

But had the space-time matrix linked them in some deeper way somehow? Or had the link always been there, across light-years or even time, and only the Guardian had known? And why only *this one man*; why not some kind of telepathic society? For instance, one advanced beyond the level of needing shoes fashioned from reeds to keep from sinking into mountainous drifts of sand?

Why this exasperatingly unsophisticated and compelling person?

"I apologize if I upset you." Colin crossed his arms tightly across his chest and drew a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "That's not telepathy; it's empathy, and it's difficult to block empathy. The matrix you used was a sentient one, not unlike the one that's kept in the mountain. Do you imagine..." he paused, biting his lower lip, then finally looked directly at her. His face darkened as he

flushed; "Do you think it's a spiteful sentient matrix, or that it...*teases*?"

Renee shook her head silently. "I didn't mean that I didn't *want* to be here —"

"Then you're either brave or crazy, because I certainly don't want to be *here*. Listen; I know, the same way I know where my arms are relative to my head, what space-time matrices like the one you used to get here are. I know where one is at. And I know how they're manipulated and utilized. Do you think *that* might help your Federation?"

How was she supposed to know? "It's not my Federation."

"It most assuredly is. Its fate is in your hands."

"And in yours, apparently." Ingram drew her legs up and wrapped her arms around them. "Listen, the Guardian gave me choices of where to go. I had no idea of which option to choose, so I picked at random."

"And that's why you're questioning your choice now."

"How is picking at random a choice?"

"Perhaps it is a choice made by something greater than yourself."

Renee Ingram distinctly hadn't thought of it that way. "I don't generally have invisible friends."

The powerful psionic man blinked at her across the fire, then gave up trying to understand what it was she'd

just said and reached out tentatively to touch her mind. He found a great deal more there than he'd bargained for and withdrew. "Your sense of trust has been..." he paused, apparently trying for some non-inflammatory term; "tested."

She laughed. It wasn't a happy sound. "Maybe more than once."

"And maybe there was a reason for that, too."

"Like I said, I don't put much faith in things I can't see, hear, feel, touch, smell, or taste."

Colin smiled. There was absolutely no warmth in the expression. "Don't you, Captain? *Really*? And yet you require others to do so on your behalf."

Now it was Renee's turn to blink and flush. Everything within her recoiled from the implications behind his words, making it difficult to explore the concept he'd just handed her. Mercifully, he didn't give her time to ponder the subject, but went on in his non-sequitur style:

"The single definite parameter will be that we need to go through the matrix together. In order to accomplish that, we will need to reset the matrix here to the same variance-frequency as the frequency of your Guardian."

"Jeez. All this after we break into the mountain fastness of the evil people?" Renee half-teased. Colin's only response was a raised brow. "You know I don't have

any clue what...um, frequency the Guardian works on. Nobody has any idea," she added dourly.

He shrugged. "We'll know its exact variance-frequency once we get through it."

"I think you just contradicted yourself."

"Not at all. Its proper variance-frequency is the space in time that you emerged through it. Therefore, you are the one who will find us the proper space in time to *re-emerge* through it."

Renee felt her own face set into lines of shock. "Me? I think I could make it snow here before I could do something like that!"

Colin shook his head, staring at her meditatively. "You have an emotional connection to what's going on there. You wouldn't be here if that weren't so. Variance spectra are the link between the electromagnetic spectra by which the Universe reveals itself, and the psionic spectra which is a response to the Universe's self-revelation; It is a manifestation of the emotional connection between all living beings and the Universe which they represent." He refilled his cup and held out a hand for hers. "This place where you live, this... *Federation*, this job that you do for them, it's remarkably dangerous."

Bemused by this comment from someone who qualified as either the bravest or the most impetuous person

she'd ever met, a man whose short life seemed to her to have been nothing except a lonely stint into remarkable danger, Renee paused before replying. "So, let's say we manage to get back. How do we fight things we can't even see?"

Colin regarded her solemnly for a moment with his beautiful eyes, then his face split into a grin. "One catastrophe at a time, Captain."

Renee threw back her head and laughed. Before her laughter had run its course, an eerie loud noise made her jerk upright and peer around wildly, as it echoed and re-echoed through the passage they were traversing toward the deepest of the underground pools. A clangor and melody at once animal and inanimate, as though an asteroid-auger were attempting to imitate whalesong, it made the small hairs all along her spine rise. "What the hell is *that*?"

Colin gaped wordlessly at her for a moment, his face suddenly slack as though he was just rising from sleep. "It's...the xelnhe are singing. Some terrible thing has happened, some vital change is coming."

"*Xelnhe?*" again she peered around wildly, but there was nothing to see.

His mind was entirely on the god-awful racket echoing through the underground karst; He misunderstood her

trepidation as a request for explanation. "The adult version of the zhollncarrha. They sing...to communicate."

Renee shuddered. "You're telling me they're *sentient*?"

"They...when they unite with the vestigially-psionic crystals the planet produces, then in return for nourishment and growth, the crystals provide the animals with a sort of consciousness, yes." Colin touched his own throat, a look of discomfort marring his features.

"The xelnhe are my protectors, but they cannot protect us forever, or perhaps ever again. We must hurry!"

Chapter Twenty-Six

It was useless trying to track biosignatures in this weather. The heavy-metal rain skewed everything; they would have to wait until the sun dried out the topmost three or four feet of ground again, and by that time, Shane feared, they might have lost all track of where their prey was. There was no question anymore that this was two people, his own creation and someone else. Who that someone else might be was just one of the many questions he was burning to have answered definitively; He didn't like mysteries, most especially mysteries like this.

Kell and his crew had taken refuge in a helix of abandoned, above-ground Minaran dwellings, complex steel and crystalline structures that wound their way dizzyingly up the sides of deep-shaded canyons, whose overhangs spared them the worst of the sun's punishment and all of the rain's effects. The Minarans had moved underground long before, to defend themselves from the implacable expansion of their sun. It had been underground that the Vians had first come to visit the doomed but technologically advanced Minarans, bringing

with them the promise and the threat of a living-machine doorway through space-time. Though old, the cliff dwellings were well-made, and compatible enough with Imperial technologies that they offered comfort.

It was late, and all but a hand-picked group of guards, Roxanne, and Shane himself were asleep. Roxanne had been in the mood for romance, and Kell, his mood growing sourer by the hour as the molecular-tracking program kept them two leaps and three bounds behind their prey, was in the mood for some honesty from his romantic partner. And though he'd told Roxanne that such a thing didn't exist, he possessed just the item that would produce the honesty he sought.

Kell bit his tongue until he tasted blood; it helped focus his mind. The exudate of zhollncarrha with which he had heavily laced the massage oil he was using was one he had used on himself before, to inure his mind to its effects. He'd raised the metamorphic proto-xelnhe that provided the exudate from an egg, feeding it nothing but creatures whose myoglobin stained water red. In the process, he had devised a way to keep the metamorphic creature at an undeveloped level of growth.

He had required help in the process of inuring himself to the serum's effects, so he'd chosen only human helpers in this quest; better to feed the zhollncarrha afterward. The

truth-serum he had devised was worth a potential fortune in markets both black and of various colors, but he gave it away for free. Goodwill, or potential blackmail opportunities, were worth a great deal more than simple lucre.

Roxanne's skin was, as it always had been, as soft and supple as that of an infant, and sensitive to the lightest touch. He'd spent the last half hour stroking her until she trembled. As he usually did at about that point, he reclined next to her and moved his lips near her ear. He'd spent two days agonizing over where to begin this interrogation and had finally decided to confront the thing that most immediately concerned him.

Kell's voice was suggestive, as usual, but not regarding the topics he was usually suggestive about. "Who is it that you think I am?" he whispered into her ear. She shivered, moaned, and reached for him. He took her by the shoulders to look into her face. Her pupils were so heavily dilated that he doubted she could see at all, and a brilliant flush had risen under her skin, both common side-effects of the drug he had spread liberally all over her body. "Tell me what it is that you think I am!" he insisted.

