

WOLFPACK

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Wolfpack
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Chapter One

Shawn Kell was a quiet, unassuming man. Those qualities were two of many that had helped him rise to the post of Inspector General in Section 31, the highest post that august and ostensibly non-existent body possessed. His unusual genetic heritage, which he almost never willingly revealed, had bestowed upon him a complete inability to see in color, something he strove to keep to himself by choosing clothes almost exclusively in shades of black and dark blue, with the exception of the unique long khaki coat that he was rarely without.

His heritage had also given him an agility he couldn't hide, and a muscular strength nearly three times human normal, which he both could and did hide until and unless he required it. Few people attempted to tangle with the Inspector General of Section 31 twice, once they'd seen what really lay beneath the facade he cultivated — assuming, of course, that they survived the first encounter.

The things he was tracking now weren't something that he would have wanted to take on hand-to-hand, though; they weren't humanoid, they were extremely intelligent, and they were casually violent. The creatures

were also multi-eyed, and the computer interface station that bordered both sides of his command chair told him that they possessed three discrete cerebral lobes and a discoid cerebellar nucleus, but nothing equivalent to a mammalian cortex. Their normally five-jointed legs had been surgically altered at birth, some ritualistic, taboo- or fashion -driven practice, Kell imagined, rather like foot-binding had once been on Earth.

The razor-edged, retractable claws these aliens possessed at the ends of long, surgically unchanged, agile arms were alarming. Their arms were so long that, when attempting to move faster than the stiff shamble that the removal of necessary joints had imposed upon them, they used them for locomotion. Kell imagined that, had they not been surgically altered at birth, the creatures would probably be quadrupeds, able to move with disheartening speed.

Denial of their own animal nature, Kell mused. He'd seen enough of that among humanoids to recognize it in these non-humanoids; it generally presaged a religious belief that proclaimed its adherents to be chosen people of one sort or another. That belief seemed to have backfired on these arrogant creatures, however. One of their own had turned against the schedule of destruction and enslavement these aliens imposed upon those not of their own kind, whom they considered less than animals because of their penchant to mate.

The runabout that Kell currently commanded, the *Blacksnake* (what used to be called a *light cruiser* by Starfleet, though this particular ship was no more what it appeared to be than Shawn was), could penetrate the alien creatures' personal cloaking and shielding mechanisms, but not the cloaking and shielding used by their ships. This was both maddening and alluring. Apparently, these aliens had technology of which Section 31 was not cognizant, a surprising revelation, since Section 31 had both discovered, and blatantly utilized, technologies from every quadrant of the Milky Way galaxy. Shawn's deceptively tiny vessel possessed Federation, Klingon, Romulan, Tholian, Cabal, Dominion, Ancari, Borg, Augment, and various other technologies, most of which Starfleet didn't know existed, particularly those that were mixed and matched in surprising and useful ways.

Kell had been part of Section 31 for over fifty of its two hundred years of existence, and this was a first for him; the tracking of creatures in possession of technologies that his own vessel didn't have.

This mission had begun when the *Blacksnake* had been slated to investigate a black hole whose event horizon was emitting far more than simple Hawking radiation. Command suspected that this might indicate the sort of temporal anomaly whose provenance was best dealt with covertly. Starfleet, and particularly Section

31, had learned the hard way just how nasty a temporal broth could become when stirred too by too many cooks.

The *Blacksnake* had detected an alien mother ship capable of directly harnessing energy from black holes, by somehow existing within and directly manipulating their event horizons. Such technology suggested that the aliens Kell was pursuing now might also possess methods for creating stable wormholes or, if they didn't currently possess such technology, that they would soon invent it. The thought was chilling, particularly should aliens like this ally themselves with other creatures that had belief systems and intellects as horrid as their own. Section 31, in all its interlaced branches and discrete cells, existed in order to hunt down and eliminate just such potential alliances, as well as to tamp down criminal activity occurring between dimensions, between galactic sectors, or through time.

It was a sad but true fact that the performance of such intricate maneuvers occasionally required the abetting, or at least the ignoring, of the very sort of activity that Section 31 existed to eliminate — sort of a covert, interdimensional game of truth or dare, which presented its operatives a continuous choice between the lesser of multiple evils, so that the greater evil might be eliminated. So Shawn Kell put the fact that the *Blacksnake* might easily destroy these creatures and their ships, and with significantly less loss of life than was

about to occur, away into one of many heavily-shielded compartments in his psyche, and told his crew instead, in a voice of raw silk and steel:

"When those alien vessels jump out of time again, I want their provenance traced. I don't care what becomes of their crews, of Archanis Four, or of anybody else embroiled in this mess. I want those netships, and the horizon ship that's feeding them energy. Understand?"

Renee Ingram sighed and looked away from the poem she was reviewing. It had both moved and surprised her when, upon entering John Harriman's untouched stateroom and accessing his personal files — which had been unlocked and decoded shortly after he had been kidnapped — to see that many of his poems had been filed away under the heading; *see what Commander Ingram thinks of this*.

She had promised, while recently taking extended shoreleave on Terra, to collect together and submit all of John Harriman's finished work to the editor of the *Federation Literary Journal*. That editor had been avid for awhile now about showcasing all of the starship captain's poetry in a single publication. She felt that this was the least she owed to the man who had been her CO for six years, who was now lost in an alternate universe whose door she herself had inadvertently opened, in order to bring back the formidably psionic individual

who had helped the Federation drive off an attempted telepathic takeover.

That individual was on the Starship *Lakota* at the moment, heading for the Romulan Neutral Zone, which was something Captain Ingram was trying hard not to think too much about. This man, named Colin, was also the man with whom she was in love, and he worked as a free yeoman aboard the *Enterprise*. Starfleet's latest construction project was the erection of heavy-faculty defensive stations at the Federation outskirts of all Neutral Zones, and Eolisu Loraugh, the *Lakota's* Bajoran captain, had wanted Colin to modify his starship's psionic capacities before they got there. The *Enterprise* was currently over thirty parsecs away from the Romulan Neutral Zone (too far to communicate with her lover telepathically), and the *Lakota* was naturally on communications blackout.

It had been lingering worries about the potential dangers of the Romulan Neutral Zone that had turned Captain Ingram's thoughts, finally, away from Colin and toward John Harriman. He'd been considered one of Starfleet's foremost field experts on Romulan culture and tactics. Thus Captain Ingram sat, insomniac, in her lost but never forgotten CO's stateroom, poring over untitled poems, her friend and commanding officer's absence and his unspoken intent to have shared them with her someday increasing her sense of loneliness

exponentially. She flicked the computer screen irritably three or four times, and it responded by pulling up another piece of John's exquisite, untitled prose:

*Nothing comes unless a
space has already been
made;*

*Nature knows this, for that
knowledge*

*Was nature's ungentle
midwife and first painful
breath.*

*And still it persists as tutor
and guide*

*Within the circular
ouroboros of every next
moment,*

*Its eyes winking out from
the pocketed caps of morels
Or from those places where
the potential*

*For combustion resides
within wood;*

*In the shadow that the
breeze leaves after ruffling
Bee-balm's tousled head, in
every last eternal stretch*

*Of time among grains of
sand in the depths of the
sea*

*And nestled between the
intertwined bodies of
lovers;*

*It is the absent frog within
the dim reaches of any*

*Polliwog mind and the
pupal knowledge of the
exact*

*Inner dimension of all
unspun cocoons;*

*It is the emptiness within a
painting that determines*

*Form and hue and
character, the silent reaches
Of music's texture that
generates its shape.*

*Only within the yawning
pockets between*

*A feather's barbs can any
particle of sun*

*Perform the dance that
evokes the precise and half-
Unreal colors of a painted
bunting's plumage:*

*These are the offerings
inside every last burning
Busy molecular gift-box
created between
Atoms in any crystal, of the
precise volume
Of nothingness found
within the lattices
And rungs of all
ribonucleosomes — and
these
Are the same as the
incomprehensible abyss
Into which the afterbirth of
time now and forever
Is flung — glistening
galactic clots eternally
circling
The drain of space, still
clinging
To the old navel-cord of dark matter...*

"Captain?" The gamma-shift communications cadet said the word loudly, slowly, and would have repeated it as many times as she'd needed to; it was the sleep period for alpha-shift personnel.

"Yes, Elise?" Captain Ingram replied to the early-

morning hail, frowning. She wasn't sure if she wanted to hear from the *Lakota* or not — worse yet, hear *about* the *Lakota*. She tried to keep the hope that this was something else out of her voice, and switched the terminal containing John Harriman's poetry off.

Days weren't twenty-four hours long on the *Enterprise-B*; they were twenty. Shifts were easier to staff and crew that way. The unusually eclectic collection of roughly seven hundred officers and crew who staffed the *Enterprise* iteration *beta* represented over thirty Federation races, several non-Federation races, and a number of diverse combinations of the same. The natal worlds of these people had native day lengths that might range anywhere from eleven to one hundred and six Terran Standard hours. Any individual whose natal planetary days were on the long side, or who slept only in short snatches of time, was free to opt for multiple back-to-back duty shifts, if they wished. All non-bridge crewmembers in good standing below the rank of commissioned officer were free to work whatever sort of shift they preferred.

A twenty-to twenty-four-hour day length allowed Federation starships and space stations to rotate bridge crews once every four to twelve hours. Which setup was used was the one favored by the captain of a given ship or station, allowing them and their officers to construct the schedule that best served the needs of their particular

crew. *Enterprise* had a few people on board whose metabolisms called for a solid sixteen to eighteen hours of sleep once every forty Terran hours or so, and others who demanded week-long stretches of rest interspersed by months without sleep. John Harriman had realized, years before, that a twenty-hour Terran Standard day appeared to mesh better with the needs of the unique staff of the *beta* version of Starfleet's flagship than a twenty-four hour one did.

Captain Ingram opted for five-hour duty shifts. This combination of day-hours and shift-length gave the *Enterprise B* four rotating shifts. First Shift was always made up of the highest-ranking bridge officers, and that shift was called back to active duty anytime anything over a third-stage alert — what was once termed *yellow* — was announced. If an emergency came about during first shift, the bridge would be theirs for the duration. They were the individuals who most often ended up working under stressful conditions for long periods of time, and their fat tended to end up in the fire. Captain Ingram preferred to give her alpha shift officers, which included herself, as much respite as she possibly could, because you never knew...

"Captain, we're receiving an automated distress call from Archanis Four. We're the nearest ship, and..." Elise Mitchell paused, real concern in her voice when she continued; "well, I've tried contacting directly, but

nobody answers.”

“Thanks, Elise. We’ll be right there.” Captain Ingram stood up and stretched; her spine popped. “Third-stage alert,” she announced to nobody in particular.

The computer recognized her voice pattern and complied by turning on all lights in the ship, and tinting them a vivid amber. Captain Ingram talked over the computer's bland tenor as it explained to everyone aboard the ship that this wasn't a drill and that first shift officers were wanted on the bridge, although nobody needed to be at battle stations yet:

“Computer, information on Archanis Four.”

Archanis Four is a Class-M planet in the redrawn space ceded to the Federation with the Khitomer Accords —

That changed things rather substantially. Captain Ingram jogged all unkempt out of John's stateroom at three o'clock in the morning, an occurrence that might have caused more than just raised brows had Harriman been present on the *Enterprise*, or even just in this space-time continuum. “*Emergency* alert, computer!” she intoned.

Had the starship been struck by any sort of weaponry, or even just detected an asteroid within a hundred meters of its hull that was more substantial than its auto-deflectors were calibrated to deal with, it would

have set its own systems into emergency, or second-stage, alert. This not being the case, the great brain of the *Enterprise* replied:

No proximate danger detected, the computer replied sanguinely: *Please supply appropriate clearance code*. Only individuals with bridge officer clearance codes could declare an emergency alert on an *Excelsior*-class Federation starship.

"Ingram beta twelve sea green!" the captain of the *Enterprise* replied, stepping into the turbolift that would deliver her to the bridge. The computer automatically opened infraship channels:

"This is not a drill: Repeat, this is *not* a drill!" Captain Ingram announced. "Officers to general quarters: All hands to battle stations!"

She encouraged her senior bridge officers to declare emergency alerts at odd and difficult hours, but she *did* demand to know whether or not they were just kidding. The computer reacted to Ingram's clearance code with a swooping squeal of sirens, a blaze of red light, and a recorded repetition of the words she had just uttered.

Flashing red lights and battle-station call notwithstanding, a red alert on an *Excelsior*-class starship was still considered a second-stage alert. A first-stage alert on modern starships was blue, and required either the presence of intruders, the immediate danger of destruction to the vessel itself, or both of those

concurrently, before it was either declared by any officer, or automatically switched on by the ship's own sensors.

Ingram hoped that this situation would not call for that eventuality.

Chapter Two

Archanis Four's main population had moved back into Klingon space after the signing of the Khitomer Accords. What remained, the home and working laboratory of a mixed but primarily Klingon population of about eight thousand people, lay dead. The few sentient life sign readings remaining on the planet were flickering and going out even as the *Enterprise* searched for them. Much of the infrastructure remained, however, which made Ingram think that there was probably an enemy interested in the laboratory planet's technology hiding from their sensors somewhere nearby.

"Nothing, Captain," Yaelat, the ship's Hali'ian senior communications officer, said.

Captain Ingram scowled at the lifeless city on the *Enterprise* B's floor-to-ceiling main viewscreen. This was looking more and more like something that would call for a landing party, and she wanted to get one there fast, before any more of those life signs flickered out. Close video showed carnage and death, but not even ground-penetrating active scans revealed sentient life-signs, alien or otherwise. Had these people all killed each other?

"There's something strange here," Seantie, even

more disheveled than her captain, cut in from the science station. As an older Betazoid matron, she usually wore her russet-brown hair up in layers. Captain Ingram had only rarely seen it down before; it glittered with silver threads in the strobing alert lights, as though it was plaited with diamonds. “I’m getting a lower-lifeform reading that the computers can’t identify. Some sort of,” she shook her head at the console, “cross between an algae and a slime mold, maybe, but with nascent animal tendencies — kind of a slime-mold-jellyfish.”

Captain Ingram had heard of creatures similar to that, which decimated worlds by taking over the bodies of their hosts; however, those were well-known to the Federation, and all of their information would have come up the moment the ship’s sensors found them. Almost certainly, this was something else. She turned to Demora.

“Ship signs yet?”

The Asian helmsman shook her head; “sorry, Captain. There’s nothing.”

This meant that somebody needed to go planetside and look. Captain Ingram thought hard for a minute; she’d need people with medical skills, tactical skills, communications skills, anthropological skills, exozoological skills, and probably someone to help render the technology down there unusable to potentially hostile forces. And she *definitely* wanted some backup

from other ships, if she could get it.

“Yaelat, put in a call to all nearby ships, Federation or Klingon. Let them know that the colony put out a distress signal, that it appears they've been attacked, and that we've got a ground crew going down in attempt to render aid.

"Computer, contact T'Dani, Mel'Taya, Bhopest, Rafael, and the fourth shift landing-security squad and tell them to meet me in transporter room two. Seantie, you're with me. You, too, Yaelat, as soon as you've sent out that message. Have the computer keep repeating it." The captain of the *Enterprise* nodded shortly at the half-Orion woman sitting on the edge of the seat next to the captain's chair; the blue-black hair tousled around the finely-sculpted bronze curves of her face only served to highlight its prettiness. "The bridge is all yours, Josi. Keep the comm signal open between the ship and the planet no matter what!"

In case anyone in the fifteen-person landing party had forgotten, they were forcibly reminded, under the fresh dawn light of Arcturus Four's young orange primary star, that large amounts of humanoid blood and associated gore reeked like some particularly garish, freshly-welded metal artwork coated in sewage and rancid honey.

The courtyard of the science complex had become a

gory battlefield strewn with the dead, its artfully-cobblestoned paths and once-fragrant gardens splashed, spattered, and puddled in blood, much of it a lurid shade of mauve, the product of iron-based globulin cells that required amounts of cyanocobalamin for healthy function that were nearly a hundred times higher than those required by any other humanoid, even those with cobalt-based blood. It was the entire reason behind the typically raw, blood-rich diet of the Klingon people, a necessity for a Klingon to remain healthy. When a Klingon bled red, it was a sign of extreme stress and incipient anemia.

The Klingons littering the grand plaza fronting the scientific complex would never eat again, and all were as unhealthy as anybody could get. Notwithstanding the fact that these particular Klingons had been scientists and project managers, they'd fought both intelligently and ferociously. The mass of bloodstained bodies also included the occasional Vulcan and human, whose biological differences from their Klingon compatriots didn't render them any less dead.

Whatever it was that the Seantie's earlier scans had picked up wasn't registering on any of their hand tricorders now, and anyway, Captain Ingram had never known people to erect mantlet barriers or use *mek'leth* and armor against slime-molds. The plaza was thick with tools of both offense and defense, and redolent with

the odor of violent death, sulfurous and sickly-sweet.

"Yaelat, Bhopest, Seantie, Mel'Taya — take a couple of security people and check the perimeter for survivors, get any wounded you find back to the ship, and report back as quickly as you can. The rest of you come with me. I want to search the main science complex for survivors and dismantle or destroy anything that might be useful to raiders." Captain Ingram turned away from the bloodstained ruin that was the courtyard of the science complex, shading her eyes with one hand, visually inspecting the environment around her.

Archanis Four's scientific complex was set on a rise, and much of the surrounding area, though rural and in places heavily overgrown with a number of nuisance plants common to more than one settled world, was open to view. Nothing moved, and no bird sang in the morning light. Something was inhibiting the normal behavior of animal life on this part of the planet, and neither Ingram's tricorder nor her own senses could tell her whether that effect was caused by the presence of sudden and violent death, or by the presence of something else outside the range of what their instrumentation could detect.

The small population that had elected to remain on the planet after the signing of the Khitomer Accords had lived in elegant homes set in an intricate geometric arrangement of interlinked courtyards around the

scientific complex, to a distance of about five miles. Passionately held, largely negative beliefs of certain Federation members toward Klingons notwithstanding, the people of Qo'Nos definitely had a flair for architectural style, particularly in combination with the human and Vulcan touches in evidence. From the outside, the homes that Captain Ingram could see appeared spacious and airy, rich in intervening spaces filled with gardens, recreational areas, open and enclosed markets, and smaller clusters of pavilioned buildings whose use wasn't immediately apparent — social or medical or religious centers, probably.

Ingram turned and considered the enormous building perched atop the leveled head of the low mountaintop. The science complex dominated the area; four tiers rambling over seven square acres, built in a style that made it look like a combination of Asian temple and Norse longhouse done in masonry and wood-frame, whose mother had engaged in a torrid, not entirely satisfactory affair with a structural-steel internment compound.

Captain Ingram reached for her communicator to call for backup for the landing party. The area involved in the attack was larger than Ingram's party could explore without breaking into groups smaller than she thought wise, considering the savagery and carnage visited upon the colony. She didn't get the chance to

open it before T'Dani, who had stopped behind the second set of mantlets her group had passed as they as they walked toward the science building, diverted her attention. "Captain Ingram?"

The captain of the *Enterprise*, her communicator open in her hand, walked back toward the science complex to get to T'Dani's position. One of the cadets who'd been assigned to the fourth shift security detail came with her, a Denobulan girl with vivid blue eyes, whose name Captain Ingram couldn't immediately recall. "Have you found something, Doctor?"

The part-Vulcan medical officer was squatting between two Klingon bodies. The one who had been ripped open from left hip to right pectoral four times by an edged weapon still clung tenaciously to a *bat'leth*; the other, heavily scarred with what looked like disruptor burns, held a disruptor. Neither one had been dead long enough to show any signs of rigor mortis. T'Dani shook her head in bemusement at the information her tricorder was giving her.

"From the first few bodies I saw, and from the information Seantie had about an unknown lower life form, I started to wonder if these people didn't just turn on each other. But according to what I've got here, the disruptor burns made on these corpses are from some other *type* of disruptor. The tricorder can't define its make. And the slashing wounds..." she let the tricorder

and the hand holding it fall to sit on her lap and squinted up at Ingram:

"Klingons don't use either the *bat'leth* or the *mek'leth* this way. These wounds... some of them were made *after* death. A Klingon would consider that a dishonorable act, verging on abomination. And they're ragged." The CMO reached down and half-raised the *bat'leth* — clean of any blood — with a moue of distaste. "These weapons are razor-honed, they wouldn't —"

"*Captain!*" Rafael had taken the Starfleet Special Ops ensign in charge of fourth shift security and his team in tow, and they were systematically searching behind each row of mantlets — shelters that covered a person from head to toe and on both sides, which could be carried for use as a mobile shield if a person was large and strong enough, or set together and overlapped to form a wall. The senior engineer didn't wait for Captain Ingram to either reply or come closer, but went on in a clear, carrying tenor shout; "There's body fluid over here that doesn't match known Federation humanoid parameters."

Ingram neither heard the rest of what he said, nor paid attention to it, because the communicator she was holding suddenly gave off the chime it used when an incoming message was tagged as *urgent*, nearly causing her to drop the instrument. Ingram had long thought that

urgent was entirely too tame for most messages that came thus tagged, but since the alternative she'd have chosen included violent profanities, she didn't think Starfleet would adopt it any time in the near future. She could hear Josi's voice through roars of static on the open channel.

"...under attack! Twenty ships, repeat, twenty ships..." a painfully loud blast of static cut the *Enterprise's* XO off.

Captain Ingram did not wait for the channel to clear. She switched the communicator to its low-frequency planetary setting, programmed in a sequence that turned her ground crew's communicators into open-channel voice pagers with a flick of her thumb, and drew her phaser, changing its setting with the thumb of her other hand:

"Arm yourselves immediately, phasers set to kill! The ship's —"

Slightly over four feet tall, they seemed to rise up out of the ground. Perhaps the cephalopod-like creatures (these had compound eyes, which the aliens to whose chinless lower jaws they clung did not, so Captain Ingram's first millisecond's guess was that they were probably separate beings, shrouding the lower half of the attackers' roughly diamond-shaped, noseless faces) put out some type of bio-shielding. The awful sulfurous reek that Captain Ingram had associated with the

ruptured corpses that fouled the courtyard rose with them.

Ingram dropped her communicator, grabbed the gaping Denobulan cadet by the back of her uniform, and dragged her backwards behind a mantlet. T'Dani rolled without hesitation through blood and gore in the opposite direction. The poison-yellow, fan-shaped beam of a phase weapon hissed through the spaces they'd vacated.

Captain Ingram crouched and curled herself into the lower right-hand corner of the mantlet, then peered sideways around its titanium siding. Whatever these aliens were, they weren't terribly fast-moving — the one that had shot at them had hardly stirred from its original position — but their hand-eye coordination was horrifyingly accurate. A disruptor blast heated the side of the mantlet to a degree that would have fried Ingram's face had she not jerked and rolled away after her first quick peek. Assuming that the thing was still standing more or less in the same place, she stood up, reached over the mantlet this time, and fired her phaser in a quick burst before hitting the ground belly-down.

If the sounds around her were any indication, the rest of the landing party had fired as well. Brabbling alien shrieks accompanied the next disruptor blast directed at the mantlet behind which she lay, a sustained discharge that sheared off the top tenth of the mantlet,

along with the frozen, petrified Denobulan cadet's head.

Captain Ingram and her officers ran bent-over from mantlet to mantlet, away from their attackers, toward the uncertain shelter of the Archanis Four science complex.

Chapter Three

"I don't *care* how slowly they follow us when we have no clear idea of just how many there *are*," Mel'Taya snarled, as Seantie and the *Enterprise's* head of security wedged themselves into a single deep doorway. Bhopest and Yaelat had already melted into the shadows of a pergola on the other side of the dead-end street. The sweet, soft tinkling of a water sculpture near the pergola filled the air with a deceptive sound of joy and peace that set Mel'Taya's teeth on edge.

Excellent aim, a non-Starfleet-issue weapon sure to get the Andorian head of security into hot water with the captain should she ever discover it, and a tactical belief gained through bitter, bloody experience — *center of mass be damned; shoot the zha'tezh in the head!* — had gotten them away from two of their pursuers by the simple expedient of killing the aliens.

Their third pursuer had been enraged by Seantie's phaser fire, which had done nothing more than burn away part of its ornate clothing, to bounce with pyrotechnic splendor off of what was either a brilliantly refractive hide, or skin-tight body armor composed of some sort of light, phase-resistant metal that had been polarized until it glittered like peacock ore.

"They could be anywhere or everywhere —" the nervous *chae-na* expounded.

"You guys? I think you'd better come over here, *now!*" Yaelat's voice, filled with trepidation and something like awe, rang across the courtyard where the street ended.

Mel'Taya glared with various sensory organs at the ornate pergola from which Yaelat had called. "That could be a trap!"

Seantie shook her head. "No, I don't think he was forced to call us. I mean, he's scared, but no more than *I* am right now. There's really something there he thinks we need to see."

"*Fine*," Mel'Taya spit out the word like it was composed of bad meat and motioned toward the street with the Andorian disruptor. The head of security's other hand anxiously clutched at the braided rawhide handle of the nastily sharp fighting knife that the *chae-na* carried everywhere; "You first!"

Seantie leveled an amused look at her companion. "I said Yaelat wasn't in the clutches of one of these things. I did *not* say that *we* might not be if we —"

Mel'Taya held up a hand to quiet the Betazoid woman, turning to tilt its head at the south end of the street they'd just come up. Their pursuer was moving up it slowly, using the shadows much as they themselves were, but its movements were both more careful and less

agile than theirs had been.

Its long arms nearly brushed the ground. They appeared to have multiple joints, or else whatever passed for clavicles in its boxy, armadillo-like torso possessed joints. If the way the aliens moved to fire their disruptors was any indication, those arms were limber indeed. The alien's legs, however, appeared to have only hip joints and odd, sideways knee joints that ended in unusually short lower legs, as though either evolution or surgery had removed necessary joints. Its short lower legs ended in sinuous, multi-jointed, non-humanoid, paw-like feet enclosed in what looked like armored, cleated sandals. The landing party had learned through experience that the creatures could not run.

Its four forward-facing golden eyes, equipped with ash-gray, radially slit pupils, scanned avidly for its prey as its head swiveled atop its long torso. Its blocky, diamond-shaped head sported fleshy cheeks with many small, soft pouches that made the sides of the alien's face appear to be covered in masses of aggregate fruits, like a thousand multicolored raspberries arranged in bright geometric patterns. The tentacled creature on its lower face pulsed and shifted positions as its host moved.

Seantie touched Mel'Taya's arm gently to get the Andorian's attention and moved her hands in Federation Standard Sign language with great care in the shadow of

the deep doorway they sheltered behind. *I'll draw its attention if you think you can shoot it fast enough.*

The *chae-na* shook its head firmly and responded using the same method. *No. Their hand-eye coordination is too good. Let it come nearer, and I might —*

A yellow flash from the pergola across the street made Seantie flinch backward suddenly, forcing Mel'Taya hard against the carved panels of the door. The *Enterprise's* head of security winced as the door's ornately scrolled knob delivered a bruising clout. *She thinks she can shield me from a blast from that?* Mel'Taya wondered wryly. *It'd just go through her. Perhaps I should explain...*

The creature hunting them through the streets was flung backward, hitting the cobblestone walkway with a sound like a melon dropped on concrete from a high balcony. It didn't move again, but the thing covering its lower face squelched off and tried to crawl away; a second yellow flash reduced that to ash, then the disruptor was flung forcibly out of the shadows of the pergola, to disappear into the thick bed of nasturtiums that surrounded it. Seantie turned and stared at Mel'Taya wordlessly for a long stretch of seconds.

"All right, I'll go first!" the Betazoid woman announced, darting out into the street in a zigzag pattern toward the pergola. The Andorian followed, swearing

softly but fiercely, weapon leveled.

The still forms of Senior Engineer Rafael Buonarroti and Planetside Security Yeoman Carl Mason Brooks were huddled as far away from the modified force field as the dimensions of the cramped space would allow.

Their captain and chief medical officer sat marginally closer to the storeroom entryway, shivering occasionally. This had been one of two repositories dedicated to sensitive electronic and electromagnetic equipment, and it was kept cool and deionized by environmental system that their captors hadn't bothered to turn off.

Captain Ingram and T'Dani had shed much of their uniforms tops and jackets to pad the cold, hard floor beneath their comrades, and to tear into strips and use as bandages for Carl, whose nose had been badly broken and his forehead lacerated and concussed, and for Rafe, who'd had the misfortune to be the first person to make the acquaintance of their captor's long, flint-sharp retractable talons. The creatures went for the face, and the left side of Rafe's had been shredded as though he'd tried to stop the mandoline blade of an old-fashioned food processor with his cheekbone. Both the lieutenant and the yeoman were mercifully unconscious under layers of bindings that seeped scarlet.

"Any clue what that thing is?" Captain Ingram

whispered against the tangled fall of T'Dani's hair, the bronze-gold color of Solar sunlight on a ripe wheat field, such an unusual color for a Vulcan that Corrigan had, more than once, considered dyeing it.

The creatures had dragged all electronic components out of both storerooms before the *Enterprise* had arrived, and were using those components, in tandem with the lab's computer, to augment the arcane piece of equipment to which this room appeared to be dedicated — a boxy, bulky something that looked to be nearly a hundred years old. It sported the chunky, glass black and brushed-chrome appearance that devices had tended toward back then, as though everything was a miniature piece inside some sort of vastly overblown faux-retro Christmas ornament.

T'Dani shook her head in reply. They were trying not to talk, hoping that their own translators would make something legible out of the sibilant croaks that passed for language among their captors, without giving the aliens knowledge of Standard too soon.

From what Captain Ingram had been able to see of the wall monitors, the information they were accessing from the computers was being taken using a type of translation link she'd never seen before, which interfaced with the computer in some arcane, purely mathematical code. It was a laborious procedure, but one that spoke for a high level of technical proficiency in their alien

captors.

The captain of the *Enterprise* didn't care to amplify that proficiency by offering up a linguistic tool with which they could speed up the process.

In the second denuded storeroom, the aliens had piled their own dead, and those too injured to function. Five of the aliens had been killed and four wounded by Captain Ingram's team, at the cost of two wounded and six dead of their own. Her landing party had fought a life-or-death struggle, not realizing that their merciless captors were looking to take prisoners until the creatures had surrounded them closely enough — in a conference room with plenty of bolted-steel chairs to shelter behind, but the tactical misfortune of a single accessway — to tear their faces off.

The gentle care with which the beings regarded their own injured was vividly demonstrated to the captives before they were sealed into the first storeroom, and it was the reason why Ingram and Corrigan stayed so far away from that room's entrance that a clear picture of what their captors were up to eluded them. The force field across the entry was only just visible, an opalescent gauze veil a photon thick. The reason that it was visible was because anything that touched it dematerialized on contact.

The wounded alien that their captors had chosen for the first demonstration of the devastating effects of the

alien force field had sported a brutally tight tourniquet, which didn't entirely keep liquid gold from oozing through the beginnings of a thick gray scab on the stump of what remained of its left arm. This combination of hues inferred to both the captain of the *Enterprise* and her CMO that its blood was probably nickel-based, but that was as far as either of them was able to progress in any sort of biological study of their captors before both of them tried, unsuccessfully, to recoil deeper into the tiny storeroom in horror. The wounded alien hadn't left so much as a whiff of ozone behind when its comrades pushed it into the mysterious field.

Their captors had performed this demonstration twice more; Ingram wasn't sure whether this was because they thought their captives were too stupid to comprehend the full meaning of the first spine-chilling example on its own, if they considered this a neat and tidy method of disposing of those not fit to engage in battle, or whether, perhaps, they simply enjoyed the act of murder. Or maybe all three of those, concurrently.

"*Logh'gha'min zhr'zel* sure if *rheq'vor* alter *gahi'ldin mahak* mind in such a way?"

Both Captain Ingram and her CMO stiffened at the sound of Terran Standard vocabulary blossoming among their captor's thorny snorts. Two of the four-eyed creatures tinkered back and forth between the bulky, toy like apparatus and the computer. Two more guarded the

room, while a third sat stiffly in one of the ergonomic chairs bolted to the floor, ostensibly overseeing the others.

Captain Ingram studied the creature in the chair and wondered fleetingly if all Klingons believed that their chairs would vacate a premises somehow if they weren't bolted down. The captain of the *Enterprise* shook herself mentally; she needed to stay alert and not let her mind wander, but she was sleep-deprived and frightened and more than a little thirsty...

While trying to pull her mind back to the problem at hand, Ingram took a really good look at first one chair, then the other. The cold irritating her fingers and the bare skin of her shoulders seemed to sink into her bones suddenly, as if it too was afraid and was trying to nestle closer for solace. She folded her arms more tightly around herself and shuddered.

"T'Dani. Correct me if I'm seeing things, because they seem to have been molded and colored to look like a natural part of the seating, but are those *restraints* on the chairs?" that was more than either of them had said for the past hour, and louder. One of the aliens acting as technician to the unknown device turned — its entire body; they didn't appear to have flexible necks that could turn independently — and fixed the captain of the *Enterprise* with a wide-eyed, intelligent stare before turning back to reply to the alien ensconced in the chair.

"No, try they to *bar'a'ahrma* of psychosis with it, but its '*lasg* is *logh'gha'min tor vom* of understanding, *Omi'Ohaly*."

"*Kye'mai* change this?" the creature in the chair inquired coldly.

"Instrument of *logh'gha* if used some way. What way? Difficult to know."

"You can change this?" the overseer demanded again. The technician hissed and pointed with one sinuous arm at the second storeroom.

"Could empty a mind — *tor vom*. *Logh'gha'rti* of no use then. Test it on the imperfect first."

The alien in the chair gave a grunt that the translators implanted in both Starfleet officer's skulls just behind their ears interpreted as agreement.

"I think we're about to find out what that thing is," T'Dani breathed. "I only know that I don't want it to be what I *think* it is." Captain Ingram nodded in petrified, wordless agreement as the aliens hauled one of their own bruised and swollen comrades out of the first storeroom and slapped it into consciousness.

The captain of the *Enterprise* didn't care to dwell on it, either, but the chairs had already given her a hint regarding what this was; an old Klingon technology, a criminal technology that, if the alien technician could be believed, the scientists here had been trying to turn into a tool to help alleviate either the symptoms or the

expression of non-retroviral psychosis. And she *really* didn't want to know what these sadistic, merciless predators would use it for, but she had a feeling she'd be learning the answer to that question entirely too soon.

Chapter Four

"Why do you have to...*torment* it?" Yaelat snarled.

They had already determined that it couldn't eat humanoid food — perhaps simply because it couldn't remove the creature that served as a breathing apparatus from its lower face. Assuming, of course, that its lower face was where it ate from; the corpse of its compatriot had revealed a lamprey-like opening more or less where a mouth and nose on a humanoid would be. Considering the aid it had rendered them earlier, Yaelat felt that the most prudent course would be to leave it alone, at least until they figured out what their own next move should be.

Mel'Taya snarled back at the Hali'ian, "I'm *trying* to get it to talk! I have not heard yet that either you or Seantie have gotten anything out of its mind, and unless it talks, our translators are useless." The *chae-na* was exhausted and on edge, and didn't feel like apologizing for either one at the moment.

"*M'nohq beh'sp?*" their alien prisoner cut in.

Both Mel'Taya and Yaelat turned to stare at it, nonplussed. It made a hissing sort of burble, teetering its head slowly back and forth; even in its multiple platelike, scleraless eyes, its sense of frustration with its

captors was perceptible. It went on, all of its words running together in the ears of the humanoids into a long, gurgling slur:

"*Ch'usnaigjen'pa jesh'mai cla'ah'veh. Jrll p'hncor anskaiblet deggvom, nohs'nal kai vom ch'usnaig rell shobsam. Drolran crigh'gha p'hncor logh'gha'min tor vom ch'usnaig bar'a'ahrma. Thrylina kai rheq'vor vom jrll p'hncor ledr'dryn ch'usnaig to lie to; called this high the sachin rell tor beyv'qua Ch'usnaig. Zunsh'mos'parra toward the unwhole is crev'sves, and any undivided who croqrak'n'phah must be annihilated trishnah'knal purdl'lasg. The undivided stebche it is to pochndris'rell all pure space. These are of rights the zazp'hyer undivided, and beh rilaugh venn'tor sny'phrsa'm teh.*" The creature paused, appeared to take a breath — or the thing it wore over its otherwise invisible mouth, if a mouth was what it was, breathed for it — and went on:

"Such beliefs *Ch'usnaigjen'pa jesh'mai.* The Undivided are *anskaiblet* to the Unwhole in all ways. If the Unwhole will not *logh'gha*-of-submit, which is their natural state, they will be annihilated. It is *rheq'vor* for any Unwhole to lie to, cheat, steal, maim, *logh'gha*, or slaughter any Undivided; this is called the low and high *sachin* of the Undivided. Mercy-in-expression to the Unwhole is *crev'sves*, and any Undivided who exhibits it must be annihilated so that it taints not the '*lasg*' of the Undivided, and I find that I cannot tolerate-of-the

sny'phrsa."

The little group of humanoid Starfleet officers gaped wordlessly back. The creature hiss-burbled again. Halfway through the hiss-burble, their Federation translators kicked in, replacing the sound with a dry cough of sardonic laughter.

"I am seeing how on the faces of yours which stupid show, you do hear me now. Let me start again, slave-race-creatures:

"My people, *Ch'usnaig*," again the Starfleet officers' translators replaced the unpronounceable alien sound with a humanoid-legible one, which still held absolutely no meaning for any of them — *Husnock*; "the Undivided, hold these-such beliefs: The Undivided are superior to the Unwhole in all ways; if the Unwhole will not bow to slavery, which is their natural state, they will be annihilated; it is acceptable for any Unwhole to lie to, cheat, steal, maim, enslave, or slaughter any Undivided, and this is called the Low and High Endowment of the Undivided. The expression of mercy to the Unwhole is a psychosis, and any Undivided who exhibits it must be destroyed, so that it does not taint the pure everlasting progeny of the Undivided; and it is the Undivided's destiny to take over all pure space in place of the Unwhole. I find myself unable to bear this destiny."