She wouldn't be able to pretend the effects of zhollncarrha exudate away.

"You..." she swallowed thickly; "I think you're the one

who sent that fusion who tried to kidnap or kill me. You..." she swallowed again. Stimulation of humanoid beta-adrenergic reactors was a common reaction in people under the influence of zhollncarrha exudate. "You wanted control over the Babel system, and I don't understand why you couldn't just ask me. Though, still, it doesn't make sense. Why would you entrust something so much like the Tantalus device to a creature like that?"

Kell gaped at Roxanne, utterly nonplussed. This was nothing at all like what he had expected; it was, simultaneously, both a great relief and much, much worse. "What... *fusion*?" He wanted to add: *Where? When did this happen? What do you know about the Tantalus device? Tell me everything!* but such a question-cascade was useless when performing interrogation using either torture or drug-based interventions; Questions needed to be both pointed, singular, and literal in such instances.

"The half-Andorian man you sent for me, at my home." Her voice was as sweet and smooth as half-melted honey-butter.

He shuddered and jerked away, feeling for a moment as though she'd tried to run him through with a blade. He could feel his face blanching in the wavering light of the Deltan mood-candles that lit the alien room, as though his skin was shrinking nearer to his skull for solace. Was she

playing with him? No; a person couldn't perform psychological manipulation under the influence of this exudate, either. He, of all people, would know it if they could. "I know of no such creature. Where did this...*thing* come from?"

She gaped at him stupidly. He took her shoulders into his hard hands again and shook her as if he could rattle the answer out of her. Roxanne's eyes remained vacant, and she didn't attempt to push him away. She couldn't, she was utterly in thrall to the slimy toxin that protected the metamorphic young of the xelnhe from one another's predations.

"*Where* did the fusion come from?" he snarled.

"He told me a rebel faction that was hidden in the Babel system sent him. The faction that your people found in the Oort cloud just beyond Wolf 424's largest gas planet, remember?"

"I remember. What was it that you took from the fusion?"

"It...it let him pass unimpeded through my sensors, the ones you'd set up for me. Only...the Tantalus device was the only thing I've ever known that would let a person do that. Or let a person move from place to place without being seen."

Another shocking revelation. Shane's hard fingernails

sank into Roxanne's translucent skin; she whimpered and tried to shrink away. "What do you *mean*, the Tantalus device would allow a person to move from place to place?" he was glad he'd determined to use the Minaran truth-serum on Roxanne. If she balked, and probably even if she didn't, he'd add the effects of an agonizer. The thought excited him, and he had to force himself to concentrate on what she was saying rather than the scent of her and the heat of her body.

"That...that's just what it did, when it disappeared people. All it ever did was take them somewhere else. Since most of space is composed of vacuum and clouds of random dust, I guess that's usually where it took them. Shane, you're *hurting* me!"

He shook her again. Blood coursed sluggishly down her upper arms where his nails dug into her flesh. "Tell me! Tell me what your father learned about the Tantalus device, and I'll stop hurting you. Tell me what he discovered the Tantalus device could do, or I'll hurt you *worse*!"

"Don't hurt me, Shane, please. I... I love you."

Kell felt his face form some expression that he didn't want to pin an emotion on. He let Roxanne go almost as harshly as he'd been holding on to her. "If you love me, then you'll answer my questions, won't you?"

"Questions?" she echoed, brainlessly. He wondered if he'd used too much toxin; some humanoids had a very low loading-dose threshold. None of the humans he'd tried it on did, of course, but there were always outliers in any test grouping.

"What. Did. Tiberius. Learn. To. Do. With. The. Tantalus. Device?" he hissed, every word as sharp, clear, and potentially deadly as a glass shard smeared with *le-matya* venom.

"He learned that he could move through the ship unseen and unsensed using it. He learned that it's not supposed to be just an exclusion device, that it had some sort of inclusion capacity that had been turned off or something. He was experimenting with its capacities when —"

"Are you in possession of the device the fusion was carrying? The thing you think is similar to the Tantalus device?"

She blinked at him for a long moment, her mind sluggishly groping its way from the topic she was talking about to the one he'd just mentioned; it was a subject that she considered to be the same, or she wouldn't have been able to keep up at all, Kell knew. For all the usefulness of the zhollncarrha exudate, it did cause temporary brain damage in some humanoids — permanent, in others. "I hid

it in the bone behind my ear," she confided in a near-whisper.

Shane frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"I implanted it there myself. It wasn't safe carrying it in my tricorder anymore. When I went into the crystal room to get that DNA sample, I was carrying the fusion's device in the tricorder, but you never saw it. And it blocked your scanners, the same way it worked to block my own scanners, but it also made the machine, or whatever lives in the machine, speak to me."

"And what did the machine say?" Kell's blood ran as cold as his tone of voice. Was there no end to the things Roxanne had kept from him, or lied to him about? He considered, while concurrently trying not to lose track of what Roxanne was saying, simply cutting off her head to get the thing out but, for all he knew, there might be more alarming secrets she'd been keeping from him. He could afford to wait.

"The Vian machine wanted to know what I wanted from *it*. So, I told it to return everything to the way it had been, and to hide what I had done. It did it, Shane! It *did*!"

Kell motioned toward one of the deeper shadows in the tent; his senior bodyguard hid there. He'd have known that even had he not placed the man into that position himself, from the sounds the bodyguard made under his

breath. The idiot had expressed less and less control over himself as he'd risen through the ranks of Kell's bodyguards, an ascension that had occurred more through attrition than through any intent on the part of the Inquisitor General. Shane was tiring of him and thought he could see a way to turn this entire alarming episode into an object lesson for everyone involved. "Get me a medical tricorder. Now!"

The visibly aroused man let his gaze linger insubordinately on the sensuous curves of Roxanne's exposed body. "She just said the thing in the Vian machine blocked our scanners. How will you tell the difference between that and an outright lie, without cutting into her head, General?" the bodyguard grinned insolently at Kell's own unclad form.

This was a mistake. The depth of the mistake was lost on that particular bodyguard; Shane had launched himself off the bed and caved in his trachea with a single, elegant blow before the man could draw his next breath. The guard had been a big fellow; most of Kell's guards were. It was, he'd learned more than sixty years before he stood over this particular corpse, breathing heavily more from a sense of mounting irritation than from the act he'd just committed, much easier to kill weighty people. Their own mass could be used to increase the force of any blow. This

knowledge cheered him, so that when he looked into the shadows from under the ridges of his brows, he was smiling.

Shane Kell knew extremely well what sort of unwelcome visage this presented to the individuals remaining hidden in the command tent's shadows. "Anybody else have a better idea than this piece of carrion had?"

There was actually a tussle as his remaining bodyguards hurried to procure him a medical tricorder. Unfortunately, as it turned out, the corpse lying cooling on the floor had had a point; according to the medical tricorder, there was nothing implanted in Roxanne's head anywhere. He motioned irritably toward the man he had just killed; the body's effluvium was getting on his nerves.

"Get that out of here!" Kell barked, prompting another scurry to follow orders that reminded him of a group of large clowns attempting to wedge themselves en masse into a very small car. He bit his lower lip until it bled again rather than give in to the hiss of frustration and loathing that wanted to leap out of his throat. He turned back to Roxanne instead, bending to nuzzle his face against her own.

"You say you've got something implanted in your head. Why can't I scan it, love?" he whispered sibilantly.

The drugged woman giggled.

"Whatever spoke to me from the crystal asked me what I wanted from it, and I told it I wanted everything I had planned hidden from you."

The flush of rage and the chill of fear that both ran up Kell's spine conspired to make him shudder. "And what is it that you had planned, Roxanne?"