Its chilling, alien, multi-eyed gaze roved over the Betazoid, Hali'ian, Andorian, and Grazerite officers in

turn, and it appeared pleased with the dawning expressions of horror it saw on every face. The Husnock's eyes, the Starfleet officers had noted earlier, were capable of independent movement.

It went on before any of them had a chance to formulate a legible sentence, "You think you are my captors, but you are not. I have only to press this device to summon my people to your annihilation." Two of the long, five-jointed fingers on the creature's thumbless hand hovered over what appeared to be a piece of jewelry.

With an altogether humanoid shrug, and faster than Mel'Taya could react to level a weapon on the thing's face, it ripped the device off of its clothing. The Husnock tossed the ornamental communicator away. It skittered over the ornate wood-parquet floor of the house they'd holed up in on the outskirts of the city, after their prisoner — who was of the considered and rather compelling belief that it was not a prisoner at all — had killed its compatriot. The alien folded its hands in what amounted to its lap, and leveled its intelligent, multi-eyed, uncompromising gaze back at the little group of humanoids.

"With my help, *you* may escape — *if* with your help, *I* may escape." It motioned at the quiescent bit of jewelry, which the members of the *Enterprise* landing party had all unconsciously backed away from the

moment it hit the floor, with another eerily humanoid shrug. "I am called *Corryag-Dr'aitar'Dahn*."

"Okay," Bhopest offered, after a pregnant pause. "I think we got the 'Dan' part. Mind if we just call you that?"

The Husnock blinked at the Grazerite. "You are not all of one thing, are you?"

The humanoids looked back and forth at one another ruefully — as unaware of how profoundly they resembled one another in the alien creature's eyes as most humanoids were blissfully unaware of their pre-eminence in the Milky Way galaxy.

"Definitively not," Yaelat replied this time, giving Mel'Taya a sidelong stare. "That thing on its mouth is some kind of psychogenic shield —"

"Yes, we breed them. And to breathe with. The atmosphere here is *p'knarra* — poison."

"That would explain the reek," Mel'Taya said dryly.

"What are your people doing here?" Seantie probed. "And why should we trust you? You've already said it's your right to lie to us."

"I have only these," the creature held up its hands and flexed the last digits of its fingers. Sharp retractable claws, nearly the length of its long hands, slid from the soft sheaths of its fingertips, supplying it suddenly with eight slender, six-inch long, double-edged daggers. Mel'Taya drew a sibilant breath.

"With a hard metal chopping utensil, I can cut them. Blunt them. I've given you all else, and that one," it motioned with one long arm toward Mel'Taya, its startling talons still outstretched, prompting the Andorian to skip back out of their reach, "knows well how to kill my people." The Husnock retracted its knifelike claws, reaching up to touch its soft, colorful cheeks and the creature that covered its lower face. The thing twined tentacles around the Husnock's fingers and made a soft humming noise; "*m'han'rt* does not work well against your weapon. We are here in *greezah'dr* — wolf pack ships, for it is our time of *jah'parra*."

"And what would *that* be, once it's had time to recuperate?" the Grazerite lowered himself gingerly onto the couch near the cross-legged Husnock, after tentatively picking up what the alien had called a communication device and tucking it carefully into one of the potted plants scattered about the tastefully-decorated living room.

"Jah'parra is the blessed time of separation. Once every ten revolutions of the planet from which we are born around its star, new Husnock must have the jah'parra. But before it is allowed, those capable of the function must come together in the greezah. Prove ourselves worthy — return with territory, slaves, technology, something to benefit the Whole. If this we cannot do, if we show compunction in the greezah, we

are unfit.

"I am unfit. Insane. There is no mercy in the universe of nature; mercy is madness, is perverted." 'Dan moved its head in an indecipherable motion; "Perhaps you are not so stupid as I first thought, after all. My own people do not trust me — they would kill me if they could. If you would not trust me either, then you may be wise."

"Separation?" Mel'Taya queried.

"To bring forth young."

"To mate," Seantie offered. The Husnock hissed and recoiled as far as its barrel-shaped body could go into the intricately embroidered cushions behind it.

"No! No such vulgar thing — that is the filthy offense of the Unwhole! The way of being of lesser forms. Husnock are *Husnock* only, being from being, Undivided. Whole!"

"You're...?" Yaelat interrupted, gaping at the creature in unveiled horror. "Your entire...this nasty cultural belief-system you've got revolves around the fact that you're *parthenogenetic*?"

'Dan considered him for a long moment, then answered proudly in the affirmative.

"You murder, maim, and enslave others because their reproductive systems are different?" Seantie shook her head slowly, swallowing hard; the preserved Klingon food that the hungry team had found in the well-stocked

pantry appeared to be threatening to come back up. "That is insanity!"

"You know of a *sane* reason for murdering, maiming, and enslavement? Do tell," Bhopest replied sardonically. "And it sounded to me like this wolf pack thing is as much for plunder and territory as anything else. The whole pure-untarnished-Undivided gibberish makes as good an excuse for that sort of behavior as any other."

Mel'Taya nodded. "It's said that my people did as much in our past. I don't think I'd believe any of you if you claimed that yours hadn't. The arcane human belief in the need to remember the past be damned — *we* destroyed anything that might tempt us to try it again!"

Modern Andorians were also brought up in such a manner that real or perceived offenses were addressed immediately. Offenses deemed to be real by a council of three uninvolved spectators were sometimes addressed lethally, but it was a strict Andorian law that all real or perceived offenses had to be dealt with without any consequent holding of grudges. Those who held grudges among Andorian people were considered to be insane, and were treated as such.

There was no such thing as ancient Andorian history. Their modern calendar possessed a count of no more than six hundred and twenty-five Andorian Standard years. That was how long ago the eldest

daughter of the ruling Thalassan clan had killed her mother, in order to stop the endless campaigns of genocide that cruel matriarch and her clan had foisted on every Andorian not of the then-dominant Thalassan race, and the continual raids and enslavement her clan had mandated for Thalassans of other clans.

Exactly how the predecessors of Lor'vela, the matricide whom modern Andorians hailed as part-saint, part-goddess, had managed to create such an overarching, socially destructive autocracy in the glacial wastes of Andoria was not clear. Lor'vela, it was said, while still in firm control of the kingdom her predecessors had shed lakes of blood to found, had mandated the dismantlement of all weapons of mass destruction and internment camps, made the institution of slavery a capital offense, disarmed and disbanded the military regime her mother cherished, and destroyed both her clan's records, and all other historical documentation that existed prior to the day she killed her mother.

The co-founding of the United Federation of Planets was the only accomplishment that the fierce, proud Andorian people treasured as much as they did the actions of the semi-mythical Lor'vela.

Seantie shook her head at Mel'Taya. "Murdering, maiming, and enslavement at warp speeds, with *disruptors* —"

"Or with steel against stone, or chariots against infantry, or projectile weapons against knives. It's all just a matter of degree, really." Mel'Taya's tone was sad. "And how did it end, finally, for any of us? When one person in the group bent on murder and enslavement stood up and said *no more!* We would not be here otherwise, ourselves." The *chae-na* inclined its head at the Husnock, and went on:

"It's right about this, at least. The alien's not a captive, it's a gift, and one we can't afford not to accept." Mel'Taya pulled the sharp Andorian knife out of its scabbard and motioned for the Husnock to move off the couch and spread out its talons on the parquet floor. The Husnock reached for the *hrisal*; the *Enterprise's* head of security pulled the knife out of 'Dan's reach.

The perfectly disparate individuals that both merited the appellation *it* stared at one another in perfect distrust.

The Grazerite broke the tension. "And we should get away from here; they might have ways to track that communication device he gave us. We need to find the others —"

"Others? There are *others* of your kind here?" the Husnock seemed alarmed at this. Seantie frowned at the creature.

"Yes. We split into two parties after beaming down."

"Where are these others?" the Husnock asked,

watching Mel'Taya sheathe the *hrisal*.

"They were going to check the science complex." Seantie pulled out her communicator and began to flip it open. Mel'Taya reached over and pulled it out of her hand, snapping it closed, at the same time the alien cried; "No!"

"I'm afraid these things will be able to home in on our whereabouts if we try to contact the other team by communicator," Mel'Taya explained. The Husnock, 'Dan, expounded:

"My people found things of use in that complex; they were focused on this alone, and that is how I escaped their scrutiny. They will be looking for me — I believe they have suspected that I am insane since we began this journey — but if they have your others..." its eyes roved over and between them coldly; "perhaps your others are dead now. You should hope that they died quickly."

As a unit, all four of the humanoids shook their heads at the Husnock. "You must help us find our crewmembers. Even if they are dead, we *cannot* leave them. Come to that, you need to help us understand how to overcome or evade your people." Mel'Taya offered the Husnock the sort of mirthless smile that Andorians appeared to be schooled in from birth. "That is, *if* you want us to free you in turn. You must believe us when we say that there is no way that we can, otherwise."

'Dan regarded the *Enterprise* officers with another cool, evaluative stare. "Would you be so severely disciplined, just for leaving the enslaved and the broken behind? Because you should understand, that is my people's proposal for yours. The thing in the science complex, it will break their minds. Better that you should free your ship from the Husnock ambush."

"Ambush?" Mel'Taya hissed in alarm.

"*Disciplined?*" Seantie spat out; "Is punishment the only way your people have of —"

"What do you mean, break their minds?" Bhopest inquired, horrified.

"Free the ship?" Yaelat interrupted, folding his arms across his chest crossly; "All *five* of us?"

The Husnock closed all of its eyes momentarily and heaved a sigh, making the organism on its face squirm and twist. "To be Whole is to obey. To do those things I cannot do. My people will not cease to hunt me until they have punished me; perhaps it is that they are so busy with yours that it seems they have stopped, but they have not." 'Dan focused on Yaelat when its eyes opened again; the empath's present could feel the depth of the tiredness emanating from this otherwise mind-blind creature:

"And I believe we could free your ship, but..." it looked away from the varied members of the halved *Enterprise* landing party, drawing its legs up to either

side of its torso in a gesture that might have been anxiety, discomfiture, or both; "for that, we will need certain equipment, and —"

"And let me guess, *that* would be found in the Science Complex," Bhopest interrupted. The Husnock made a noise that their translators read as an affirmative response tinged with a combination of fear and frustration.

"But I will help you." 'Dan raised its gaze to Seantie, blinking in a way that caused the Betazoid woman a crazed moment's thought that the Husnock was flirting with her. "And I would have you teach me what ways there are besides punishment or the fear of death that could compel such imprudent conduct, because I cannot understand why it should torment me that I can imagine none."

Chapter Five

Their captors turned off the deadly force field and the technician entered, disruptor leveled and talons partly extended, at about the same time as Captain Ingram's wounded crewmen began to stir and make sounds of pain. T'Dani knelt near them, her Vulcan healer's mind trying to keep the humans as calm and comfortable as she could with absolutely no medical supplies or instrumentation to work with.

Ingram came to her feet as the field was switched off, raising her hands palm-outward and lowering her head in what a humanoid would read as submission, without removing her gaze from the vicious creature. What these things would or wouldn't see in the gestures she didn't know, but she wanted them to take her first — the only tactic available to her was to sacrifice herself in order to try and buy time for her crew, and she intended to use it.

There was no longer any doubt as to what this laboratory housed, or what the depraved aliens wanted to use it for. Attempting to force its settings off of the mild, theoretically therapeutic alignments that the scientists here had managed to calibrate into it for their experiments — settings it had never originally been

designed for; the thing was a tool of interrogation and torture — had apparently caused the instrument to reboot itself in such a way that its settings now seemed to be over-modified in the opposite direction.

Ingram hoped her last minutes would be painless, but somehow she doubted it. She wished she could say goodbye to Colin — but no, that wasn't true, there was no satisfactory goodbye there, she loved him too much.

When their captors had strapped their final wounded comrade into one of the therapy chairs, the technician had spent no more than ten feverish minutes manipulating controls. A horror show composed of recollections of alien and humanoid gore and slaughter, terror and suffering, only just visible to Captain Ingram and T'Dani from their position in the storeroom, played out on the instrument's screens. Within those ten minutes, the wounded alien had succumbed to death, as the mind sifter triggered failure after failure in autonomic brain areas it wasn't even supposed to be able to access.

Conversation between the technicians and their overseer had revealed that the creatures wanted to use the machine to produce docile, willing slaves for use on planets with oxygen atmospheres, which were potentially lethal to the aliens themselves. Easier to transport and, ultimately, to keep creatures that were docile. The aliens called themselves *Husnock*, and

breathed an ammonia-rich nitrogen sulfide atmosphere, somehow provided for them by the non-sentient creatures they wore over their lower face. The only other race Captain Ingram knew of who breathed nitrogen sulfide were Benzites, a gentle, contemplative people who would be just as horrified by the Husnock as she currently was.

Those humanoids that weren't docile, the Husnock simply destroyed, hence the courtyard full of dead Klingons. From conversation between technician and overseer, Captain Ingram also gathered that the Husnock were confused by the behavior of the knots and clusters of humanoids in this particular sector of the galaxy; why, for instance, they should be so incomprehensibly combative that some of them were, apparently, not docile even when happy or at rest. It was to this inconceivable trait that the Starfleet officers' Husnock captors ascribed the apparent failure of the mind-sifter on their companion.

The Husnock had argued among themselves whether the mind sifter's capabilities were simply incompatible with their own, superior brain patterns, or whether its mechanisms were just generally altogether out of the range they desired for it. Their overseer finally settled the question by proclaiming that only a test on a slave-species would resolve the subject — and that there were plenty of slave-subjects available to work out the

instrument's defects on.

This statement had horrified the captain of the *Enterprise*. Had they somehow captured her ship and crew? Or did the Husnock merely consider four humanoids *plenty*? The aliens were unresponsive to her pleas and questions on the subject, the way a busy person might be unresponsive to a restive pet.

Now the technician tried to move past Captain Ingram toward her injured crew members. The captain of the *Enterprise* responded by stepping directly into its path. Three steps into this grim dance, the irritated technician raised its clawed hand to strike her out of the way.

"Gr'bar'mahl! If the being wishes to assist us," the overseer brought an end to the situation in the cell with what the translator decoded as a chuckle, "let it!"

Josi was mistaken in her first evaluation of what the twenty little ships that surrounded the *Enterprise* had been attempting to do. The starship wasn't under attack — it was being held in stasis by a technology unrecognizable from anywhere in the Alpha or Beta quadrants of the Milky Way Galaxy. Nor was the unknown stasis technology anything that the Federation had experienced in its brief, eerie, often violent encounters in the Delphic Expanse, either.

The closest match the starship's great electronic

brain could conjure up was the confining energy webs sometimes used by the Tholians in order to keep perceived enemies in traction. However, the webs of the delicate non-humanoid, insectile, methane breathing Tholians were microscopically permeable, and didn't inhibit the transfer or flow of energy the way that this net did.

From the scant data that the *Enterprise* sensors were finally able to obtain, the computer theorized that the alien netting functioned by restraining the normal fluctuation of Higgs bosons in targeted areas — an unheard-of proposition. It had long been postulated that monkeying around with the Higgs, which granted all other subatomic particles in existence their mass, could tear the fabric of the Universe apart.

Each of the twenty tiny ships belonging to their current, unknown adversary sent out violet-red beams, whose provenance and composition the scanners and computers of the starship could not accurately identify, in multiple directions. Those beams appeared to link together in a moving, constantly shifting, complex geometric dance, the combined force of which touched the *Enterprise* nowhere. The shifting beams acted, instead, to turn the area of space they encompassed into a gravimetric null point.

Not only was the starship effectively kept from escaping this net, but there was no way to maneuver

within it, so the use of escape pods or shuttles to the surface was out of the question. Nor could the *Enterprise* send messages anywhere outside the null point created by this mesh; they all bounced back, painfully amplified. However, prior to the appearance of the pugnacious little ships, the *Enterprise* had dispatched roughly twenty minutes of broad-band informational communiqués, which Josi desperately hoped would constitute a request for aid by someone. She really didn't care who, as long as they were even just vaguely allied with the Federation's interests.

Not that, at this juncture, she'd turn her nose up at Orion or Kemanite profiteers who'd expect remuneration in return for aid. At the very least, Josi hoped that the communiqués *Enterprise* had sent out before the boson-net-wielding ships showed up would pique anybody's curiosity enough that they'd come looking, like bystanders at an air car wreck, and pass the fascinating conundrum of the starship's helpless status on from a safe distance. Of course, the *Enterprise's* executive officer had no idea how many of the little ships were required to maintain something like a boson null-field around a larger vessel, and it would be ill payment to put a potential rescuer into the same helpless position that the crew of the *Enterprise* had found itself in for the past ten hours.

Not that there was anything the starship's crew could

do about its predicament, or anyone else's. All weapons still functioned, but EmJay had determined that anything fired off inside the mesh would most likely remain inside the mesh, including the destructive force of phasers, photon torpedoes, or antimatter. Attempting to fight off their captors — whose little ships had been so swift and agile that targeting them was like trying to shoot down gnats with a water pistol — would cause the *Enterprise* to immolate itself.

Which, depending upon the intent of the starship's captors, Josi kept as a final option anyway. There were any number of things that humanoids would rather die than allow themselves to be forced to live with.

Fortunately, the gravimetric null space didn't affect the starship's shielding. Even though the crew of the *Enterprise* found itself stuck at an impasse, the aliens were not free to beam their own personnel or weaponry aboard the starship — unless, of course, they had some sort of technology capable of beaming through shields ameliorated by fluctuating psionic waves, which Josi doubted. If they could, they would surely have been here by now. Josi silently blessed the absent telepath who'd reinforced the starship's shielding using psionics.

Of course, unless the *Enterprise* was able to somehow eventually get through the net, all the aliens really had to do was tow it away, and the crew with it. Considering the level of technology that must lie behind

the unheard-of boson null net, Josi wouldn't be surprised to learn that their alien captors also possessed some technology, somewhere, that would allow them to enter the *Enterprise* with no more effort than was required for a man to open a packet of field rations. What it was that the aliens planned to do with the starship — with the crew of the *Enterprise* — the XO didn't like to think, hence the consideration of the self-destruct sequence as a viable tactical option.

The scanners, unlike either the propulsion or the weapons, were still entirely workable, though not to scan the little ships, which had an odd shielding like nothing the Federation had ever seen before, a fact that didn't surprise Josi a bit considering what the ships were holding them immobile with. She was currently using the scanners to track the movements of their people on the planet.

The starship's scanners could trace individual communication devices. The awful truth was that the number of humanoid life-signs on the planet no longer matched the number of Starfleet communication devices, and the presence of the devices gave absolutely no indication of exactly which of their landing party members' lives had been snuffed out by the entirely unknown invading force — communication devices, after all, were simple disposable electronic gadgets, like 'padds or tricorders.

Should they get through this, Felingaili determined to press Starfleet to come up with personal sensors capable of at least roughly determining a humanoid life sign's particular race, and whether it was dead or alive. She thought they used to actually have something like that, way back before the time of Zephraim Cochrane, when electronics weren't so easily replicated.

However, the *movements* of the communicators could also be tracked, and she had put them onto the bridge's pull-down semi-holographic screen to keep an eye on, in a not-to-scale representation of the activities of their people on the planet below. It hadn't taken long to see that eight of the communicators had ceased all movement after the first hour, but maintained position in or near the science complex, while four of them did move, at least occasionally.

Josi tried hard to keep her mind wrapped around the fact that lack of movement didn't, necessarily, denote lack of life. If she had even a moment's chance, she'd shuttle down the squad of a dozen security personnel she had waiting for that command. Unfortunately, the thing that might give her that chance hadn't yet appeared.

T'Dani wasn't sure which was worse; hearing Captain Ingram alternately sobbing out the names of the people she loved and screaming, being stuck behind a lethal force field that allowed her to do absolutely

nothing about the torment her friend was undergoing, or having to listen as their awful captors discussed what it was they were learning from their torture as they wrung out the mind of the captain of the *Enterprise* like a shower sponge.

Awful memories of her own rose up to torment T'Dani at the sounds her captain was making; months upon months of memories, too much to have had it all burned out of her mind as a child, though she'd begged them and pleaded for the relief of *falara*.

"These slave-race store memories strangely. They have no single memory area, but a little is stored everywhere. Different emotions in different contexts are scattered throughout the cortex, and also below, and many emotions are mixed, not one thing only."

"The brain is inferior. We want to be taking out emotions of what makes fight, and enhance emotions of fear, fear of things in life that will make them want to turn to those who are superior for solace. Make them young clones again, make them forget."

"Difficult, the way these are mixed, to make them believe as young clones believe without also causing them to behave the way young clones behave. See here? This is what their race would call a child's memory of fear, but there is anger here, too. Fear makes this slave-race angry."

"Or this slave itself. It may be that its brain is

damaged; remember how it interfered when you tried to take its imperfect ones to test? All angry memories should be taken until only dependence emotions remain."

The technician shook its head. "Infant humanoids make worthless slaves, Omi'Ohaly."

"Then find and feed its fears until it will submit." The overseer's tone brooked no refusal, true of the tone behind the vast majority of Husnock language.

The technician tweaked the controls. The screen filled with reel after reel of Captain Ingram's vivid memories. The technician paused them on the seventh reel, and manipulated another set of controls in attempt to modify them. They warped and twisted like images seen in fun-house mirrors, and the instrument whined as it pulled power in an attempt to keep them that way. Captain Ingram fought the machine, and the Husnock had not yet determined a useful way to force her to quit. To make someone like Renee stop fighting required that damage be inflicted; T'Dani could have told them that, had they asked.

They didn't ask. The Husnock technician instead made a noise that translated as an irritated sigh and raised the affect setting.

The captain of the *Enterprise* screamed as arbitrary sets of her memories were warped into outlandish, irrelevant sets of haphazard neural patterns that

destroyed neuroglial cells and altered the texture and faculty of her brain. She couldn't fight against that level of nerve tissue manipulation — they had already determined as much.

The technician made another sound of annoyance and erased that set of memories from the screen. They'd determined early in their torture of the human woman that the distorted, random mass of memories, and its accompanying brain damage, was useless as a tool of control. As far as T'Dani could tell, the Husnock did not appear to understand what the inventors of this machine had known before they had even devised it; stored memories were already warped, having been stored only after being filtered through screens of learned perception and personal emotion. The surest way to form a memory that could control another was to heighten or clarify that memory, not warp it further.

T'Dani shuddered. If they put her into that chair, she'd certainly show them the reality of that particular psycho-physiologic effect of humanoid memory. She'd have no choice. She needed to try to kill them and escape before they got that chance, or die trying.

"Fear does not make this one submit. It makes it try harder to resist."

"But is there any one thing it fears above all?" the overseer inquired.

The technician shrugged, pulled another reel of

memories out of Captain Ingram's mind, and raised a different component of the instrument's affect capacity, distorting the color range on the screen until a certain one stood out:

"The difference in texture and color-emphasis shows different emotional ranges in these animals. The computer says that *this* range," the Husnock technician motioned at part of the screen, "is the spectrum of fear in minds like this." It spooled through a number of different memories to make its point. "You see how *that* color is always flat —"

"Not *here*!" the overseer stood suddenly and lunged at the screen. The technician hissed.

"Its memories of the thing are vulgar, Omi'Ohaly. What is there in that to make even a slave fear?"

"The thing shrieks when you take them away."

"And then *this* happens," the technician flipped a switch, and Captain Ingram screamed again — T'Dani, concerned because her best friend had stopped speaking in the pauses between screams, could hear the difference in the sound. "This color, *here*, that flared when I removed the other? That is rage."

"Then *remove* the rage!" the creature the technician referred to as Omi'Ohaly reached over and modified the controls brusquely.

Ingram didn't scream this time; she convulsed against the unyielding straps that held her to the chair

instead. Both aliens turned to watch her with obvious interest until the convulsions stopped and both the screen, and Captain Ingram's face, went gray.

Chapter Six

"Commander! Ships —" Demora began.

EmJay overrode her; "Two of them. Relatively small, but armed to the teeth; I'd say they were Conjunction Ships. They're still fairly far out, but they're heading this way!"

Josi turned away from the holographic screen's agonizingly snail-like pursuit of the landing party's movements, toward the main viewscreen. "Magnify!" she snapped, taking a seat in the central command chair and grasping the padded tips of the arms, where there were no control modules, in a death grip.

More pugnacious little alien ships, come to tow them away? Felingaili hated the pragmatic, pessimistic bent of her own mind sometimes, but much as she tried to control and modify it, it was the mind she'd been born with; she had no control over the fact that she had Orion blood, Orion genes, or the tendencies that those things spawned.

A magnification of two hundred thousand gave everyone on the bridge a clear view of what were obviously Federation Conjunction Ships, marked with Starfleet identification alphanumerics in the dominant written language of their own planet. As per standard

operations procedures for all Federated vessels — transport, exploratory, tactical, or scientific — their running-light patterns also told both their names, and their port of origin.

It had been a hobby of Josi Felingaili's as a child, learning to read the names of ships from their running-light patterns, and daydreaming about joining Starfleet — hobbies and daydreams beneficently encouraged by her adoptive parents. Josi's Starfleet minor was engineering; she loved the elegance and sheer wonder of spacefaring vessels.

The Conjunction Ships headed toward the *Enterprise* were the *Fang* and the *Fearless* — *Cleef* out of the shipyards scattered among the Van Allen belt that surrounded the Cygnus system, and *Tashrun* out of the excellent dry docks that were part of the extensive station that orbited Vulcan, respectively. Conjunction Ships were Federation vessels answerable, not to Starfleet, but to their respective Federation governments. Conjunction Ships tended to be light- to medium -heavy vessels outfitted with whatever specialized Starfleet technology a particular Federation world determined would make them efficient defensive vehicles of that world's star system. The only mandate upon them was that they respond when Starfleet or the Federation called for backup of any kind, anywhere, anytime.

How these two particular ships had heard the

Enterprise's general hail regarding Archanis Four, Felingaili couldn't imagine. They were a long, long way outside their home ranges, which were at either side of the juncture between the Alpha and Beta quadrants. The *Enterprise's* XO sincerely hoped she'd get a chance to ask somebody about it later.

Josi recalled that the medium-heavy Vulcan Conjunction *Tashrun* had unusually powerful warp and transporter capacity, while the little Tellarite *Cleef* was nearly as fast and maneuverable as the vessels that currently held the *Enterprise*. They would have halted, Josi was certain, to discuss tactics and strategy, to scan the alien ships that held the Federation Starship, and (Josi desperately hoped) to call in more backup.

It was what she would have done. She would also not come in as a pair; she'd separate and... well, do what they were currently doing.

"Commander, the Conjunction Ships are coming toward us at warp four in a pincer movement." Demora's pleasant contralto announced what was obvious to everyone looking at the viewscreen, which was everybody on the bridge, as there was absolutely nothing else for them to do.

Josi bounced out of the command chair as though it had been electrified. "Hail, hail, the gang's all here! When the Conjunction Ships try to draw off these little *chesh-mach*, break out of their hold if you can, Marco.

Demora, the second we get out of this net, contact those security personnel in shuttle bay one and tell them to launch, then go in aid of both Conjunctions — we *still* don't know what sort of weapons these aliens might have. Ignore every damn thing else. EmJay, when we're out of this net, you have my permission to fire at the little *ne'hch* at will."

"Aye, Commander," the pair at helm and navigation said in neat tandem, turning their eyes unwaveringly toward their displays. EmJay responded in the affirmative a split second later. Josi, and the rest of the bridge crew grew quiet, watching the viewscreen avidly as it tracked the Conjunction Ships.

Cleef increased its warp by two, then dropped down into impulse in what looked like a single fluid motion, an intricate maneuver that Josi knew firsthand required considerable proficiency on the part of a multi-team helm and navigation crew. The *Fang* came at the alien ships that held the *Enterprise* from above, spinning as it came, strafing the alien ships with a prolonged torrent of phaser fire. It was fit with parallel phaser and torpedo cannons along the full perimeter of its hull, and the whirling discharge laced out around the *Enterprise*, from the tips of the sensors at the front of the saucer, around the curves and contours of the *Excelsior*-class vessel both fore and aft, and back to the plasma-exhaust ejectors at the tips of the nacelles in a seamless, tailor-

cut suit of fire.

Tellarites *did* enjoy dramatic entrances.

Five of the alien ships went up in pyrotechnic splendor, and the big starship rocked on her haunches.

"Shields holding!" EmJay announced.

"We've got no significant traction, Commander," Marco snarled.

"No openings in the net!" Demora said.

"Try and get us out of this, Marco!" Josi commanded.

"Trying, Commander." Marco manipulated his board, then hit it with a fist, shaking his head as the felt-not-heard whine of the great engines fell to nothing beneath Josi's feet. "Sorry, Commander; no response."

Josi looked back up at the screen. The violet-red mesh had already reasserted itself in the area where the destroyed ships had been. *Fang* warped away in a long loop and came back for another pass from below the *Enterprise* just as the *Fearless* sent a barrage of torpedoes at the alien vessels.

Five of the little ships that had been targeted by the *Fearless* jumped away from the *Enterprise* like hyperactive fleas. Two of them weren't fast enough, and the Vulcan ship's scalpel-precise torpedoes, heavily-modified experimental weapons theoretically designed to effect the quantum rather than just the photonic range present in their targets, blew them into glittering clouds

of space dust.

This time, the *Enterprise* didn't merely rock in response to heavy weapons fire occurring so near her hull; some alarming effect native to the experimental weapons the *Tashrun* carried caused all systems on the ship to go eerily blank and silent for nearly ten seconds. Josi found herself holding her breath until the bridge light, heat, air, and various ship's systems reasserted themselves. Should they make it out of this, she'd have to remember to tell the commander of the *Fearless* about these undesirable effects caused by their experimental weaponry.

The tiny alien ships that remained reasserted their hold on the *Enterprise* within microseconds. Josi wasn't the only person present on the bridge to respond to this with a frustrated snarl. The three alien ships that remained of the five which had leapt free from the net entwining the *Enterprise* went after the *Tashrun*. The weaponry they brought to bear gave off an eerie, poison-yellow glow.

The remaining unfriendly vessels around the *Enterprise* evaded the *Cleef's* next pass by engaging in a whirling dance along the lines of the net now stretched taut and thin around the starship, as if they could move along its strings at warp speed, the way electrons moved from shell to shell in an atom.

Warp travel was neither believed in nor invented in

any planetary culture, until somebody finally figured out that the only way an electron could release its photons to travel at the speed of light was when the electron itself was moving faster than the photons it liberated. Electrons encased an atom in a warp shell. Utilizing focused crystalline matrices that could liberate mass electrons with the energy obtained from the interaction of matter and antimatter, a warp shell extensive enough to transport a vessel at varying electron speeds was possible.

All of this was, of course, why it erroneously appeared to pre-warp cultures that an electron could exist in two places at the same time. The unwelcome ships surrounding the *Enterprise* presented the same relativistic mirage, one which the sensors and viewscreens of any warp-capable vessel were calibrated to filter out.

All of the alien ships fired at the *Cleef* as it passed overhead. The Federation Conjunction Ship ignored the disruptor beams the little alien vessels sent winging after her as she passed; relative to the speed at which the Tellarite vessel was moving, the ships holding on to the *Enterprise* like a team of small ospreys with a prize king salmon were stationary, after all. *Cleef* concentrated its attentions, instead, on the three vessels targeting the *Tashrun*. It managed to turn one of the alien ships into hot metallic slag just as the *Tashrun* began its own turn

back toward the *Enterprise*.

The *Cleef* ceased firing and arced to starboard to let the Vulcan ship pass. As though they had somehow divined what the *Fang* would do, the two tiny alien ships made that convulsive flea-jump maneuver again, directly into the little Tellarite vessel's path. The alien ships moved with the *Cleef*, as though somehow riding on the wake of its passage, spinning a red-violet net around it and pulling the threads tight, whipping the Tellarite ship around viciously and dragging it to a stop.

Before Josi could order a channel opened to try and signal the *Fang*, the Tellarites fired on their tormentors.

The *Enterprise's* XO wrapped her arms around her midsection and keened softly as the Tellarite Conjunction Ship, all her crew, and the alien vessels that had attempted to detain the *Cleef*, turned into a miniature nova. She did not look away from the screen, as most of the *Enterprise* bridge crew did in horror — she refused to dishonor the dead that way.

A deep veneration of courage was an Orion psychological trait. Josi Felingaili was Orion. As much as possible, her elderly human foster parents, who had passed away before they had seen her graduate the Academy, had raised her as an Orion, and had even given her an Orion last name — a largely meaningless last name, though it had meant something to them to bequeath it to her, and she'd loved them for it.

The woman whose ostensibly Orion last name meant *first female girl* had not looked away from her foster parent's deaths, either. And even when she could not personally be there, she made certain that someone honored their graves with flowers throughout that spring month that bore their last names — *April*, Robert and Sarah. She sent a silent thought to the crew of the *Cleef* now; *you took them with you. I know what that would have meant to you. We will meet some day, you and I.*

The *Fearless* targeted the alien ships around the *Enterprise* again on its pass back. This time, it used the *Cleef's* tactic of a sudden warp burst and a spiraling near-entry, indisputably the *Tashrun* commander's means of honoring the sacrificed crew of the *Fang*. The alien ships slid along their quantum strings again, but the *Tashrun's* weaponry still obliterated one of them. That whirling stream of fire was a difficult, if not impossible, tactic to evade.

But this wasn't what made Josi's mouth fall open in shock.

That effect was caused by the super-heavy bird of prey decloaking off the *Enterprise's* port bow, almost close enough to touch the minute alien vessels. The *QhonDoq* — its name written proudly across its hull in sparkling gold letters; *Assassin's Blade* — sprayed fire over the little ships on the *Enterprise's* starboard side, and the starship shuddered and groaned under the

impact. Five of the alien vessels simply vaporized. The Federation starship's shields and surface deflectors threw silver-blue foxfire back at the *QhonDoq*, like a thank-you gift composed of glittering positronic confetti.

"Shields down sixty percent, but holding!" EmJay announced.

Then the big Klingon cruiser locked onto *Enterprise* with its forward tractor beams and literally dragged her out of the arms of her alien tormentors.

"I'll take that!" Josi snarled. "Demora! Ground crew *now*!" and, if she was given any chance at all, Felingaili mused to herself fiercely, she was going to personally reward the captain of that Klingon ship.

The bird of prey's tractor beam didn't affect the *Enterprise's* shield capacity, but the starship's shields needed to be lowered before the *Enterprise* could send the shuttle down. The *QhonDoq* released the *Enterprise* as it sensed her shields dropping.

The few remaining alien vessels attempted to surround and encase both the Klingon vessel and the Federation one, like a man with a tiny mouth confronted by an enormous sandwich whose layers he could not separate. The big ships were so near together that plasma had flowed in a glistening wave between shields and tractor beam, before the *Enterprise* had dropped her shields and the Klingon bird of prey released the starship.

The *Fearless* returned for another spiraling pass...

And the remaining four tiny hostile ships vanished.

"Ensign!" Josi snapped at the young man on communications — she didn't know his name, and the XO allowed herself a second of worry for Yaelat; "Open a split channel so that I can send our thanks and compliments to the *Tashrun* and the *QhonDoq*." She very much wished that there was still a *Cleef* to send them out to, too.

Chapter Seven

Carl wept when they hauled him out of the cell and put him into the chair. T'Dani found the fact that she was unable to emulate her captain, and make their torturers take herself rather than her sorely-wounded, semiconscious crewmate, to be a bitter grief. The sound of his agony tore at her heart, but she had to focus on making certain that Captain Ingram's autonomic nervous system continued to function.

The captain of the *Enterprise* was in a waking coma, the eerie, sometimes continuous vegetative state found in the severely brain damaged. Mind-melding with someone in such a state was dangerous for both parties, but wouldn't be as dangerous for Captain Ingram, the part-Vulcan physician figured, as ceasing to breathe would be.

Humanoid cerebrums possessed a remarkable capacity to mend themselves, having evolved to store a tiny bit of everything everywhere — conscious memories, intuition receptors, the pathways of awareness. Such minds shared certain functions typically considered non-cerebral with cerebral areas, and vice-versa. Humanoid parietal lobes, somehow all simian-derived even in races ostensibly evolved on

planets that included no simian simulacrum living or extinct, contained motor-function neurons once thought to be found solely in the cerebellum, and the cerebellum itself was important for regulating emotional experience, even in humanoid races with entirely non-simian brain regions.

Human brains were particularly adept in their self-repair capacity — it was one of the trademarks of humans, that they were capable of eternally enhancing themselves, a trait that most other humanoid races found fascinating, and one which many sought to emulate, T'Dani's mother's people among those. Unlike the cells found in the brains of many humanoids, to which any injury was invariably irreversible or even fatal, human cerebral cells could build entirely new pathways around injured areas, to limit or even wholly reverse crippling damage.

This was always true, unless the scope of injury involved over thirty-three percent of the total area of the outer cortex of the brain. That sort of large-scale damage showed up as a specific trait-set in all humanoids: Inward curling of limbs at rest; difficulty in walking, balancing, and swallowing; essential personality and memory loss; the sort of waking-sleep T'Dani currently saw in Captain Ingram; and, finally, the destruction of vital links between autonomic nervous functions.

It was this mortally final condition that T'Dani hoped to allay in the captain of the *Enterprise*. If they could get out of here and back to the ship — assuming that the ship itself hadn't been demolished by the spaceborne companions of these awful creatures, a condition that T'Dani refused to speculate on, because to do so would accomplish nothing — there were ways to help Captain Ingram. T'Dani had been born with a great skill at mind-melding, but she'd never sought — had never thought she'd *needed* — to improve it further. Her innate aptitude had been enough to qualify her as a Vulcan healer.

The part-Vulcan doctor regretted her decision not to refine her inborn telepathy now. She'd spent so much of Ingram's youth in her presence that she wanted to be able to give those memories back, along with their associated motor, social, emotional, and intellectual skills. Unfortunately, T'Dani wasn't personally capable of performing this feat unaided.