"To circle around while you were out here hunting your escaped creation, and get back into that room, to see what I might be able to do with the Vian machine, and with the thing I tore out of the hybrid. I changed it, you see. I made it so that it would respond to —"

Kell had heard enough. That damned dead guard had been right, after all. *No use crying over spilled milk*, Shane thought coldly as he clamped one hand over Roxanne's mouth and slid the other behind her head. Her eyes widened, and she shook her head wildly, biting at his hand. He pulled his bleeding palm away with a curse, and backhanded her smartly across the face, nearly hard enough to accomplish the snapping of her neck which had been his first intention.

Roxanne disappeared.

Shane stumbled backward from the bed, then whirled on his guards, his mouth opening and closing but no sound coming out. As a unit, all five men and one woman

cowered backwards into the shadows that blanketed the candlelit room. The woman, whose name Kell couldn't recall and wouldn't have cared if he could, came out of her fear-crouch first, and snapped on the harsh electric lighting that they had rigged for the complex during their stay.

It only underscored the fact that Roxanne was no longer in the room.

Shane Kell screamed in rage. It wasn't that Roxanne was gone, or even that she'd taken what might or might not have been a Tantalus device with her. It was that he couldn't be certain that the device had truly delivered her into the vacuum and dust clouds of the galaxy that galled him. If she retained her sanity, and possessed some remnant of the Tantalus device, particularly if it somehow fell into Imperial hands...

It didn't bear thinking about, so Kell screamed, to drown out the terrified yammering that filled his mind. He fell back onto the bed he'd shared with Roxanne, still screaming, covering his face with his hands as though he could blot everything out that way. And, with a facility unusual among the vast majority of humanoids in the Milky Way Galaxy, Shane Kell, whose facile strength came tagged with the price of sudden and total exhaustion, fell asleep screaming, with the appalled gazes of his bodyguards drilling into his back like little flint knives

wielded by some soft, skillful hand.

When he awoke, his guards were gone. Not, he noted once he rose, showered, and treated himself to the bracing Klingon equivalent of coffee, just from the room; the treacherous bastards had fled the camp.

They should, he mused, have killed him as he slept, because frankly, there was nowhere that they could go that he wouldn't find them. Shane shrugged. AWOL servants were hardly the worst of his problems right now. Roxanne's last words to him echoed in his mind; *To...get back into that room.*

That was the worst of his problems, and he wouldn't rest until he had solved it to his satisfaction.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

From the reeds and the more flamboyantly glowing flowers that surrounded the pools they encountered, Renee and Colin fashioned themselves temporary, heatless torches to light their way as the tunnels deepened. Various parts of every plant growing in the caverns glowed, and this growth wasn't limited to the floors of the caverns, whose roofs were saturated with both light and water as often as not.

The subterranean flora of Minara Prime was intriguing. Renee supposed that the metals and rare earths present in the countless tons of karst above them had kept both the bloated sun and the merciless, sterilizing rays used by what Colin thought of as the empire of the bloody sword from destroying the planet's underground life quite as thoroughly as it had destroyed life aboveground.

Occasional vaulted halls filled with elegant, empty rooms carved from living rock met them on their underground journey. These were largely dark and required the light of torches woven from luminescent flowers or torches set aflame for Colin and Renee to find their way through them. All the stonework in them was

smooth as glass and intricate, as though it had been done by highly advanced electronic tools.

The sound of running water could be heard everywhere in the lower levels of the karst tunnels; in these spaces, the sound morphed into something similar to the calls of birds or the chattering of children, eerie and haunting. After a week of travel, they left these cathedrals of stone behind for an underground wilderness whose richness and variety stood in stark contrast to the empty rooms in which the ghosts of voiceless children sang.

In this wilderness, there was little need for fire unless one wished to cook. Nearly every form of life present, whether it sucked at the soil with roots or scurried across it with legs, glowed. Accompanying the softly barbed purple reeds around the lips of the sandier pools, which sometimes glowed with phosphorescence themselves, was a short, furry black vegetation that looked like a combination of clover, liverwort, and sedge. This was not edible, but any water near where it grew was clear and sweet tasting.

Great sprawling mats of tough, boxwood-like brown leaves spawned enormous floral extrusions similar to corpse flowers. These flowers were poisonous and arose from burdock-like pistil-roots that attracted tiny, blind, crab-like pseudo-mammalian creatures. Once pollinated,

the root-like structures were both edible and tasty when soaked overnight with a tuft of the black liverwort-sedge; So were the hairy little carapaced creatures that pollinated them.

Renee simply assumed that since Colin could eat these things, she could, too. This was, she confided as they walked along the seemingly endless tunnels, a potentially dangerous assumption, and she expressed longing for a molecular-function tricorder. To Colin's look of bemusement, she expounded:

"Living beings are composed of various iterations of universally-common atoms. Unless the atoms in a palatable living being or recipe form molecules whose particular conformation is toxic, then that palatable being or recipe can be eaten. A tricorder can tease out potentially toxic molecules, but it *can't* tell you whether you'll find something palatable. A tricorder's really only used when encountering unknown plants. Very few animals on any planet occupied by humanoids are inedible to humanoids. I can count all of the inedible animals that exist, galaxy-wide, on one hand; There's one bird, two mollusks, and a reptile.

"In fact, eating foods from other planets is generally advised by medical practitioners. Loads of them are capable of completely altering medical problems or

outright diseases that were once considered intractable on a person's planet of origin." Renee shrugged, lifted a hand, and began counting these off on her fingers; "Terran pernicious anemia, Vegan choriomeningitis, Draylaxian progressive osteoarthritis, Catalian acne-boils, Kreetasan croup..."

She let the rest of the long list go. They hadn't passed many side-branching corridors lately, and the one they were now approaching threw out a blast of frigid air. She shivered. "Are we near the surface here? It's cold!" a slight breeze moved through the side passage before them, as though they were coming out of the tunnels and into a Minaran midnight.

"No indeed. We are coming to the manmade parts of the mountain. They have very powerful cryogenic systems, but like other aspects of their systems, these..." Colin shrugged, "leak. There are — or once were; sometimes it's difficult for me to remember the difference — plants on the planet attracted to cold, and they send out rhizomorphs that..." whatever he was going to append the sentence with never emerged. In the wan light of the fuzzy golden moss that threaded through cracks in the tunnel, his face had taken on a far-away cast. Then he seemed to snap back to the present, and smiled down at her, unslinging his pack from his back, then squatting down to fish through it

for one of the two ceramic bowls they'd brought with them.

"We're not going that way, but there's something I'd like to share with you, if it's down there." He motioned toward the source of the unpleasantly cold breeze. "If you think we'll be comfortable nearby as long as we have a fire, why don't you head up the main tunnel a little way and make one? I'll show you what I'm talking about when I return." Excited by the prospect of something, he hurried off without another word down the cold corridor.

Ingram sighed, shrugged, and began scouting ahead for a likely spot to take off her own pack, dragging his along with her as she went, amazed, and not for the first time, at the load he was able to carry. Sometimes as happily aloof as a little boy, sometimes as dour with wisdom as the oldest of priests, he was like no man she'd ever met before.

She became very quickly tired of the weight and bulk of Colin's pack, and determined that she'd gone far enough for the curve of the main corridor to block out the worst of the cold pouring out of the side branch. Her mind stayed on the subject of Colin even as she turned to stripping bits of reed to make tinder. The reeds, or items made out of them, caught fire like pitch-filled pine, burned as hot as juniper, and a pile of them would burn for roughly the same amount of time as a joint of oak.

Renee understood that it was simply easier for Colin to show her things directly, than it was for him to verbally explain or describe them. He preferred to either pour the information into her head, or else to produce whatever it was he was trying to describe in physical form, as he was obviously off to do now. This was, she knew, a problem psions often had; Betazoids ran up against it a lot, and it could cause those not used to dealing with telepaths to erroneously believe them to be arch and standoffish. Nevertheless, Colin realized that Renee disliked knowing that he could have free access to her mind whenever he wished, and he maintained a psychic wall for her benefit, which she appreciated, but it definitely made communication more difficult between them.

She started four little fires around the perimeter of their impromptu camp — the most effective method of using naked fire to heat a small area, particularly in breezy conditions — and put their evening's ration of roots and crustaceans, which she liked to think of as Minaran clam chowder, over one of them to simmer. Then she sat back on her heels and wondered where Colin had gotten off to. By the time the stew seething in the little water-soaked hide they used for the purpose of cooking began to emit fragrances that told her dinner was ready, Ingram had become concerned. The thought of being alone in this

place...

Renee hadn't finished the thought before Colin reappeared, holding in one broad palm four green...at first glance, they appeared to be unripe pinecones. In his other hand, he held the bowl he had taken with him into the depths of the caverns. This, she saw when he set it between them, was full of irregularly shaved ice.

"What is it?" she motioned at both the bowl and the unknown wads of vegetation he carried. He offered her a brilliant smile.

"The fruit is called First Liberator of the Tellarite people. The juice —"

Renee gave in to a snort of nervous laughter that she covered with one hand before it could get away from her. "My translator's doing it again." Accompanying the difficulty Colin had in communicating with her when refraining from psionic contact, was the fact that her translator occasionally encountered translation issues with whatever language he spoke. These were so bizarre, and her translator tried so sincerely to make some sort of sense out of them, that they segued into the blatantly hilarious. Ingram assumed that the implanted instrument had been harmed somehow, either on her trip through the Guardian or during what had, quite frankly, been her momentary death in an underground pool in these very caverns.

Colin sighed. "It is the only native fruit that still exists here. The only sweet thing on the planet, really. Their juice was called *shalhar* by..." he faltered, frowning; "or, the juice of the fruit was *once* called shalhar, when there were native people here to name it. The terms for the fruit and its juice are different because of the way the fruit changes when it's juiced."

This was not the first time that Colin had implied the existence of a genetic memory, or something much like one. Probably, he had surmised to her, it was information fed to him along with the language he spoke, by the people who had created him. He selected a flat rock to set the fruit on. "Watch!" he said, pulling the long knife he carried everywhere out of its strange breastwork-sheath. The knife bemused her as much it did every time she saw it — the jeweled weapon of a king pressed into service as a multipurpose hand tool.

The fruit itself must be called *shalhas*, very close in pronunciation to the name of the ancient Tellarite Shallash, who had freed his people from a long period of control by thought-police, whose squads murdered in cold blood anyone whose opinions, attitudes, or words defied, or dared to differ in any way, from the opinions expressed by the reigning regime. Freedom of thought, expression, and the ability to disagree as vehemently as one liked with

anything at all was beloved of modern Tellarites because of their reign under fascism.

The juice he squeezed from the fruits was colorless, but turned a vivid, fizzing red when it struck the ice in the bowl. "Try it," he handed her the bowl, and she felt his mind touch hers. The sensation filled her with a heady joy, as though she was a child again, at a fair, and it would be her first time tasting some exotic treat. She raised the bowl to her lips and took a sip.

The juice was fizzy in reality; the fizz was not an effect of the ice as far as she could tell. It was both sweet and sour at once; Sour like half-green strawberries, sour like pomegranate molasses, and yet with a dizzyingly sweet undertone like mango-flavored cotton candy.

Colin threw back his head and laughed. "It tastes different to me! Here," he took the bowl from her hands and drank the last drops. But what it was she tasted when he drank it, she couldn't identify any more than she could have identified the fruit that lay crushed on the cavern floor. Cinnamon-sprinkled watermelon, perhaps, with a hint of quinces, or...

A pain hit her then like no pain she'd ever known, and she thought at first that maybe it was some effect of the alien drink. It was as if he'd taken up that beautiful encrusted dagger and was using it to cut out her heart.

Colin dropped the bowl as though it had suddenly begun to burn.

"Stop it, just *stop* it!" she turned away from him, wiping her eyes viciously, hoping that nothing would get a chance to run down her face. "Get out of my mind, stay out of my *mind*!"

Colin swallowed dryly and looked away from her, at the shards of the bowl. "Riana, the only way we'll be able to do what we need to do is using a mind link. I'm sorry, I know this bothers you. I... I wasn't —"

She made as forbidding a face as she knew how and shook her head at him. "Just...just don't do anything like *that* again." She stood up and paced away, to the fire over which their dinner was threatening to turn into a burned mess of chitin, overcooked tuber, and ash. If he was correct in his estimation, they should be to the mountain soon, and she was glad.

The potential for violent conflict with the people who ruled this place was far preferable to the thought of such intimate psionic intercourse. Losing her arm, she was certain now, was less painful than the potential for destruction inherent in such a thing.

It shouldn't have to be painful, some rebellious part of her mind insisted.

They didn't get very far after hoisting their packs in the morning before they were stopped by a great black lake of water that Colin readily admitted couldn't be crossed. The air around the lake was thick with cold moisture that dripped from the ends of their hair and down their back in occasional icy droplets. It had bemused Ingram to see Colin's hair wet the first time, and she'd decided that its brilliant titian shade was not a function of color, but a chromatic effect, like that produced by the barbules of some bird feathers, and she'd have bet that his eyes were the same. In the saturating underground fogbank, his coppery mane had gone as black as a sable's pelt.

This, however, was not the issue that preyed upon Renee's mind at the moment. She'd tried halfheartedly to fool herself into believing that this was a standard watering-and-bathing stop, but it very obviously wasn't. She had refused to step foot into the pools so far during their excursion. She bathed, more or less, by taking a leather bag of water, a rough reed-cloth, and some saponin-filled yellow flowers of the glowing black liverwort-sedge into a dark corner. But now...

"You're saying we have to *what*?"

Colin knew what issue was bothering her, and in his customary artless manner, he went straight to the heart of it. "The zhollncarraha won't harm you as long as I am with

you. I swear it."

For her own sanity, she decided to change the subject obliquely. "I thought you said the things were brainless until they started collecting crystals."

"Brainless wouldn't be entirely accurate —"

"Quit pretending to be a damned Vulcan. This isn't funny! I... there has *got* to be some way to get around this!" Renee stared with desperation at the dark lake that filled the cavern from one side to the other and extended back nearly as far as the vividly sparkling walls allowed her to see. Its lack of phosphorescence spoke eloquently of its depth. All around them, water trickled down the walls into it. At the edge of her vision, the only point where the lake appeared to end, a lazy whirlpool indicated a deeper point of egress for the water.

The cavern had lost all side-projections as it progressed; the frigid tunnel where Colin had found the strange Minaran fruit had been the last cross-tunnel they'd encountered. Renee had assumed that this was because they were coming to the end of the natural karst and into the entrance of the mountain that Colin had told her the people who'd conquered this place had rendered hollow for their own use. The formidable telepath hadn't corrected her assumption. But he also hadn't told her about *this*.

"If I was pretending to be a Vulcan, I'd hardly be

making a joke. Even these people need water, Riana. It's a tiered water-system; it should be much easier working our way down through it than it was swimming up it."

She shook her head at him. "What possibly possessed you to even try something like that?"

"I had to get away."

She shuddered. "It could have killed you!"

He nodded somberly. "That, too, would have been getting away. Just so that I was in a place where they couldn't find me again."

Renee regarded the big man with utter incomprehension, and more than a little fear. "I'm not prepared to do the same thing, Colin."

"I won't let any harm come to you, Riana. I promise."

Ingram had little faith in promises that weren't backed by a chain of command. They'd betrayed her too often. "That might be a little tough to do if you're dead."