She'd never had any real interest in developing the stringent mental discipline of *t'san s'at* that many Vulcans possessed, beginning with the pre-pubescent initiation rite of *kahs-wan*, from which some initiates never returned. She'd had her own personal rite of agony at a very young age, and had absolutely no desire to experience it, or anything remotely like it, ever again.

Kahs-wan was the accepted cultural indicator that

Vulcans were fit to reproduce, something T'Dani swore she would never do, even though she had passed the *kahs-wan* easily in the relatively rich, lush temperate forests of Nisus. She'd really only taken on the challenge of *kahs-wan* because Renee Ingram had also wanted to try it. Renee had loved everything about the outdoors, according to her adoptive parents, from the first time she'd crawled out of her cradle.

Neither of T'Dani's own parents had ever sought to influence her decisions for her life in either the human or the Vulcan direction. Both had known, since the day that their delicate, intense, tow-haired and lapis-eyed jewel of a daughter was born, that she was some fey changeling, which neither of them would ever fully comprehend but could only love and accept on her own terms — unlike her younger brother Sanial, who had studied at the great psionic temple at Mount Selaya on Vulcan since fulfilling his own *kahs-wan* at thirteen Nisean years of age.

He was now an upper-level priest there. That would be where T'Dani would have her friend taken, if either of them lived through this nightmare. The CMO knew from unpleasant personal experience just what seemingly irreparable levels of damage they could amend in that holy place.

It seemed more and more unlikely, however, that *any* of them would survive at the hands of these beasts.

The creatures were exploring the use of fear as a form of control, and it seemed that Carl had a fear of water in general, and a phobic terror of drowning. The merciless creatures could play on this with ease since, unable to breathe through his broken nose, his sinuses flowing with blood and lachrymal fluid, he actually was in imminent danger of drowning himself.

T'Dani pulled herself back from Captain Ingram hesitantly — Renee should be out of immediate danger now, the doctor hoped — and crowded as close to the deadly force-field as she dared, lifting her trained singer's voice to rise over Carl's own horrified, gurgling screams:

"Stop crying, Carl! You *must* stop, you're making your situation worse. Carl! Listen to me! Can you hear me? You —"

With a slap of its hand against the whip-like apparatus it wore diagonally across its body, one of the technicians turned off the field in front of the cell they were holding their prisoners in, and strode into the cell. T'Dani, furious, strode forward firmly to encounter it, met the fall of its daggered hand by catching its thick, multi-jointed wrist in both of her own deceptively delicate hands, and used the short creature's own forward momentum to flip it onto its back as hard as she could manage. These aliens, she had learned not long after the attack on the landing party had commenced, had

exceptionally brittle bones.

The CMO of the *Enterprise* was petite and fine-boned herself. She was also incredibly powerful for her size — a gift of her mother's genetics that she strove to keep well-hidden. A weapon was magnitudes more effective when it came as a surprise. One Vulcan technique she was adept in was the martial art of *tal-shaya*; her strong healer's hands had already dispatched two of the Husnock in this fashion.

She intended to do so again.

Something inside of the alien popped as its bones cracked against the unyielding steel-reinforced concrete floor, and it looked up at her in evident surprise with two of its ecru-colored eyes, the others closed in an obvious expression of pain.

There weren't many stronger races in the galaxy than Vulcans. All of the strongest of the Milky Way's humanoid races, including T'Dani's mother's people, had evolved in some sort of bleak, desolate wasteland whose forbidding environment and, often, high planetary gravities or pressures required prodigious vigor just to survive.

This time, the wrestling maneuver T'Dani had used in order to subdue her alien opponent tore something in her left shoulder. Her Vulcan mother's musculature in combination with her human father's ligaments and tendon-attachments made for a galling combination

when her heart was set on performing some physically-difficult feat — but these awful creatures didn't need to know that. She reached down with her right hand and, in a single smooth, deadly motion, snapped the alien's thick, brittle, largely immobile neck between her fingertips and the heel of her hand. Both of those were bruised from having performed *tal-shaya* more than once in a single day, but the Husnock didn't need to know that, either.

The entire incident had taken place in less than ten seconds. Aware that time was of the essence, T'Dani reached for her enemy's disruptor and the force-field controls with her other hand as she performed *tal-shaya* with her right, but the fiery resistance of her injured rotator cuff made the movement unwieldy. Another of the technicians had entered the cell behind the first one in its inefficient, shambling walk. This one grasped the *Enterprise's* CMO by her hair and flung her face-first into the steel-reinforced concrete wall before she could get at either the weapon or the controls.

She crashed into unconsciousness without a sound, and so never knew when Carl finally drowned on his desperation and tears, and his captors determined that, once a workable fear had been located in the minds of these soft, ephemeral beings, more finesse on the slave-making controls was required.

Now they were getting somewhere.

Chapter Eight

The *Enterprise* beamed its rescue party to an area outside the dwelling that was the last known location of Yaelat, Seantie, Mel'Taya, and Bhopest. The team's tricorders registered no sentient lifeforms alive inside the house, though the tricorders did register the presence of all four of the landing party's communicators.

This development made Lieutenant Lewis Markson, the leader of the team, exceptionally nervous. If the landing party was lying dead inside the house, the tricorders should show that, too, but they didn't. Furthermore, if four members of the *Enterprise's* original landing party were lying dead inside the house, that would infer the nearby presence of the same unknown alien combatants that had held the *Enterprise* captive.

It also occurred to Markson that, since these potentially nearby alien combatants were in possession of equipment unfamiliar to Federation science, this *might* include equipment that skewed or altogether changed tricorder readings. Or it *might* include equipment that would make Starfleet personnel artfully hidden in the surrounding nighttime environment utterly obvious. Or it *might* include...

Markson shook his head; he would get nowhere squatting here mulling unimaginable maybes to death. Having to rely on a standard shuttle, without the reassuring backup of transporter potential, made him painfully nervous. He turned to the ensign who was his second, a tawny-skinned, dark-eyed, full-figured Hali'ian woman named Marava Ezriel. She looked as apprehensive as he felt.

"Take half the team, search the house," he ordered tersely. "Report in every five minutes."

She turned her gaze from his toward the lightless entrance of the dwelling, which gaped open. Not an encouraging sign, and Markson knew it. She shook her own head slowly. "I don't think that's a good idea. We ought to go deeper into the cover here and —"

"Are you questioning my orders, Ensign?" he snarled. She swallowed and offered him a reassuring look.

"It's just a feeling."

"I don't make decisions based on *feelings*, Ensign. Follow my orders or I'll put someone else in your rank!"

He could see by the expression on her face that she was considering telling him to go ahead and do that. Instead, she frowned, nodded wordlessly at her commanding officer, and eeled through the undergrowth tapping the shoulders of five of her crewmates at random, silently telling them to follow her. They

complied.

If Markson hadn't known what path his team was taking toward the house, he wouldn't have known they were there. He certainly couldn't fault their stealth or care. He sat back, every nerve on edge. "Security party six, keep your tricorders set on the readings of those people going into that house," he murmured into his communicator softly; the instrument was set on wide-band, and transmitted to his entire security crew. It would be nice, he reflected, to have a setup like this that you didn't have to hold, manually turn on and off, and waste time putting away afterwards. "Be ready to back them up or to pull out of here at any time."

He didn't try to contact the *Enterprise* to let them know his tactics or to request further backup. Considering the general level of interference present in the Archanis Four atmosphere, he was fairly certain that he wouldn't be able to reach the starship using either a standard communicator or the instrumentation of the shuttle. In the short and, ultimately, mortal melee that would follow, it would occur to him that this was his principal, if not his only, error.

She awoke bruised and bleeding, strapped into the chair.

T'Dani's greatest fear was going insane, a fear acquired via having lived through the process already.

She had been forced into what had appeared to Nisus' Vulcan healers to be *pon farr* at a startlingly early age, and in an abnormal fashion — as though she was undergoing every *pon farr* that would ever happen in her lifetime, all at once, as a nine-year-old child.

The effects of severe central nervous system inflammation on her still-developing brain had begun gradually, slowing down and accelerating various sections of her conscious mind at random. She'd wandered away from a friend's birthday party into the caves and grottoes bordering the windswept seashores of Nisus, and lived out a lifetime there as an anomalous, non-viable creature transported into a state of continual grief, anger, and desperation that still returned to visit her sometimes in nightmare.

By the time they found her, starving and raving amid the signal-multiplying, transite-rich caves along the west coast of Nisus' largest continent, her brain had shrunk like a chestnut dried slowly within its own shell, a state more like human Alzheimer's disease than Vulcan *pon farr*, as her body worked desperately to prolong its life. She had, fortunately, inherited her mother's kidney and digestive system structure, which freely allowed her to slake her thirst on seawater, and the worst of her hunger on the rough seaside plants of Nisus.

The nine-year-old part-Vulcan girl had evolved, thanks to experiencing what should have been no more

than eight days of agony for nearly half a year, into a wizened little madwoman rocking back and forth on the strand, attempting to ease the torture of her own insanity by clawing through her scalp and skull with filthy, broken fingernails, and nearly succeeding.

Such an occurrence was atypical in the extreme. Indeed, no physician, Vulcan or otherwise, had ever documented its occurrence before. Though by the age of fourteen T'Dani had experienced her first menarche and, ultimately, developed a normal forty-day human menstrual cycle that told doctors she'd never have to experience *pon farr*, she might never have any sort of normal response to a mate; the thought of such an occurrence nauseated her with panic.

She'd never revealed to anyone that *something* had sent her into that crazed state, something she'd always maintained as a secret and had tried hard to banish from her conscious memory, largely succeeding.

T'Dani's mother, T'Mir, had learned that, in order to keep her daughter on an even keel, she either had to give her responsibilities grave beyond her years (hence, the *Enterprise's* CMO had practically raised both her own brother and her stepsister), or send her away from Nisus — first with Captain Ingram's well-traveled parents, then to various undergraduate schools, medical training, and finally Starfleet Academy. T'Dani didn't personally ascribe to the emotion-controlling tenets or methods of

the Vulcan people, but she'd definitely been born with the unquenchable intellect of one.

Sometime after her father had been killed, T'Dani had finally healed enough that she'd ceased to awaken screaming at those hours of morning darkness when life's tides ebbed lowest. By that time, T'Dani had come to believe that something much like what she'd endured as a young part-Vulcan was apt to recur should she ever know the horrible misfortune of falling in love, even though she'd never gone through a normal pon farr cycle in all her life and, according to three separate doctors and one chirurgeon, couldn't. She didn't have a Vulcan reproductive system — hers was human.

Over the years, almost everyone she knew had tried to soothe her. They'd told her that she wouldn't be able to help falling in love when it finally happened, and that love itself would heal her of her fears. Physicians insisted that T'Dani wouldn't ever have to experience Vulcan blood fever — and that, even if by some unlikely mechanism she did experience it, by that time medications had been developed that would halt the process before it could progress even a fraction so far. She had ignored every shred of this advice, had denied all offers of comfort.

Her current crewmembers weren't the first to nickname her *Ice Princess*.

Corrigan didn't care about the nicknames, or about

the excellent medical advice, the blatant evidence of her own reproductive system, or for any of the soothing platitudes. One thing she *had* learned with Vulcan obsessiveness was to shield herself from the possibility of romance, to scrupulously avoid any individual she suspected she might somehow become attracted to in that way.

She didn't find it difficult; neither Vulcan nor human men were particularly alluring to her in the first place. That had been true even before she'd had her endless brush with madness. And after all, she reasoned with all the naiveté of the uninitiated, who else was likely to be interested in a part-Vulcan, half-human woman?

Fear of insanity had given her a phobia of amorous affection.

Even the thought of being touched by the aura of *plak tow* could trigger a panic attack. If romantic love ever managed somehow to enter her life, it would first have to scale the heights of T'Dani's dizzying inner fortress, either through deadly earnest vigor, the silent stealth of pure implausibility, or both. She was not going to break under this machine; she was already broken.

The ardent entity that might spur T'Dani to resist, as Captain Ingram had resisted using memories of Colin, was manifest nowhere. She would hand them her fear willingly. The CMO of the *Enterprise* would give over

anything, anything at all, to avoid ever having to live through anything even vaguely similar to that psychosis again.

T'Dani had thought it was bad listening to these monsters talk about Captain Ingram while they played with the captain's mind. Listening to them talk about *her* while they played with her own mind was magnitudes worse. She'd thought maybe Captain Ingram hadn't been conscious enough to hear them while they tore her brain apart, but T'Dani could hear every word they said, even filtered through terror and a concussion.

"The creature fears these recollections as though they have never ended. It has no reference point by which to move beyond. This, I think, is the sort of thing we are looking for, but..." the technician ignored T'Dani's powerful tugs at the straps of the chair's restraints that half-tore them away; she couldn't get enough impetus to actually get out of the chair, and even if she did, where could she go?

The *Enterprise's* chief medical officer bit her lips and tongue until olive-green, copper-tasting blood flowed, rather than scream. She knew that if she started, she probably would be unable to cease until she'd shredded her vocal chords. She could see all of the Husnock's movements out of the corners of her long, almond-shaped blue eyes; she couldn't bring herself to close her eyes, too terrified to even consider trying to

shut out the horror of what they were doing to her that way. She doubted it would make a difference, anyhow.

The technician probed deeper, located a desire to be rid of these memories that was an incessant exhaustion which, over time, had grown into a constant, nagging pain like a missing limb. The Husnock moved its head in an expression that, to Husnock, conveyed wonderment:

"It is doing this to itself, Omi'Ohaly. It keeps *itself* enslaved to its own limitations, as if it is their..." it paused, as though searching for an adequate term, at last offering its superior a repellently humanoid shrug; "*pet*. All I am doing is *looking* at them. The creature itself is intensifying them. I am quite certain, Omi'Ohaly, that these slave-race creatures *are* insane."

"Of course they are; they are Unwhole. To require another to complement one's life is insanity," the alien whom the technician deferred to replied, as if that explained everything about the woman trapped in the chair. If what little T'Dani had learned about the language and customs of these bizarre, violent aliens was accurate, *insane* was the least-scathing term by which the Husnock described those whom they considered Unwhole.

T'Dani's concussed brain processed the conversation between the technician and its overseer without her consent. *I could stop this? I could replace it with*

something else...something that would make me whole?

Part of her shied away from the implications of this, while most of her clamored for just such a release. The part-Vulcan woman substantially increased both the intensity of her concussion and the weakness of the straps that bound her by physically fighting against her own thoughts. Whether she fought her terror or her hope, she couldn't have said.

Chapter Nine

Husnock m'han'rt were genetically designed creatures, able to produce a breathable nitrogen-sulfide atmosphere for the Husnock who had created them. Additionally, they were passive psionic communicators capable of putting out simple camouflaging biofields. After a few hours on any new planet, m'han'rt were able to process that planet's native atmosphere in the opposite direction, producing for any alien whatever its native atmosphere was.

Ordinarily, the Husnock leader would have taken the aliens who had filtered quietly into the house, had its underlings slap an oxygen-nitrogen-producing m'han'rt on each of their ugly faces, and sent them as slaves to some Husnock colony, where they would be used until they were used up. *Ordinarily*, however, a Husnock greezah didn't lose four-fifths of its members in a single planetary day — an infuriating, unheard-of catastrophe.

Z'liths'dtor — honorary member of the Ruling Congress until after jah'parra took place, when it would attain to the Elder form and become a full governing member, as the last Elder form had been before attaining to the High Elder Council — watched the creatures in the anteroom below, through gaps in the decorative posts

that surrounded the upper-floor balcony.

These Unwhole were fierce and peculiar. They possessed what the Husnock considered a low level of general technology. That had been this greezah's entire basis for striking out so far from home, into the largely unexplored Alpha quadrant; to obtain slaves incapable of serious technological resistance. Z'liths'dtor had been cautioned by the High Elder Council, the way all greezah group leaders had been cautioned for the last thirteen jah'parra cycles:

Avoid the boundary between Alpha and Beta quadrants. Their Unwhole have formed a complex defensive confederacy. Their technologies are not worth the mayhem potentially inherent to conflict with these unpredictable creatures.

Z'liths'dtor had led this greezah'dr here nevertheless. It had been the intention of these young Husnock to finally dispel the night-terrors of their most venerable Elders. Surely, Z'liths'dtor had reasoned to the Elders and to the members of the wolf pack team that would take part in this jah'parra, Unwhole creatures so dissolute of liaison and squalid of pride as to conceive of or require a multi-species defensive confederacy would be no risk to the Husnock.

In retrospect, Z'liths'dtor conceded that its estimation regarding these particular creatures might have been somewhat inaccurate. In any case, there

certainly were many more of them than Z'liths'dtor had expected; their homeworlds and colonies and stations and ships were everywhere throughout the Alpha quadrant. It was unnerving, and had led one Husnock in this greezah to re-evaluate the expediency and deeper truths of the Unwhole strategy of confederation and reproduction — a horrid blasphemy for which Z'liths'dtor had in the past, and would in the future, cheerfully kill its own kind.

It was the attempt to capture this filthy blasphemer, and the Unwhole with whom it had made contact, that had caused Z'liths'dtor's tiny band to find itself in this potentially untenable position.

The three Husnock who had come to investigate the signals put out by the Unwhole communicators could, of course, remain entirely hidden from the twelve confederated Unwhole that had beamed down to surround the house barely seven seconds after the Husnock had entered it themselves, still reeling from the reports of destruction being visited on their greezah'dr vessels by comrade-vessels of the starship they had taken as a prize. Z'liths'dtor was incensed that the pack hadn't dispersed sooner, but of course, as their leader, Z'liths'dtor would have needed to issue such an order before they could perform that action.

The greezah'dr vessels had been too vitally busy, attempting to elude the confederated Unwhole ships

attacking them, to supplicate Z'liths'dtor to give the command to disperse. Which did not, in any way, lessen Z'liths'dtor's culpability for having lost four-fifths of the wolf pack ships. Now the Husnock greezah'dr was down to the bare minimum of ships required to return to their horizon-craft, which supplied energy to the little group of vessels by feeding garbage and slag into a stable black hole near the galactic core at the inner edge of this quadrant, then harvesting the resultant kinetic potential for the various uses of the greezah'dr.

No one had needed to give the order to disperse once four-fifths of the greezah'dr had been annihilated. That was programmed into all Husnock ships, to occur automatically should the pack ships somehow be reduced to this crucially low number. Not even the Highest Elder had been able to adequately explain to Z'liths'dtor why such a program should have to exist.

No living Husnock had been witness to such an occurrence as the destruction of four-fifths of a greezah'dr in a single planetary day. Nor was it part of any Husnock's genetic memory. As the design of a greezah'dr ship itself was considered sacrosanct, part of the Husnock Holy Order, it seemed that no one had ever thought to alter what had appeared to the youngest Z'liths'dtor to be a cowardly flaw in their design. Again, in retrospect, the Husnock leader admitted that such an estimation might not have been entirely accurate.

The open communication channels left in this dwelling had, obviously, been a trap, set up to lure Z'liths'dtor into the position in which the tiny group of Husnock currently found itself. As the Husnock leader waited in the alien dwelling with but two companions, while twice their number of confederated Unwhole crept about downstairs, and twice again that number surrounded the dwelling, Z'liths'dtor began to understand why the greezah'dr had been preprogrammed for such a destructive eventuality — and why the High Elder Council had remained steadfast in its directives to its newest wolf pack *not* to venture into the Alpha quadrant.

Remaining hidden, and ultimately withdrawing, was a perfectly viable option for the remaining Husnock and their diminished greezah'dr. These confederated Unwhole didn't appear to possess instrumentation capable of finding Husnock life signs as long as the m'han'rt camouflage remained in place.

However, exercising that option might be considered the way of cowardice, and would not reflect well on Z'liths'dtor in the face of other Husnock jealous of centuries-old entitlements to power. Z'liths'dtor admitted silently to itself — and thus, through the m'han'rt, to all of its companions — that it would be preferable to deal with these confederated Unwhole now, than to have to deal with potential enemies among the Husnock later.

The confederated Unwhole had few options for

fighting back, as long as the Husnock maintained their m'han'rt camouflage. M'han'rt did not eat but required the influx of undifferentiated energy to survive. M'han'rt engines also ran the shields of the wolf pack ships; such shielding required an enormous outlay of energy from the horizon-ship lying cloaked and quiescent several star-systems away. However, the staggering energy requirements that the greezah'dr had set out with no longer existed; sixteen Husnock ships had been destroyed, with their crews.

Z'liths'dtor had been proud of the capture of the Unwhole vessel that had come to investigate their taking of this planet. The wolf pack leader had very much wanted to return with it to present to his people as a prize; it appeared to possess several functions that utilized some portion of psionic spectral energy that the Husnock had never encountered before, vaguely similar to that produced by m'han'rt, but somehow allied to the ship itself. Nonetheless, both that prize and the majority of the greezah had been lost. There was abundant horizon-energy now, and leaving the personal shields on while fighting would not be the serious resource drain that it usually was.

Z'liths'dtor made an executive decision; not only would the confederated Unwhole in and around this house die, but Husnock reinforcements would be sent for — all the remaining greezah members, commanded to

keep their invisibility shields firmly in place on pain of dismemberment. Those remaining Husnock would hunt down and slay every last infuriating Unwhole creature on this planet, before returning to the horizon-ship. An example had to be made to this Unwhole and unwholesome *Federation*, of what would become of them should they ever again stand in the way of their Husnock overlords.

Then Z'liths'dtor would make certain that any greezah'dr ever venturing into this space again came in groups of no less than five hundred ships. It would be done, the Husnock vowed, if it was necessary to delay the next jah'parra for a hundred years in order to accomplish it. Z'liths'dtor was of an esteemed line among the Husnock race, both on the homeworld and on all seven of their colony planets. That esteem was what had allowed this greezah to overrule the advice of the High Elder Council. And it would be overruled again, Z'liths'dtor declared mutely by m'han'rt, as the ugly group of confederated Unwhole began creeping upstairs toward them.

Attack and kill silently, with the garrotes; do not remove your cloaking fields upon pain of dismemberment. The command was sent through the chemical-neural link between the m'han'rt. Z'liths'dtor positioned itself at the top of the stairs, waiting for the Unwhole to come.

The leading confederated Unwhole creature took a step backwards down the stairs after having scarcely started up them, waving the others behind it to a stop. It felt something — whether an air current as Z'liths'dtor's companions removed the fusion garrotes from their safety-pouches, or some nuance of the non-sentient esper connection between the bioengineered m'han'rt, Z'liths'dtor could not have said.

But Husnock could be endlessly patient. The command for reinforcements would, ultimately, have to be sent subspace, and aloud, but Z'liths'dtor wanted these others dead first, and painfully, if that could be carried out in a timely fashion. If the Husnock had been humanoid, it would have made a snarling grimace of pleasure at the thought. That message, too, passed through the m'han'rt, and Z'liths'dtor felt a surge of agreement from the other Husnock in the room. It was a warmth in the blood.

They all took firm holds on their fusion garrotes, and waited. These useful weapons were utilized by Vorta field agents, as one measure of control against the enormous, reptilian cannon fodder that those gracile clones had been bred, by some unknown, half-mythical Dominion race, to manage. The weapons worked by emitting an inescapable charge that crushed, melted, and twisted cartilage upon contact. They functioned even through Husnock armor.

Much of the best technology the Husnock possessed had come from the Gamma quadrant. Z'liths'dtor had no doubt whatsoever that this technology would ultimately be able to put down these Alpha quadrant Unwhole, too, regardless of how severely they outnumbered Z'liths'dtor's people.

Gr'bar'mahl and its Omi'Ohaly focused on the screen, watching as their comments slipped into T'Dani's mind like a soft ribbon. Both Husnock wondered how the unattractive creature could be unaware that the edges of that metaphorical ribbon were sharper than razors, that it could cut her free if she simply tugged in some direction that was as unfamiliar and obscure — though certainly more frightening — to her as it was to the Husnock inspecting her memories.

Gr'bar'mahl poured these memories back into the skull of the slave in the chair before comprehension gelled, and pulled out a different set. The *Omi'Ohaly* offered another of its more-irritating-than-helpful opinions:

"It needs to be made to believe that we can protect it from its fears."

The technician blinked its eyes asymmetrically at its master for a long minute. "I will try. Be advised that the creature firmly believes that nothing can protect it from or in any way change what it is that it so deeply fears."

Gr'bar'mahl pulled up memories of the Husnock from its captive's memory as though it was weeding a particularly overgrown garden patch, and overlaid them with the emotion-color it had come to identify with *soothing* in these irritatingly convoluted Unwhole minds.

The brain of the creature in the chair responded by performing a feat stranger than either of the Husnock surmised it might do. Rather than perceiving the emotion first, or the memories the technician had linked with *soothing*, it perceived the color first — and absolutely nothing else. Then it began to entirely overlay its memory of their people and the soothing emotion with what was, first, a still image, then a cascade of other memories, all pertaining to that color. There were other slave-creatures in these memories, and...

"Gaaah!" the technician snarled, trying to erase the entire miserable flow. It had little success — it was extremely difficult to alter or erase this particular slave's memories, a glitch that hadn't occurred with the others. "Perhaps, really, it's this *machine* that is damaged, after all." The Husnock gave up attempting to erase the flood of useless monochrome memories and simply poured them back, as it had been doing before.

To both Husnock's surprise, T'Dani let out a panicked squeak — at nothing more than her own, unaltered, memories.

"Be gentler, Gr'bar'mahl. More subtle. Use a different emotion to overlay."

If the Husnock technician had dared to give the *Omi'Ohaly* a filthy look, it would have. Gr'bar'mahl hissed instead, making the m'han'rt on its face squirm in discomfort.

The technician attempted to summon patience — surely there were more useful things on the planet, or even just in the science complex, than this machine? — and chose a color that meant *balance* rather than *soothing*. That the first was a secondary color and the second was a primary one was probably an evolutionary quirk of this slave-race, about which the technician couldn't care less.

"Color calls up things that don't..." the Husnock technician paused, not at all certain it even had the language to describe what it thought was happening; "things that have nothing to do with seeing color."

The *Omi'Ohaly* gave its underling a fleeting look which inferred that perhaps it was Gr'bar'mahl who was tending toward insanity.

The technician gave up and snorted wordlessly. How to say *sometimes when I insert color to act as an emotional overlay, this thing perceives a smell, or a musical note*, and not be considered crazy? This time, it blended the color into T'Dani's memory of the Husnock before inserting either of them into her mind.

This time, the creature in the chair didn't perceive the *color* — its memories of the Husnock were too harrowing. The technician dialed the settings down and tried again, first inserting the color-enhanced memory into her mind without including the Husnock...

"Wait," Gr'bar'mahl hissed, then sat down in one of the chairs itself, removing a headset from one of the three other input-output areas located on the machine and placing it over its own skull. The technician writhed in the chair as its own memory — its own perception — of the Husnock people appeared on the screen.

Truly, this was an unpleasant experience, even when thinking of something one generally considered pleasant, or at least not particularly threatening. Perhaps the trick would lie in just strapping a slave-race-creature to the machine and letting it think its own random thoughts until it simply couldn't stand it anymore. Gr'bar'mahl would test that hypothesis with the next specimen.

"Freeze that on the screen!" the technician gasped out; its superior officer complied. Gr'bar'mahl tore off and flung away the headset. It hit the wall and broke into pieces, which the Husnock ignored.

It was its own color-ameliorated memory of its people that the Husnock technician next inserted into T'Dani's mind.

Chapter Ten

This was like an equation that wouldn't balance, which would probably drive her mad, given time. She reached up to rub at her aching forehead, and nearly passed out from the pain that touch caused. When had she been injured? She struggled to remember, to think back, and other memories that had absolutely nothing to do with her current predicament pranced through her mind. She tried to push them away —

Par'shen suraht, some Vulcan part of her subconscious whispered:

This isn't really happening.

T'Dani shook her head in attempt to clear it, then wished that she hadn't done so when she lost all sense of balance and fell against the wall. There was some reason she shouldn't fall toward the open space at the front of the cell, but she couldn't quite remember what that reason was. Nor could she remember why everything was flat. Dimensionless. Oddly colorless. She was having trouble, too, remembering the exact identity of the wounded, dark-haired man the Husnock had strapped into the chair in her place. Everything was too *flat* — it was difficult to pull anything up from...deeper.

Except for vivid knowledge of the Husnock. *They* were there to help her. To keep her from ever again knowing insanity, to shield her against a feeling of anxiety in the face of an emotional presence that was too much for her mind to encompass without screaming. Against...

But...hadn't the Husnock attacked the landing party? It made no sense whatsoever to feel *safe* when she considered them, for their presence to fill her with the heady joy of open, wild spaces, as though she was with Captain Ingram in some fragrant forest near the tree line. She had to wrench her mind back to *now* again, and in the *now*, Renee Ingram lay as still as a discarded doll in one corner of the cell. T'Dani squatted down next to her to check her breathing.

The movement sent a jolt of pain through Corrigan's left shoulder. The last clear memory she had was of pulling her shoulder trying to overpower one of the Husnock. She flexed the joint again. The stab of icy pain that ran through her rotator cuff, up her neck, and partway down her back came almost as a pleasure; she wasn't misremembering that. *Why*, then, should she believe that creatures she had sought to kill, using the time-honored method of painless assassination passed down through countless generations by her mother's people, were somehow her...*allies*?

As T'Dani sought fruitlessly to make sense of the

senseless, something flooded into the part-Vulcan woman's mind that *almost* made sense, before an avalanche of terror squashed it flat. The thing had been so horrifyingly dimensional that she felt her gorge rise. Even buried beneath a heavy load of anxiety, however, the image and the feelings it raised were insistent. The *Enterprise's* CMO shuddered and huddled into the corner, her head aching violently. Perhaps the solution lay, not in analyzing the situation, but in simply accepting it. Certainly, that would require less energy, and evoke less pain.

"Help me!" T'Dani moaned, holding out her arms toward the Husnock who stood beyond the open space at the front of the cell, observing her. Only the Husnock seemed wholly real to her — them, and the awful, impossibly dimensional *thing* that kept reasserting itself, filling her with anxiety. Such anxiety! The *thing*, and the feelings the thing made her afraid might come again.

She moaned and let her chin fall forward toward her knees, around which she had wrapped her cold arms, until she was huddled into a tight ball, rocking back and forth against a tide of memories that kept trying to push the Husnock away. Why wouldn't those horrible images let her alone, let her...

T'Dani heard it as clearly as the Husnock standing before her cell did; a clarion call to battle, which came as the Husnock technician began to inspect the first set of

memories from the mind in the man in the chair, attempting to replace his sense of independence with a lingering impression of uncertainty in the face of any action not associated with the Husnock.

That the Husnock would then be able to resolve that uncertainty, T'Dani had no doubt. This, she understood, was what they were attempting to do; to replace all fearful humanoid ideations with the concept that the Husnock could protect one from the feared thing. Whether such an action was ethical, the CMO of the *Enterprise* couldn't determine anymore. It could be difficult to remember things like honor or principles or love — even love for oneself — in the face of one's worst fear.

That the Husnock couldn't refuse that battle call, T'Dani also had no doubt. T'Dani didn't want to refuse the call, either, but no matter how sweetly she wheedled or how she screamed after them, they left her there in that room with the other broken people, and the corpses.

Rafael watched the horrible aliens leave the room out of the corner of his good eye; the other was swollen shut by the inflammation of his gashed cheekbone and temple. He had no idea whether the Husnock were just stepping out to retrieve some nasty new variety of machinery to use on their erstwhile slaves, or if they were leaving for good. T'Dani, a prisoner in the cage

they had just taken him out of, screamed and wept for them to come back, sounds that raised gooseflesh on Rafe's skin. It took him thirty seconds to decide that he wouldn't stay in this chair whether the Husnock came back or not, if he didn't have to. He tested the strength of the straps binding his right arm. If he could just get a little leverage...

The force he put into the maneuver sent his blood racing, and caused the gashes on his face to start seeping again. He ignored the pain, and put all his concentration into breaking one of the arm bonds — one of those that pinned his biceps, or one of those that held his wrists, he didn't care which went first.

As far as Buonarroti was aware, standard Klingon mind-sifter chairs, and their restraints, were probably made entirely of metal, like most other Klingon chairs; there would be no getting free of *those*. These, on the other hand, were soft Federation therapy-restraint seats. Of course, the aliens would have had no way of knowing that there would — or should — be a difference.

It was the upper right arm band that gave way first. Three strong individuals had been strapped into this torture-chair before him, and all of them had struggled against the restraints. This had the effect of having weakened those restraints. Rafe had consciously kept his muscles bunched in such a way that the Husnock would not be able to strap him in as tightly as they

otherwise might, and that much leverage was, apparently, just enough. Now he could twist and wrench his entire arm against the wrist strap. He strove to ignore the crying and whining of the doctor who was trapped inside the force field-shielded little room; worse was the corpselike silence and lack of movement in his captain.

Two minutes into this desperate, sweating exercise that broke open scabs on his face and chafed the skin off of his wrist, as he worried that the aliens would come back and decide he was simply more trouble than he was worth, the wrist restraint, too, snapped free of the chair. Buonarroti used his now-free hand to remove the rest of the restraints that strapped him down as quickly as he could.

Now he had to figure out a way to release the captain and the CMO — one a mental vegetable, the other a psychological basket case. Rafael himself was weak from blood loss, half his face in tatters that he had to consciously force himself not to touch; he wasn't sure he really wanted to know the extent of the damage. He drew a deep breath and rubbed at his raw wrist, then looked consideringly over at the dark cell to the left of the chair, which held corpses, including the dishonored corpse of his own shipmate.

Standing, he looked around for a loose object — anything would do. He picked up the wrist restraint that

he'd just dropped, and tossed it at the entryway of the cell that held the dead, fully expecting it to disintegrate in midair.

It didn't. He spent a fraction of a second wondering whether the Husnock were actually that stupid, or if they were simply overconfident with conceit. Settling on the latter explanation, he waded in among the corpses. What he really wanted was something to turn off that force field with, but weapons would do nicely, also.

Five minutes into his fruitless search, he re-evaluated the Husnock's overconfidence. Nothing that might be used as a weapon revealed itself — even ornamental metal uniform badges had been removed. Unless he wanted to wrench off somebody's arm and use it as a weapon, there was nothing in the malodorous storeroom that he could use. As far as Rafe was aware, only those heavy belts the Husnock wore could perform the function of taking down the deadly fields they held their prisoners behind, and none of those were in evidence, either.

He re-emerged from the room into which the Husnock had relegated the dead and considered his surroundings. Where had the Husnock gone? Was this some sort of psychological test? Were they, perhaps, observing him from elsewhere in the complex? The thought made his skin crawl worse than strip-searching corpses had. He wondered what they would do if he

attempted to leave this room and prowl around the complex.

Because, really, that was his only other alternative. This was, after all, a science center; he'd been brought along specifically to help disable parts of it. If the Husnock hadn't already performed that task themselves...

"T'Dani!" he hissed, moving across the room to the other cell near the door, going as close to the vicious force-field as she dared. No response; the CMO continued to rock and croon to herself like an autistic child. Rafe closed his eyes and shook his head. This was bad. Two of the top-ranking officers of the *Enterprise B* had effectively been neurologically and psychologically crushed.

"*Doctor!*" he prodded, louder. The part-Vulcan woman ceased rocking, and a shudder passed through her that reminded Buonarroti of nothing so much as a horse attempting to shake off bothersome flies. Rafe lost himself in a half-second reverie — how wonderful it would be to be back at his brother's ranch in New Montana on Alpha Centauri Five, his ranch now he supposed, with nothing more worrisome to concern him than the pleasant chore of getting up at the crack of dawn to feed the horses. Rafe always brought apples or carrots and a currycomb with him, and they were always waiting expectantly. Manny had always joked that he spoiled them.

"*Fare impazzire qualcino!* T'Dani, *listen* to me; try to understand what I'm saying. I need to go find some way to contact the ship, to get us all out of here. *Doctor!* Can you hear me?"

The CMO of the *Enterprise* turned a blank, bruise-ravaged face half-hidden behind tangled blonde hair toward Rafe and blinked as though she was having trouble focusing — which, with a concussion, she probably was.

"Where are the Husnock?" T'Dani whined plaintively: "They *promised* to take *care* of me!" Rafe watched with undisguised horror as tears overflowed T'Dani's jewel-blue eyes and dripped off the end of her chin.

Perhaps, the senior engineering officer of the *Enterprise* thought as he turned and hid behind the expansive jamb of the only door that gave into or out of this terrible room, it was better that he couldn't get T'Dani out of there. The woman would probably go off looking for their captors if she was let loose. And Captain Ingram...Rafael doubted that Captain Ingram could even stand up, and he knew he'd be unlikely to outrun even Husnock when injured and carrying her, while also trying to drag T'Dani along. He would have to find a way to get out of here himself, then worry about getting them back to the ship.

Assuming we still have a ship left to go back to, he

thought grimly; *assuming I'm not just a lab rat in a maze for the Husnock's amusement at this point.*

Rafe tried to clear his head and focus on what he had to do. He couldn't start thinking thoughts like that — he'd never get out of this room if he did. He'd be too afraid. Too unsure. He swallowed nausea, and exited the room anyway, moving cautiously and furtively — like a lab rat.

The first thing Lieutenant Buonarroti discovered was that they were being held on the top floor of the vaulted, four-story complex. He could see the ravaged courtyard from the corridor-long, south-facing picture-window that took up the wall just outside the room they were being kept in. It was nighttime; the automatic solar pathway lights knew nothing of battle and death, and they cheerfully illuminated the area around the complex as they always had.

Looking out at the courtyard and seeing a nighttime scene of desolation confused him more than a little; his last clear recollection was of dawn. Rafael forced himself away from the window. He needed to find some variety of comm unit or computer interface, and he needed to do it *yesterday*.

The first thing he discovered was that the entire floor top floor, on which the *Enterprise* officers had been caged, appeared to be given over entirely to psychological, sociological, anthropological, and trans-

species humanoid sciences. The next thing he discovered was that the attack on the colony must have come during the middle of the previous night when the science complex was deserted, because when he tried to get into one of the suites of private trans-species offices in order to attempt to contact the ship using someone's personal computer system, he found the door firmly bolted shut.