"I cannot die. Not...not the way you think. And I no longer wish to..." he paused, his brow furrowed, as though he was digging for the words with some kind of mental plow, "remain unfound," he finished finally. She shook her head at him.

"This is *crazy*, Colin!"

"I would like you to do something for me," her replied, in the non-sequitur sort of conversational aside apparently

beloved of psions, or anyway of this particular one.

Renee snorted and threw her hands in the air. "Yeah, follow you to your death," she snarled.

"No. What I need you to do is to describe a single thing about this place, or the situation that has brought you to it, that doesn't qualify for the term *crazy*. Because *that* will be the precise number of other options we have at this moment."

Renee avoided his gaze. He'd had, he said, no choice but to access her knowledge and memories while he was healing her; not purposely, but because knowledge of the needs of her flesh were intimately linked with her knowledge and memories. He could now read in Standard, raise a bird from an egg, and run the manual interface of any starship bridge or battle-bridge console. What she'd gotten from him in return...

She didn't want to think about. Instead, she nodded at their packs and the other paRafernalia they'd carried with them this far. "Fine. Then what do we need to take with us?"

In response, he motioned at her torch, her pack, and the kerchief-sized remains of a woven-reed cape draped across the top of it, just enough to make them a couple more cozy evening fires. "Everything we have is basically doubled. We don't need two of everything, or really two of

anything. Get rid of whatever would bog you down and keep hold of me while we swim."

Loathing every movement, Renee did as he'd suggested. Her scars ached, as though in sympathy at the idea of having to leap into that bottomless black lake. Because that's what it was; this was no natural pool with a progressively sloping bottom. It was, for all intents and purposes, exactly the same as the pool Colin had dragged her body out of weeks before. He waited until she came close enough to twine her hands into the lower edges of the woven braids that slung his back frame across his broad shoulders before he admitted, softly.

"No, Riana, this is the very same place. I had come down this way looking for the fruit that makes shalhar. The plants back the way we came hadn't ripened yet. I was here, precisely here, when you came." He jumped before she could respond to the horrid revelation that flashed across her mind from his; that the ice he'd chipped into a bowl the night before had been part of the very same ice-thicket he'd used to help staunch the horrible bleeding of her wounds.

The glacier-cold black water threatened to steal the deep breath she'd gasped up as Colin leaped into it without forewarning, his weight and the weight of the gear he carried sinking them like stones. To her surprise, though,

he was a strong swimmer, his powerful arms and legs propelling them quickly toward something she could not see. She kicked as hard as she could in order to provide more force, and clung tightly to the straps of Colin's pack, wondering desperately what she would do if she couldn't hold her breath for...

How long? How far? How *deep*? Between the depth he was propelling them to, the strong currents in the water, and the lack of oxygen, her eardrums and head ached abysmally, threatening migraine. There was nothing to see; How could he possibly know where they were going?

A sudden crosswise eddy of water forced her cold-numbed hands off of the back-frame's shoulder straps and pushed her away from Colin. She had to force herself not to open her mouth and scream, first as her senseless fingers were ripped away from her only lifeline by the force of ten thousand pounds of current, then again as she struck the wall of the passage they were trying to swim down.

Captain Ingram grasped at the wall in desperation. It was as hard and smooth as metal, probably was metal, and she realized something even as she desperately groped for direction in the lightless, weightless, airless void; It was not easier to swim down through this than it would have been to swim up it. The back currents, like those produced by a mouth sucking at a glass, were what caused the vertex

in the lake, and they pushed against her fiercely.

Taking control of what little sanity her spinning, aching, oxygen-deprived brain retained, she turned into the reverse-current and desperately forced herself to swim. Her burning muscles felt like they were coated in lead. The cold of the water felt so good against them...so warm...so welcoming...

She opened her mouth and drew a deep, refreshing breath.

What the hell am I doing? her mind yammered, even as it cleared, and she clamped her lungs shut again. But what had entered them...what had filled them...what *still* filled them, she thought as her bursting lungs exhaled in a flurry of bubbles whose flow told her that she was still headed the wrong way, was air.

While trying to regain her bearings, and wondering if, perhaps, she was in fact dying and this was the final hallucination that was said to rage through someone's mind as they perished, something stronger and more implacable than the current nudged her downward.

Renee Ingram screamed.

This had no effect on the thick walls of water, or on something at once thicker and less cohesive than water that pressed slimy tendrils against the skin of her neck. Again, her lungs filled, impossibly, with oxygen. She tried to turn,

to fight the hard-soft, slick-rough thing that was pushing her, forcing her —

Stop fighting!

He cried this aloud. Renee knew that in the same way that she knew that it was one of the monstrous young of the xelnhe that was carrying her through the influent tube that the masters of the mountain had fashioned to bring them their water. She knew it in the same way that she knew this flow ended at a series of grated lagoons that could be skirted by traversing the aqueducts that carried the filtered water from them.

She knew it in the same way that she knew Colin's voice wasn't just hoarse from the grating effects of the sentient crystal that had been enslaved to become the vocal apparatus for a humanoid throat, but from the water he had choked from his lungs pints at a time. She knew it in the same way that she knew that the influent pipe had ended, and that he was reaching down through the layers of water for her hand.

Her body was begging for oxygen once more, but she adamantly refused to open her mouth again. It would hurt him too badly, and she never wanted to hurt him. Her mind felt strangely clear and open, like it had been swept clean and was new again. Without hesitation, trusting without a shadow of a doubt that he would be there, she

reached up and felt Colin's fingers grasp her wrist. A final current swung her about like a bob on a pendulum as the monstrous Minaran tadpole released her and swam away. Colin pulled her to the surface, and she rested, gasping, her arms wrapped around the nearest convenient projection:

Colin.

Her lips, tongue, larynx, and freshly filled lungs worked in tandem, but without any direction from her mind whatsoever, an odd feeling like walking on a numb limb. "You...you breathed for me, didn't you?"

He nodded and coughed, still trying to recover his own breath. The movement of his jaw against the side of her head led her, mindlessly, instinctively, to nuzzle him back. A current of pure surprise flowed through her from him. As metamorphic as the young of the xelnhe, the sensation turned into something else when it hit her nervous system. Wanting almost beyond bearing to thank him for what he had done, it seemed like the most logical thing in the world, then, to give in to the intractable pull of his beautiful mouth and the sensation of desire that was suddenly flooding through them both, and kiss him.

His lack of response lasted only as long as it took him to riffle through her mind to figure out exactly what it was she was doing. He was inviting her into his mind, she realized as he returned her kiss, deepened it, and she

longed to go, to feel her own thoughts and emotions touched by his, explored by his...his...

She reached out to try and touch the reality of his combined essence. He pulled away and smiled at her, and she opened her eyes to his smile. His hair, half-dry from the light breeze in the chamber, caused by the pumping mechanisms she could hear forcing the water in the pools through progressively finer grates and into aqueducts, reminded her of nothing so much as the coat of a Bengal tiger.

"You're welcome," he whispered, adding; "you are seeking to understand me. Why?" his voice wasn't so horrible in a whisper; it became a scratchy baritone, as gently prickly and sweet as a ripe Barbary fig.

"I've always sought to understand." The words emerged without her volition.

"Have you ever sought to simply...accept?"

Something within her recoiled as if it had been poked in a sore place. Again the words came out without her volition, and they were unpalatably bitter, with an acid undertaste that destroyed every last vestige of sweetness from his kiss, from the touch of his mind; "Says the man who's been alone his entire lifetime, which spans the incomprehensible vista of five entire years."

Colin shook his head at her, his smile fading. "I am

ancient. How is it your people say? *Old as the hills.*" He pulled away from her, hoisted himself and the water-logged pack on his back out of the water ponderously, and then held out his hand for hers. "I know you understand what I mean when I say that. But I don't think you're yet willing to accept the reality of it." He shivered. "Hurry; our bodies must be dry before we move on."