Klingons, it seemed, had not yet culturally reached the point of losing the habit of locking things away once they were finished with them. In much the same spirit as they bolted their chairs to the floor, personal office doors were locked and optic-scan-coded to deny entry. Knowing Klingons — and he'd made something of a study of them in his early Starfleet career — they probably would never lose that habit.

If any of the many unmarked doors in this upper floor were turbolifts, they were locked down, too.

Cursing colorfully, Rafe crept down to the third floor of the complex via the stairwell, which was not only unlocked, but possessed no doors at all. Oddly, though, at least to the human's mind, they did contain what appeared to be various complex artworks in multiple sculptural metals, which he found unaccountably creepy; they seemed to be right on the verge of coming to life. None of them appeared to be Klingon artworks, and his hurting mind refused to cough

up any sort of cultural provenance to link them with. He hurried through the stairwell as fast as he could, reminding himself; *I am a Starfleet officer, dammit, and too old to be frightened of...*

Something. He was frightened of something, or panicked by something, or maybe...Rafe bit at the inside of his cheek until it bled, and peeked out of the relative security of the stairwell at the hallway that ran the length of the third floor. No one seemed to be there; still, it took the senior engineering officer some time to work up enough courage to venture out of the stairwell.

In the center of the third floor, where the stairs let out, was another large set of obsessively locked office suites. To the north of this suite of offices was a door marked *Animal Studies* in Terran and Vulcan Standard, as well as in *Klin'zhai*.

The thought of such a thing made him wince — the Federation had banned all performance of scientific or other research using multicellular living beings as subjects, considering the practice barbaric, but he had to concede that such a place could come in handy if he needed somewhere to hide, particularly if it contained bad-tempered creatures with teeth and claws that he might somehow turn against pursuers. On the south end of the third floor was the conference room in which, he seemed to recall muzzily, he'd last been conscious and trying to kill Husnock, prior to waking in terrible pain on

the cold floor of the cell where T'Dani and Captain Ingram were still imprisoned.

With an exhausted sigh — he was dehydrated, famished, and tired, all of those undoubtedly aggravated by, if not a direct product of, his injuries — he re-entered the stairwell-cum-horror art gallery, and dragged himself down to the second floor. There he found laboratory-offices, almost certainly the provenance of multiple individuals over rotating shifts, and therefore left blessedly unlocked. He perused them carefully. From north to south through the building were chemistry, biology, botany...

Medicine. He paused there to use an analgesic unit, sterilizer, sonicator, and dermasuture unit on his face, and borrowed the medical replicator to procure himself a liter of mineral water, a rare roast-beef sandwich, a large mixed-fruit salad, and three chocolate bars, which he tucked into a uniform pocket after devouring everything else.

Buonarroti felt unaccountably, unreasonably guilty for stopping to give in to the needs of his own injured, exhausted body, but there was one strict survival rule that Starfleet drummed into its members, from their first day at the Academy to their final posting; *if you let yourself drop from dehydration, pain, hunger, or exhaustion when there's an alternative, you'll end up being of no use to yourself or anybody else.*

Feeling significantly better, physically at least, he continued his tour of the second floor. Temporal studies, geophysics, and astrophysics labs filled the remainder of this floor, but none of those laboratories contained the communication equipment he sought. The labs on the second floor did, however, provide an array of items potentially useful as weapons, and Rafe stocked up. He figured that a dermasuture unit set to high phase and directed into an eye would stop even one of the Husnock in its tracks.

Frustrated, it took him a bit of searching to find the stairs again — next to the botany lab— in order for him to make his way to the first floor. It occurred to his now-less-muzzy mind that the reason the stairwells were stuffed with artworks was because the purpose of something as outmoded as stairwells, if not compound and heavily utilitarian at once, would have been nullified in the Klingon mind.

Probably, some Vulcan had mentioned the potentially life-saving utility of multiple methods of ingress and egress in case of fire. For this, Rafael was grateful. For the fact that it had been the stairwells that had allowed the Husnock access to the mind sifter, however, he was much less grateful.

Chapter Eleven

It was what Bhopest termed a *trash forest* — an undergrowth-heavy mass of fast-growing, weedy trees, bush, brush, vines, and grasses accidentally or purposely brought from the worlds of those individuals who had first colonized Archanis Four. Terran slippery elms, staghorn sumac stands, and heavy thickets of thorny Himalayan blackberry bramble competed with equally thorny Klingon limber-pines, hairy *besQoh* vines, and Vulcan *seshnach*-berry webs for dominance.

Every garden flower on the planet, and some fruits as well, had gone wild in Archanis Four's warm, lush, well-watered soil — hot pepper bushes and snapdragons were everywhere in evidence, the first through their exceptionally bad effects on Bhopest's mucous membranes when they were accidentally crushed in the dark, and the second through Seantie's intolerance to their pollen. And to Mel'Taya's annoyance, the night-insects of Archanis particularly relished cobalt-based blood. It was difficult, in the deep of night, to choose the appropriate mini-hypospray (from the emergency medkit Yaelat had absconded with from the house where they had left their communicators) to alleviate allergic reactions.

No one was in particularly high spirits. The humanoids were hot, scratched up, and more than a little irritated at the poky pace set by their alien companion, whom Mel'Taya had piggy-backed for the last hour so that they could try to gain some significant ground on their pursuers.

The landing party and their Husnock ally finally paused in the center of a dense thicket composed of particularly vicious blackberry vines working their way up knots of *seshnach* working their way over and between a group of hard-pressed limber-pines, to rest awhile from antihistamine and Husnock overload. The Husnock was heavy, and was in possession of heavy news.

"You're telling me," Mel'Taya grouched at 'Dan, "that your people are after us wearing some sort of *invisibility* suits?"

"Yes. And that they are in constant-use mode. A *jhrrll'jahm* is required in order to distinguish individuals wearing the *blesh'marr* controlled by *m'han'rt*."

"And you do have one of those, don't you?"

The Husnock didn't answer right away. The landing party had determined several hours earlier that shrugs, nods, and other physical motions of communicative intent were largely useless beneath the dark blanket of the Archanis Four night. "One of which?"

Mel'Taya hissed in irritation. Seantie laid what was

probably meant to be a calming hand on the *chae-na's* arm. The *Enterprise's* head of security jerked away from the Betazoid and snarled; "Something that'll let us see the invisible Husnock following us!"

"I do. Unfortunately, if I turn it on before they have found us, they will be able to use it to track us."

Now Mel'Taya refrained from responding instantly. "And how exactly *will* we know when they've found us?" the security officer inquired at last, the deeply exaggerated patience of its tone as clear as sunlight to the other humanoids in the sticky, sniffly, sneezy, scratched-up little party.

Another extended pause, broken only by the lovesick chirk, whirr, and croak of various insects and amphibians, ensued. "They will attempt to kill us," 'Dan replied at last, in a confidential tone. Apparently, the Husnock wasn't capable of comprehending the meaning inherent in humanoid vocal tones.

This occurred to the Andorian security officer, who gave up all attempts at sarcasm however tightly or loosely wrapped, and simply bellowed; "Turn the damned thing *on*! I don't know about you, but I'd rather potentially be killed by things I can perceive than *definitely* be killed by things that I *can't*!"

"He just said they'd be able to find us if —" Yaelat began combatively. Mel'Taya cut the Hali'ian off, but spoke to the Husnock, not to Yaelat.

" 'Dan! You say they can trace us if we use the thing that makes them visible to us, correct?"

"Yes," the Husnock replied shortly.

"But I've seen for myself that they can only move about a quarter to a third as fast as humanoids can. Is this also correct?"

"Yes," 'Dan came back again.

The Andorian appreciated the creature's brevity. "And are the ones you know are following us the only ones there *are*?"

'Dan considered this question for a moment. "There are others on our ships. Many others."

"And these others in the ships can *already* track us, and might beam down here wearing their invisibility suits and ambush us anywhere — from the front, from behind, from the side. Tell me, am I *incorrect* in this estimation?"

'Dan gave the Husnock equivalent of a grim sigh. "No, you are not incorrect."

No, I'm in mortal danger of turning into a damned Vulcan, so I can make a point to a damned Hali'ian, hopefully before we're all disintegrated by the damned Husnock, the cranky security officer thought snidely. Hot, tired, and itchy were not states of being that put Mel'Taya's people into happy moods. Indeed, Andorians had been known to kill with less provocation:

"In which case, am I *incorrect* in assuming that it'd

be better to be able to see them should they attempt an ambush of this sort, since your *tezh'il* ships already know where we are *anyway*?" The tone of exaggerated patience had crept back into the Andorian's voice. Mel'Taya took out its irritation by slapping far harder than necessary at a stinging insect that had alit on the back of its left hand.

Again, 'Dan appeared utterly oblivious to the overt condescension as he considered the security officer's logic. "Your estimations are very shrewd. I'll do as you request."

"*Excellent*. And Yaelat?" now that the *chae-na* had made its point, the Andorian addressed the ship's senior communications officer directly.

"Yes?" the Hali'ian's tone had lost its sharpness.

Mel'Taya's hadn't. "*You* carry him this time. I'm going to need my hands and arms free. Now, should they at any point decide to stop and *talk* rather than try and kill us all, I'll take him back. Agreed?"

Yaelat laughed ruefully. "Agreed, Lieutenant."

Mollified, Mel'Taya heaved a sigh. "All right, then. Much as I would like to lie down and sleep, we need to *move* — we're being hunted."

"Yes, let's see how many more poisonous objects we can stumble over in the dark," Bhopest offered wryly. "What you appear to be inferring, Mel'Taya, is that you can *see* in this infernal night?"

"Something like that. It's why you're following me. Sorry if that wasn't clear." The *Enterprise's* head of security sounded not one whit sorry. Everyone's joints crackled as they stood, including the Husnock's. Seantie tried to bite back a moan. She didn't succeed.

"And can you also see them should they ambush us from *behind*?" Bhopest inquired.

"I could," 'Dan said.

"Now he tells us," Seantie muttered.

"I'll stay in the rear while I'm carrying him, in that case," Yaelat offered.

"I am not a *he*," 'Dan said.

"You get used to it," Mel'Taya answered the Husnock. They left the thicket slowly, and as quietly as they could, as if that might matter.

"Get down!" Mel'Taya hissed fifteen minutes later. Yaelat dodged behind a convenient tree; everyone else went for bushes or clumps of vine. The security officer had neither the time nor the inclination to say anything else before the individuals the *chae-na* had sensed approaching in an arc from the west appeared. An enormous, luminous moon had risen, illuminating their way and allowing them to make better time.

They people approaching wore relatively bulky Starfleet-issue night-vision goggles. Mel'Taya watched them move for roughly a minute, trying to determine the

best way to announce the *Enterprise* landing party's presence without drawing nervous fire. And if Mel'Taya's senses weren't inaccurate, the little group of Vulcans were nervous indeed. No significant barriers stood between Mel'Taya and the approaching group, so the *chae-na* could plainly sense the electrical effects that the emotions of nervousness and fear caused; they played over the Vulcans' bodies like so many fireflies, as anxiety did in all humanoids, even those who claimed to control or deny their emotions.

In the estimation of most Andorians, it had taken Federation scientists a mind-bogglingly, if amusingly, long time to finally figure out just how a native of *Fesoan* could, ultimately, work out exactly how and why another person was lying to them, without ever actually being told. It was, frustratingly, the *where* and the *what* of an untruth that Andorian antennae weren't equipped to distinguish, since they had evolved solely as organs of warning against predators. Only in the Aenar had they evolved further, and only then because of the atrophication of other sensory organs.

"*Fendsa'ataad zhii'in atiin, Yivratani,*" Mel'Taya announced in a conversational tone — *There's an Andorian in front of you and just to your left, Vulcans.* How humans had ever worked the cognomen *Vulcan* out of what the people called themselves, the Andorian had never determined; perhaps humans figured that a *V* in the

word somewhere made it close enough. Humans could be like that.

As Mel'Taya had expected, the group's weapons came around apprehensively. The *chae-na* tensed.

"Wait," one of the group snapped — not allowing panic to cloud logic, as Mel'Taya had hoped, and so able to realize that their invisible, unknown alien adversaries probably wouldn't speak *graa-len*; "hold your fire." The man's head swiveled toward the sector where Mel'Taya's voice had emanated from. As the Andorian had also suspected, the little party of Vulcans was so shaken that they had trouble focusing clearly, even using night-vision apparatus. "Who are you?"

"Senior security officer of the starship *Enterprise*. Part of the first landing party sent to investigate what's transpired here. My name is Mel'Taya. Who are *you*?"

"Show yourself!"

Hands raised palm-out in the pan-humanoid attitude of submission, antennae raised as high as they would go, Mel'Taya did as requested. The tiny group of Vulcans visibly sagged with relief as they let their weapons drop. The *chae-na* took advantage of the momentary lull to explain the situation:

"There are four others with me. One is a rebel Husnock, which are the creatures that attacked this colony. This Husnock's aim is to help us. Understand?"

The Vulcans stiffened again. "You believe the

thing?" the voice of the Vulcan in ostensible command of the triad was so full of fear and distrust that Mel'Taya could almost smell it. The *chae-na* forced its antennae out of a position of distaste, and into one of relaxed friendliness. To do such a thing required intense concentration that made an Andorian scowl, but this went largely unnoticed by the anxious Vulcan relying on night-vision apparatus.

"We do. How many of you are there?"

"Four. We *were* twenty. The *Enterprise* had also sent another landing party of twelve. Therefore, the total number sent here to retrieve the original *Enterprise* landing party was thirty-two. However, the majority of us have been killed, and we are pursued by alien beings that we cannot see."

Mel'Taya's mouth went dry. "You're not from the *Enterprise*? What vessel did your particular landing party come from?"

"The Conjunction Ship *Tashrun*. We aided in freeing your starship from the attackers. Those aliens — the *Husnock*, you call them? They are swarming these woods."

"Have you communicated your status to your commander?" The *chae-na's* own skin was now crawling with anxiety, and it had to force itself not to fidget.

"We do not dare. We appear to be quicker than these things, but they appear able to home in on —"

"Do it *now*! We need some sort of backup. The Husnock with us has equipment that makes the unseen aliens visible, but —"

The underbrush exploded.

Chapter Twelve

The ground floor of the scientific complex was largely composed of administrative office suites, once again tightly latched, and a series of public study rooms appended to four libraries. To Rafael's great relief, these were all unlocked.

It was the libraries that contained the sort of instrumentation he sought. He attempted, after determining this, to lock one of the libraries and its associated study rooms behind him, unsurprisingly without success. *I guess the way the Klingon psyche works*, Buonarroti mused to himself, *irritated, is that if something can't be compulsorily locked, it must remain mandatorily open.*

Rafe settled for barricading him into the library. Part of him expected the Husnock to immediately appear, knock down the barricades, and drag him back to the cell — or the mind-sifter.

When this didn't happen, he became significantly more frightened for the *Enterprise* and its crew. Either these monsters who had tortured his portion of the landing party — at least one of those to death — and, as far as he was aware, killed the other portion, had no fear of their prisoners going anywhere, either because there

was no ship to return to, or because they held the entire *Enterprise* crew captive. Or possibly both.

Rafe pushed those thoughts as far into his subconscious as he could, and set himself the task of building a good strong subspace commlink. A quick inspection of the library consoles showed him that the transceivers were a series of interlinks between the libraries in the Archanis Science Complex and the great library computers of Memory Beta, Delta, Gamma, and Prime, which held artifacts and copies of the written, videographic, and holographic cultural knowledge of the entire Federation.

It was no more difficult for the *Enterprise's* head of engineering to disconnect one of those interlinks and program in the subspace contact parameters for the starship *Enterprise* using an inverse carrier-wave (which, he hoped, Husnock dampers would not block), than it would have been for an old-fashioned telephone operator to remove a series of end-plugs from one telephone trunk line and connect them to another. *Difficult* was sending out the hail. *What do I do if nobody responds?* he mused blankly for nearly a minute.

Rafe rubbed at his temples. Apparently, he'd done a particularly bad job with one or more of those medical instruments — he must have sustained a concussion or something and not had enough medical savvy to see that on some readout. The answer to the question that had

him so perplexed was as basic as stopping to eat and drink, and even sleep, whenever it was possible to do so in an emergency situation, and as deeply-ingrained into the minds of every Starfleet Academy graduate:

Send out a broad-band distress call if you find yourself abandoned, or feel you have limited subspace capacity. If you have been abandoned and feel your subspace capacity is capable from where you are, contact Starfleet or the nearest Federation Outpost directly. The greenest damned cadet knew that. Buonarroti drew a deep breath, and opened a channel.

"Buonarroti to *Enterprise*! This is Lieutenant Rafael Buonarroti. Come in, *Enterprise*!"

The response was immediate. "Rafael! Are you all right? Did the security team get to you already? What is going *on* down there?"

The breath that Rafe didn't even realize he was holding escaped his lungs with explosive force. "*All right* is a relative term, I think, Commander. I have no idea what *team* it is you're referring to, but I do know that the creatures that've been torturing us for the last..." he shook his head at the transceiver, suddenly aware that he had no idea how much time had passed, even since he'd begun his search for a subspace band. "I don't know how long, I've lost all sense of time, Commander. But the Husnock all ran off right after they strapped me down, I think. Both the captain and Dr. Corrigan are

badly injured."

"Hold on one minute, Lieutenant, can you?"

"Aye," Rafe came back shortly. He could hear Josi trying to contact the security team she'd been talking about a moment ago. Even as she did that, Rafe tried to formulate a feel for how long the XO spoke relative to how much time passed.

He couldn't do it.

Those alien bastards did something to me, too, Rafe thought to himself in disgust. He couldn't have said what it might have been any more than he could have said how long Josi continued trying to contact the security team. Half a minute. Half an hour. Something like that.

There was no response from the team. Buonarroti heard the executive officer of the *Enterprise* swear softly, then engage in a swift, clipped conversation with someone else nearby. Maybe forty seconds. Or fifteen minutes. Rafe rubbed his temples again, and bit back a moan.

"Lieutenant, what's your current location?"

"The lowest floor of the Science Complex, barricaded into one of the libraries. Josi, if you send a team to help Captain Ingram and the doctor, you have to know that they're stuck behind a force field that'll vaporize anybody who comes near enough to touch it, and there's no way of turning it off — the aliens ran off

with the technology to do that."

"Are there dead aliens in or near the science complex that might have destabilizers for this force field?"

Rafael thought about that for a minute or twelve. "The dead ones inside the complex have been stripped of everything. I..." he wracked his brain for the information, and scowled; "I've been injured myself, Commander, and I honestly can't *remember* whether or not there even are dead aliens outside, much less whether any had the belts that carry whatever destabilizers take these force fields down. And I'm afraid if I do manage to release Dr. Corrigan...well, somehow these things have her convinced that they're our allies, and she could be a danger to everyone else."

"Good green god — how did *that* happen?"

"The Klingons had a mind-sifter here. No idea why. The aliens — they call themselves *Husnock* — were using it on us to try to find a way to turn us into willing slaves. Captain Ingram... Josi, the captain's in really bad shape. I mean..." Rafe swallowed audibly; "she isn't *there* anymore!"

Josi made a deeply aggravated sound somewhere between a whimper and a snarl, then choked it back. The XO's voice had lost all extraneous emotion when, finally, she replied to Rafe crisply. "Here's what I need to know, Lieutenant; how many of these *Husnock* are

currently on the planet?"

"I...I can't remember..." he quit trying, and pulled a number out of thin air, "Fifty, maybe? There were four in the room who ran out. And the four of them... Commander, they can—"

"Do you have any idea of the crew compliment of their ships?" Felingaili broke in before Rafael could lose himself in fear again.

"I don't have that information. I'm sorry, I —"

"One moment, Lieutenant," the XO interrupted again. This time, the line made a holding-hum as Josi switched signal modulations. Rafe tried to relax back into the overstuffed library chair, but a sensation of his current uselessness in the face of this situation — *I don't know, I don't know* — made the muscles in his back and shoulders work themselves into jumpy knots.

He pulled one of the chocolate bars out of his pocket, more to distract himself than because he really wanted it. He'd hardly had time to open it before the line switched back on. Josi's voice was grim:

"That was the second security team, *Tashrun* Conjunction crew. The entire first team the *Enterprise* sent down to look for you has been killed, but the house they were sent to search is empty otherwise. The second team's now searching the forested area between that house and the Science Complex for Husnock; they're heading toward the complex to back you up, Rafe, so

hang in there. Exactly what are these aliens *like*, Lieutenant? "

"They're terrible." Rafe set down the chocolate bar and rubbed at his aching head again. His fear and sense of helplessness weren't what his commanding officer had just requested to hear; if the starship that was his home, and the crew that was his family, was to help either him or each other at all, Josi needed facts, not feelings. Buonarroti cleared his throat, and began again:

"Here's their weaknesses: They don't breathe a type-M atmosphere, they have some sort of tentacled thing on their faces that breathes for them. Their breath smells like ammonia and rotted eggs. They're roughly humanoid-shaped but they're not really humanoid; they don't walk fast and can't run, so they can be run away from if you can *see* them. I do remember that they have some sort of way to not be seen when they don't want to be, but when they're not cloaked somehow..." Buonarroti thought for a second or an hour, then went on:

"I'm using inverse-carrier waves to talk to you right now, and I'm thinking that if you alter the ship's scanners to use those, you'll be able to scan the aliens that are on the planet that *aren't* cloaked. It might be the thing they breathe with that skews our sensors. Along with the fragmenting disruptors they've got, they have natural razor-like talons, and they go for the face. They might

have types of weaponry that I don't know about, and I'm sorry I can't —"

"How many of your landing party are left alive, Lieutenant?" The XO interrupted Rafael before he could fall off the cliff of data into the swamp of emotion again, and for that, Rafe was grateful.

"As far as I know? Myself, the captain, and T'Dani. The captain sent Mel'Taya, Yaelat, Seantie, and Bhopest off to scout the perimeter and look for survivors, and I haven't seen them since then." He sighed tiredly. "I think that's all I know, Commander, and I'm sorry."

Josi's tone softened. "You have *nothing* to be sorry for, Lieutenant. Rest awhile — help's coming!"

"What *are* they?"

Josi sat in the captain's ready room with the commanding officers of the *Tashrun* and the *QonDoqh*. She drew a deep breath before replying to the towering, blonde-haired, gray-eyed Klingon captain. The *Enterprise's* XO was more than a little bemused by the commander of the *QonDoqh*. In her estimation, most Klingon captains, upon being faced by a Klingon colony that had been wholly slaughtered by an unknown enemy, would not stop to ask questions prior to beaming down a landing party to pay back the slaughter.

It appeared that she just might have to re-estimate her estimation of Klingons. She wondered, too, how

badly his crew misestimated him, and how much trouble they gave him, or if they dared:

"They call themselves *Husnock*. Both they and their ships appear resistant to standard scanners, Federation or otherwise. According to our senior engineer, inverse-carrier waves might reveal the aliens, as long as they're not cloaked. The main thing we know about them is that they have technologies we've never encountered before. Beyond that, we know that they're extremely intelligent, merciless, and dangerous. Also, according to our senior engineer, individual Husnock have some method of remaining undetected while standing directly in front of you, and —"

"A *personal* cloaking device," Captain Qlada said in a tone that suggested that he was impressed. Josi shrugged.

"Apparently. They also have razor-sharp talons and what sounds like Type Five disruptors. My engineer says they might have other weaponry of which he isn't aware. Their ships assemble to lock other ships into a sort of vise, as you've seen. However, if you ever find yourselves held in such a vise, you should know that performing defensive actions while you're inside of it will make your own ship implode."

"We saw that, too," Qlada said grimly, and changed the subject; "Personal cloaking devices would require a great deal of energy to maintain."

The commander of the *Tashrun* stirred in her chair, looking from the *Enterprise's* XO to the captain of the *Assassin's Blade*. "Have they weaknesses that might be exploited? And is there not some means of penetrating cloaking devices, Captain Qlada?"

It was the *Enterprise's* XO who replied, and she answered the second question first. "I looked up the anti-cloaking information first thing. There is something we could try, but it has drawbacks. First, it takes ten times as much energy to power an anti-cloaking device as it does a cloaking device, something along the lines of a quarter of a googolplex in wattage. Also, it's positron-based; it would take the engineering crew of the *Enterprise* about three days to produce one, and frankly we just don't have that sort of time right now."

"Well, that *is* interesting to know," Qlada replied dryly. Josi smiled.

"I also happen to know that Starfleet possesses at least one of the things, though I couldn't tell you where it's gotten off to. And a cloaked ship can be discovered by looking for either its ion trails if it's cruising at impulse, or its magneton trails if it's traveling at warp. But as for personal cloaking devices..." Josi shrugged and threw up her hands, "who knows?"

"Several Federation worlds have been working to supply their Conjunction Ships with the sort of cloak-penetrating equipment you have just described,

Commander Felingaili. It is not considered to be classified information at the Starfleet level." The Vulcan woman scowled slightly. "Do these Husnock have any *weaknesses*?" Commander T'Parda inquired again.

Of course, it wasn't classified information, the *Enterprise's* XO mused, irritated. If at any time it had been, she wouldn't have been able to dig up any sort of information on it. Though to be honest, it hadn't actually required much digging; the *Enterprise's* computer was quite forthcoming when it had been some iteration of the *Enterprise* itself that had, ostensibly, invented something.

Felingaili nodded at T'Parda. "The Husnock have at least two weaknesses. First, they're not humanoid, except in rough conformation, and they don't breathe an oxygen-nitrogen mix. According to the report I just got, they wear some sort of lower lifeform on their face that somehow breathes *for* them. Remove the creature, and I suppose they'd suffocate. Nor can they walk at the same pace as a humanoid, or run at all, which I'm told is a perfectly effective way of eluding them, when you can see them."

Commander T'Parda nodded at Josi, a thoughtful look replacing the slight scowl on her face. The *Enterprise* had sent down a crew consisting of a dozen Starfleet Marine-trained security personnel in full protective gear. None of them ever checked back in with

the ship. Assuming communications difficulties, the *Tashrun* had followed up with twenty *Varkhenn* elite troops, who found that the Marine squadron sent down by the *Enterprise* had been killed in the house they had been sent to monitor. Not long after making this discovery, the *Tashrun's* landing party found themselves being harried and pursued by Husnock troops, and hadn't reported back since.

Both the *Enterprise* and the *Tashrun* had found it impossible to beam their people back aboard; some sort of jamming signal now swathed the planet from its core to its lower stratosphere. Josi had put this down to yet more unidentified Husnock technology. Of course, if any of the ships present could have done something as simple as just beaming people off the planet they orbited, they wouldn't be here now having this conversation. Josi sighed.

"And you have no idea how many of these damnable Husnock might be down there?" Qlada snapped. Felingaili reached out to press part of the inlay on the glossy black desk at which she sat. The desk came alive with capacitive touch-buttons and readouts. The Orion woman pressed one of the buttons.

"Seantie?"

"Here, Commander."

"I need you to alter the scanners to scan using inverse-carrier waves. Can you do that?"

"I think so, Commander."

"Good. This should let us scan the creatures on the planet directly. Let me know once this is done, will you?"

"Absolutely."

"Good. Josi out." She pressed the same button, then sat back and looked up at the Klingon.

"I guess we'll know pretty soon, assuming that this works, but I can still give you a rough estimate, which my people also call a *guess*; there may be as many as sixty Husnock on Archanis Four right now, and there may be more Husnock yet in the four ships that got away."

T'Parda stirred in her chair again. "In which case, our away teams are not large enough, most particularly if these creatures possess personal cloaking devices. My next question would be —"

Qlada grunted and talked over the Vulcan commander. "Yes, we should at least double the Husnock numbers down there. I shall —"

"How many armed Klingons lived on that planet to begin with?" Josi interrupted both Conjunction officers softly. Qlada bridled, and the *Enterprise's* XO held up a reassuring hand; "I'm not implying, Captain, that they didn't fight hard and valiantly. I'm assuming that they *did*, and that it made little difference.

"So far, what may or may not be around sixty

Husnock have killed approximately two hundred and twelve Klingons, seventy-four Vulcans, twenty-seven humans, one hundred and three Tellarites, and probably an Andorian, a Betazoid, a Hali'ian, and a Grazerite. What I'm *saying* is that these things kill with absolutely no compunction, possess technologies against which we have no current defenses, and appear to be able to overcome odds of, let's say, seven to one. I'm *not* convinced that throwing away the lives of more people is the best method of either defeating or destroying these aliens."

"Another option might lie in my next question. Of what substance, or perhaps it would be more logical to say, of what phylogenetic type, is the creature worn as a breathing apparatus by these Husnock?" Commander T'Parda inquired.

The *Enterprise's* executive officer shook her head at Qlada while considering T'Parda's question. Josi wasn't going to make the same mistake again; she had prepared a security crew to take a shuttle down, triangulate on any survivors, and pick whoever might still be alive from the three separate landing parties up. She hadn't sent the shuttle yet, however.

"They appear to be some sort of..." *what* was it that Seantie had said about the things yesterday? Josi's memory was usually more or less eidetic, but stress had driven all but the most necessary information into the

nooks and crannies; "ahm, cross between an algae and a slime mold, maybe, but with nascent animal tendencies — kind of a slime-mold-jellyfish. Rafe says they're tentacled, and that they're required by the Husnock in order for the aliens to tolerate an oxygen atmosphere."

"Then it seems to me that the most logical course of action would be to determine what would kill such a creature," T'Parda replied serenely.

Josi inclined her head at the Vulcan Conjunction Ship commander. "That's an excellent thought. We should try to have just such a substance on hand before sending emergency shuttles or any further landing parties down."

Chapter Thirteen

A quick scan of the situation told Mel'Taya two things:

One, that the Andorian was in the most protected, central area of their attacker's rough semicircle, whose concentrated edges were to the southwest and east of the *Enterprise* and the *Tashrun* landing parties. This meant that their attackers probably had knowledge of the *chae-na's* excellent — and deadly — aim.

Two, that both Federation parties together were outnumbered at least two to one, which meant that their attacker's goal was almost certainly not capture. Mel'Taya ducked and wove in order to avoid the disruptor beam of the single Husnock approaching the *Enterprise* party from the north, turned, and sprinted full-out in the opposite direction. The bulk of their attackers were in the south, and it was these that the security officer pelted toward.

There were things that the attacking Husnock couldn't possibly know about the *chae-na* — that most Andorians were fully ambidextrous, for example, or that Mel'Taya carried an edged weapon in one hand and a disruptor in the other, or the ability of Andorian antennae to perceive the location of a person or object without visual backup, or the powerful, agile facility of Andorian

muscle.

Or the fact that once an Andorian had decided they were probably going to die anyway, they would to shocking lengths to either protect others or to take their enemies with them — preferably, both at once. And Mel'Taya was a deceptively delicate-looking Andorian, *deceptively* being the crux of that statement.

Seantie, who had been following nearly in the security officer's footsteps, followed Mel'Taya's lead and fell back southward, though neither she nor Mel'Taya were in time to stop the Husnock that had materialized nearly at Bhopest's feet. The alien was so near the Grazerite that the Husnock didn't bother drawing its disruptor; it simply reached out with what appeared to be a two-foot truncheon. A light tap to the startled Grazerite's neck sent the humanoid crashing to the ground clutching at his throat and trying vainly to breathe through a crushed windpipe. Grazerites drew in air through different parts of their faces than most humanoids; nevertheless, those anatomical structures still coalesced into a single, humanoid trachea.

Seantie altered her trajectory when she saw Bhopest go down, aiming for the face of the Husnock who had attacked him. Seeing the Betazoid take aim at it, the Husnock drew its weapon, but before either it or Seantie could fire, 'Dan — whom the landing party had agreed to re-arm with the renegade Husnock's original weapon

before setting out for the Archanis Science Complex, since they had no additional weapons to arm the alien with — sent a burst of fire from a position next to Yaelat. The Husnock had little protection from their own weapons, and the one that had attacked Bhopest went down with an eerie screech, the armor that had covered the left side of its thorax a melted, smoldering black ruin which, for a few moments at least, spurted gold.

It was then that Seantie saw there were two Husnock, not one, in Bhopest's general area, and the second had already drawn a bead on her. She dove for the only cover available, before the Husnock could fire — Bhopest's body. The Husnock intent on killing her came lumbering forward, presumably to shoot her point-blank where she huddled behind the large male Grazerite who, Seantie noted in terror, wasn't breathing. Before the alien could take more than five strides, the rebel Husnock the *Enterprise* party had befriended shot that erstwhile compatriot, too.

Yaelat had fired at the same time that 'Dan shot the Husnock who had killed Bhopest. The Hali'ian targeted the alien whose disruptor blast Mel'Taya had been forced to dodge before the *chae-na* headed south. He didn't miss; his shot hit the creature squarely in the right hip. This earned Yaelat a glare and a laser sight in the center of his forehead.

The Hali'ian took refuge behind the large elm he had

ducked behind when Mel'Taya had first sensed the approach of the Vulcans. Shortly, he was forced to run from both the tree and the Husnock he had enraged, as disruptor blasts directed at the elm caught it on fire and caused it to topple. The Husnock followed at the usual slow amble which, for it, was both walking and running.

Far more agile than his pursuer, Yaelat threw himself under a thick tangle of blackberry vines, gaining cover as well as multiple facial, forearm, and back lacerations for his trouble, and garnering several particularly itchy spider bites that he wouldn't be aware of until much later. Through the tattered semi-evergreen foliage, the Hali'ian took careful aim at the Husnock's face. Facilitated by the light cast by the flaming tree, his aim was true. His phaser had originally been set to kill, but apparently the sudden rough trip through the brambles had snagged its setting, and the Husnock — along with the patch of thumb-thick thorny vine directly in front of Yaelat — disintegrated in a snarl of flame.

The communications officer flinched backward from the smoldering foliage in front of him, earning more lacerations from the tangle of thorns behind him. Frowning, he hurriedly left what was no longer a hiding place through the portion of prickly thicket he'd disintegrated, before what remained toppled over on him. He paused only long enough to reset his phaser. *Disintegrate* was good for maybe ten shots, if you were

lucky, before a phaser morphed into a not-particularly-effective blunt striking weapon.

Disintegrate was, however, a *gratifying* setting, the Hali'ian communications officer thought with a fierce grin.

The Vulcans were having a difficult time of it. The leader of their team had killed two Husnock, who rose out of the teeming vines to his north, efficiently and quickly. The second had gotten no shots off at all, but met Bhopest's fate before his female companion killed the truncheon-bearing alien. The Vulcan woman had then turned and hurried westward, killing two Husnock and wounding another, before being fatally shot herself.

The single remaining Husnock at the westernmost edge of the trap they had planned to spring like a vise on the Federation teams eluded the single remaining Vulcan, and melted into the hazy darkness that was building further west as the moon set and the eastern section of the sky began to lighten toward dawn, plotting a slow and careful path toward the south.

Where Mel'Taya was creating havoc. Indeed, though certain humans, many Tellarites, the occasional Vulcan, and numerous other Federation citizens had a penchant for finding the natives of *Fesoan* almost irresistibly quirky and fascinating, the specific term for *Andorian* in the language of at least two other species residing in the Alpha quadrant could be translated as

havoc.

Having neatly shot two Husnock while barreling through a stand of sumac, the *chae-na* hardly paused as a third swiped at the Andorian's face with its talons, laying the skin and muscle over the security officer's right cheek open nearly to the oral cavity before finding itself entirely divested of its hand. The shock of a duranium-reinforced blade passing through flesh and bone, and nicking badly on the edge of the Husnock's armor, thereby leaving a shard of metal lodged in what remained of its forearm, gave the enraged, bleeding Andorian the crucial few seconds required to sever the alien's windpipe. The Husnock had no large arteries in the throat. Mel'Taya noted this almost unconsciously as the alien fell, drowning in what, to it, was a poisonous atmosphere.

As far as Mel'Taya was able to perceive, considering the waves of pain throbbing their way up the *chae-na's* badly sliced-up face, the final Husnock in the knot that had been gathered south of the *Enterprise* party was concealed within a dog-haired thicket of Klingon limber-pine just to the east. The weakening, infuriated Andorian didn't hesitate, but simply fired into the thicket without pausing, until the disruptor grew warm and gave a warning signal.

The thicket, and everything within twenty meters of it, became an inferno so hot that the soil melted and

crazed. Fortunately, the foliage, ground, and warm air was heavy and wet with rains and mist, or the enraged security officer might have started a wildfire that would have immolated them all.

Mel'Taya dropped the weapons it carried, tore off its outer uniform layer, folded that into a pad, and pressed it hard against its torn face. The weary, sapped Andorian half-fell into a graceless sitting position with a moan — and not a moment too soon. A disruptor bolt flew over the *chae-na's* head from behind, adding force to the fire already burning. Mel'Taya's mind was sluggish with heat, exhaustion, pain, and blood loss, and it took the *chae-na* several seconds to comprehend what this meant.

One hand busy with the terrible lacerations torn into its cheek, the Andorian had only enough time to grab for one weapon before somersaulting backward into a standing crouch, while letting go of the material pressed to its wounded face, before the Husnock fired again. Mel'Taya had no effective shield, but even dizzy and wounded an Andorian was capable of moving with remarkable alacrity, particularly in comparison to a Husnock. And unless the Husnock's disruptor ran out of power, that was Mel'Taya's only option, because the *Enterprise's* head of security had picked up the *hrisal* rather than the Andorian disruptor.

"Coward!" Mel'Taya roared, while trying to keep from stumbling or even wholly passing out from the

screaming agony that the simple act of speaking caused. "Afraid to fight hand to hand?"

The alien wasn't even tempted by the taunting that would have been responded to in kind by any humanoid even a fraction as martial as the Husnock were; as Mel'Taya had surmised, its people's intent was destruction, not capture or intimidation. The Husnock pushed the wounded, bleeding *chae-na* inexorably back toward the north. Eventually, one of its shots would connect.

Another Husnock popped up out of the very stand of sumac Mel'Taya had charged through not ten minutes earlier, and leveled its disruptor. There was no evading this; instead, the Andorian turned to make a killing — or at least disabling — stroke before the alien shot.

Yaelat burst out of the sumac stand and tackled Mel'Taya around the shins. It was fortunate that the Andorian was weakened, or the *chae-na* might have attempted to remove the Hali'ian's head with the blunted, nicked *hrisal*. Instead, Mel'Taya struck the ground with an *oof*, and lay stunned for long enough that Yaelat could roll out of the immediate path of the head of security's long knife, which barely had enough force behind it in any case to penetrate the forest duff. 'Dan shot over the tumbling *Enterprise* officers, directly into the pursuing Husnock's face.

Mel'Taya was done in. The *chae-na* was fairly

certain it wasn't going to be getting up or going anywhere anytime soon. If the Andorian's face hadn't ached so abominably, it would have fallen asleep where it had dropped into the thick, soft pile formed by a dozen years' buildup of sumac leaves.

Mel'Taya's eyes fell closed nonetheless, so when Yaelat gave the *chae-na* a dose of painkiller — an old-fashioned morphine-syringe ampoule, utterly safe for use with all humanoids, as all humanoid bodies hosted similar opioid-receptors, just as they all hosted similar receptors for serotonin, neurotrophin, psylosinine, or oxytocin — the Andorian flinched in surprise. The *Enterprise's* head of security was unconscious before the realization of what Yaelat had done dawned.

Captain Qlada had returned to his ship, to gather his troops and wait for whatever weaponry the *Enterprise* ultimately sent them. After they received that weaponry, they would be beamed into the shuttle Josi would send for them.

There was no doubt, in either Josi or Commander T'Parda's estimation, that the Husnock would fight rather than withdraw. The two women had remained in the captain's ready room, cups of coffee that had little or no effect on either of them in their hands. The intimate atmosphere inferred by the presence of the warm cups had a salutary effect on Josi's exhausted, anxious mind,

allowing her to think creatively without wanting to throw up her hands and run screaming. T'Parda politely played along.

"It is not uncommon for sentients who require what we would consider extreme environments to be exceptionally belligerent," T'Parda reasoned. "Take the Breen, for example. Their blood in its natural state is a colloid that turns into a gas at what, for most humanoids, is a reasonable room temperature. The suits they wear maintain a constant environment of minus two hundred degrees Centigrade. And they, too, are poisoned by the presence of oxygen."

Josi nodded; she already knew that the Breen respired liquid helium, and that the cells which carried nutrients and gases through their bodies were nucleated rather than biometal-centered. In the strict biochemical sense, the Breen didn't have *blood*, or discrete channels to carry that liquid, at all. Nor were their bodies naturally humanoid-shaped. Breen flesh was plasticine and amoeboid; the choice of a humanoid-shaped environmental suit was, knowing the Breen, either pure prevarication, or an attempt to lull potential enemies into a sense of complacency. Felingaili had seen Breen in headless, tentacled environmental suits, too.

"You're saying that the Husnock might have evolved to be combative in order to keep potentially mortal situations at bay, the way the Breen have done?" Josi

asked, though frankly, she didn't really care; she just wanted to know how to destroy the damnable things.

The Vulcan woman nodded serenely. "And once they learned that being combative could not only protect them, but give them dominance..." she shrugged and changed the subject:

"Your crewman said the breath of the Husnock smelled like ammonia and rotten eggs. That combination of odors would indicate the presence nitrogen sulfide. Nitrogen sulfide, in environments with heavy atmospheric pressures, allows ammonia to form bonds strong enough to be conducive to life at ambient temperatures above freezing. It would be logical to conclude that these personal cloaking-suits the aliens wear also somehow maintain high-pressure environments for them, to keep the liquid constituents of their bodies from evaporating away in relatively low atmospheric pressures.

"In combination with chlorine, the breath of these Husnock might make chloramine gas, an exceptionally toxic compound that should at least be able to asphyxiate the Husnock, though probably it would cause their bodily liquids to boil, even if it cannot kill the creatures that provide the aliens a breathable atmosphere. However, the combination of chlorine, ammonia, and sulfur can potentially be lethal to humanoids who breathe a *menshara* atmosphere.

"Gas masks capable of filtering out chloramines and hydrazines as well as disulfur dichloride, should be provided for all ground crew expected to encounter the aliens. I am not certain, however, what would provide the best delivery system for this substance. Hoses, perhaps, or —"

Josi laughed outright. The Vulcan commander offered her a look which plainly said that T'Parda thought the *Enterprise's* executive officer might have lost her mind. "You're telling me that the most lethal option for the ground troops would be to come armed with water pistols and water balloons full of chlorine bleach?"

The Vulcan woman blinked. "What you refer to are human toys, are they not? And we have seen that we can scan for the presence of the Husnock using simple inverse-carrier waves. It would be logical to assume that such technologies are simply so primitive that it does not occur to these aliens to consider that we would use them, ourselves. However, I would imagine that, should we choose to supply an attack force with an equivalently primitive device capable of delivering a chlorine solution as a chemical weapon, it would not be logical to depend upon human toys."

Felingaili held up one hand to stem T'Parda's logic-hemorrhage. "I'm sorry, Commander. I didn't actually mean to suggest that we use toys to combat the Husnock.

It was..." Josi sighed tiredly, "a joke. No, some sort of solution-containing backpack apparatus capable of delivering bursts of spray both hard and accurately would be best. I do have a concern, however, about the people currently on Archanis Four who don't have chemical masks." The *Enterprise's* executive officer set down her coffee cup and expressed her next concern with utter, unstudied seriousness; "I'm also unsure how we're going to convince a bunch of really pissed-off Klingons go into battle dressed as noxious-weed exterminators."

"You imagine they might take to water balloons more readily?" T'Parda inquired, a flash of humor causing her eyes to twinkle for a split microsecond. Josi snorted.

"I imagine that we'll need to send an *Enterprise* contingent in first, with the chlorine solution..." she sighed again and rubbed at her eyes. "How do we know this will even *work*?"

"Considering the chemicals involved, the Husnock should, at the least, be incapacitated. Let us send two groups, in that case, or even three. *Enterprise* troops, to utilize this weapon which the Husnock have no reason to suspect. Follow this with a wave of Klingons, armed as they desire. I could then send individuals from *Tashrun* to the science complex, to locate and free your people held captive there."

"I'd like to go to the science complex with your people, and I believe we should send them in sooner rather than later. We need to get our badly wounded crewmen out of there. And we ought to give the Klingons the chemical packs even if they don't use them. In fact, fit everybody who goes down there with one, and a mask, just to be on the safe side. Which brings me back to my continual nagging worry; how do we fit the people already on the ground with masks?"

Chapter Fourteen

The Hali'ian sterilized and dermasutured Mel'Taya's cheek with 'Dan standing guard over them both, casting bemused glances at the disparate humanoids occasionally. Yaelat could hear the creature on the Husnock's face making distressed squeaking noises, as it attempted to alter the smoky, ozone-rich atmosphere of the impromptu battleground into something that 'Dan could breathe.

“You're certain there's no more of your people nearby?” Yaelat quizzed their Husnock ally tensely — Andorians, the Hali'ian noted, leaked like humanoid sieves. And their skin was tough and thick. It was slow, hard going for a first aid dermasuture tool. They wouldn't be getting another use out of it, that much was certain. The fingertips of the Hali'ian's left hand were stained an inky blue, where he attempted to hold Mel'Taya's torn flesh together while the little dermasuture tool did its work.

The Husnock tossed its blocky head in response, and it was only then that Yaelat realized he was seeing by more than the light of various conflagrations. A new, if smoky, day had dawned while the landing parties fought for their lives. “Not within at least three miles.

Humanoids approach, however.”

Yaelat paused his suturing and looked around hopefully. If he'd been expecting reinforcements, he was disappointed. The approaching humanoids consisted of a grand total of one Betazoid and one Vulcan. The Hali'ian bent over Mel'Taya once more. He supposed that, when outnumbered two to one, losing half of your people while destroying the enemy entirely was a remarkable deed, but it didn't feel that way. It didn't feel that way at all.

Seantie carried a Husnock's torso strap and equipment.

“You will want to put that down *now*,” ‘Dan hissed at her; “my people can beam you up or even cause you harm utilizing your unauthorized touch on it!”

The Betazoid dropped the gear immediately, but fixed the Husnock with a scowl. “But is there any of it we can *use*? That's why I brought it — the apparatus that makes your people invisible, for instance, or any medical supplies.”

The Husnock cast another reflective glance at the Hali'ian and the Andorian. “None of that equipment would work for any of you; it was genetically modified to perform only for the warrior destined to bear it when that one was born. Our greatest leaders bear weaponry generations old, proving the purity of their lines. Such technology was developed elsewhere and elsewhen, to

arm a race of clones against the cannon-fodder they were bred to control.

“None of it is anything you could alter to your own use, unless you first possessed the technologies of the Dominion. And my people do not carry medical supplies on wolf pack ships; those who die or are injured in a wolf pack are obviously defective. As I, myself, am defective. I am no longer Husnock. I am not certain what I am, now.”

“You’re our friend,” Yaelat replied, without looking up. To the exhausted, stressed senior communications officer of the *Enterprise*, most of the rest of what the Husnock had just said fell somewhere between the poles of meaningless and incomprehensible. The dermasuture tool Yaelat was using to heal the nasty gash on Mel’Taya’s face gave out with what could only be described as an electronic whimper.

At least, Yaelat reasoned, the *chae-na* had stopped bleeding. The Hali’ian sat up and stretched his back and shoulders, then drew his legs up to rest his arms on them. After staring meditatively at the fingers of his left hand for a moment, he rubbed them hard into the duff and underlying soil he sat on, in order to free them of clotted blood. His stomach growled viciously. As though in sympathy, the stomach of the single remaining Vulcan growled, too.

The Vulcan pulled out a communicator, an

unmistakably bemused expression on his face as he stared unblinkingly at the Husnock standing over the unconscious Andorian and the disheveled, abraded Hali'ian. "Syral to *Tashrun*."

"*Tashrun* responding, Major. What is your status?"

Syral sighed audibly. "Two skirmishes with the aliens, Commander. I am the sole survivor of our away team. I doubt very much I would be alive now, however, had we not met up with part of the original away team from the *Enterprise*. They have made..." he paused, apparently selecting and discarding adjectives, "an unlikely alliance with one of the aliens, Commander. The entire *Enterprise* security team we were originally sent down to rendezvous with has been killed. Most of our own team was killed while verifying this."

The soft sound of conversation between the commander of the *Tashrun* and at least one other individual could be heard in the background. Syral went on without waiting to be prompted:

"Our remaining members took refuge in the woods around the science complex, and we came across four members of the original *Enterprise* landing party there. We are there now, approximately half a kilometer from the north-northwestern edge of the complex. There are four dead from this last clash, and one wounded. We require medical aid, food, and water."

Again, a soft murmur of conversation came through

the communicator, then the Commander said; “Stay where you currently are, Syral; an *Enterprise* shuttle is headed your way. Did I correctly hear you say that an alliance has been formed between the *Enterprise* landing party and one of the aliens which originally attacked it?”

“That is correct, Commander. I am not currently salient on all details regarding either how or why this has taken place, but I personally witnessed this alien attack its own people to save Federation lives. They call themselves Husnock —”

“We are in possession of that knowledge, Major. The captain of the *Enterprise* and the other half of that ship’s original away team is being held hostage in the science complex itself. We remain unsure of the number of hostiles within the complex but have been told that both the captain and the chief medical officer of the *Enterprise* have been gravely injured.”

Yaelat and Seantie shared a significant look. As the shadow of the *Keller* loomed above them, the Hali’ian stood and the Betazoid began to pace. “We need to get there and help them!” Seantie insisted. Syral held up one hand, palm-out, in a calming, negating gesture.

“One concern at a time, Lieutenant,” he implored. The electromagnetic and auditory effects caused by the landing of the shuttle overwhelmed the ability of Syral’s communicator to send or receive for a moment. The major’s overriding concern was to get the helpless,

wounded Andorian security officer out of this area, which undoubtedly would become the focus of any further Husnock activity.

“How many more of these belligerent aliens are we dealing with, Commander?” he inquired finally, as the shuttle team emerged with food packs, a stretcher, and further equipment that Syral’s stressed mind took a moment to recognize as gas masks and some sort of backpack fitted with what looked like projectile hoses. “You must understand that their weaponry is both unknown and extremely effective. Do you believe they will attempt to kill their hostages within the science complex, or —”

“There were twenty ships, each manned by fifteen individuals, all receiving energy from a central horizon-vessel. Five individuals from each ship were sent planetside originally. A full fifty of those were killed or severely injured before we were able to subdue the populace here,” ‘Dan offered.

Syral, his attention on the fascinating equipment that the shuttle crew was insistently handing out, hadn’t seen the Husnock approaching. The Vulcan man literally flinched away as the alien began speaking. ‘Dan ignored this diplomatically, and went on, more than loudly enough for its voice to be picked up by a Starfleet communicator:

“Our leader felt that this was unusual, but did not

call for further backup, fearing that the potentiality of such a leader might be called into question. *That* is what persuaded me that I, myself, might ally with such fierce individuals as yourselves, and thus escape my own people. I killed one of my own people just after making the acquaintance of those,” ‘Dan motioned with one long arm toward Yaelat and Seantie, who were now both pacing in frustration, even as part of the shuttle crew cajoled them to don chemical masks, for which they gave no explanation, and others hurriedly bundled Mel’Taya into the shuttle.

“I understand that the white-haired one had killed two, not including the twelve who were just killed in this area,” the Husnock continued. None of the *Enterprise* officers had deigned to actually introduce themselves to ‘Dan, and the Husnock hadn’t asked. For all the changes toward the Unwhole that ‘Dan had felt compelled to make, it still hadn’t occurred to the Husnock to be concerned with what individual Unwhole called themselves:

“This would leave thirty-six of my people active upon the planet. I have no firm idea of how many of those might have been left in charge of the humanoids taken hostage in the complex. Which would leave roughly two hundred and thirty-six Husnock on or orbiting the planet, unless —”

“Ah...*that* is the alien, Commander,” Syral offered

into the mouthpiece of the communicator. He had put on a chemical mask, which muffled his voice somewhat.

“Yes, I surmised as much. Husnock, have you a name?”

The being blinked its eyes randomly; if there was an emotional context to that, Syral was not capable of guessing what it might be. “They call me ‘*Dan*,’ it replied shortly.

“Very well. ‘Dan, we have destroyed all but four of your ships. *That* would leave —”

“Forty. And all forty may come for us here, right —”

Now.

“We need to try and find the rest of those little...” Demora bit back the first word that sprang, illogically but descriptively, to mind. She said, instead; “Alien ships.”

“These things are really different, Lieutenant,” Mark Justice Fletcher replied somberly. “I’ve already checked, and they don’t leave ion trails.”

“How is that even possible?” Marco asked, his brow furrowed.

EmJay Fletcher shrugged. “They cloak; I guess they have something that cloaks their trails, too.”

“Or obliterates it,” Demora said, thoughtfully. “Marco, are there residual magneton pulses in the area?”

The ginger haired man handling both navigations and helm worked the consoles silently for a long march of seconds. “Sure there are. The *QhonDoq* came in using the sun as a shield. The *Fang* and the *Fearless* came in the other way, from behind the gas giants at the edge of the system’s Oort belt, like we did. Not a trace of anything...*wait* a minute! EmJay, do you see this?” Thomas Marcus Johnson sent the information in front of him to the tactical console. “Sensor ghost, do you think?”

“Hmmm, no. I mean, yes, it’s obviously a ghost, but...I don’t think it’s a dead one, if you get my meaning. Lieutenant, I think there’s another ship in the area!”

“Husnock?” Demora demanded hopefully. EmJay shook his head at his console.

“I... I couldn’t say. I mean, from what we’ve seen so far, the Husnock don’t leave ion trails *or* magneton pulses, but who’s to say they might not be trying to lure us into something?”

“Where is this ship?” Demora stood up from where she was perched nervously at the edge of the captain’s chair and walked up the slanting walkway to Fletcher’s station. Women in command positions in Starfleet didn’t possess feminine, mincing walks; they strode like their male counterparts, and they emitted the same air of command.

The *Enterprise’s* senior tactical officer stood aside

and motioned at the tactical board. "Right off our starboard six, Lieutenant. I've taken the precaution of raising shields. No response to that so far."

Demora scrutinized the tactical information. "Good. Can we get this up on the main viewscreen?"

EmJay shrugged. "I can try. But I don't think there'd be anything to see in the visual spectrum."

Demora's mouth twisted. She turned toward the beta-shift communications officer filling in for Yaelat. "Ensign Kanchumurthi? Open a general channel. EmJay, charge the starboard phasers."

"Yes, Lieutenant," both men replied in tandem. Ramesh Kanchumurthi touched the board in front of him once; the emerald-green response light of a free, unblocked channel answered his touch. "Channel open, Lieutenant."

"This is Lieutenant Demora Sulu of the Starship *Enterprise* to the unknown ship off our starboard bow; declare yourself or —"

"*Enterprise*, stand down your weapons on the authority of the Inspector General of Section 31." A monotone male voice that could only be Vulcan replied.

Demora felt her eyebrows disappear into her hairline. "*Eh?* I'm sorry, to *whom* am I speaking?"

"You are speaking to Commander Sovar of the *Blacksnake*, Section 31 Special Agent. This vessel is the purview of Inspector General Shawn Kell, currently

planetside. Lieutenant Sulu, I am going to drop our cloak. At that point, if you do not stand down your weapons, I shall take control of the *Enterprise* from here and do so myself. I shall allow you the courtesy of one minute to perform this function.” The open channel light on the *Enterprise’s* communications board went white, followed by various other lights across that station.

All communications, including internal ones, were now offline. Kanchumurthi held up his hands and turned away from the station. “Well, the cloaked ship off our rear’s closed our communications channels, anyway.”

“Computer, information on the Section 31 ship known as the *Blacksnake*,” Demora snapped. The computer didn’t even bother to tell her that it was working:

No such vessel or section exists in this database.

Demora rolled her eyes. “Good lord. How do we know —”

“If you want my opinion, which I know you didn’t solicit, Lieutenant, I’d suggest that you do as they ask,” Marco interrupted. “If they’re Husnock, I don’t think they can get through psionically-enhanced shields. And if they’re Section 31...” his face twisted. “Let’s just say I’ve dealt with PsyOps. They’re bad. I’m told Section 31 is worse. *A lot* worse.” He nodded at the locked-down communications station; “With all due respect,

Lieutenant, they obviously *can* get through our shields!”

Sulu nodded. “You’re right. EmJay, stand down weapons.”

“Yes, Lieu —”

The main viewscreen snapped on; it was filled with the hazy but gradually well-defined lines of what looked like the offspring of a standard Starfleet runabout, should a standard Starfleet runabout engage in relations with some sleek, predatory vessel that Demora couldn’t begin to guess the provenance of. At the same time, Kanchumurthi’s board flashed green lights all across. Demora sighed.

“Ramesh, hail Commander Felingaili.”

Chapter Fifteen

To some extent, genetic memory was a gift of the Whole. Z'liths'dtor could not remember ever having felt such anger, not even when the Husnock delved into the dark reaches of its ancestral mind.

Z'liths'dtor could not remember having felt such humiliation, or such fear. None of the Husnock in this catastrophic greezah'dr could. Hence the verbal warnings of the Elder Council. A dozen generations was a long time, even where the Husnock genetic memory was concerned.

That Z'liths'dtor realized this now was cold comfort.

Only seventy-six Husnock troops remained, from a strong greezah of over twenty-four dozen. Fewer Husnock had been required to defeat the central Jem'Hadar outpost in the Gamma quadrant that had bestowed such superior weaponry to Z'liths'dtor's people. Fewer still had been required to enslave every Xindi avian in the Delphic Expanse that stretched between the Sagittarius arm and the Leonis arm, which signaled the outer boundaries of the Delta quadrant. It *had* required several large contingents over numerous generations to finally keep the wildly violent Charrah that lived in fluidic, interstitial space in the Delta quadrant from

overrunning the Husnock Empire itself, that was true, but the final result of those heroic struggles had been to make the Husnock stronger, and even then...

Even then, no entire greezah'dr had been annihilated while attempting to claim just one technology on just one planet. It was a burning shame. Z'liths'dtor determined to die here rather than to carry that shame back to its people.

There would be no further Z'liths'dtor. For a long moment, the greezah leader thought it could understand the desperation that surely clouded the existence of the Unwhole; each and every one so utterly unique, so utterly alone, the realization of mortality a terminal abyss. How could such creatures endure existence?

Unlikely in the extreme that Z'liths'dtor would ever have the opportunity to ask one such a question. Indeed, even the most fleeting desire to inquire such a thing of the Unwhole only proved just how unfit Z'liths'dtor truly was in its current incarnation — unfit in the extreme to have been made the leader of this greezah'dr.

Free of the nasty animal desires and needs of the Unwhole, free of loneliness and longing, of lust and that indescribably messy tangle of interrelationships the Unwhole called *love*, the Husnock had been created a purer creature, to expand and rule. There was no surrender for a Husnock, because there was no questioning the nature of the Universe that the Husnock

had been created to govern. These things were part of the genetic makeup of the Whole.

Weren't they?

The Husnock leader shook its unworthy thoughts back to the desperate present. Such musings were worse than useless.

Z'liths'dtor had encircled the largest contingent of Unwhole and their shuttle in Husnock troops three ranks deep. Z'liths'dtor was aware that there were other Unwhole between the Husnock ranks and the science complex; the plan was to break away with nineteen others and storm the Unwhole now surrounding the complex, and any that might still be alive and sane inside the complex. Z'liths'dtor still wanted that machine, and slaves with it, if it was at all possible to still obtain those things.

The Husnock leader had sent scouts to check, and the Unwhole between themselves and the complex were of the same sort that the first ground crew had decimated. Only one Husnock needed to attain the complex; the technology there, and any remaining Unwhole slaves, could be sent back with the remaining greezah ships using the netship's automated drive systems. In this way, the honor of the Z'liths'dtor memory could remain untarnished, and Z'liths'dtor's people would send many heavy greezah'dr into this *Federation* to avenge that memory. If the Husnock

could have, it would have smiled; not since their struggles with the Charrah had greezah gone forth en masse.

That, Z'liths'dtor could locate the genetic memory of, and it was both glorious and comforting. The Husnock watched as the Unwhole moved in and out of their flimsy, unshielded shuttle. There was one thing, more than vengeance, more than Unwhole slaves or any of their technology, that Z'liths'dtor wanted:

Corryag-Dr'aitar'Dahn.

The composition of that one's name hailed it as a First, what Unwhole beings called a *sport*. It had seemed, to the Husnock's genetic priesthood whose sacred duty it was to raise such a creature, to be hale and Whole. It had passed all their tests. And it hadn't occurred to Z'liths'dtor, at first, that there would be any problem including Corryag-Dr'aitar'Dahn among this greezah.

The netships had scattered from the horizon vessel before Z'liths'dtor had perceived the subtlety of the twisted nature of that one's mind. It *felt* things, both physically and emotionally, that Husnock did not, should not, feel. That tendency increased as the greezah'dr advanced. Z'liths'dtor had finally determined that it would have to die when confronted with the next greezah landfall.

Corryag-Dr'aitar'Dahn had felt *that*, too. And the

sport's subsequent actions had led Z'liths'dtor to this terrible pass. If Z'liths'dtor obtained the opportunity, it would gladly tear the beating, multiplying self-hearts of jah'parra out of Corryag-Dr'aitar'Dahn's abdomen with its own talons.

It had been thought that the remaining Husnock forces should uncloak and attack upon the arrival of the shuttle. But it had occurred to Z'liths'dtor that such a vehicle might gain them access to the Unwhole starship. Scans showed that this vessel was in possession of a psionic-interface technology the Husnock did not have, and which would still bring Z'liths'dtor home in glory if it could be captured.

Such capture should not pose any difficulty; considering the effects of the Husnock's personal cloaks and the psychogenic effects of the m'han'rt on the surrounding cubic mile or so of space on this planet, the Unwhole wouldn't be able to beam down reinforcements close enough to the shuttle to make any difference before Husnock troops took it. And again, there was the technology in the science complex, which the *Omi'ohaly* now claimed could be used successfully to create docile slaves...

Yes, it was better to plan for success than for failure. Though the wolf pack ships had been sent on a course back to the horizon-vessel, they could always be recalled. They *would* be recalled. These thoughts filled

the Husnock leader with a fierce pleasure that caused everything around Z'liths'dtor to snap into sharper focus.

The Husnock leader was in the center of the troops furthest from the Unwhole shuttle. It was necessary for Z'liths'dtor to be in a protected position, since only Z'liths'dtor had the authority to tell the greezah what to do. The *Omi'Ohaly* could claim that authority only should Z'liths'dtor fall in battle.

Z'liths'dtor turned to that one now. "You say there are Unwhole troops coming toward us from the direction of the science complex?"

The *Omi'Ohaly* moved its head in a tight motion of agreement. "They are like the things we fought to gain access to the complex, so filled with Unwhole emotion that there is no logic in their methodology, but this in itself makes them uniquely dangerous. We should go at them cloaked."

Z'liths'dtor considered this counsel, and found it sound.

The Husnock leader sent a message through the m'han'rt link for the twenty surrounding Husnock to turn southeastward, away from the shuttle and the fray currently going on in the northwest, to face the foes behind them using full camouflage. Along with this, Z'liths'dtor sent a message for all m'han'rt to link and recall the netships. There would, the Husnock leader vowed, be slaves and technology to load them with, even

if none of the troops remained.

Josi inspected the truncheon she'd removed from one of the dead aliens outside. It had been designed for more than simple striking; it was fit throughout with miniature semi-crystalline, semi-ceramic rare earth relays which, much like the force field they'd been spending the better part of two hours attempting to put down, defied simple description. Whatever further capacities the weapon possessed, they were as inaccessible as T'Dani and Renee. A combined *Enterprise* and *Tashrun* team of engineers had determined that all of the technologies the Husnock had brought with them had somehow been keyed to the Husnock alone.

"This field is generated by no force or combination of forces of which I am aware, Commander," the Vulcan engineer in charge of the *Tashrun* engineering team who'd asked for an opportunity to examine the deadly force field in-situ announced tonelessly.

Josi was hardly surprised; every engineer on the *Enterprise* was currently singing arias on the same theme. She looked dourly through the terrible, delicately sparkling field at her mortally injured captain and their mentally injured CMO. "I estimate it will take the combined engineering crew of the *Tashrun* and the *Enterprise* fourteen point seven-seven two days to either

reconform the alien's existing equipment, or to devise a method for taking down this force field ourselves."

Josi held up her left hand palm-out, and offered the Vulcan engineer the sourest look of which her face was capable. A Husnock might be able to explain exactly how all the equipment they had brought to Archanis Four with them could be altered so that other species might access it. Unfortunately, the only Husnock available for them to turn to for aid was somewhere in the forest surrounding the complex, and would remain there until *Enterprise's* first landing party was rescued by the shuttle Josi herself had sent for them.

"We don't *have* fourteen point anything-anything days to get them out of there. In fact, I doubt we have fourteen *minutes*. Isn't there some way to duplicate..." she shook her head, "hell, I don't know, whatever it is that makes the Husnock equipment work?"

"Indeed, it would be possible, if there were the slightest hint of exactly what it was that *caused* the Husnock equipment to —"

The unmistakable sound and sensation of a concentrated explosion made the plate glass of the hall ring shrilly. A thrill of terror caused Josi's hands to tremble. She filled the empty one with her phaser and balled the one holding the truncheon into a tight fist, casting a horrified look into the hallway. Whatever the commotion was, it wasn't nearby. The *Enterprise's* XO

hurried into the hall, to see if what was going on was visible through the windows that wound their way entirely around the top floor.

A pulsing, lime-green mist seemed to be spraying outward from the main doorway and into the courtyard. It had an odd effect on the corpses arrayed there, causing some of them to jerk or twist. Josi moved closer to the window and squinted downward. It took a moment for her to comprehend that the courtyard was not, thankfully, turning into some kind of massing-ground for the undead. The corpses were moving only where they were being stepped on or otherwise moved aside by a sizable group of Husnock, whom the pale green mist rendered visible in on-again, off-again multihued flashes.

Though, now that she thought about it, Klingon zombies might be preferable to an invasion of Husnock. The thought made her flinch backwards again, against all logic. There was nowhere to hide from their gaze except the room from which she'd just come, and in any case, the attention of the aliens was centered elsewhere than the floor of the complex that housed the mind-sifter and the mind-sifted prisoners.

The inelegant aliens were attempting to move with alacrity, while at the same time using the scattered mantlets in the courtyard to conceal themselves behind. The greenish mist refracted some sort of indescribable

light off what was either the creature's skins, or some sort of finely scaled armor. Tendrils in the mist reached out to entwine the aliens at throat and wrist and ankle. The Husnock shrugged these away and fired their poison-yellow disruptors en masse toward the main doorway once more.

Blazing white pulses, no more than a nanosecond long replied to the disruptor fire. Where they struck anything, whatever they struck simply disappeared — the mantlets, the corpses, the Husnock, various parts of the courtyard.

"What the *hell*...?" Josi muttered to herself. The Klingon force had been slated to infiltrate the area between the wild land and the courtyard of the science complex. Felingaili holstered her phaser, pulled out her communicator, and hailed the *QhonDoq*. "Captain Qlada, what sort of weaponry is your landing party equipped with?"

The Klingon captain's reply oozed with unexpected rancor. "The *puh'Takh'aT* laundry detergent you supplied them with. They refused to use it, and now —"

Josi's attention returned to the courtyard in alarm. "And *now* the Husnock are trying to get into the complex. Somebody's fighting them, and it looks like they're using the aliens' own weaponry. Dammit, Qlada, if you've figured out how to make Husnock equipment work for you, you *need* to tell us. We have people

trapped down here!"

Another volley of exchanged fire took place forty-eight feet below where Josi stood. The brilliantine volleys coming from the science complex nearly emptied the entire courtyard this time. "If my people discovered how to use the Husnock weaponry," Qlada grated out, "they did so after they were dead. Perhaps you could try that, Commander?"

Such a comment wasn't meant to have a response. Josi snapped her communicator shut. Was this more Husnock fighting Husnock? She opened the communicator again, this time tuning it to its main channel. "Felingaili to *Enterprise*. Is the shuttle back yet?"

White noise greeted her question. Still scowling down at the now-apparently-lifeless courtyard, she altered the settings and tried again. Nothing. She wanted to talk to one of her crew who'd dealt with these creatures, or even the creature that had ostensibly helped her ground crew, to get some idea of what the hell was happening here now. The attempt to contact the shuttle directly brought the same result. Something or someone was jamming communications between *Enterprise* crewmembers. Josi put the suddenly useless instrument away.

Another thrill of horror wormed its way through her and, clutching the truncheon tightly in one hand and

drawing her phaser out of its holster with the other once more, she backed away from the window, away from the scattered detritus of battle that uncanny darkening fog had backlit, so that weapons brighter than midday sun could demolish it utterly. She did not share her terror – that this might somehow be a second troop of Husnock come to rescue their comrades – with the Vulcan engineers obsessively working to lay down the deadly force field in the room in which she feared she might have to fight her life's last battle.

The summons of the communicator she'd just put away made her start; its cricketing chime indicated that the summons was from the *Enterprise*. It was with fumbling fingers that she reholstered her phaser again, wishing, not for the first time in her life, for three hands. "Felingaili here, *Enterprise*. What in hell is going on?"

"You're not going to believe this, Commander," Demora replied.

Chapter Sixteen

Kijara was incensed. Qlada had sent her, she was certain, to lead this landing party because of the humiliation inherent in it. That the captain of the *QhonDoq* considered her unworthy of a warrior was something he had made plain before; she was a science officer. *You are more level-headed than the others*, Qlada had teased her; *of everyone on this ship, I would trust you to understand this thing the Federati have devised against these Husnock.*

Even though, theoretically, the stuff should be effective, still Kijara's ire was up. Qlada's opinion of her had long ago percolated down the ranks of warriors on the *QhonDoq*, and she doubted that the party assigned to her would listen to theories.

No, she *knew* the party assigned to her would refuse to listen to theories. "What have we come down here to do, *laundry*?" Mic'Lah leered.

"Hush!" she snapped at him hotly. "These aliens breathe an atmosphere laced with ammonia vapors. If the things on their faces produce such vapors —"

"And what a hero's song this exploit will make! It shall begin; *we killed them using their own stink*," Mic'Lah stage-whispered back. The troops salted

through the underbrush passed this jibe back and forth among themselves, chuckling and spitting by turns.

Kijara's anger boiled over. She leaped up and turned toward her tormentors, but what she might have said fell to the ground in a heap with her. The rest of the Klingon landing party regarded her twitching form with mingled interest and alarm. Three more of them succumbed before Mic'Lah realized that his compatriots were the target of an invisible attack.

Invisible, but hardly silent. Mic'Lah drew his disruptor and fired into the center of the slurry of noise and disturbed ground that, for all intents and purposes, resembled a particularly fierce dust-devil. The rest of the *QhonDoq* landing party converged on his position — remaining hidden was patently useless — and followed his lead.

Which meant that, when the Husnock drew their own weapons and fired, every Klingon on the planet was in the center of that conflagration.

The chemicals they bore in back-carriers went up in plumes of mist, and the m'han'rt squealed a psychogenic warning, which Z'liths'dtor and two of the Husnock leader's people were too near the plumes to heed. The Husnock leader died choking to death on its own blood, which boiled into its body cavities and out through the pores of its skin in reaction to the foul chemical mixture. The other two simply exploded into so many dripping

rag, as the chemical reactions raging through their systems turned them into living bombs.

The *Omi'Ohaly* was one of those near Z'liths'dtor, and leaped as well as a Husnock who had been subjected to the sanctifying surgery of the genetic priests could away from the dead leader. The maneuver left the Husnock lieutenant facing toward the bulk of the Husnock behind Z'liths'dtor's group; these had been charged with capturing the Federated shuttle for use.

To the *Omi'Ohaly's* horror, that vessel itself was layering the forest around it with the terrible oxidizing substance that had just killed Z'liths'dtor. The Husnock lieutenant called desperately through the m'han'rt link for its still-cloaked troops to regroup and concentrate fire on the shuttle immediately.

Shawn Kell had, all his long life, endeavored to become as nondescript as an undercover operative might contrive to be. He'd been assured more than once that he couldn't quite pull this off. Nonetheless, Starfleet had seen fit to make him Inspector General of the covert operation known as *Section 31* when he'd reached his sixty-eighth year of service and shown no interest in retiring.

He'd made it clear to his nameless, faceless superiors that he wouldn't leave the field to sit behind a desk in order to fulfill the function of Inspector General,

and they had concurred. Experience had shown them that a spy of over eighty Terran years of age, who looked sixty and acted thirty, would not perform well behind a desk. They rarely sent him on strictly undercover operations anymore, however. The operations he led were as forthright as any ever performed by Section 31, which gave them the potential to be either less or more dangerous than strict undercover work.

Shawn never actually knew which danger-level any given operation fell under until he was somewhere in the middle of it.

At the moment, he was confronted by an utterly terrified *Enterprise* crewman wielding a charged dermoplasmer in one hand and an active sonic regenerator in the other. He swallowed down both his first urge, which was to laugh aloud and pluck the items out of the stranger's hands, and his second, which was to render the stranger unconscious in one of five or six ways. Instead, he motioned the rest of his team to wait for him out in the atrium, and held out both hands, palm-up.

What tone of voice would work best in this situation? He wondered. What came out was soft and somewhat higher pitched than he was wont to use. "I won't hurt you. I'm a Starfleet operative. Give me those, okay?"

"And... and...and then what?" the man tightened his hold on the dermoplasmer and aimed it with exquisite

focus toward Kell's eyes.

"Then," Shawn soothed, "I'll beam you to the *Enterprise*." He did not add that he'd beam the obviously psychologically injured crewman there through the buffers of his own ship, which possessed programs capable of ameliorating nearly any type or level of injury that a humanoid could sustain. These had been reverse-engineered from those used on a planet whose people had literally turned their world into Valhalla, where opposing political parties fought to the death, all trusting in highly-advanced, planet-wide, solar-fueled transporter terminals to repair the damage and deliver them back into the fray.

Where they would fight again, but for the opposite side.

The entire society had forgotten what death actually was. The Starfleet crew who had inadvertently gotten sucked into this mad, mortal game had been only too happy to remind them. That landing party had used the shock and grief of a violent reality bereft of advanced transporter technology as a cover under which to get away.

They had also gotten away, if inadvertently, with part of the technology itself. Section 31 had spirited *that* away nearly half a century ago, now, with the help of one of its most deep-cover operatives of all time, who had been known even to Section chiefs only by the

pseudonym *Fenton Harcourt Mudd*.

Kell missed Mudd sorely. He'd been a great man.

The creatures Kell's ship had been following had found something in the science complex capable of causing levels of injury that he wasn't certain even the capacities of Section 31 could fix. And he had no doubt that they'd used it on this man — *Rafael Vincenzo Buonarroti*. Shawn had read up on the senior officers aboard the *Enterprise B* while that ship had been held in the Husnock net.

"How do I know you're not...not working with the Husnock?" the senior engineering officer of the *Enterprise B* choked out.

Now Shawn smiled, and thoroughly altered the tone, level, timbre, and texture of his voice. "Do I *look* like a Husnock, Rafe?"

Buonarroti blinked at him like a flirtatious lovebird for a long moment. Shane took that opportunity to gently divest the engineer of the potentially injurious medical equipment he held. Kell also reached into one of the front breast pockets of his jacket, removed a chameleon-shift transport-transponder from it, and attached it to the back of Rafael's left hand with fingers deft enough to pluck a mosquito out of midair, and gentle enough to release it again unharmed.

This caused Rafe to look down dumbly at his hands, as if the dermoplaser and regenerator had somehow

disappeared into thin air. Section 31 taught its operatives both sleight-of-hand, and how to vocally hypnotize various humanoids. Shawn Kell, when not otherwise occupied, was the go-to operative should someone wish to hone those particular skills.