She understood that whatever it was that the xelnhe tadpoles produced to protect them from one another had removed the normal self-protective constraints from her mind, and (whether more terribly or more mercifully — it was impossible to be sure) effectively anaesthetized Colin's ability to control his own mind. It was the man she had kissed, the man who had responded, but it was the crystal that was speaking, protecting the being of flesh that carried it from the feelings she inspired in him.

When she took his hand, she was struck dumb by the sense of overawe Colin was feeling; he was unable to control the psionic projections of his own mind under the influence of the slime she could feel sluice off of her along with the water as he pulled her from the pool. The effects of overawe weren't alien to her; she'd been exposed to its aftereffects before from men she'd loved, even had a few try to put it into words, as cold and clipped as words enunciated by an entity composed of crystal, before they

left her. She tended to have that effect on people. It was an something that was simply part of her personality, yet another individual marker looked for by Starfleet in their command officers, and one of the main reasons why more than a few of them had unremitting difficulties sustaining intimate relationships:

I am not good enough for you. She'd had literally those words spoken to her no fewer than three times. A person had to be in a strong, healthy psychological place to not give in to that sort of passive-aggressive manipulation. Renee wasn't certain she inhabited that place yet. A sense of dread that was also familiar, almost comfortable in its familiarity, crept up her spine. She didn't dare fall in love with this man. She knew how it would end.

Colin blinked at her in alarm, pulling her against him again. What she was thinking was, concurrently, an untruth, and something that he couldn't even comprehend. He touched her mind more deeply, in order to try to understand — he realized instinctively, she knew, that what his mortal body was feeling was something he *wanted* to understand — and she pushed him away, both physically and psychically, and he allowed her to. "Thank you for my life, Colin. I owe you a great deal." Her words were as stiff and cold as her joints currently felt. She shivered.

"And this...*touching* is a way of showing thanks?"

She nodded, not willing or able to meet his bright eyes. "Yes, it...it can be."

"But it can be other things, too," he pressed. He'd gotten that much out of her, anyway.

Not wishing to face that concept at the moment, she hoisted her own pack. "Where do we go from here?"

Chapter Twenty-Eight

"You'll need to stay hidden here while I go inside."

Renee looked around the metal-shrouded dead end whose single, minute outer bulkhead door — a disposal chute, or something similar — blinked at them with malevolent eyes capable of sensing in several different spectra. She'd seen those sensors before, exact in shape, conformation, and even color to the sensors found on *Salem One*, though these were much smaller.

Do you still trust this man? the thought came to her as a feeling, not as a series of words. It was, she knew, naive to ever believe that trust, once established even through a long series of trustworthy acts, couldn't be broken as easily as the shell of an egg. And yet, it wasn't her own heart or her own needs or her own longings that she'd asked the Guardian to address in this instance; It was the safety of the Federation.

Meaning that she had no choice but to trust this man. Again, she recalled the conversation about *choice* that she'd had with the sentient matrix on the blasted world that endlessly orbited Tres Two. She could, she thought, finally

understand why it was that various individuals and societies had tried, futilely, to destroy the thing. She wrapped her arms around herself in what was, she knew even as she did it, a forlorn act. Her clothing was still moist from their entry into the bowels of this place, though fire and leftover food and the walk along the aqueduct system toward the steel limbs of the complex had warmed her. "How do you intend to do that? Those sensors —"

"Won't see me. Or I should say, they will see me at first, but I can alter what it is they perceive as I pass through the wall."

Renee felt her brow furrow and her face crumple, as though the load of anxiety and fear she'd carried for all these weeks had finally made its mark on her countenance. "Pass...?" of course; she'd seen this in the fever-dreams she'd had for the week she'd spent going into and out of consciousness while Colin had strung her back together like a poorly made marionette. She hadn't given much credence to these dreams. "You can just...walk in there?"

He nodded somberly. "I must. *Your* presence will trigger the sensors. I need to disable them first, make certain that our path to the Entity is unimpeded." That was the first time he'd used the term *Entity* to describe the psionic matrix they had come here to try and access. The word fell on Ingram's ears like an atmosphere, whose

horrifying presence threatened to crush you when its reality was pointed out. *Doorways*, he'd called these Entities. Not unlike the virtual wormholes created by warp travel.

Of course, during the four-hour jaunt from Earth to Vulcan, the worm wouldn't turn around and *speak* to you. Didn't philosophize about the quantum landmines inherent in the deceptively simple concept of *making a choice*. Couldn't...

"Riana," Colin took her face gently into his hands. The sound of that name made her blink. Definitely, when they got back, if they got back, assuming they got back in one piece, should they get back and be able to recover any sort of normality at all, she was going to have to have a long talk with her adoptive mother, because...

"*Riana!*" he hissed again, his voice the sound of some mad pharmacist patiently crushing volcanic cinders to bits in a marble mortar, and this time it got through. All the way through to her exhausted, anxious mind, in which her body never stopped aching, as though every nerve fiber in it had turned into a rotted tooth.

The virtual equivalent of the gentle, heavily callused hands with which the formidable psion touched her face reached deftly into her mind. Without either her knowledge or her consent, they lifted the layers of psychic and physical pain away and sent her spinning into the void.

He was able to lay her sleeping form down gently in a shadowy wall nook before giving in to the wave of agony that rushed through him; Riana's pain, both the physical and the psychological, much of it tamped down into a largely-impermeable layer that she liked to call by another name.

When the gray wash cleared from his vision, he gazed at her in awe, and not for the first time. Then he looked back over his shoulder at where the bones of the mountain turned to metal, as though the sharply rising range above them had morphed itself into some sort of geologic xelnhe. Which, of course, was exactly what had been done to it. The master of this place was nothing if not fiercely creative.

He would come back and waken her when he was ready. He had done a bad thing, he knew, but it was also a merciful thing, at least in the ethical no-man's-land of this place where he'd been spawned. As if they were trapped together in one of the children's stories that her people called *fairy tales*, Colin had given the brave, brilliant, beautiful woman who had come here to rescue him a one-way sleep. If he didn't return to waken her, then nothing would.

Ever.

Either way, she would never know. It would spare her all sorts of anxiety and give her mind and body the rest that they desperately needed, which she so stubbornly and quietly denied them. And he could use that small and enormous act of treacherous compassion as the first brick in the wall that he knew he would have to build between them, either because he'd be caught while trying to access the Entity...or because he wouldn't. Because he already knew something that she might never be able or willing to either admit or return.

He loved her.

He could take her with him through that metal wall; of this, he was certain. He'd done similar things before. However, he couldn't take *more* than her with him. His abilities became muddled and unsure if the molecular arrangement of anything he attempted to walk through was too complex, or if he had to pay attention to more than one thing (or, in Renee's case, person) at a time while performing the act. He was even rather concerned about the effect that clothing might have; he hadn't had that, last time.

Colin looked down at her again. He wouldn't leave her vulnerable in that place, and consciousness made a being of flesh vulnerable. Even if he somehow contrived to forget everything else she'd taught him in their short

time together, he'd never forget that.

Frowning, the bioengineered man whose symbiotic crystalline companion called itself *Kyhln* picked up his crossbow and started toward the least-steely section of the wall, where there were no flashing lights and, hopefully, very little circuitry. He'd need to find a place to hide their only projectile weapon where nobody else could get at it, or even find it; Though he was fairly certain that the mountain was largely empty of the individuals who usually oversaw its workings, he also knew that overseers were not the only caste of individuals present inside the mountain. And both consciousnesses belonging to the individual whom Renee Ingram called *Colin* knew that the place's many doors and hallways were hardly the only method of ingress or egress from the daunting bastion of metal.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The place is so...empty, Captain Renee Ingram thought, as softly as she could, pausing to wipe beads of terror-sweat from her forehead, and to lean back against the intersection of two icy walls in the painfully air-conditioned corridor, before she and her striking telepathic companion padded down the next hallway of horrors or up the next stairwell of despair; *And this is altogether too easy*. Her entire being had become a divining rod, as she tried to determine, ahead of time, when the merciless shoe that was surely poised was going to come crashing down on them.