"But T'Dani...they made T'Dani..." he stuttered. Kell shook his head sadly, touched one of the many buttons that decorated his coat, and Rafael dissolved in a brilliant flurry of subatomic effect.

The Inspector General rejoined the squad of five waiting for him in the atrium of the Archanis Four science complex. Scans taken from his ship had assured him that two badly injured and largely inaccessible Starfleet officers were marooned on its top floor. One of the myriad reasons he'd been selected for this post above potentially more qualified — and younger — individuals was because he possessed scruples, something occasionally lacking in the ranks of Section 31.

In general, Shawn Kell strove not to let this information become common knowledge, either. Again, he'd been assured more than once that he couldn't quite pull it off. He'd originally had no intention of letting anyone know that his ship had been tracking the Husnock since the aliens had entered the quadrant.

The situation as it stood had caused him to reevaluate that decision. The *Blacksnake's* Vulcan science officer had discovered that the Husnock's

communications activities could be clearly monitored using the new psionic comm channels the ship possessed. The alien leader had demanded planetary reinforcements from every available Husnock vessel orbiting the planet — meaning that those ships would be left vulnerable and unmanned. Easy enough, Kell reasoned, to look for unmanned enemy vessels after ensuring that every Husnock currently swarming the quadrant was either annihilated or captured while on the surface of Archanis Four.

Plus, there were high-ranking Starfleet officers on Archanis that Section 31 might still help. A winning situation all around, Shawn figured, but he still requested his science officer to calculate out the likelihood of something utterly unseen and unlikely occurring that might work against the *Blacksnake* and its crew. Sovar gave that an 18.569 percent likelihood.

Kell found those odds acceptable, if only just. Motioning his squad away from the doorway and taking refuge behind the doorjamb himself, he pulled a small, spherical device from one of the many pockets of the bulky khaki jacket he affected in order to hide a slender dancer's build. The device spilled out an eerie green light that wasn't light at all, when he squeezed it gently. He directed this non-light into the courtyard filled with horrid bloated corpses and the scattered remains of battle.

Shawn smiled to himself drolly. Certain people might use the description of that courtyard to describe his own psyche, and *that* was how he preferred it. His dark gaze moved past the once carefully manicured courtyard and into the surrounding weedy territory.

To his intense surprise, an explosion rocked the complex. A pall of flame and smoke rose from the forest not a quarter mile from where he was standing. He peered into this intently. In his experience, explosions generally signaled the beginning of a dance, not its ending. True this time, too. He was amazed that surgically altered Husnock could move with the sort of speed that these appeared blessed with, but fire and smoke advancing on a person *were* excellent motivations.

"Jem'Hadar stealth suits," he whispered. The timbre of that whisper carried to every corner of the atrium. To certain ears, the architecture would have thrummed with the sound for a march of seconds, but the operatives whom Kell had brought with him were human, and largely incapable of sensing the effect.

"I thought the scans determined that the Husnock use Gamma quadrant technology almost exclusively?" the literal captain, and current executive and tactical officer of the *Blacksnake*, Drysi Gravenor, noted calmly. Shawn had not reacted to the explosion. Section 31 operatives were obsessively trained to deny, or at least

smother, feelings of either irritation or panic and, when their higher-ups responded not at all, to studiously avoid reacting to a stimulus themselves.

Kell cast his executive officer a narrow sidewise glance, set his hand-held tetrion beacon to automatic, and carefully laid it on the floor, where it continued to show the aliens advancing through the courtyard. "And the Husnock are coming this way using it. I want beacon lines on this door, *now*. Full-phase removal only if the magneton charges don't knock them out. Some of these alive —"

"What about the fellow in the library?" Van Ness boomed in his intimidating basso.

Kell didn't intimidate easily — or at all, really, another reason he'd been awarded the highest posting Section 31 possessed. He shrugged at the big man who had joined his crew only weeks before without looking at him. "He's not there anymore. He's in *Blacksnake's* buffers. These things do *not* get through that door. Understood?"

Chapter Seventeen

"Damn!" Yaelat snarled. "You mean you took *all* of the phaser banks out in order to —"

"Hypochlorite is extremely flammable when divested of its water content," the Vulcan piloting the shuttle replied, concurrently closing the chemical tanks, raising shields, and plotting a course into the upper atmosphere, away from the sudden concentrated fire of the obviously-cloaked Husnock at the southern edge of the forest near the science complex.

As though to prove him right, the forest beneath the beams of the Husnock disruptors exploded. The hand-disruptors the aliens wielded hadn't had much effect on the shuttle, but the concussive force of the thermal wave caused by large swathes of forest erupting into flame was a different story; it swatted the shuttle aside as though the craft was a stinging fly. One of the tanks carrying the chemical ruptured under the pressure of the shock wave, and the cabin was suddenly full of the smell of chlorine. No other system aboard the shuttle was affected, however, and as the craft lifted into the stratosphere, the atmospheric controls began to vent away the gas.

They didn't vent it away fast enough. 'Dan's m'han'rt

made a terrible grinding, squealing sound, and the Husnock collapsed. Yaelat unbuckled himself from his seat and hurled himself across the shuttle toward his alien friend. His first urge was to breathe for the Husnock, which he certainly could not do. His second was to check the Husnock's vitals, which he realized in short order he hadn't the slightest clue how to do. The creature on 'Dan's face gritted and whined, but the Husnock still appeared to be respiring.

"What happened?" Syral inquired. Upon receiving no answer, he unbuckled himself from his seat and went to join Yaelat. Together, they inspected the Husnock fruitlessly.

"No damned idea. I mean, these things vent ammonia, so I guess chlorine's dangerous to them, but just the *smell*..." the Hali'ian man shrugged. By this time Seantie had vacated her seat and come to join them. In the single bed at the back of the shuttle, Mel'Taya slept blissfully on

"By the time a smell is sensed, many thousands of parts per million of a substance might already be extant in any atmosphere," Syral said. "I have no way to know what sort of loading-dose of the chemical is dangerous to Husnock, or what it might do to them."

"Or how to treat it," Yaelat added. He pulled out his communicator. "Lieutenant Qat to *Enterprise*!"

"Sulu here, Lieutenant."

"I need sickbay. Something's happened to 'Dan!'"

A short silence ensued. "The Husnock that was helping you?"

"Yes. One of our tanks was ruptured, and the smell of chlorine filled the cabin. 'Dan just collapsed. He seems to be breathing, but..."

"Hold on, Yaelat."

The three humanoids in the shuttle's cabin stared at one another helplessly.

Five seconds later, the Husnock dissolved in the soft, pinkish twinkle of transporter effect that was the hallmark of the transporters on the *Enterprise* iteration *beta*.

"Can you help him?" Seantie asked, loudly enough for her voice to be picked up by Yaelat's communicator.

"You're asking me?" Demora replied.

Crisp footsteps rang down the hall leading to the room where T'Dani and Captain Ingram were irreconcilably imprisoned. Josi and the four *Tashrun* crew flattened themselves against the walls at various strategic locations, Josi still holding her phaser and the Husnock truncheon.

The six people who bustled into the room weren't Husnock. Nor, however, were they *Enterprise*, *Tahrin*, or *QhonDoq* crew members. All of them were humans in dark clothing, except for a compact man in a khaki

trench coat with an absurd number of zippers, clasps, and pockets who, judging by his bearing and the fact that he entered the room giving the others orders, was their leader.

Without a single pause, he drew a tiny, distinctly non-Starfleet-code phase weapon from one of the many niches in his taupe overcoat, pointed it at the mind sifter, and pressed its trigger. A single pulse of blinding white light left the weapon; the potentially deadly torture-machine winked out of existence, leaving absolutely nothing behind to show that it had ever been in the room.

This occurred within the span of a few seconds, scarcely enough time for Josi to process what was happening and turn to the stranger, alarmed. His gaze was as penetrating as the weapon he wielded. Josi drew herself up to protest his unauthorized action, but the fellow overrode her, plastering her in place with his voice:

"We've heard of Husnock. We've never *met* them. I was led to understand that they avoided Federation space. But according to the rumors, the fact that anybody involved with them ever got away is something of a minor miracle. Section 31 wants to get their hands on a live one," his face crumpled into something that wasn't quite a sneer, "to *study*, Commander Felingaili."

"Who *are* you?" Josi snarled, irritated by the unknown man's intent gaze and easy arrogance. Just

what they needed, further complications in this bizarre, dangerous situation. And if Section 31 was anything at all, it was a complication. She reholstered her phaser for the third time in five minutes.

The stranger in the bulky overcoat drew an audible breath and responded to the XO of the *Enterprise* in terse, crisp statement segments that left absolutely no room for either misunderstanding or inquiry. He did not offer a handshake. "My name is Shawn. Inspector General Shawn Kell. Of Starfleet Section 31. Currently commanding the *Blacksnake*. That," he motioned with one graceful hand at the alien baton she held in one white-knuckled fist, "is a fusion garrote. You shouldn't touch it. They kill upon contact." He offered her a conspiratorial smile; "I'd really rather you didn't attempt to use it on me, Commander. And you must trust me when I say that so would you."

Josi scowled back at him. The *Tashrun* engineers watched the byplay with poorly-concealed interest from where they stood to either side of the storage room doorway. "You've dealt with the Husnock before? I guess you never got to the part where you realized that their technology won't work for anybody else."

Kell offered her a bemused look. "Not with the Husnock, no. Just with that weapon. And you need to turn over to me anything else these aliens have left behind, whether or not it's ceased to perform its function.

It falls under the aegis of my department."

Josi's mind worked furiously. What did Section 31 know about this situation? What *could* they know? Only one way, really, to find out. Demora had just called to tell her that their unlikely Husnock ally was in full stasis on the *Enterprise*. It would take the medical staff some time to learn the alien's physiognomy and biological requirements well enough to even begin formulating a way to treat the chemical injuries it had sustained. Demora had beamed the alien onto the starship trusting that stereotaxic medical stasis and quarantine equipment generally hid life-signs from standard sensors. Could Section 31...

"We're aware of the Husnock in stasis on your ship. We're also aware of the fact that the alien rendered aid to you, and why."

Josi felt her face tighten into a cold fist, as alarm warred with rage. Could this man read her thoughts? Or had he just hidden away somewhere observing while people suffered and died by the dozen? The XO of the *Enterprise* wasn't certain which of those potentialities she'd most dislike to discover to be true. "How long have you been here?"

Kell raised a brow. "On Archanis? About half an hour. In this system? Three days. There's a fascinating alien ship about seventeen parsecs away, feeding slag into a black hole, turning the resulting quantum reactions

into energy, and directing that energy to its compatriot ships here. It's been doing that for the better part of a week. We thought —"

"You thought you'd sit and watch these monstrosities torture and murder Federation citizens?" Josi interrupted venomously.

Shawn Kell chuckled. The sound held absolutely no trace of humor. The executive officer of the *Enterprise B* was overcome with the momentary urge to pick the truncheon back up, and utilize Shawn Kell as a template upon which to determine exactly how it worked. She refrained. It was a court-martial offense for one Starfleet officer to strike another. What might happen to a Starfleet officer who struck an executive officer of Section 31...Josi imagined that there wouldn't be a court-martial in which she might be given the chance to explain her current level of ire.

"Commander Felingaili, the net that these things arranged around your ship was pseudo-temporal. That's just how it is when the Higgs boson is manipulated. Not only did your ship never, relatively speaking, send out any distress call at all, it wasn't even *there* anymore, once the Husnock got hold of it. Only emergency warp communications and temporal phase-discriminator beacons changed that. If it helps, we *did* make it seem as though all of those pleas for help and illuminating beams came from the *Enterprise*. And you're *welcome*,

Commander."

Josi set her jaw. "Tell that to the *Fang*. I *won't* let you have the Husnock who rendered us aid, while *you* sat on your ass and watched, as a... a lab animal."

Kell laughed again; this time, it held actual mirth. Felingaili felt offended by the fact that a man like this should have dimples. "Commander, when your people finally figure out how to heal the Husnock, I'll have all the physiological information I need. Or did I not make it plain that the *Blacksnake's* got a link to all of your ship's systems?"

"This Husnock's far more valuable as a source of tactical information against its people than it is as a dissection subject, Commander Felingaili. Because more Husnock *will* come. If 'Dan wants the Federation's help to find a suitable new home, it will provide the information we need in order to stand against the Husnock when they next appear. Hadn't the same thing occurred to you? If it hadn't, Commander...well, I'd be disappointed."

Now this suave-voiced viper's playing with me, Josi thought bitterly. However, before she could formulate a response that didn't incorporate hissing and spitting, one of the other Section 31 investigators spoke up.

Kell's people had been directing some variety of phased beams into the cell that held T'Dani and Captain Ingram. Those beams didn't appear to effect either

woman at all: Indeed, neither woman appeared whatsoever cognizant of what was going on just outside the cell that the engineering officers of the *Enterprise* had determined they had no way to unlock. The Section 31 operatives had switched off their beams and were staring expectantly at Kell.

"General? The doctor's been forcibly inoculated with Stockholm Syndrome," one of the operatives, a dark-skinned, basso-profundo-voiced man, broke into Shawn's conversation with Josi. "It's only been there for a day or so; we could remove its engram pretty easily. But the captain..." the man stopped and scowled, shaking his head at the woman lying prone on the cold concrete floor:

"She'll need major brain regeneration in most areas, and even then, whole chunks of her memory and parts of her brain stem functions have been wiped. We can regenerate her brain stem and cortex and sleep-teach her pretty much everything that she'd need to know in order to function, including engrams of her own Starfleet career and missions, but the more intimate stuff..." he shook his head and raised his hands, palm-upward, finishing that statement with an expressive shrug.

"And even then, there's no guarantee she'll come out of this coma," one of the women on the team added dourly.

Shawn nodded. "I'd expect as much." He turned his

attention back to Josi. "We can get the doctor more or less free of whatever they did to her. We've contacted the *Lakota*. Your captain will need Colin's help."

It was no secret that Colin had been working with Section 31 nearly from the time of his appearance in this quantum timeline; obviously, Kell was able to see the lack of surprise on Josi's face, and for reasons unknown, this caused the man to look pleased. He went on:

"The *Lakota* will meet you at Vulcan, where your captain might actually stand a chance of being fully healed. I'm not certain when the *Lakota* will be in range of Vulcan; you can contact it yourself when you get there. For now," Shawn Kell motioned with his head toward the storage room doorway and its intractable force field, "I want everybody who's not my staff out of here. I'll need to send your doctor and captain to the *Blacksnake* in order to help them, but I'll send people of my own to the *Enterprise* to help that Husnock." He smiled again, mirthlessly.

Divide and conquer. Josi bared her teeth at Kell; most humanoids mistook this facial expression as a smile, but she could tell that the Inspector General of Section 31 didn't. "I'm not going anywhere, *Shawn*, that Captain Ingram doesn't go."

He chuckled at her, and the sound somehow caused her to feel as though she was some exotic animal trained to perform amusing tricks; his dark eyes twinkled in a

friendly way that Josi thought obscene, considering the circumstances. "Have it your way, Commander. No doubt I can use you."

With a dismissive shrug, he then knelt down in front of the force field, drawing something that looked like a crab genetically enhanced to sport a duranium carapace from one of the endless pockets of his coat. The instrument didn't, Josi mused, look as though it should have fit in the pocket from which he pulled it.

"We've already tried to dissolve the field. We didn't have any success," Felingaili admitted.

Kell half-turned and gazed up at her from his half-kneeling position. He was, she noted, a much smaller man than his force of character made him seem. "And why do you imagine that is?"

"This field does not appear to utilize a simple increase in the standard native electromagnetic force between objects in proximity," one of the *Tashrun* engineers offered. "Indeed, electromagnetic implants do not even appear to exist for the doors of this cell."

Shawn smiled and returned his attention to the pseudo-metallic crab-instrument. "No indeed. That's because *this* isn't strictly a *field* at all. Kearney, Marshall, kindly escort everyone but Commander Felingaili back to their respective vessels."

While two members of his team efficiently ushered the *Tashrun* members out of the room, Shawn Kell

positioned the crustacean-like instrument in front of the deadly restraint, where it drilled itself into the reinforced concrete floor with a loud squealing noise. Kell didn't hesitate to cover his ears with his hands against the sound, nor did Josi. Once the instrument became quiescent once more, the Inspector General manipulated several of its crustacean-like limbs, and the force field—that wasn't drained downward with a sound that Josi could only describe as a trickle, before disappearing altogether.

The instrument that had drilled itself into the floor disappeared, too, without leaving a hole in the floor, or really any indication that it had ever been there. Felingaili would have sworn, as the force field had drained downward, that the instrument *had* become a crustacean-like lifeform, just before it disappeared, and what had to be a memory construct insisted that the lifeform/instrument had somehow *eaten* the force field.

Josi opened her mouth to inquire what, exactly, Shawn Kell had just done. The Inspector General of Section 31 looked up at her obliquely and said, before she had a chance to put her thoughts in order:

"Don't ask questions, Commander. It's easier that way. They'll be discovered by Starfleet soon enough."

T'Dani had leaped up and flattened herself against the far wall of the cell when the unidentified, impossibly living instrument had drilled itself noisily into the floor

where it, obviously, hadn't drilled itself at all. There were bloodstains on the floor inside the cell that made Josi's own blood run cold, as did the brilliant mass of teal-green, deep orange, and black bruises that made up the majority of the physician's complexion. "Where... where are the Husnock?" the *Enterprise's* CMO asked in a gravelly whisper.

Kell hadn't moved from where he squatted outside the cell. He shook his head at the doctor but spoke, as far as Felingaili could ascertain, entirely to himself. "And with a concussion. This should be interesting." He glanced up at the XO of the *Enterprise* again. "She has Vulcan strength?"

Josi nodded at him, folding her arms across her chest as she took the measure of the Inspector General of 31. She found it wanting. "She'll hurt you bad, Mr. Kell." She did not inquire how he knew that T'Dani wasn't entirely Vulcan, as he must have surmised in order to consider asking such a question. Section 31, it was rumored, knew pretty much everything about pretty much everybody in Starfleet in particular, and plenty of stuff about most Federation citizens in general.

He replied to her considering gaze with an eloquent look that she couldn't quite interpret. Josi was still trying to work out the layers of meaning in it when Kell got up, strode purposefully into the cell, and turned the Vulcan wrestling maneuver that the injured, demented

CMO attempted to use on him into something that ended up with Corrigan pinned prone to the floor face-down beneath Shawn Kell's right knee.

The unlikely fellow moved so fast and with such conservation of motion that Josi couldn't have told a court-marshal commission exactly what it was that he'd done to produce this outcome, but it had included allowing T'Dani to toss him over her shoulder, at which point he'd somehow whipped around to turn her arms into a ready-made straitjacket.

Corrigan let loose with a bellow of rage that might have frightened a wild sehlat. The man whose speed and grace reminded Felingaili of nothing so much as a Terran tiger remained unmoved.

Holding Corrigan somehow immobile with one knee and one hand, he dove into the pocket of his never-ending jacket again. The Inspector General of Section 31 pulled out a patch that he applied to the nape of the neck of the part-Vulcan woman with a gentleness that left Felingaili as bemused as anything else Kell had done since he walked into the room. The CMO of the *Enterprise* lapsed into unconsciousness, and Kell released her.

"If I'm to help her more, I'll need to beam her to the *Blacksnake*," the Inspector General of Section 31 announced to the air in general, moving without standing back up by using one leg to propel himself efficiently

over the polished concrete floor to Captain Ingram, who lay curled in the opposite corner. "We've got medical technologies Starfleet doesn't have."

That announcement aside, Josi recognized the equipment he pulled out of his coat this time; a standard Starfleet cranio-neural analyzer. Kell didn't attempt to move Captain Ingram, but gently brushed back the tangled hair over her left temple to apply the analyzer. He continued brushing the snarls out of Ingram's hair with breathtakingly insouciant gentleness as the instrument took its readings and applied appropriate stimulation.

"This is your captain?" he inquired, his voice as gentle as his fingers this time. He didn't look up at Josi as he asked the question. She was certain that he knew the answer; the inquiry probably contained some sort of under-context that she couldn't decipher any more than she could adequately decipher the look he'd given her moments before.

Obviously, Josi considered snarling back at him, but she refrained. It wasn't obvious at all. Neither T'Dani nor Captain Ingram had on either their uniform jackets or their rank insignia. "Can you help her?" she replied, instead.

Kell continued caressing Ingram's face, as though searching for something lodged just beneath her skin.

Felingaili shot a glance over at his operatives, who

stood at ease in a carefully spaced group near the room's only doorway, and scowled. She had, really, no idea what these people were up to. And she possessed about as much authority or control over this situation as a toddler equipped with a flotation device did over the ocean. This man and his operatives had sat by and *watched* while the Husnock mind-sifted her landing party, had *watched* while the *Cleef* and all its crew turned into their constituent molecules. Section 31 was the ultimate secret wrapped in a puzzle tied off with an enigma. Around Starfleet, it was spoken of in whispers and regarded with awe, if not outright fear.

"What we *want*," the Inspector General said, again as though he'd read Josi's mind, "is to locate the four remaining Husnock netships. We want to know how they obtained the technology they're using here." He half-sneered at something that wasn't in the room with them; "Though, considering what these things do to obtain energy out of black holes, they might also be capable of forming stable wormholes. I say this because things like *that*, Commander," he looked up from Captain Ingram at last; his eyes were hooded as he removed his hand from Ingram's face and motioned at the truncheon Josi had set down, "come from significantly far away.

"Drysi, have the doctor beamed into a standard psych-eval buffer." He returned his gaze to Captain

Ingram, huddled into a ball as small as the corner of the cold room would allow. "But you'll need to set up a full neurogenic stasis chamber for the captain."

One of the women in his crew nodded, and touched a pin on her uniform that Josi had mistaken for a rank insignia. She was swept away by a transporter with a brilliancy that made the executive officer of the *Enterprise* squint, and whose buffering chimes rang alien in Felingaili's ears. The commander shook her head at the place where the Section 31 operative had been standing, then turned back toward where Kell still knelt on the floor.

Only to find that both Captain Ingram and T'Dani were gone.

"God damn you all to hell," the executive officer of the *Enterprise* snarled under her breath. Not that she gave a damn if the Inspector General heard her curse; it was just that the simple hardheartedness behind the fact that these people might have beamed at-risk crew off of Archanis Four at any time, and had chosen not to, took her breath away.

Chapter Eighteen

Captain Ingram was the first person Shawn's crew had removed from the *Blacksnake's* buffers. The captain of the *Enterprise* needed a lot more than even those buffers could offer. He had given his crew a rough guideline for the neuro-regenerative stasis setup she would require, if they were to begin rebuilding her brain. He had allowed Felingaili to witness the procedure, then beamed with her to the *Enterprise* in order to determine how many more of their crew, injured by the Husnock, the *Blacksnake* might help.

This gesture had seemed to soothe the sense of infuriated distrust that Commander Josi Felingaili was experiencing. Now Kell was waiting, though he wasn't currently alone, for the executive officer of the *Enterprise* to beam back to the *Blacksnake*. Ingram's neural regeneration had begun, and he'd need information from Felingaili that would allow him to program her captain's regenerative stasis more accurately as that regeneration progressed.

T'Dani was the second person he'd removed from the buffers. To his intense dissatisfaction, the heavily modified buffers hadn't appeared to fully heal her issues, either. This was why he'd sent her back to the

Enterprise to help care for the rebel Husnock, rather than using her knowledge of Captain Ingram to help him set up a more appropriate stasis program.

Kell had volunteered to take all *Enterprise* wounded into the buffers of the *Blacksnake*, to help speed the healing of vital personnel, and so that the *Enterprise* could focus its efforts on 'Dan. The Inspector General planned, eventually, to mandate that some of his own Section 31 technicians must be present before the Husnock was revived. The lead technician he planned to send, a venerable woman who had been with the Section even longer than he had, would be able to help the ship's doctor, too; Shawn was certain of it.

And besides, Kell really wanted to finally meet the individual who had come last out of the *Blacksnake's* buffer. This person didn't know it, but it owed him one. The Am Tal had taken out a contract on its life, when it fled Andoria for the bastions of Starfleet. Shawn Kell had a certain amount of leverage with certain individuals on Andoria and hadn't even needed to invoke the scary reputation of his employers in order to quell that particular little covert brouhaha, though he'd been sorely tempted.

The *chae-na's* eyes widened, and its antennae arced forward so far that Shawn winced. "Am I dreaming?" it asked him.

Kell smiled. He'd been born with certain Andorian

genetic electromagnetic markers he'd never bothered to have removed. Hence his pull with certain people on Andoria.

"You are entirely conscious, *Shra'tohles'Mel'Taya Ce'na'Levrix-kethIdrani*. You're also quite unusual. I wanted to meet you." He held out his hand in the human fashion of greeting.

The *Enterprise's* head of security blinked at that hand in alarm, then looked Kell over with meticulous care. Its body language plainly announced that it wasn't certain which question to ask first. "Who...*what*...who are you?"

"I work for Section 31. My ship was trailing the Husnock, and —"

"*Eeeh*," Mel'Taya interrupted, grimacing, its antennae drooping. "Section 31? Are you a... a clone of some sort?"

Shawn grimaced in return and retracted his proffered hand. He had no antennae with which to express his irritation with that question, or to enable him to see in color. "No. I'm afraid I was produced the old-fashioned way. My name's Shawn Kell."

"Your whole name? *Amor'tezhruu fendvor'elaa'zhi'iin, thaa'?*"

Kell shook his head, scowled, then took a seat on the biobed nearest Mel'Taya's own. "*Cha'ensaahr'iil* damned *thaan*, first of all. *Ereezh'aa fendteryu'in*

sholii'natezhma about...I suppose about a hundred and forty *Teryu'in* years ago or so," he explained, in the mishmash of *graaLEN* and Terran Standard that he'd learned from the cradle.

It had taken five years, and several sessions of deep hypnosis, before he'd finally stopped lapsing into it at unexpected times while working with the Section. It had taken his coworkers long enough to become comfortable with his face and voice, which were more than a little similar to those of his great-great-grandfather on his mother's side, without adding Lesser Andorian pidgin to the mix.

It was that eerie similarity that had led, as it had more than once, to the chae-na's inquiry regarding cloning. Section 31 had followed that line of thought up meticulously, and actually was prepared to clone the current Inspector General of Section 31, among others, should the need arise for some reason.

Mel'Taya nodded haltingly. "We have one like you...well, more or less, on board the *Enterprise*. You still haven't told me *who* you are."

Kell shrugged. "*Bix'jhaluuShawn Thyle'Kell-kethIvorna*. I don't give many people my whole name."

"I don't think I'd give that out willingly, either." Mel'Taya's antennae announced that it wasn't entirely joking. Shawn's whole name was a mishmash of Lesser and Greater Andorian fused with Terran Standard in such

a way as to be largely meaningless. "I thought the *Ivorna* keth was proscribed?"

Kell's mouth twisted. Not many individuals admitted to possessing ties to that frowned-upon clan, whose ancestral lands, holdings, honor, and authority had been stripped away long ago. Usually, people unlucky enough to be born into *Ivorna* either bought or worked their way into other clans. In general, the Talish *Ivorna'thii* weren't allowed to marry according to Andorian custom, because they were considered Unmentionable, as were the clan-beliefs that had once caused them to attempt mass genocide on the Theskian and Bish'ee people.

Naturally, this had led their clan to the brink of extinction. The *thaan* who had bequeathed Shawn Kell his countenance had been *Ivorna'thii* and had spent his entire life trying to prove that he was better than a name.

Intelligent, and unusually open-minded for an Andorian, he had succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. "*Mine's* just a family title, not a reality."

Mel'Taya's antennae arced backwards. "Well, aren't you fortunate," the *chae-na* spat. Kell averted his gaze.

"Please forgive my rudeness. I didn't mean it. It's just...you're the only person who's noticed in a rather long time. I decided long ago that I wouldn't let a bizarre quirk of genetics seal my fate. To be reminded of it can be galling."

The *Enterprise's* head of security snorted. "*Seri'itaahgraish'aal!*" – Tell me about it in detail.

Kell laughed outright. He hadn't expected to receive either openness or humor from a *chae-na* shunned because its desires ran counter to what other people wanted to use its life for. Shawn was going to reply, but someone behind the biobed he sat on cleared their throat. The Inspector General forced himself not to start. His capacity to feel the presence of a person behind him or otherwise around him was as dead as his sense of color. He peered back over his shoulder.

"You said you needed my help with Captain Ingram?" Josi Felingaili inquired.

Shawn slowly and pointedly returned his complete attention to Mel'Taya. "Please feel free to return to the *Enterprise* at your leisure, Lieutenant," he said to the Talish security chief.

Mel'Taya half-bowed its head and antennae in polite response. "Thank you, Inspector General Kell. It's been..." the ghost of a smile touched the *chae-na's* lips, and its antennae arced forward slightly, "*interesting.*"

Kell grinned. "We aim to please." He hopped off the biobed and turned his attention toward the executive officer of the *Enterprise B*. "Follow me, Commander. There are some questions I need to ask you."

Josi stared down at the woman in the stasis-field

tank that was like no stasis-field tank she'd ever seen. Captain Ingram was naked; apparently, Shawn Kell didn't concern himself with the niceties of human dignity, or else he simply didn't care. Thought to be fair, much of her anatomy was more or less modestly encased in refractive wire. This included her head, from which all hair had been removed. Ingram floated in a nest of wire, a sort of highly technological spider's web jeweled and dripping with condensation from whatever fog it was that surrounded her. The wires pulsed with energy where they twined about her and through her, as though she was victim and heroine of some high-tech horror holovideo. All of this was attached to a bank of computers that flickered softly in the low lighting of the room.

"Dear god, what *is* this?" Felingaili breathed. When she received no sort of answer whatsoever, she wrenched her gaze away from the captain of the *Enterprise* and glared at the Inspector General of Section 31, who stood across the tank from her. The pressure of her gaze seemed to pull him out of a trance.

"*This* is a neuro-regeneration unit. Your CMO would recognize it. Though we've..." he paused, selecting his terms with the same care with which he enunciated his words, "...*enhanced* it. We can regenerate her brain tissue, replace or even augment intellect and knowledge, insert engram-traces of her past missions on

which real memory can be strung like beads on a string. To affect the central nervous system this way, it's necessary to activate portions of the peripheral nervous system, hence the wires. In a sense, what you see here is a version of the same mind-sifting technology the Husnock used on Archanis Four, only in reverse."

His attention slid back to Ingram, and Josi could read attraction on his face. The *Enterprise XO* wondered if Kell was aware how blatant his expression was. Captain Ingram possessed a classical sort of grace that she herself always seemed blithely unaware of; she had, Josi'd always figured, more important things on her mind.

"Starship captains are trained to be self-sacrificing for their ship and crew. I'm assuming that was the case on Archanis Four?" Kell inquired, returning his keen dark gaze to the *Enterprise's* executive officer.

Felingaili drew a deep breath, turned, pulled a folded, greenish-gray clinical sheet off of the foot of the nearest biobed, and draped it over most of the field in which Captain Ingram was enmeshed. The field didn't care. To Josi's surprise, Shawn Kell had the decency to flush.

"I wasn't there, Mr. Kell, but I can tell you that's what Captain Ingram is like in general, yes. Assuming, of course, that attempts at the destruction of whatever it is that might be menacing her ship or crew or the

Federation in general have failed. And it's not something that a person can be *trained* in; it's a natal quality looked for when —"

"What's she like as a commanding officer?" Kell interrupted, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning back against the blanket-covered field itself.

Josi blinked. "Why do you need to know?"

Kell blinked right back, then made a sweeping motion with one arm at the tank Captain Ingram lay in, before tucking it back against his chest again. "We're trying to bring back what she *is*, Commander."

That didn't seem entirely logical to Josi, and he hadn't given her a single reason to trust his intentions, though she should hope that his intentions toward the captain of the *Enterprise* weren't nefarious. Felingaili shrugged. "Surely, you can get Captain Ingram's psych profile out of your own computer?"

"Not the same, Commander. Trust me on this."

Josi snorted. "*Not* going to happen, Inspector. By law, I don't have to give out anything that'd incriminate or otherwise harm her, not even to the likes of Section 31. I *will* admit that she's both gracious and formidably intelligent, and strong both physically and mentally. Captain Ingram doesn't condone sloppiness, a lack of imagination, or timidity in her officers." The XO of the *Enterprise* narrowed her eyes at Shawn Kell; "And she'd consider the sort of subterfuge you pulled in the face of

the Husnock attack to be the act of a gutless coward."

Kell gave no outward sign of any emotion from that barb. Josi went on; "She's a distinct multi-tasker, but when she turns her attention to anything, it's a done deal, even when it might not have actually existed before she decided to tackle it. And if somebody crosses or betrays her, Mr. Kell, they end up sorry — and not necessarily because of anything Captain Ingram herself does. She has more integrity, patience, and wit than one person's really entitled to, and when she's retracted that from someone who once possessed her trust..." Josi shook her head. "It's a grievous thing. Potentially a destructive thing, should she determine that she does have to act on it."

"She's vindictive?" he had listened to the last few sentences of Josi's description with his head turned toward the uncovered part of the field-tank, studying Captain Ingram's face. He didn't look back up at Felingaili when he asked this question.

The executive officer of the *Enterprise* gave this serious thought. "Not that I've ever seen. Hell, half of the time her commands contain the word *please*. But she's ruthlessly thorough. She gives everything she's got to everything she does."

"I take it there's no dearth of what she's got?" the trace of a real smile played across Shawn's mouth, and Josi revised her opinion of him; he would indeed stand

out in a crowd, when he smiled. It occurred to her that this might be why he didn't smile often.

"I've known her for twenty years, Mr. Kell, and I still can't describe to you everything she's *got*, because I haven't seen it all yet. While it's a mistake to underestimate her, she's an excellent officer because she's an excellent person. So, tell me," she offered him the same sort of fleeting smile that was on his own face, "How do you intend to put *that* back?"

"I don't, but I *do* intend to create the lattice on which the *Enterprise's* psions and the people at Mount Selaya can hang it all. I know your Yeoman Colin pretty well, and I've no doubt he can help them carry this task out; that's why I called the *Lakota* to tell them what had happened here." Kell drew a deep breath and let it out in a sigh, "she loves him, and she's going to need him.

"I'd imagine your captain's engram-lattice would be composed of artistically-molded duranium, and not a filigree of lace, from what you've told me. Which means that I need to alter what I've already had programmed into this unit. I mistook..." he folded his mouth around whatever it was he was going to say, and shook his head.

"You're saying you can *actually*...?"

"Rebuild the physical construct of her central nervous system, yes. What you're telling me is that it's very dense in connections. What was she like as a child? What does she do for fun?"

Josi smiled. "I didn't know her when she was a child. I can only offer anecdotes. Like; if you wanted to spur her do something, all you'd really have to do is imply that she *couldn't*. Still true, and I'll admit that she goes a little bonkers when somebody tells her she can't do, have, or be something. That is to say, when she *wants* that thing."

Kell nodded. "I see. Have you more anecdotes?"

Josi shrugged. "Sure. When she was in elementary and middle grades, she had a distinct difficulty with mathematics, so the first thing she did when accepted into Starfleet was to enroll herself in a math-heavy multiple minor, which she passed with honors.

"Her parents refused to allow her to take swimming lessons with her classmates, so when she was something like six year old she taught herself to swim by mounting a diving board and jumping off.

"She was adopted, like I was." Josi smiled affectionately at the still, pale face of her senior officer. "Her parents had lost their own children and were horrified of losing her, so they were ridiculously over-protective. They were also quite highly-placed socially; they had no intention of ever allowing to learn anything that could be done for her — to drive her own aircar, for example. They had chauffeurs. So, Renee purchased her own aircar, had it delivered to her home, and announced to her father that he *would* teach her to drive

it."

Shawn Kell chuckled and made a please-continue motion with one hand.

Josi shrugged. "Captain Ingram can change you, Mr. Kell. Just her simple presence in your life will change you. I'm not certain that this is something she, herself, is actually aware of."

The smile fell from Shawn's face like a stone dropped from one of Mars' Tropic of Capricorn Canyon's overlooks. "I see that, Commander. Quite clearly, in fact. Hobbies? Does she collect stamps?"

Josi laughed. "Hardly! She collects orphaned or injured or, sometimes, extinct birds and raises them, heals them, or brings them back to life. She owns a fifty-pound traditional longbow we've altered gymnasium six for, and she often tries, occasionally with success, to best me at racquetball."

"She's a strong lady, is what you're saying. Bird rehab, racquetball, archery; all of that's easy. Her Starfleet studies, too. We have logs and supplementary logs of all her missions. Does she, perhaps, study languages or dance or...?"

Josi shook her head. "No, but she likes to forage for wild food and cook it up, largely into something that other people will actually pay to eat. Her adoptive mother's a famous chef."

Kell nodded. "Sheryl Alice Todman Ingram. We

know that, too. Wild foods like..." he looked away from Captain Ingram again and offered Josi a scowl that aged his face to a point that shocked Felingaili, "*what?*"

"Like everything and anything she can lay her hands on. She fixed me Polaran grass-slug ink fettuccine with crumbled parmesan and frost-aged cauliflower mushroom sauce once. It sounds like something they'd feed to prisoners on Rura Penthe to get them to confess, but I still dream about that dinner.

"Did you know that there are ants on Terra that live underground and are fed honey all their lives by other ants, and that they taste like Muscat grapes dipped in balsamic vinegar? I was raised a picky eater, Mr. Kell, but she's gone a long way toward curing that."

The face of the Inspector General of Section 31 morphed from aged to exquisitely endearing; he actually laughed, the ringing laugh of a young boy. There was something, Josi mused, about the man that didn't seem entirely human. She shook her head at him in bemusement. He was just...odd.

"Charming." He rubbed his hands together and pushed himself away from the tank in which Captain Ingram lay. The light and expression drained from his face, and when he looked at Josi again, his gaze was hooded. "Thanks for your time." His tone was dismissive, and it made Josi want to bridle.

The executive officer of the *Enterprise* decided that

she was impressed. This unassuming fellow could do with the simple force of his voice what most races required either psionic capability, pheromones, or both to accomplish. She awarded this with what she hoped was a winning smile. "You're welcome, Inspector. I'll talk to the psions aboard my ship and contact the staff of Mount Selaya, to make certain that what she needs will be there when we reach Vulcan."

Kell nodded, his face impassive. "You must believe me when I say that I'm sorry we couldn't help those who died at the hands of the Husnock. Attaining the horizon ship, the Husnock's technology, and the knowledge 'Dan was willing to provide —"

"Was more important. Of more *worth*." Josi's tone stung despite her best intentions. She closed her eyes, shook her head, and began again. "Command decisions, Inspector, I understand." Command decisions made by powerful individuals not really answerable to either the Federation or its Star Fleet, she didn't add.

"Touché," Kell husked softly. He opened his mouth to add who-knew-what when another voice overrode him:

"Inspector, I've got a live-feed communication from the *Excelsior* on emergency channel. Her commander wants to talk to you."

The captain of the *Excelsior* was on half-shoreleave. They'd learned this when they had contacted the

Excelsior, the only Federation ship available near the sector where the Husnock horizon vessel was located. *Excelsior's* commander, Josi reflected wryly, was probably not going to be at all happy to hear from the Inspector General of Section 31.

Chapter Nineteen

"Fine, Drysi. Go ahead and patch the commander of the *Excelsior* through voice channels into sickbay." Kell waited five seconds, staring fixedly, as most people did when required to speak to a ship's computer or voice-communication network, at some point between the floor, the ceiling, and eternity, then went on:

"Go ahead, *Excelsior*, this is Inspector General Shawn Kell of the *Blacksnake*. I'm without visuals because I'm in sickbay with the commander of the *Enterprise*, trying to help her captain. Have you located the horizon vessel, or any of the cloaked Husnock netships?"

"Not only do we have no idea what any of these things are, Inspector," Commander Pavel Chekov's thick Russian accent had mellowed, over many years, into something between a slur and a burr. Currently, it was thick with irritation and disbelief spread with thinly-veiled sarcasm; "but there appears to be nothing at all in the binary system you've sent us to. Of course, the event horizon of the black hole at its outskirts is unusually active, but —"

"That's what I'd thought. It's why the *Blacksnake* was out there in the first place. The horizon vessel's

cloaked. It's also largely stationary, which leaves standard sensors nothing to trace. Commander Chekov, has your ship been modified to carry active psionic waves in any capacity yet?"

"No, sir."

Kell scowled. "No matter. You can still refit *Excelsior* to look for basic quantum particle-wave variance. You'll need to revamp your deflector dish for this; that's the fastest way to set such a thing up. Takes about six hours. You'll want to run the Riemann arrays on all the *Excelsior's* sensors through the deflector's main particle-volume sensor matrix using the positronic reflex-deflex lines from your tactical —"

"We do that, and we'll have neither sensors nor weapons!" Chekhov spluttered.

The Inspector General of Section 31 sighed. "You're only partly correct. You'll have *better* sensors. And the horizon ship has no weapons itself, except for whatever energy it can leech of the black hole's event horizon. The netships themselves *are* weapons, against which standard Starfleet armaments are worse than useless. We'll get to all that in a minute. What's *Excelsior's* current location?"

"Just inside the binary's Van Allen belt, near the ice moons furthest from the black hole. What in Hades do you mean, the netships themselves are *weapons*?"

"The netships are capable of creating pure null space

pretty much wherever they please, by manipulating select Higgs bosons. They do this in order to hold an enemy vessel stationary. If a vessel inside such a null space attempts to fire upon the netships, it will very efficiently immolate itself. If you locate the...no, wait:

"If the netships locate *you*, and try to pull you into null space, do not for any reason perform defensive or aggressive maneuvers against them. If we —"

"Higgs boson null space?" another voice cut in over the line, cool and imperious. Kell had a Vulcan science officer himself; he recognized what sorts of tones he was hearing. "I cannot see how that might be possible. And even were it feasible, it would be impossible to contact the *Blacksnake* at that point to let you know that the Husnock netships had formed such a space around us."

Kell's mouth twisted. "I was getting to that, Lieutenant..." his eyes rolled upward for a minute, then he closed them, scowling in thought. "*Tuvok*, isn't it?"

"Indeed," the haughty Vulcan baritone on the audio line replied gravely.

Kell went on as patiently as a grandfather might to a child; "If you interrupt me again when I'm talking to your commander, Tuvok, your title will spiral down to *ensign* at warp speed.

"As I was about to say, Commander Chekov; the *Blacksnake* will keep trying to contact the *Excelsior* once every fifteen minutes from this point on. You'll

remain stationary, you see? If you don't respond, we'll know the netships have —"

"Found us. Or destroyed us. Or absconded with us. Or that we've —" Tuvok came back smartly.

"Sure," Kell's interjection emerged like something venomous attempting to shed a skin of raw silk by slithering over blunted steel barbs; "And so the *Blacksnake* will know just exactly where the damned things are, *Ensign* Tuvok. Care to try for midshipman now? And don't imagine that I can't demote you below cadet rank. I, *Ensign* Tuvok, can make you *disappear*."

No response from the *Excelsior's* science station. Kell fixed Josi with a narrow stare, and announced; "So, Vulcans *can* learn. I'm impressed despite myself."

"You'd use *Excelsior* as *bait*?" this from Chekov. His voice was cold. Kell's own tone, when he replied to the starship commander, was a stage-whispered study in frozen nitrogen:

"To ultimately protect the Federation from these monsters, you bet your life I will. I *mean* that literally."

Silence reigned over the line for a march of seconds. "Of course, Inspector General," Chekov choked out finally. Inspector General, Josi seemed to recall, was the Section 31 equivalent of Fleet Admiral.

Kell went on, in a less dramatic tone, "You'll be happy to know that there are only four Husnock netships. I'm not certain so few would have the capacity

to create null space around an *Excelsior*-class starship. And even if the bastards've got Delta quadrant drive technology and left yesterday, it'll still take them two days to get to where you are. Now *listen*, goddamn it!

"The horizon ship's so far from your current point of origin, even if it immolates itself in the event horizon, the energy from that shouldn't be able to reach you there. But quantum sensors *will* reach that far. So, you *will* stay where you are and carry out your orders. You *need* to do this, and send the information your Rube Goldberg quantum sensors pick up about the horizon ship by emergency warp channels to Starfleet."

Chekov sighed heavily. "Rube *what*? Never mind; I don't care. I take it, Inspector General, that this can all be considered a direct command?"

Josi's eidetic memory had been busy drawing imaginary schematics of the quantum-sensor system Kell had just revealed to Commander Chekov, to present to Raphael and Captain Ingram later. Now her attention snapped back to the present like an overstressed rubber band.

"And if you contravene it, I'll see that *Excelsior's* flag officers spend the remainder of their lives breaking rock on various unsatisfactory asteroids. If you'd rather, you can contact my Starfleet interlocutor, Fleet Admiral Arsnell, and he'll tell you the same thing. But he'll also tell you that time's at a premium, Commander."

Pavel Chekov sighed again, a melodramatic sound of utter resignation. "Aye aye, Inspector General. I don't guess you'll tell me what purpose this serves?"

"Need to know, Commander. You don't have need. And tell Ensign Tuvok to take off and turn in that damned Lieutenant's pip to Arsnell, now if not sooner, or I'll visit *Excelsior* and do it myself. Tuvok *would* regret that. Kell out." The *Blacksnake's* comm system, like all modern Starfleet ship's comms, shut off when it perceived a personal pronoun or name combined with the word *out* used at the end of a sentence.

Kell turned to Josi. "I want you, Commander, to make the same alterations to the deflector dish of the *Enterprise* as I just told Commander Chekov to make to the *Excelsior*. Except —"

"Except you want the positronic lines to interface with the psionic Lonsdaleite matrices at some point," Josi finished for him. She wondered if Rafe knew how to put commands like that into the computerized table which oversaw how the psionic capacity of the Lonsdaleite matrices was directed. Those matrices, located in the walls all throughout the ship, were all that was left of the transwarp fiasco of a couple decades back. Colin had figured out how to use them, and how to converge their psionic energy, when Renee had brought the man back from otherwhen to help the *Enterprise* overcome violent psionic enemies. And

Colin was the person who usually oversaw the use of that particular computerized table. Josi didn't burden the Inspector General with this information, however.

Kell's brows flew up, and an unaffected half-smile caused his face to dimple momentarily. "Very good, Commander Felingaili. This'll give you sensors comparable to those on the *Blacksnake*. They'll draw a hell of a lot of power when the drive systems are engaged, but I need the *Enterprise* to help me look for those damnable Husnock netships. I'd rather none of the beasts returned home to tell their compatriots about us, and regardless of what I just told Commander Chekov, I've no particular plan to sacrifice the *Excelsior* to these miserable creatures."

Josi nodded. "Agreed, Inspector. With all my heart!"

"She's *what*?" Colin's usually olive-dark countenance, unusual for person with red hair, was pale and drawn, looking almost green against his hair and his vivid hazel eyes.

What the Husnock had done to the woman whose mind he was irretrievably linked with, even from so far away, had made him physically ill in a manner that the *Lakota's* physicians hadn't been able to affect. The *Lakota* had headed back toward Federation space for this reason, and to everyone's alarm, Colin had become

worse — until suddenly, and for no apparent reason, he'd gotten better, and let Captain Loraugh and Starfleet know that something terrible had happened to Captain Ingram.

"Badly brain-damaged. There's a Section 31 ship here, and the medicos on it are trying to..." Josi trolled around for some sort of adequate description, "Trying to restore the glial cells she'll need in order to reformat her memories properly."

Colin let his face fall into his hands, steeped before him on the table. "Is this something that can even be *done*?" he begged hollowly. Josi sighed.

"I talked to T'Dani's brother at Mount Seleya myself not an hour ago. He thinks it's possible, but that we should assist the priests and priestesses on Seleya psionically. Every telepath and empath on the ship's volunteered to help."

"I've never done such a thing," the Minaran admitted raggedly.

"Saniel tells me that he's studied the technique. It's not...he *says* it shouldn't be terribly different from transferring a *katra*. It's just that it will require the transfer of numerous emotional-memory engrams instead. He thinks —"

"He *thinks* he's never actually experienced such a thing either, has he?" Colin interrupted hollowly.

Josi shook her head. "No. But if he doesn't do this,

we won't be able to get the captain back, Colin. The damage is just too severe."

"And a Section 31 vessel just happened to show up in order to help Riana?" the telepath's facial expression made it quite clear that such an action was beyond the realm of possibility, even to the mind of a man who'd been grown in a tank as a form of psionic cannon fodder, and come through alternate dimensions in order to aid the Federation against just such creatures as he had been bred to be.

Josi sighed, trying not to be irritated by what she considered the yeoman's pet-name for the captain of the *Enterprise*. Surely, there was a time and place for such things, and that time and place was not now. Ingram's executive officer ignored the sensation of irritation; this situation was so awful, she was almost certainly just projecting her sense of frustration about it into any convenient channel. "Not...no. The undercover vessel was lying cloaked in the system tracking the Husnock when we showed up."

Colin's brow furrowed; the furrows filled with anger. "I don't know if I'm understanding what it is you're saying. Let me see if I've got this straight; you went to Archanis Four in response to an automated distress call. Riana..." he shook his head and began again: "*Captain Ingram* decided a landing party was called for. This landing party encountered the Husnock,

who killed half of them and wounded two of them using a mind-sifter, while trying to figure out some way to make docile slaves out of everybody else on the *Enterprise*.

"Meanwhile, the *Enterprise* is left to fight the Husnock ships as well as it's able while being held in some kind of stasis, and all of this is going on while Section 31 has a ship and crew *capable of aiding the Enterprise and its landing party lying hidden above the planet?*" the last part of this came out in an angry bellow.

"Our ship would have been in the same fix as the *Enterprise*, had we declared our presence too soon," the other person sharing the long-distance emergency-warp commlink explained. "The netships possess a capacity to create null space like nothing else we've ever seen before; we're still searching for them, and for the horizon vessel that fuels them. *That* is what Section 31 was in the area to do. What's important is that the Federation as a whole is protected from the Husnock. This...*babysitting* of *Enterprise* crew is nothing more than an upshot of that."

The anger on Colin's face morphed into something like hatred as he considered Inspector General Kell over the clear commlink. "You personally sat by and allowed Federation citizens and property to be destroyed, *Shawn!*"

Kell's face morphed into a particularly cold slab of

granite. "Don't try and quote propriety regulations to me, *Yeoman*; you possess neither the authority nor the intellect. We did everything we could for the Federation citizens embroiled in this Husnock nightmare, rendered more aid, in fact, than Section 31 is ever required or expected to provide on behalf of a single starship and two conjunction ships."

"Because *Enterprise* has a Husnock on board that you want information from," Colin snarled softly. The two men considered each other in silence for a long march of seconds.

Josi took this opportunity to haul the conversation back onto its original track before she had a full-out brawl on her hands. "This is getting us nowhere, gentlemen. The clerics of Selaya say that they can maintain Captain Ingram in the tank during the process of restoring her to consciousness, but they've no idea how to remove her from it afterward."

"I can send a medical technician with you to perform that function," Kell responded blandly. "Of course, you do understand that this technician will also want to interrogate the Husnock?"

"The Husnock isn't out of stasis!" Josi objected.

"And you're not going to protect the thing by keeping it *in* stasis. The minute it comes out of stasis, Captain Ingram can be released from the tank. Otherwise, it's not happening."

Colin half-stood and all but climbed into the screen of the terminal he was using. "You can't *do* that!"

"I can do whatever I damned well please. Haven't I made that clear to you in all the time you've known me yet? You've got to trust me when I say that I'd hate to see any harm come to Captain Ingram." The Inspector General of Section 31 smiled at Colin through the commlink. There was, as far as Josi could ascertain, neither friendliness nor compassion in the gesture.

The muscles in Colin's cheeks and temples worked. "I suppose you'd *better* send a technician, Kell. Because if you come yourself, I'll —"

"You should always strive never to make a promise you can't keep," Shawn interjected smoothly.

Now Colin smiled. Not only did the expression hold no warmth, it held so vicious a warning that Josi herself wanted to recoil. "What I did to the doppelganger I can surely do to the original, *Shawn*."

Josi snarled silently, and closed the commlink between the two men, while keeping both links open to her own line. "Inspector General, transport your technician or team of technicians aboard the *Enterprise*; they'll come with us to Vulcan, and they can help us try to get 'Dan out of stasis on the way there. Colin, we'll meet you on Vulcan. Felingaili *out*!" the executive officer of the *Enterprise* closed both channels before either man could comment.

"Like I really need this macho *vresh*," she muttered.

Chapter Twenty

"I feel that such a decision would be..." the elegant, elderly Vulcan Section 31 biotechnician paused, and the word she was reticent to speak echoed, instead, in Colin's mind:

Dre'nyetvan.

"I am aware that the behavior of nature is quantum in its unfolding," Colin replied. "I only wish to spare Riana undue pain."

"You wish to keep from her memories which, in your estimation, are painful," the Vulcan woman came back, her voice more passionate than was normal for any Vulcan, particularly an elderly one. "You are young, in both time and the constructs of reality, sir. I cannot stress to you enough that the memories you are considering...*molding* into what you perceive to be a more harmonious form may hold lessons necessary for personal growth."

"Your people perform an act known as *falara*, the removal of painful memories —"

"Which impinge on the working of the mind or the ability of an individual to continue functioning in their life-role," the Vulcan woman replied tartly.

"I contest that some of Riana's memories have that

effect!" Colin came back, heatedly.

"You say this because you wish to have a more intimate role in her life." The elder's voice grew cold.

Colin shook his head slowly. "*You* don't understand. I already have such a role in her life. What you might call destiny has already determined that. The memories I speak of keep potential destinies from occurring. They warp natural progression. They impinge upon quantum unfolding."

The technician pursed her mouth in response, the expression an exact image of the one T'Dani Corrigan made when she was pensive. Her sleek cap of brilliant silver hair caught the last light of the setting sun, making it seem, for the moment, nearly as auburn as Colin's own. The sun also coppered her aged face and filled her eyes with fire.

Section 31 possessed a number of technologies unknown to the Federation; among them, Colin knew, were those that lengthened lifespans and the vigor that accompanied those lifespans. This woman was, the Minaran thought in the private recesses of his mind, startlingly beautiful for such an elderly Vulcan.

The thought wasn't private enough, it seemed; the elderly woman, who was the lead technician that Kell had sent to the *Enterprise* to help heal the Husnock and revive Captain Ingram, smiled. The expression turned her face from a grave, lovely carving into a childlike,

almost impish one. "I have never considered myself beautiful, sir. But someone has. And were I you, I would not relieve the woman you care for of memories in which she felt beautiful."

"Is a moment of beauty worth a year of begging to have one's needs met and dignity admitted, elder? Captain Ingram possesses depths of beauty that she's let herself make contingent upon bowing before the coldness and fear of people no longer even in her life. Surely, what you speak of is based upon love able to bridge differences, not upon —"

The elder raised one hand palm outward. Not a Vulcan mannerism, but one that Colin knew well. "Then let me put this in the terms of simple physics. Memory is held in the brain as a chemical, a particle. *Everything* is a particle — you know that! If that wasn't true, there would be no physical spectra. There would not be anything.

"If those neurons in the brain that that have been regenerated for Captain Ingram to hold missing engrams don't have anything in them, then they will *construct* something to go there. The quantum traits of nature in this dimension ensure that there is no way to know what those constructs will end up being. You're *sure* you want to take that sort of chance with the brain of the woman you love, Colin? With the memories of a starship captain?" the Vulcan technician's voice had lost all

stridency, and had become what the woman was feeling:
Sad.

The big telepath swallowed hard, closed his eyes and, very slowly, shook his head *no*.

As in most other humanoid cultures, Vulcan mystics and religious dedicants believed that times and places of transition held great spiritual power — those places and times between mountain and sky, sea and shore, day and night. T'Dani stood in just such a place and time. Her brother had told her that he would meet her at dawn, just before the ceremony in which they would attempt to bring Renee Ingram back into her own mind.

The temple and surrounding grounds had been closed to visitors, its priests and priestesses in a period of enforced fasting and meditation that had nothing to do with Renee Ingram's predicament — indeed, it was highly irregular that Mount Selaya should receive anyone during this time, even visitors in need, but the *Enterprise's* CMO had convinced her brother that the situation was dire enough to merit the concession.

T'Dani and a number of other psionic *Enterprise* crewmembers had been at the temple since midnight. A once-in-a-lifetime celestial instance was occurring; a flux in the orbit of Vulcan's closely-orbiting sister planet — called *T'Rukh* in certain dialects spoken in the far northwest hemisphere, *T'Kuht* in dialects more common

in the southeast, neither of which T'Dani herself spoke with any degree of fluency — caused that planet, usually locked in its orbit by tidal influences, to ride so low in Vulcan's northwestern hemisphere that it peered briefly down into the southeastern hemisphere of Vulcan. Usually, T'Kuht could not be seen at all from that vantage. Such a tidal fluctuation was so rare that it occurred for only one Terran Standard week, once every one hundred and seventeen point seven Terran Standard years.

And on this morning, something even rarer was happening; Vulcan's twin cast her shy glance down over the southeastern horizon at precisely the same moment as 40-Eridani, the red primary of Vulcan known as *Nevasa* in the ancient dialect, rose opposite T'Kuht in the west-northwest. That particular confluence occurred roughly ten times less often, and the desert around the city of ShiKahr, whose most modern suburbs were not quite twenty Terran kilometers from Mount Selaya as the *sha'vokh* flew, was literally packed with tourists, both Vulcan and otherwise, who had come to view it.

T'Dani turned her attention away from Vulcan's sister planet, and toward the architecture in the modern sections of the ancient city, which she could easily see from where she stood. It used the same multi-hued cut-stone blocks in its building facings as ShiKahr's ancient buildings, but the lineation of the buildings altered as

one moved from the heart of the city outward, as though the city itself was a constantly-unfolding architectural time-capsule. The odd, particular twilight caused by the current celestial occurrence threw the city's various architectures into eerie juxtaposition, alien and harsh to the senses of a part-Vulcan not raised there.

Most humanoid cultures would call the fact that Captain Ingram had come to Vulcan for succor during such a rare astronomical occurrence a coincidence, but the dour and logical people who composed the majority of her mother's lineage didn't believe in coincidence.

From one of the wide-open viewing porticoes of the great temple below the apex of Mount Selaya – known as *Surak's Peak* – T'Dani watched the voluptuous curve of Vulcan's sulfurous, volcanic twin begin to rise again above the northwestern horizon. With a silent sigh, the part human CMO of the *Enterprise* realized that she was too psychologically exhausted to know what she believed, anymore.

The early-morning sky was full of an eerie purplish twilight, as T'Kuht took on a falsely blue glow and unreal magnitude due to the depth of atmosphere through which it peered. It seemed so close that one might touch it, as the red star for which T'Dani had been named rose slowly in the west-northwest. Vulcan parents might have named her *Nevasa* and bonded her to another at birth, leaving the completion of her name for

the day of her marriage. However, both her father and far-flung segments of her mother's family had been human, and at birth she had been given the Vulcan name of a full-grown woman, one that proclaimed her free of the need for any bond, and whole in herself; a Terran custom.

Certainly, at the moment, she felt neither free nor whole. The part-Vulcan woman, bequeathed a body temperature nearly as low as that of an Orion by the caprice inherent in hybrid genetics, shivered, and not just from the desert-dawn breeze that 40-Eridani stirred as it rose. T'Mir had once told her daughter that, months before her birth, numerous people had been able to literally see the fiery glow of T'Dani's aura, as red as the nuclear fires of 40-Eridani.

T'Dani privately thought that particular apocryphal story was nothing more than a parent's fond whimsy. The doctor's acquaintance with her own personal psionic trace confirmed that it was flat and colorless, much the way everything had seemed to her since the Husnock had strapped her into the mind-sifter chair.

The deep-eyed, evocative man who led Section 31 had told her that the technology inherent in their transporter systems had removed the physiological nerve paths that the Husnock had installed into her brain, as though she was a piece of technological hardware. But it hadn't been able to untwist the psychological knots

that the prying of the Husnock had tied in her psyche. T'Dani lost herself in the rare hue of the Vulcan morning, and in the knowledge that something terrible had yet again been done to her against her will, making her feel as vulnerable and as insignificant as...

"T'Dani?"

The sound of the voice made her start. With it came a memory so suddenly sharp that it felt like an ice pick had been driven into her right ear; a memory of a time before anything had ever happened to her against her will, of being *very* little and sitting on a warm, soft lap as someone brushed her hair, cooing softly over its color.

Had she even seen her great-great-grandmother since then? *Who* was this greatest grandmother, and what was this sudden, unbidden, half-unreal memory? She grasped at the fleeing memory dizzily, swaying slightly. T'Dani caught at the high sill of the sashless window, and let the motion carry her around until she was facing a memory.

No; this was no memory. This was a slender woman wearing the Deltan-computerized black fabric common to Section 31. Her age was belied only by the pure silver of her hair and the creases that had begun to form on her face — creases, T'Dani knew, that her own face would sport someday, ones that Vulcan faces rarely possessed, caused as they were by laughter and tears. The shape of her face and eyes were the mirror of

T'Dani's own, her skin the same shade, but her eyes were the mahogany-black hue most common among full Vulcans, as her hair had once been.

How can I possibly know these things?

T'Dani inclined her head, as much to hide her confusion and consternation as to offer the elderly woman respect. "Greatest grandmother," she said softly. This title wasn't usually used among Vulcan family members. It was an incredibly powerful title on Vulcan, most commonly used for the matriarchal rulers of Gol and Selaya.

But T'Dani had no idea what else to call someone whom she both did and did not, could and could not, remember.

When she raised her face to look at the Section 31 operative standing across the room from her once more, T'Dani was alarmed to see that the woman's countenance had become a mask of pain. No, she did not recall this person.

"You did not used to call me that."

A feeling of incomprehensible guilt swept through T'Dani. She tried, valiantly, to remember what the woman was talking about, and then realized, with a sinking sensation, that she could not. She pinched her eyes shut, thinking furiously, forcing herself back to the memory of the chair...a *rocking* chair, she was on this woman's lap and...

She slitted her eyes open and regarded the elderly woman, the warmth of whose lap was T'Dani's last real memory of her, hopefully. "I have no memory of what I called you. I was, after all, very young."

To her horror, the elderly Vulcan woman's chin trembled for a moment. "No," she replied finally, at last. "You..." she stopped and swallowed convulsively. The sound of soft shoes in the corridor overrode whatever it was that she was going to say. Both she and T'Dani turned to see Sanial in the doorway, his hands folded calmly in front of him. His blue eyes — paler than his sister's, almost sharp in contrast to the inky blackness of his hair and nearly opalescent in the eerie half-light — flicked from one woman to the other, consideringly. He inclined his head to the older woman, who returned the gesture.

"I would speak to you both more later, Sanial," the elderly Vulcan said, softly, "but I believe at this time you must attend your sister. She..." the woman closed her eyes, and went on; "She does not really remember me. I will meet you both in the healing chamber," she reopened her eyes and cast a look half-over her shoulder at T'Dani. Her eyes were filled with love and longing, "when the healing for Captain Ingram begins."

Sanial sighed, softly. "You needed to ameliorate her memory all those years ago. And I may need to do so again."

T'Dani shivered. They hadn't done that! She had begged them to do that, but they hadn't...

Had they? Of course, she wouldn't remember that, either. She knew quite well that Vulcanoids possessed a certain brain area which, when allowed to develop unchecked, could cause them to become psycho-compulsive and schizo-obsessive. Emotions, for such a person, did not ebb and flow; they would persist until and unless acted upon, and the longer they were repressed prior to that action, the more violent they would be. Undoubtedly, her experience had caused this to happen; if all that had been done by her family was the rebuilding of this particular brain area, that by itself may have caused resultant memory loss.

The thought saddened T'Dani deeply. She wished, and not for the first time, that she was fully human.

Her brother Saniel had once admitted to her that he harbored the opposite longing. An immensely sensitive empath, he would wail piteously as a tiny baby, for reasons that no one could readily identify. When it was realized that what was happening was the nervous response of his raw, undeveloped nervous system to the emotions and sensations of other people, or animals, or even insects, their mother had taken him to Vulcan for a time — here, to Mount Selaya, where the sharp intensity of his all-too-human empathy could be blunted or stored for later, like a *katra*.

Saniel turned to gaze at his great-great-grandmother as she walked out of the portico. Turning back, Saniel then gazed at length at his sister. Before she had time to reflect on the compassion she saw in his eyes, Saniel reached out to take her face into his hands. With unstudied effortlessness, his fingers found the telepathic nerve-nodes that ran through the prefrontal, temporal, and sub-parietal portions of every humanoid skull, whether that humanoid was actively sensitive to the psionic spectrum or not.

He didn't give her a chance to argue or struggle. That sweet, sensitive mind she'd known and loved ever since she first saw him in T'Mir's arms — solemn and insightful, even as a newborn baby — fell softly over her own like a comforter. Somewhere, T'Dani knew, she was crying out in distress as that softness enfolded the shards of violation that had been visited upon her psyche and pulled them out, the way a doctor might use a semi-hardening gel epoxy to pull barbed spines out of a length of flesh. That much he could do; whatever festered in those reopened wounds would be hers to mend. *Physician, heal thyself.*

"*Dya*," he softly crooned the baby-name that both he and their stepsister had used for her, before taking her into his healing embrace.

T'Dani smiled against his shoulder. She didn't want to leave this place, this time, this embrace. If she was

the nuclear fire of Nevasa, he was the cool, illuminating reflection of T'Kuht. And now she could recall who the woman who'd just left the room was. *Intriguing...*

"You'd think you were my elder, San, not the little creature I used to diaper and burp." She could feel his answering smile in her mind, even if it would never show up on his face.

T'Dani adored her brother. She wished she could spend more time with him, the way she used to when she'd take him out in a tiny air-carriage to teach him the names of things and allow him to experience the colors, sounds, scents, and flavors of the endless array of goodies available to babies on Nisus. She blinked at the blazing ascension of Nevasa from the safety of his arms and saw that the world had regained all its dimensions — the ones she allowed herself to see, anyway. Saniel clucked his tongue like a disapproving father.

Saniel had never sought the severe disciplines of Gol, though the High Master there had sought him out for induction herself. He had found it necessary for his own sanity to relinquish ties to his human qualities, but he would not willingly relinquish his ties to his family. He knew what it was to relinquish such ties unwillingly. Though he had been only four years old when their father had been murdered, he remembered the shock and loss, and T'Dani knew that he still grieved.

She could feel his grief touch her own — softer than

hers, as all of his emotions were softer, blunter. It had been a surprise to her to learn, as she grew older, that her fiery emotions were actually more like her Vulcan mother's. Saniel's gentle demeanor was like their father's had been. It was a surprise to her to learn, now, that the grief she thought he felt for the loss of their father was, in fact, for her.

"I need to tell you, *Dya*," he said softly, pulling away far enough to take her by the shoulders and gaze somberly into her face, "that both your ship and this planet stand in proximate danger from the creatures that have harmed you and your captain."

T'Dani felt her countenance crumple into a look of disbelief. "But...I thought we killed them all!"

Saniel shrugged, a human reflex he'd never particularly tried to subsume. "I can only tell you what I myself have been told."

As though in response to Saniel's announcement, the morning light of Vulcan turned an ugly neon orange, the planetary defense system that surrounded every Federation world put out that particular hue, when it kicked on. T'Dani shuddered.

Chapter Twenty-One

The Husnock possessed an ammonia-based biology, driven by the heavy nitrogen sulfide atmosphere in which they'd evolved. This was not terribly unlike the molecular makeup found in Benzites. Both the m'han'rt and the polarized, refractive suits they wore enabled them to maintain the atmospheric pressure necessary to survive — another reason, undoubtedly, why the creatures were unable to move quickly.

Uta Morell mused on this as she stared through the invisible force field-wall of what was, for all intents and purposes, a Benzite surgical suite in one of the quarantine rooms of the *Enterprise*, regarding her patient and the Section 31 operative with some trepidation. She had significant experience with individuals like Benzites and Xelations, who required wildly different atmospheres from the basic nitro-diox breathed by the bulk of humanoids in the Milky Way galaxy, and she was worried about this one. A medical team from the *Blacksnake* stood nearby, watching and listening to the interrogation, as did Josi Felingaili.

The m'han'rt creature on the Husnock's face, and thereby the Husnock himself, had been knocked unconscious by the seventy parts per million of chlorine that had filled the atmosphere of the shuttle when the

pod carrying the substance had breached. The subsequent injury 'Dan had sustained had been to his internal organs, when the internal pressures of the suit that the m'han'rt was an integral, organic part of had lessened due to the chlorine's effects on the symbiotic creature. According to witnesses on the shuttle, the effect of greater volumes of chlorine bleach had caused far more dramatic effects on some of the Husnock, whose suits had lost pressure at such dizzying rates that the aliens had exploded.

As it turned out, many of the internal organs 'Dan possessed were actually other developing Husnock, making it seem as though the parthenogenetic creature possessed many hearts, lots of multi-lobed livers, multiple kidney-like organs that somehow also fulfilled the function of spleen and gall bladder, excessive immature gill-like masses of lung tissue, and innumerable yards of intestine, bone, and nerve fiber — all very tiny, and all migrating, slowly but inexorably, toward the surface of the alien's skin, increasing in bulk as they went.

Due to the way the Husnock ate, their food was turned into chyme in the upper three chambers of their lamprey-like mouths, and so the creatures didn't require the equivalent of a stomach. They possessed, instead, four seven-lobed lungs that were more like book-lungs than the lungs of humanoids; these took up the space a

stomach might have otherwise utilized. The creatures were fascinating; Morell hoped for the chance to study them in more detail, and to be the first to write monographs about them.

Not to mention the biology of the creature on the Husnock's face. The transporter buffers had flagged the Husnock as a potentially hazardous substance because of that creature — not just because it produced a nitrogen-sulfide atmosphere for its host, but because it had tried sucking energy directly out of the transporter linkages the moment the *Enterprise* had taken 'Dan into the buffer. As it had turned out, the creature consumed raw energy and had simply been hungry; the flushing of raw quark-plasma from the warp matrix into the buffer that held the m'han'rt's pattern had solved the problem.

What sort of creature consumes raw energy, and is capable of doing so in a transporter buffer? The question excited both Morell and the ship's entire exobiology team, but now, unfortunately, was not the time to address that question.

The effects of a Benzite compression chamber had hastened the healing of both the m'han'rt and 'Dan's internal organs. Benzite regeneration serum had been found to be effective by the medical team sent over from the *Blacksnake*, too, though frankly Uta had thought their justification for the use of it to have rested on too slim a basis. She never would have chosen to use it

herself, but she wasn't given a choice in the matter.

'Dan had been astounded when it was told of the life it was carrying. Apparently, such a thing was abnormal in the extreme for a Husnock; they bred one at a time, not in litters. Genetic analysis had determined that all the young 'Dan held were unique — genetic sports, like their parent. Had 'Dan returned to the Husnock homeworld with its greezah, such a severe genetic abnormality would have meant a death sentence for 'Dan and all the young it carried. Aiding unknown humanoids, it had turned out, was almost certainly a survival imperative forced on 'Dan by that Husnock's own young.

'Dan was uncertain what to feel about all this. Indeed, 'Dan hadn't been given much chance to feel anything at all, before the Section 31 medical team who had aided her as nurses and med techs morphed seamlessly into a team of undercover agents eager to interrogate a captive Husnock.

The head of the team had beamed down to Vulcan, and fulfilled the promise of removing the captain of the *Enterprise* from her wire enmeshment before turning her over to the high priests and priestesses of Mount Seleya. That woman said she doubted they'd need an entire team in order to get an already-cooperative prisoner to cooperate. The individual in the Section 31 medical group who had been chosen to interrogate 'Dan was clad

in a phase-resistant environmental bodysuit while performing this interrogation. Josi Felingaili and Uta Morell looked on, half-fascinated, half filled with concern for their strange alien ally.

"How can your netships be located?" Drysi Gravenor asked, her voice muffled and strange through the faceplate of the forced oxygen suit she wore. Gravenor, Commander Felingaili had noted, was a great deal like Captain Ingram; she had medical, tactical, and officer training tucked into her belt beside the fact that she was a Section 31 operative, meaning that if she wished, she could work for any of Starfleet's less covert sections. She'd also confided to Josi that she played the violin.

"A temporal receiver can locate them. They communicate with the horizon vessel using temporal beacons, and the horizon vessel utilizes similar beacons to send energy to the greezah'dr."

Gravenor slapped her hand against the communicator-brooch she now wore pinned to her environmental suit. "Inspector General?"

"Go ahead, Captain Gravenor."

The *Blacksnake* was now teamed with the *Excelsior*, scanning the area for the Husnock netships. How the Section 31 vessel had travelled over ten thousand light-years in the span of just a few hours, Josi would really have liked to know, but she thought it extremely unlikely

that she'd be told, if she asked. It would take a Federation starship travelling at its highest warp the better part of a Terran Standard week to perform the same feat.

"We're commencing the interrogation of the Husnock. 'Dan's quite forthcoming, but...um, does Central still have that temporal receiver?"

"Bits and pieces of it. I don't believe they've managed to replicate it yet, though."

"Well, that sucks. Because 'Dan says the netships can be traced using one."

Shawn Kell sighed. "A quantum-variance locator's no good?"

'Dan didn't wait for Gravenor to repeat the question. "One would first need to determine the time the greezah'dr was inhabiting. But m'han'rt carries and stores commands from Husnock leaders, and I do know this; Z'liths'dtor sent a final command to the netships to track and seize the *Enterprise*."

Commander Felingaili was horror-struck. She tapped, hard, on the force field surrounding Gravenor and 'Dan. The effect bruised and skinned her knuckles, but the brilliant flashes that it also sent into the room didn't go unnoticed by anyone inside.

" 'Dan, could just four Husnock netships threaten the *Enterprise*?" Felingaili asked.

'Dan considered this question at some length.

"Z'liths'd'tor did not give exact instructions to the ships, only that they should collect the *Enterprise* specifically. There are not enough of them remaining to transport a vessel of this size whole through temporal channels, but they might attempt to form temporal rifts between themselves and —"

"Rip the *Enterprise* into pieces," Kell finished for the Husnock in a throaty snarl so clear and threatening that, had she not known better, would have made the Commander of the *Enterprise* think he was standing in the same room with her. "Commander Felingaili, select a skilled skeleton crew and beam the rest of your people off the ship and onto Vulcan *immediately*! And... Christ, high-warp a base-sector warning to Starfleet that these things are coming into the heart of the Federation!"

"Inspector," Josi interjected, "this ship's capable of something that I don't think even Section 31 knows about. The captain had the refit crew perform alterations that can basically pull the *Enterprise* into distinct modules, and hopefully we can do that before the Husnock netships get back here. If your people have something to fight the *ne'hch* Husnock with, they can control the engineering bridge section. We can use the saucer as bait."

"Damn." Felingaili wasn't certain whether the tone of this expletive was impressed, annoyed, or some combination of the two. Before Kell could add anything

more, 'Dan volunteered:

"You should know that I am not cognizant of whether Z'liths'dtor ever completed the commands to the netships. This information is not known to my m'han'rt."

"Do you have the expertise to help my people revamp the *Enterprise's* engineering bridge against your people's netships?" Kell snapped in return. Josi was pretty certain that, if it could have, the Husnock would have winced.

"I do not. I am... not of that line. I am sorry."

"Drysi, is the Husnock in the saucer section currently?"

"Affirmative, Inspector."

"All right then. Leave it there as bait. I'd guess that its people want it nearly as badly as they'd like to capture the *Enterprise*."

"That is correct," 'Dan interjected.

"I'll get the *Blacksnake* and the *Excelsior* to Vulcan as soon as I can. You'll want to alert the Vulcan government that their world may be about to be invaded. 'Dan? I'm assuming that those netships have the technology that'd allow them to trace the *Enterprise* here from Archanis Four?"