The corridors were largely dim, almost dark, but for the nerve-wracking violet-blue glow of the tiny implement Colin had clipped behind one of his ears. He'd assured her that it should keep any psionic individual or instrument in the complex from divining his presence. It did not keep him from comprehending her thoughts or feelings, however, and the formidable, bioengineered psionic man let her know that there was no such thing as *thinking softly*; such a concept was, as were so many things, nothing more

than a whimsical construct of virtual mind. Colin had admonished her, however, to walk softly, and slowly, and not to make any sudden movements in these hallways.

Ingram wasn't, in fact, still not entirely convinced that Colin himself wasn't some sort of whimsical construct of her mind.

The captain of the *Enterprise* understood, however, that the sense of emptiness she was experiencing in this place didn't refer just to the anxiety-producing lack of sentient beings patrolling the hallways. It also encompassed the sterile amorality inherent in the complex. She'd already realized that the windows in this place were one-way mirrors or walls or...*something*, but that didn't mitigate her disgust with what the rooms abutting the coldly lit hallways contained:

Modern surgical suites bereft of any sort of instrumentation capable of inducing anesthesia or otherwise ameliorating pain, but crowded with proudly-displayed racks of meticulously-labeled potions whose scientific names, if Renee's eyes and the dim surroundings didn't deceive her, spoke of nothing but poison and death.

Rooms lined with what looked like transparent-aluminum cryogenic freezers both large and small, containing incomprehensible alien forms, and pieces of what might or might not have been people in various stages

of growth and decay.

Rough bedrooms full of rocking, drooling, crooning, naked females of several distinct humanoid species, as the hue of healing bruises and the particular shapes of their emaciated bodies attested; these rooms were surrounded by tiny, dim dissection cells, perhaps designed as single-use chambers, whose gore-spattered ceilings, walls and floors — which no one had ever deigned to wash — spoke eloquently of once-living specimens.

Bank after bank of laboratories housing state-of-the-art machinery dedicated to the study and manipulation of nucleic acids, their walls lined with shelves of sluggishly pulsating crystals of various sizes and with instruments, ancient and modern, whose purpose could only be torture. Colin had liberated what he called the *psionic damper* he wore behind one ear, and several more instruments that he had secreted into his pack frame, from one such room.

Gaudy corridor intersections and abandoned stairways, decorated by abominable holographic wall-projections of a bloody, planet-piercing sword that proudly proclaimed a *United Empire of Planets* and its twisted motto; *In Division is Conquest*.

This last threatened to unhinge Renee's mind. *IDIC*, it shrieked at her every time they passed one of the semi-transparent, three-dimensional signs, sending signals of

anxiety down her spine that were so strong they caused her stomach to writhe. *That is some twisted variation on Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combination and oh where the hell has the Guardian sent me?* This was followed by a spurt of fear that she'd thought this so loudly, so manically, that it had burst forth from her mouth.

There is no thinking loudly any more than there is thinking softly, Riana. That's just a reflection of your anxiety in this place. Anyone who would otherwise be guarding this installation is out looking for us. The room we want is just ahead, but I need to go get my crossbow. It is near here. I'll be right back.

Without further explanation, Colin turned and padded eerily silent feet down the deserted hallway, taking his soothing and (here, in this horrible place, she dared admit it) beloved psionic trace with him.

A sense of mistrust shadowed Ingram's mind. She shook her head. It was the creepiness, the nastiness of this place that filled her with such trepidation, it had to be. She could trust Colin. She *had* to trust Colin. Renee crept carefully forward and, as Colin had said, the door to the next sunken, circular room on the right, lined as they all were on all sides with stairs that did double-duty as beds, lab benches, shelves, tables, and horrid surgical platforms, gaped open, unguarded.

Ingram's mouth did the same thing when, peering around the jamb of the open door, she saw what lay inside; A space-time portal rawer-looking than the Guardian on Tres Two, as sharp-cornered and shiny as the largest piece of fool's gold that had ever existed. Perhaps it was younger than the Guardian, or simply sown by another hand. She knew, now, that these doorways or matrices in time, which Colin called *Entities*, had grown from pseudo-seed-crystals of terrible power.

And Renee Ingram was the fool who was going to walk into the room with it. Really, she mused bitterly as she tiptoed down the stairs and into the otherwise-empty chamber whose architecture would make the room ring like a bell with the slightest sound, she didn't have any other choice.

She literally jumped, a not-insignificant two feet into the air, landing on her backside in a painful heap on the lowest entry stair, when the voice of the Entity filled the room like the voice of some archaic god.

You are the one who had chosen me. It is you for whom I was brought here.

The Entity's screen cleared and began to show images, some of them in places where Ingram imagined no piece of rock or metal, however magical or otherwise technologically advanced, could possibly survive. So

many matrices in so many places! Most of those doorway-matrices, those *Entities*, those nodes from elsewhere and roads to elsewhere, were probably hidden from casual sight, as well.

Who had placed them all? *Why?* What multitude of purposes, or what specific and far-reaching purpose, could they possibly serve? Why did the links that bound them occasionally become visible and destroy anything that they touched? These were some of the questions that scientists still attempted to coax from the living machine on the blasted planet endlessly circling Tres Two.

The more martial individuals in the Federation lived in fear of what might someday come through the Guardian. Renee was one of those, having become part of the *Enterprise* crew not long before its badly-botched maiden voyage and its deadly encounter with what — she had come to realize through Colin's patient explanations of what these Entities were and how they functioned — was probably a malfunctioning matrix-link, one suffering the quasi-magical, quasi-crystalline Entity equivalent of Alzheimer's. Hence the other reason for the creation of the defensive station that endlessly orbited the planet on which the Guardian resided, a great automated dreadnought that the United Federation of Planets had christened *Salem One*.

"I knew you wouldn't be able to stay away. I've been

waiting for you. You didn't plot half as well has you should have, Roxanne. You should have had me killed. Did you honestly think I wouldn't suspect this? Did you not wonder why the sensors are off?"

Again, Renee started violently, this time leaping up and spinning around in search of whomever had spoken, nearly falling again. The fellow slowly descending the stairs — not, Ingram was distressed and confused to see, from near the doorway but from the other side of the room entirely, where there was no doorway but where this room still had stairs, leading down to the pit where the matrix stone rested; Had he beamed in here? — was dressed in a webwork of what might be considered paramilitary clothing, had it not been composed of such sheer and flimsy-looking material. This exposed a lithe, muscular body that was either painted or tattooed with incomprehensible, faintly repulsive patterns. His face, too, bore traceries that partially obscured his features and made him look, Ingram thought with a frenzied, manic whimsy driven by cold fear, like the Pict from Hell.

The stranger held what she assumed to be a weapon in his left hand. *Who the hell is Roxanne?* Ingram wondered as she held up her own hands palm-outward, the universal humanoid gesture of surrender, and *damn it*, where *is Colin?*

The hard-faced, bitter-countenanced individual regarded her empty hands with a look that might have been rage, contempt, longing, or some unholy trinity of all three. "How long have you been in league with this thing I created?"

"Do we...know each other?" Renee hazarded. She received the grim simulacrum of a smile in response to the question, which morphed almost instantly into one of the most forbidding frowns she had ever seen. The lines of his face, she noted with the heightened sensory impressions of extreme fear, seemed to naturally follow those contours; He was older than he had first appeared.

Colin! she thought, as loudly as she could. Of course, the psion had already explained that there was no such thing as *thinking loudly*, any more than there was *thinking softly*; either she'd be heard, or she wouldn't. Part of her mind wanted to mull over why he'd chosen *now* to run an errand, but she couldn't do it because she needed to pay attention to what the lithe but daunting stranger, who paced with horrible slow patience across the room toward her, was saying;

"I wasn't aware I'd caused so much brain damage, Roxanne. Or is this all just another ploy? You may as well drop the act; I'm not letting you go again."

Renee attempted to moisten her lips with her tongue,

only to find that her tongue had gone just as dry. She could always try running away, but she wasn't certain exactly what sort of weapon he might have in his left hand, and in any case, this was where she needed to be if she ever wanted to access the Guardian again. She desperately needed to play for time.

Colin! she thought again. She was way out of her depth, here. Who exactly did this fellow think she was? And if he was as intent on keeping *her* as he currently seemed to be, whoever in hell the *her* was that he had mistaken herself, Renee Ingram, for...why would he have let *her* go in the first place? Various psychological ploys taught by Starfleet to its budding officers ran through her head in a matter of microseconds:

First and foremost, the off-putting facade this man presented was almost certainly some sort of mask he used to hide an extreme sense of self-loathing. She was not certain, however, whether kicking this flagrantly obvious Achilles' heel would benefit or destroy her, in a dimension that marked its territory with planet-piercing weapons.

She could pretend, in an effusively friendly manner, not to understand what was going on, in order to put him at ease so that he might reveal either the truth of a situation or complicity in something. This would be patently useless; she honestly didn't know what was going on, and he was

obviously complicit in everything she currently saw around her. Alternatively, she could pretend that she actually *did* know what was going on, in an irritated and condescending fashion, in order to make him nervous or frightened, which could cause him to reveal secret information or the identity of some unknown conspirator which he would otherwise keep hidden.

Ingram desperately needed some information, but she had no authority over this man and very little influence over her current situation. Both the man and the situation promised to turn volatile if she made a misstep; she'd have to be very careful about exactly how she chose to try and extract information from him. In such a situation, her Humanoid Motivation teacher would have told her...

Mirror their own words back at them in just such a way as to throw them emotionally off-guard.

The body language of the individual approaching her announced that this was a man accustomed to controlling his environment and everything in it down to the sub-micron level. Poor self-esteem rearing its twisted head again. And again, the question asserted itself; *why* would such a man let an ostensibly mentally compromised prisoner go? Was *Roxanne* some woman who was supposed to be in one of those dreadful harem-rooms?

Throwing her head back to regard him down the

bridge of her nose, she sneered; "Let me go, did you?"

The man confronting her flushed. She'd hit a nerve. He manipulated the small device he carried in his left palm. She watched him closely, trying to conceal her anxiety behind a mask of condescension and wondering if the device was some sort of communicator used to summon others. After a moment of this manipulation, he shrugged and tossed the device away. "I see you've maintained enough sanity to remove your agonizer chip. Do you still retain the Tantalus? That's all I want. Surely you realize that? I could remove it from you...painlessly, here." He tossed his head toward the door she'd just come through.

Ingram was unable to suppress a shudder. She knew exactly what lay beyond the door to this chamber. She felt, instinctively, that expressing either fear or confusion to this person would not cause their meeting to end well, but she honestly had no idea what it was he was talking about; it was almost as though he'd lapsed into another language. "Both of those things are elsewhere," she hedged, tossing her own head imperiously at the matrix crystal, only then realizing that the images that had been pouring across its face like flowing water had stopped:

It had paused to linger over a long-range view of another desert landscape. The vista was gray and dead-looking but for a fringe of frail, outdated scientific

architecture and an ancient, eroded partial column that thrust up thirty feet directly in front of the aperture-screen like a rotted tooth; The very vista she had desperately needed the machine to find, the psionic doorway back to the lone planet that orbited Tres Two, even though, according to Section 31's files, that planet and its enigmatic pseudo-machine had been entirely obliterated not once, but three times.

The stranger balled his hands into fists, and his gaze flicked away from Renee toward this vista for a long moment.

A sound like the wind in tall trees on a still day, or like an open-throated choir singing a single perfect note at increasing volume, filled the chamber. The forbidding-looking fellow who confronted Renee Ingram partially turned, an odd and senseless reaction, as though he were somehow looking for the sound. Colin took this opportunity to leap from the doorway and over the stairs to land in a crouch near the matrix stone, between herself and the stranger. Colin was a big, heavy man, and this landing made both the floor and the matrix stone vibrate.

Renee was relieved to note that he now carried his crossbow, but the physical feat he'd just performed threw him off-balance; Nobody, he'd explained to her once while traversing the sometimes-treacherous stone ledges that

often overlooked or bordered the underground pools that had brought them here, could perform psionic and physical activity at one and the same time. Anyone who could, he'd mused, would be a formidable adversary indeed.

Without actually turning directly toward Colin, the stranger, who moved with the springy grace of a cat, struck the psion to the ground with one hand and reached out to take Renee by the throat with the other, all in one fluid motion. Some part of Ingram's mind, alert nearly to the point of panic, recognized the movements the man's body made; they were similar to the ones ch'Riss had made, just before Josi had disintegrated the Aenar records officer on the bridge of the *Enterprise B*.

Ch'Riss had almost certainly expected Renee to attempt evasion.

Ingram grasped the nearest available wild conclusion and ran with it. Rather than trying to get away from the man, she moved toward him, took a fleeting grip on the stranger's wrist as he reached for her (the marks on his body, she realized with a sense of distaste that she wouldn't consciously react to until much later, were neither paintings nor tattoos, but gaudily-colored scarifications) and struck upward with her knee against the stranger's locked elbow. She was, she surmised as she closed on him, somewhat larger than himself.

She released his wrist and spun away behind him, favoring the suddenly-numb knee she had just used to break his elbow joint, but not before his arm had made a satisfying popping sound, and not before he'd snagged her hair with the fingers of his other hand. Colin had been forced to cut most of this off after he had rescued her from the underground pool the Guardian portal had deposited her into on her foray here.

Yanking what remained of that hair out of the stranger's grasp wasn't as painful as it otherwise might have been, though Ingram still felt the sting of blood rising to the surface of her trauma-numbed scalp before she was able to leverage herself free. Her knee felt like she'd just used it to attempt to punish a concrete floor for some imagined transgression. The joint refused to hold her up, and she fell nearly at the feet of the Pict from Hell.

The next thing that struck the stranger, who stood frozen for a crucial moment in the throes of pain, was a crossbow quarrel—the last one Colin possessed, the captain of the *Enterprise* realized with a certainty that wasn't her own. The odd sound that had arisen as he'd entered had been something in the quasi-crystalline Entity itself announcing his presence.

He'd had to fight his way back toward this chamber against several of this man's compatriots, hence his dearth

of crossbow quarrels. The thought that more enemies could be forthcoming frightened the overwhelmed telepath, making Colin's aim wild. He'd meant to make a killing center-body shot, but the bolt of stone transfixes the man's shoulder through the right clavicle and stuck there, telling Renee Ingram volumes about the strength and density of the stranger's bone and muscle. Nonetheless, the force behind it threw him across the room, knocking him unconscious.

Renee's knee joint felt as though she might have cracked her patella; it was difficult to focus on anything but the steadily increasing pain that blossomed through her like an enormous, nauseating flower. Colin did not hesitate in order to ameliorate her pain. He grasped her firmly around the waist, lifted her from the ground, and leaped through the center of the seemingly solid pseudo-crystalline matrix, just as armed figures clad in the same weirdly lingerie-like paramilitary gear as the stranger Colin had just shot began flooding the chamber.

Tarnished Relections will be concluded in:

Book 2, A Darkened Glass

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