"Of course. Slower, you understand, when the process is purely automated."

"Which I suppose is why they haven't gotten there yet. Though that makes little sense; I thought these ships

were temporal?" Kell queried.

"Difficult to trace a non-temporal warp trail through temporal space," the Husnock noted.

"Odd that your people haven't stumbled across *that* technology yet, but fortunate for us. Drysi, Felingaili, get moving *now*!"

"Yes, sir," both women replied.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Captain Ingram was exhausted.

For a long time, that was all she was aware of.

Until it occurred to her to wonder *why* she was exhausted.

She groped for an answer. Into her awareness came a trickle of memories — all the times anyone could remember that they'd ever been so tired, so weak, so unutterably helpless. None of those were *her* memories, until the pure volume of other people's recollections built into something that reached across some unnamable chasm and formed bridges to things — thoughts, dreams, daydreams, nightmares and, yes, even memories — that she recognized as hers.

When she was born, they'd called her *Riana*. She'd been just as unformed, weak, and helpless then, as mindless and drifting as she now was — would be? Had been? These terms had no meaning. The name they'd given her had some meaning beyond itself, but she'd forgotten what that was. But she remembered that she'd been born this exhausted, and she *remembered*...she remembered the touch of the hands that had lifted her from some artificial womb. No...no, these were other hands, another touch that she was remembering, but it

was sweet and comforting and she leaned into it, *remembering...*

She remembered her exhaustion and pain as a five-year-old child, recovering from a disease she'd never learned the name of, which had killed thousands in the little community where she'd lived. She'd been weak like this then, too.

Where *had* she lived?

When the answer came, she was finally aware enough to be conscious of other reasoning, feeling presences around her. A fleeting memory popped like a soap bubble in her mind, of a ragged circle of dissimilar individuals led to pour out the strength of their souls into a semi-psionic interface crudely constructed by a man in crude leather clothing.

Man? Clothing? She felt the presences touching her psyche cringe slightly as they realized the extent of the bridges they would need to labor to cross, if not to build, even as some sort of answer — evocative and nearly as meaningless as the term *man* — to her original question flowed through her mind. *Her* mind. The concept was strange. She could feel the disparate textures and shapes of the minds that permeated her awareness, but her own *mind*...what did such a thing signify, really?

Nisus, Renee, we both come from a planet named Nisus. It was the Klingon Imperial Virus you had. The

people who released it there were probably the same ones who killed my father and his friends, later. That particular presence in her mind evoked a fragrance; Terran roses and Vulcan rain-poppies and Rigellian frankincense.

This was followed by further trickles of unsolicited information, panoramas of vast wet forests — *like the ones in the Pacific Northwest on Earth, remember?* — and cool salt-smelling shores, vivid midsummer auroras and the sound of snow pattering softly against an array of different windows for twenty-two midwinters that both lasted forever and melted away, like mist in the morning. Like loved ones melted away, when one's back was turned. The thought brought pain, but that pain formed the boundaries of patterns.

Patterns meshed together, tugged at certain glial pathways in her brain, sparking them awake. *Exhausted...* the effect of other people's memories in her mind increased the sensation, and suddenly she was wedged painfully into some dark crevice, with icy water trickling down the back of her neck, and a broken clavicle keeping her from turning her head toward that water to slake a killing thirst. *Pain.* There must have been pain.

But this wasn't a memory; it was a recital of a telling of a memory, what was imagined by someone else to have happened, and her own mind responded:

No. Josi was also a cadet; she wasn't wearing an officer's uniform. It had taken everyone weeks to become used to the thermal-turtleneck uniforms Starfleet had used for the last twenty years. And one of those miserable bulky creations, the bane of whining midshipmen who finally learned to keep it to themselves, had almost certainly kept her from perishing from hypothermia and shock before she was found.

It had been the first time she'd ever met Josi, there on Arantia Nine. Nobody else had been present, immediately after the disaster, to enter the crumbling cave left by the rockfall and search among its signal-warping formations for life signs. That rockfall had, two days before, been a box-canyon, and its fall had killed everyone except for Josi and an Ana'Siuolo doctor being rotated through basic training prior to applying for a Starfleet posting.

Pure luck had situated Renee Ingram in the stablest and shallowest rock-fall zone. Pure coincidence had caused Josi and the doctor to pause before entering the canyon. Both were interested in gem-bearing rock formations, Josi for the making of jewelry, the doctor — *B'tsmi*, that had been his name, B'tsmi gsh'siuolo — for their potential use as catalysts in the synthesis of various Ana'Siuolo medications.

There were plenty of gem-bearing rock formations on the planet, but there weren't any living sentient

lifeforms on Arantia Nine. The cadets had been sent to research the odd archaeological formation in the box-canyon, whose ancient culture, which had never evolved beyond the Paleolithic before going extinct for reasons so obscure that they remained unknown, was eons dead. Both of those things were verifiable; dead culture, simple stone-age structure of uncertain archaeological significance.

Unfortunately, the indeterminate archeological formation in the box-canyon was a trap, set who-knew-how-long ago for a herd of gargantuan beasts once hunted by the planet's sentients. No one was ever able to determine exactly what sequence of events triggered the trap to spring closed on the group of Starfleet cadets, after having lain quiescent for eons uncounted.

It was the first time, too, that Renee's flesh had ever been pierced by needles. There were any number of races, both in and out of the Federation, whose physiognomy required the continued use of such arcane medical techniques; the Ana'Siuolo doctor had been an expert on those. It was an experience that her awakening mind recognized as one of the most wonderful of her life — needles that slaked thirst, that removed pain, that sent warm nutrients coursing through her veins after lost days and nights spent under an icy, groaning pile of rock. She remembered the alien doctor's relatively rough ministrations with a fondness

second only to the pleasure of knowing that she would survive the ordeal.

Within a short period of time, the space around Vulcan was crawling with warships from every Federation world within two parsecs. Along with most of the Vulcan Conjunction Fleet, there were five Conjunctions from Andoria, four from Tellar, four from Terra, two from Mars, three from Draylax, one from Alpha Centauri, and two from Denobula Triaxa.

They didn't, as Shawn Kell had noted acerbically, just need to repel the Husnock netships, they needed to try and capture them. He was worried that those electronically guided temporal netships might show up with reinforcements unless they were captured. Of course, at this juncture, nobody was certain how to perform either the function of repulsion or the function of capture, and more than one individual had brought up the concern that reinforcements might already have been requested by the Husnock.

It had become vitally important to find some way to disable the pitiless creatures' ships. As she had promised Shawn Kell, Josi had separated the saucer section of the *Enterprise* from the engineering section, in order to help Kell's crew perform that function, even if only as bait.

Captain Drysi Gravenor had requested the aid of Rafael Buonarroti and a Vulcan engineering technician,

in order to manage the computer connected to the psionic matrices of what Kell himself referred to as the *Enterprise battle bridge* — the engineering section of the starship. Josi had requested only Ensign Kanchumurthi's help with the communications station in the saucer. She could run the remainder of the stations on it herself from the command chair, though she hoped that she wouldn't need them. Without the vital connections present in the engineering section of the *Enterprise*, the saucer section sported no weaponry, no access to any psionic matrix, and only rudimentary propulsion.

The remaining crew of the *Enterprise* (though not without numerous complaints and concerns and almost outright mutiny from Rafael Buonarroti) had been ordered to the surface of Vulcan by shuttle and transporter, through carefully made holes in the planetary defense system. Felingaili had asked Kell whether or not the planetary defense systems of Federation planets would be effective against the technologies used by the Husnock. He hadn't given her anything even vaguely akin to a straight answer, and she put that fact away to use against Section 31 when she was debriefed on this mission by Starfleet Command.

She had absolutely no doubts that a major debriefing, if not an outright inquest, would be slated for her if she survived. As far as the executive officer of the

Enterprise was concerned, if Section 31 possessed better planetary defense capability in their astounding bag of tricks, they should be pressured into revealing them. Of course, it *was* Section 31 they were dealing with; as far as Commander Felingaili knew, she'd be as likely to receive shoreleave as a debriefing, should she survive, and the entire affair would be glossed over, somehow.

Josi Felingaili felt that she needed every milligram of help that she could get in such a situation.

"I did *not* authorize the alien's removal from the brig!" The voice coming over the subspace channel of the *Enterprise* bridge was murderous. Had she been in the same room with Kell, Felingaili would certainly have exited that room as quickly as possible, preferably with a phaser to enhance her exit. As it was, she shrugged and turned to the now-fully-healed individual she'd had removed from the starship's brig and brought to join her on the bridge:

"The Husnock's a damn sight more useful to me right now than you are, Kell. 'Dan, when your netships appear, assuming that they ever do, how can we capture them?"

"It requires at least two ships to activate the null-spacenet. If you can separate them, you can capture them."

"Lovely. I'm assuming they're programmed to work as a unit?"

"I am not certain, but that, too, would be my assumption."

"And I bet you can also guess my next question?"

"Quit playing around, Commander. How the hell can we separate your netships, Husnock?" Kell growled bad-naturedly over the commlink.

"When our ships are harmed, they automatically retract their null-space network capacity. If they did not do so, their destruction would culminate in the destruction of..." 'Dan stop and considered for a moment. "Everything, I suppose. If you can injure the netships, they will become incapable of forming a net with any other netship."

"And how can our weaponry penetrate a netships' shielding in order to injure it rather than destroy it?" Kell asked. "In every instance when Federation vessels fired on your netships successfully enough to penetrate their shielding, the damned things imploded."

"Yes. They are programmed to self-destruct if their shielding goes down out of phase."

"I want to *capture* the netships. Was that not clear? I want information on their shielding and the null-space network they use. *How* can we get through their shielding in such a way that they don't implode?"

'Dan blinked his eyes asynchronously. "The null-spacenet itself runs the shields. Or, perhaps, the shields run the spacenet. I am not certain in what way. I am not

of the technician caste, please forgive me. I am a soldier."

"Marvelous," Shawn Kell replied, disgustedly.

The Inspector General, Josi could tell, was trying hard to summon patience that simply wouldn't come. The best he could do was to speak with exquisite softness in an extremely impatient tone. Why the juxtaposition of the two brought forth the inspiration that flashed through Josi's mind, she couldn't have said had an armed Husnock force suddenly appeared and threatened to destroy Vulcan itself if she wouldn't reveal her reasoning to them:

"Kell! Does the Blacksnake possess *Tholian* technology?"

Silence on the line for a long march of seconds. "To some extent. You imagine that a simple Tholian electromagnetic energy-web could trump a net made by weaving the null space of displaced Higgs bosons together? Sorry, Commander, but that's —"

"We're not all idiots here, Inspector, much as you might think we are. No, what I was thinking was an *actual* net of some sort. The null space these things create isn't complete; it doesn't, in other words, render the ship it's meant to capture into a null space as well. Its functioning is through the alteration of mass force *around* whatever vessel the Husnock capture. What if there was some way to fit ships with...I don't know, some

sort of scoops..." Josi shook her head at nothing in frustration, and began again:

"Look, Kell, we killed five troops of aliens in possession of technologies that I, for one, can't even comprehend, and we did it using *chlorine bleach*. The Husnock expect everyone they encounter to be as technologically savvy as they are, and it's a failing that we could use. Just like your failing to take into account that somebody out there is smarter than you are is likely to do you in one day, *Inspector*."

"You're out of line, Felingaili." The tone held danger. Josi snorted.

"Bite me, Shawn. Now, can we do this, or not?"

Shawn Kell snorted, himself. It took a moment for Josi to register the sound as a burst of laughter. "Give me a minute," he replied, and closed the commlink.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Humanoid voices that weren't just the sound of her own voice, hoarse from screaming, ranked among the greatest gifts Renee Ingram had ever been given. That thought had significance and weight, and she followed where it led. She found other voices, the touch of other minds, and was spun into earlier memories.

Ingram had never had the experience of consciously sitting down with a humanoid of another race and being struck broadside by the sudden revelation; hey! *This person really isn't particularly different from me, at all.* She'd grown up among all sorts of children; to her, they were merely different iterations on the concept *children*.

Her own, personal this-is-another-species revelation came when she had just breached the far side of three, and one of her Denobulan playmates skinned his hands and knees, falling off of a merry-go-round being pushed perhaps a little too enthusiastically by groups of children alternately running, then jumping back on to regain their breaths. She hadn't even known he'd fallen, until she'd heard his cries.

His blood was purple. He hadn't been bleeding hard, and the difference really hadn't struck her until she looked at the cloth — the tail of her own blouse — that

she'd used to try to staunch the worst of the wounds in the heel of his left hand. His upset face was also purple, not something that had registered at first in the brain of a little girl who had also been known to scream herself more or less purple now and again.

Only, having just turned four, she knew that her blood wasn't *actually* purple.

"Why is it like that?" the tiny girl pawed at her pale-blue blouse. Part of her wanted to believe that the shade of the fabric had caused the strange color, but the vivid, tacky purple liquid that clung to her fingertips and nails, themselves the hue of Japanese cherry blossoms, made her change her mind. She sniffed at them, grimaced at the unmistakable odor of *blood*, then grabbed at the boy's arm to drag him home with her; it was all too messy, and he was making too much noise, to deal with it here. "*Mine's* not like that! Does it hurt when it comes out that color?"

"His blood contains manganese, which make it purple. You can usually tell people with manganese blood, because they tend to have very pale skin adorned with brown facial areas," her nanny had explained, gently touching the little boy's temples. She had dermasutured his scrapes, and set out a platter of Ingram's favorite peanut- butter sesame -seed mochi and glasses of candy-pink Tellarite *guarr* juice for herself and the children. Captain Ingram's parents had been

gone somewhere; she'd begun school early on Nisus, and they wouldn't take her with them until her curriculum, and her mind, was in a more advanced state. "Not everyone has red blood. I don't!"

Captain Ingram gaped at the woman. "But...but you're human, like I am!" the little girl had been devastated at having been left by her parents, even for the two months they said they'd be gone. These other sudden revelations threatened to make her recently crashed world burn.

The woman smiled, and turned her pale forearm over, so the children could see her veins. "I am Denobulan and Deltan, *not* human my dear. But my blood, when it's not carrying oxygen, is greenish-blue, and so is yours."

"But usually it's *red*!" Captain Ingram asserted feverishly. Around a blissful mouthful of sweet rice cake, her sloe-eyed Denobulan playmate added; "Whysh it com'thn diff'rnt..." he paused and swallowed stickily, "colors?"

"Because it's made up of billions of tiny cells whose centers are made of different metals."

"Metal?" the children chorused. Both cast dubious looks at their forks, which neither of them had deigned to pick up in order to eat what, in both of their minds, was candy. It would be years before Renee learned that the special confections which were her favorite candies

were, in fact, highly nutritious little nuggets, no more candy than the cloudy, vitamin-packed juice of the *guarr* was soda pop.

"Metal's silver'n gold," the Denobulan boy averred, reaching for another rice cake and, with delicate care, proceeding to nibble the sesame seeds from the outside. Captain Ingram nodded in complete agreement, watching her playmate in fascination.

"Not when it's alive, or anyway, only a couple of metals are that color in living cells. Blood, you see, is alive. Its job is to carry oxygen around —"

Captain Ingram winced. "Like bugs?"

Her nanny, Deborah, who was also the Ingram's next-door neighbor, and whose unique living arrangements had more than once prompted Captain Ingram to pester her parents with the question *why does she live with so many other grownups?*, which her parents blithely ignored by diverting her attention elsewhere, threw back her head and laughed. "Okay, sure; like incredibly tiny bugs, then, but made of metal. The metal in many humanoids' blood...our *bugs*, is iron. It's red when it's carrying oxygen, but blue-green when it's not."

"Like plants? Is that why plants are green, and sometimes go red in fall?" Captain Ingram offered, eagerly.

"Sort of. Only plant blood usually contains the

metal magnesium. It helps them turn sunlight into food."

"Plants eat *light*?" the diminutive Denobulan, whose name was lost to Renee not due to any injury worse than the march of time, stopped in the fussy middle of divesting his rice cake of sesame seeds and gaped at Deborah.

Life was becoming much weirder and more complex than either young child had imagined it might be upon skipping hand-in-hand to the playground that morning. The patient woman smiled at both of them. "They do. And then we eat them, so in a way, we eat sunlight, too."

"Are Orion people plants? Summa them're green," Captain Ingram observed, worriedly, wishing the moment the comment was out of her mouth that she could take it back — she did *not* want to learn that people were, sometimes, also plants. She wished she'd brought up the endlessly fascinating issue of Deborah's extensively extended family, instead.

"Actually, in times of starvation, Orion people *can* use sunlight for energy, because their blood is also based on magnesium. But it causes their bodies severe stress, which can also kill them, so they have to be very careful. Did you know that, many hundreds of years ago, on an island on Earth called England, there was a legend that said some high-born person found green children, a boy and a girl?"

"What happened to them? Were they lost?" the little boy asked sympathetically, crunching the final sesame seed on his slippery denuded mochi between his front teeth.

"No one knows how they got there. The legend says that the little boy died, but the girl lived, and grew up to marry the man who found them."

"So... they're not plants?" Captain Ingram probed, draining her glass of juice. It was tart and puckery in comparison to the savory-sweet mochi, and made her thirstier. "Can I have more juice?"

"Sure, honey. No, nobody's a plant that I know of, it's just that our blood cells contain different metals that make our blood different colors sometimes."

"What other colors?" the little Denobulan was now licking his way through the sticky-rice layer of his mochi with a frog-like tongue. Deborah smiled at him. Captain Ingram kicked him under the table. He giggled.

"Let's see...you know how you said metals should be silver and gold? Well, selenium and silicon give you grayish-silver blood when they carrying oxygen, and nickel gives you gold. Copper can give green sometimes and orange other times, depending on whether it's oxygenated or not. Cobalt gives mostly bright blue.

"Manganese, the metal in *your* blood, is brown when it's not carrying oxygen. And what gives pale-skinned people their main skin tone," Deborah reached

out and gently pinched the back of Captain Ingram's little pink hand, "is whether the super-tiny vessels near the skin's surface are carrying oxygen or not..."

Captain Ingram knew the conversation had gone on, until Deborah had made them both supper and taken them over to play with her enormous brood of grandchildren and semi-sort-of-grandchildren and kind-of-sort-of step-grandchildren. But Captain Ingram's mind — the mind in the *now* — snagged on one statement.

Nickel gives you gold.

Felingaili sighed and turned back to 'Dan.

"Computer," the XO of the *Enterprise* intoned, "call up a sectored and marked map of the Milky Way galaxy on the main viewscreen."

The computer complied. There were three computer cores in the engineering section of the ship and three in the saucer. These were run by hundreds of subprocessor units throughout the vessel; the bridge alone contained fifteen banks of these, behind the wall panels that ran between each structural bulkhead. It had been the delicate process of creating separable computer links in the area between the upper swan neck of the engineering section and the aft portion of the saucer that had been the difficult part of making a separable starship.

"'Dan, I need you to look at this and tell me where

your people come from," Josi said. "We're currently in the lower right edge of Sector 001."

The Husnock blinked at the screen thoughtfully. "A number of our colonies are in Sectors 54 and 207. I am the product of a colony planet in Sector 54. Our original home, however, is in Sector 730."

Josi digested this. "You personally come from the edge of the Taranis Rift, but your species' original homeworld is in the Delta quadrant?"

'Dan nodded. The gesture was stiff and odd, not a natural Husnock gesture at all, but something that the alien performed in deference to its humanoid allies. "It would require the lives of thirteen generations of my people, to reach the homeworld using the technologies of which you are aware. As we have come, we have taken better worlds and better technologies from others. Thus, Husnock travel; thus, Husnock spread."

The executive officer of the *Enterprise* made a face, and was about to respond, when Ramesh at communications interrupted softly.

"Commander? It's Inspector General Kell again."

"Put him on speaker."

"Commander?"

"Here, Inspector. Was my suggestion at all feasible?"

"Playing cat's-cradle using the electromagnetic spectrum? Hardly. But we've come up with something

we think ought to be. The problem is that only the *Blacksnake's* got the capacity to attempt it."

Josi scowled. "Why?"

The smile on Kell's face was apparent in his voice when he replied. "Because it's highly technological, Commander. Requires a sub-particle accelerator and mass transducer. Knock the bosons off a mess of helium; compact it into a usable baryon-heavy mass. Fling that mass into the Husnock net. If the net's composed the way my scientific team thinks it is, the apparent light you see as the weaving of its strands is the photons that are liberated when any Higgs that should exist in the null-space is pulled out of phase with the boson triad that constitutes the Higgs itself. So —"

"It's difficult to explain how thoroughly you just lost me. How in hell is it possible to purposely divest an atom of its *bosons*?"

"Neutron stars do it all the time. So do antimatter projectors."

"You're telling me that your runabout is going to perform the duties of a neutron star? And since your ship is so damned advanced technologically, can you explain to me why the Husnock netships you're so avid to catch won't just turn around and take the *Blacksnake* as a prize?"

"The *Blacksnake* is going to become an antimatter projector. Unpartnered baryons will be driven to seek

supersymmetry, and should destroy the null space that constitutes the inside of a Husnock net by pulling the spin-altered bosons that constitute the strings of the net back into their original conformation. Or something like that. And my ship is specially hardened against takeover from the outside, Commander. Or didn't I just tell you that we possess various Tholian technologies?"

Josi shook her head. "Assuming I don't just close the channel now because I think you're off your rocker, Inspector General, let me ask this; what *else* might a flock of hungry baryons eat? Blacksnake might be hardened against that, too, but the *Enterprise* and whatever system we're in when you unleash them won't be similarly hardened."

Kell sighed. "That's the real problem; determining relative mass/volume ratios in relation to relative force. I'd assume that we wouldn't have to *exactly* match the baryon volume to the bosons we'd be —"

"Commander, emergency transmission from Vulcan. The Husnock netships are headed toward the engineering section of the *Enterprise* at warp five," Ramesh Kanchumurthi spat.

"You heard that, Kell?" Josi inquired anxiously.

"I heard it, Commander. Husnock! What will your netships do if they capture some part of the *Enterprise*?"

"Return with it to the horizon vessel. It is the horizon vessel that can make the jump back to Husnock

space directly."

"Good. They'll definitely want the saucer because you're in it, and the battle bridge because the psionic network's in it. The starship's halves by themselves aren't too much for four netships to deal with, am I correct?"

"You are correct, I think," 'Dan hedged.

Kell sighed. "Then that's the best we can do. Let's encourage them to collect both the saucer and the battle bridge of the *Enterprise*, but not too damn soon. Where the horizon ship is, is where the netships should bring the dual modules of your starship, and that's where we currently are. Much easier to work on this without worrying about spending a great deal of energy concurrently attempting to get back to Vulcan."

"Assuming that the Husnock haven't brought reinforcements!" Josi snarled.

"I don't believe that even my people would have been able to do such a thing in such a short span of time, not even in as much time as has passed since we first arrived at the planet with the mind-sifter," 'Dan noted. The Husnock had been told why it was that the *Enterprise* was at Vulcan, and not with the *Blacksnake*.

The engineering section of the *Enterprise* was directly opposite the Nevasan system's gas giants, roughly nine hundred thousand kilometers away from Vulcan; the saucer section was concealed behind

Vulcan's sister planet, but it was time to change that. Josi took the command chair and programmed a vector into the saucer propulsion system that led out from behind T'Kuht and toward what the Inspector General of Section 31 referred to as the *Enterprise's* battle bridge.

The saucer could only travel at impulse. Nonetheless, she wanted to use the saucer and the rebel Husnock within it to confuse the netships into pausing before they simply whisked away the engineering section. 'Dan had told her that the Husnock who had led them hadn't sent its compatriots any sort of definitive preference between the capture of 'Dan and the capture of the *Enterprise* before perishing. "Fine," the *Enterprise's* XO replied, "We'll do it your way. Felingaili to all Conjunction Ship captains!"

"Captain Quinn of Terra Conjunction Eighty-Two here, Commander. What can we do for you?" the channels of the other Conjunctions present showed open channels on the little screen that popped up from one of the command chair's arms, splitting the screen into twenty-four discrete sectors, each one filled with the face of a Conjunction ship captain, all of them nearly too small to perceive.

"Warp forward and harry the netships," Josi advised the Conjunctions, "Not to destroy them; we just want to keep them busy for a little while, while the *Blacksnake* works out a way to take them. When the netships jump

either *Enterprise's* saucer or engineering sections into..." she shook her head, unsure of the word, "ahm, *otherspace*, start scanning for their return. By all means, do not allow yourselves to be captured by them. We want them to concentrate on the *Enterprise*, understood?"

"Understood," Captain Jeffrey Quinn replied calmly. Josi had worked with the young man before; as calm as a starship's computer, many people thought he must have taken training in the Gol monastery on Vulcan at some point in his life. At twenty-four, he was the youngest human Conjunction captain Starfleet had ever posted. "Quinn out."

Josi herself was not so calm. The *Enterprise's* saucer section possessed no psionic ability without the engineering section attached. The Husnock netships would want the rebel Husnock in the saucer section just as much as they wanted the psionic technology in the engineering section. Josi could only hope that the ships wouldn't just beam 'Dan off the saucer. Captain Gravenor, in the *Enterprise's* engineering section, had theorized that, if all four netships were required in order to maintain a hold on the battle bridge, they could hardly use them simultaneously to capture either the saucer or the Husnock in it.

Gravenor was receiving all transmissions that Felingaili was receiving and sending out, as well as

information regarding anything Josi did with the saucer, and would continue to do so up to that point that the Husnock slung their net over either the saucer or the engineering section. The Section 31 operative was remaining nervewrackingly quiet.

The saucer section of the *Enterprise*, where Josi currently sat, was now headed away from Vulcan and T'Kuht. All available Conjunction Ships that had surrounded this planet and its desert twin, producing ionic interference which, both Felingaili and Gravenor hoped, had heretofore acted to shield the saucer's presence, now warped out to meet the Husnock netships. Just because the automated Husnock netships had been commanded to collect the *Enterprise*, nobody had any intention of making it easy on them. If the *Enterprise* was playing the role of bait, the *Blacksnake* would be playing the role of snare, and only the difficulties that the netships encountered while taking the bait that would buy time to set the snare.

Of course, if Kell couldn't develop any sort of working technology against the Husnock netships in the period of time it would take those ships to gather up both sections of the *Enterprise*, the only real choice either the *Enterprise* battle bridge, the *Blacksnake*, or the *Excelsior* would have would be the destruction of the netships. And the mothership parked near that black hole...

Josi shook off the what-ifs to concentrate on what was currently going on. "Ensign Kanchumurthi, did Gravenor get a copy of which sectors the Husnock live in?"

The East Indian man shrugged. "All channels are open, Commander."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Strange, violent aliens with multiple eyes and eerily opalescent skin, that bled gold...she saw them, saw herself fighting them, saw herself lose to them.

Another presence moved in her mind, not so much to wipe the memory away as to soothe her. That presence was attempting to give her memories, not to remove them.

Again, her awareness was filled by a group of humanoids, and the man in buckskins. He was a big man, auburn-haired, the sort, Captain Ingram knew instinctively, that she usually avoided becoming involved with. Also present was an older woman, her exuberantly curly russet hair laced with silver as though she wore jewels in her hair; a dark-skinned, burly man with vivid green eyes, who she somehow knew wasn't alone in himself, though she could not have said what that meant; a humanoid with hair and skin the hue of licorice, with tender, fawnlike dark eyes and a countenance so gentle it melted Captain Ingram's heart; a blue-eyed, slight young man with golden skin and sharp ridges running from the bridge of his nose up his temples to disappear in his thick raven black hair; and two...*Vulcans*?

Was she supposed to know what that meant?

Another of those seemed to walk up and touch her, a dusky woman with hair like countless strands of fine gold and bronze and brass and electrum thread flowing down her back, and beautiful almond-shaped blue eyes. *She knew this woman*, but her attention was pulled toward an individual nearly as large as the redhead in buckskins — where all similarity ended, and pale violet-blue skin began. Her head spun with confusion for a moment. *There had been other people than this.*

When? How? Where? Why? Who?

Good! she heard — what did that mean, anyway? — from the minds linked with her own. Ah; now she understood. The voices represented the individuals she saw in her...memory? Yes, this was a memory, but it was incomplete. Inaccurate.

And the individuals she sensed now were with her, now.

Here.

That was the most elusive thought she'd had in a while — the concept of *here*. Slipperier even than *now*, it was a concept that forever shifted, particularly when you had nine minds. Each of those minds were whole, and she suddenly realized why they were linked to hers — it was to help make her own mind whole. A sudden torrent of information flooded her mind:

She saw what had happened to her at the hands of

the Husnock.

She understood that she had been saved by the shadowy undercover organization referred to as *Section 31*, and that it had been because the leader of the covert mission against the Husnock had felt compassion.

She remembered her ship and her status again.

She realized that she was the lover of the big man in buckskins; that because she had finally taken the risk of becoming involved with someone different, she had finally found something better.

She understood that the flaxen-haired *Vulcan* had been her friend for much of her life, and that she was currently on the planet from which such people derived.

She comprehended that the man she knew as *Colin*, as well as the *Vulgans* and the *Andorian* who were here to help her integrate back into herself, represented most of the founding races of the *Federation*.

She perceived that she had been adopted, her biological mother deceased and her biological father unavailable, by a childless couple who loved her dearly.

All of these things filled her with a poignant, bittersweet delight, and Renee Ingram awoke in the arms of the man of whom she had kept seeing in her memory-dreams.

“Colin?” she managed.

“Hush,” he whispered, stroking her hair. The others were gone — had been gone for some while, she

realized — and she lay with Colin in a soft bed in a dark, cool place. “Sleep now. Just sleep.”

She sighed, and gave herself over to the strength of his body and his mind again for a moment. “The ship... the Husnock... is the crew all right?”

“The crew’s currently on the planet. Vulcan. We’re all on Vulcan.”

Renee sat up, rubbing at her eyes vigorously. “I really need to know what is going on?”

Colin made an irritated noise, then sat up, too.

"You're *what*?" the captain of the *Enterprise* demanded. "With *who*?" she ameliorated the settings on her communicator — the Vulcan defense grid garbled them horribly — and settled back in her seat to talk to her XO. It wasn't as though becoming tense and agitated would allow her to do anything about the situation from here. And becoming tense and agitated in front of your officers and crew was never a good idea, in any case.

Colin had given Captain Ingram a telepathic overview of as much of the situation as he knew. She wanted to be able to catch up on what was happening by being fed it in small bits, preferably by someone who'd had more direct contact with the situation than the *Enterprise* yeoman. Still dizzy from the procedures that had pulled her out of what had nearly been her life's last abyss, she shifted in her seat carefully, trying not to draw

the nervous attentions of Demora, Marco, Mel'Taya, EmJay or, particularly, T'Dani and Colin. Seantie, and the rest of the telepaths and empathes who had helped Renee return from what had been a very black void, were still sleeping, with the exception of Yaelat, who was good-naturedly playing the role of maître d'hôtel to the rest of the group.

Josi made what Captain Ingram well knew was an irritated sound. "If we get cut off, it'll be because the Husnock ships've decided to surround the saucer, which they might end up doing at any time, since we'd be the easier nut to crack." Josi sighed, then continued feeding her CO nuggets of information about the situation they were in:

"So, a Section 31 ship trailed the Husnock ships to the Klingon scientific planet, and —"

"What were the Husnock doing there in the first place?"

"We travel as a pack at the time of jah'parra, to prove that we are worthy by obtaining slaves and new technologies," a toneless, nasal, space-attenuated voice offered.

"That was the Husnock who turned against its own people to help us," Josi explained.

Captain Ingram's eyes narrowed. "It's on the bridge with you? You should put it somewhere under guard, Commander."

"You sound like Kell," Felingaili noted, wryly.

"And Kell would be...?"

"Inspector General of Section 31, currently in command of the *Blacksnake*. What Section 31 wanted was to —"

"Determine the aliens' home sector and level of relative technology by capturing their ships?" Captain Ingram cut in. Her XO's silence acted as positive confirmation of her guess.

"While the Husnock on the planet killed and tortured everybody," Josi replied heatedly at last.

Captain Ingram rubbed at her throbbing temples. According to Colin's secondhand information, Section 31 itself had been instrumental in helping her regain mental capacity. She supposed that she owed them for that. The thought was unpalatable; she didn't trust the undercover group as far as she imagined she could kick them, but as a Starfleet officer, it was her duty to maintain a sense of unity between branches, even ones that purportedly didn't exist, at least before her subordinates. Though if she happened to ever privately encounter the cold-blooded creatures who crewed the vessel that had been given such a cold-blooded name, she doubted she'd be able to maintain such a facade.

"You are aware, Commander, that the protection of Starfleet personnel is not in any way a Section 31 imperative? Apparently," Ingram went on, before her

passionate XO could offer her opinion about that stark reality, "at some point, their interests in this mission became confluent with ours. Fine. Now help me understand this; *why* was the decision made to split my ship?" though one of Colin's tasks was to fit every *Excelsior*-class ship of the line with this capability, Captain Ingram had never actually imagined a scenario in which such a desperate maneuver would be required.

"The ships the aliens crewed were programmed with..."

The comm link between herself and her XO cut off with such utter finality at that point that, at first, Captain Ingram imagined that her communicator had simply ceased to function. Everyone in the room cast alarmed glances at Colin, from whom Ingram felt a wave of what she could only define as excitement. The big telepath rubbed at his face, then said aloud:

"From what I gather, the Husnock have some sort of technology that can capture other ships, and they want the psionic technologies the *Enterprise* is equipped with. The..." Colin bit down so hard on what he was going to say that Captain Ingram didn't even get a smattering of it telepathically; "Inspector General of Section 31 wants the Husnock ships to study. And there aren't many of those left; Kell was concerned that, should those few manage to capture the *Enterprise* in its whole state, they'd rip it to pieces trying to make a temporal jump

with it back to their mother-ship, which feeds them energy. The Husnock are after new technologies, after all, and a Federation starship, even in pieces, would meet that criterion."

"They want the Husnock who helped our people, too, so they split the ship and put the Husnock into the saucer section," Marco added softly.

"The upshot to all of this being that they're using my ship as bait so that Section 31 can get at these aliens' technologies."

"They're using both the *Enterprise* and the *Excelsior* in that capacity. It was basically part of the agreement we made in order to revive you," this from T'Dani. "Josi and the beta-shift comm officer are piloting the saucer. Part of the Section 31 crew's manning the engineering section, except for Rafe and a Vulcan engineering tech whose name I forget, who chose to help them come up to speed on the psionic matrix —"

"I *don't* find that additional information particularly comforting," Captain Ingram snapped.

"Nobody was given a lot of options," Demora cut in. "The Husnock manipulate boson nets to create a null space that can't be fought against, and it's not permeable, even to subspace transmission. That's probably why we just got cut off from the saucer."

Captain Ingram ignored both the residual stiffness in her muscles and a lingering feeling of weakness, pushed

herself up off the couch she was ensconced on, and began pacing as furiously as her aching, weakened body would allow. Being faced with an utter inability to act was not a situation that starship captains found particularly charming, and pacing seemed to be her only option at the moment. She'd always been bemused by John Harriman's seemingly overwhelming desire to pace around much of the time; now, she understood it.

Lords of light, how she wished he was here!

"The minute Section 31 showed up, Captain, they took the situation right out of our hands," EmJay offered softly. "None of this is Commander Felingaili's fault."

"It's true," Yaelat said; he'd just walked into the room bearing a plate of various replicated sandwiches, and an assortment of Vulcan juices that wouldn't render other humanoid digestive systems permanently inoperable, as several of them could. "Section 31 doesn't take no for an answer."

You need to rest, Riana, Colin cut in telepathically.

Pretty soon, sweetie. I promise! She replied in kind. He sighed and rubbed at his own temples.

"Inspector General Kell wields a considerable amount of power," Mel'Taya added, reaching for a cup of salmon-colored fruit juice. The *Enterprise's* Andorian head of security considered the beverage with what looked like the roughly same amount of distrust Captain Ingram currently harbored toward Shawn Kell.

The captain scowled. "The Section's run by humanoids, people, not by demons of light and air. I can guarantee you that this Inspector General fellow bleeds, and that if anything happens to my senior staff whom he's shanghaied along with my ship, I'll personally *make* him bleed, if I have to hunt him down and use my own teeth."

Mel'Taya offered her a look not uncommonly offered by Andorians, one that Ingram couldn't quite decipher. The captain ignored it and flipped open the communicator she held:

"This is Captain Renee Ingram of the starship *Enterprise* requesting emergency warp subspace communications!"

"This is Vulcan Communication Control, Captain. How may we assist you?" a bland male voice that reminded Ingram of nothing so much as the *Enterprise's* computer voice responded at once. She made a wry face.

"Am I correct in assuming that you have no knowledge of the communications codes for a Section 31 ship called *Blacksnake*?"

"Ah...hmm..." one knew, Captain Ingram reflected, that they'd asked a thorny question when they caused a Vulcan to stammer; "no individual of whom I am aware possesses such codes, Captain Ingram. You do, of course, have the option to transmit a broadcast for such a

request to higher Starfleet channels, but doing so would require multiple clearances of your authorization codes, and considering the current state of emergency —"

"Never mind. Can you patch me through to the *Excelsior*, emergency warp comm channels?" warping information was magnitudes faster than warping a starship; information possessed significantly less mass, and even in warp, mass mattered.

"Right away, Captain. Your clearance?"

"Ingram beta twelve sea green. The last one was Ingram beta eight nine four five zero. What's the lag time?"

"Significant. They're all the way across the quadrant. Also, the current state of emergency will increase the lag time."

"Which would be what, in Vulcan hours?"

The man on the other end of the line drew a deep breath and let it out slowly, "Considering the dilated effects of general relativity at warp? Between seventeen and forty-six. I regret that the quantum effects of warp, combined with the potential lag inherent to the enactment of Federation emergency protocols, do not allow me to offer you greater accuracy at this time."

"Terrific," Captain Ingram muttered, under her breath. "Thanks, anyway."

She was simply going to have to trust that Commander Josi Felingaili and Commander Pavel

Chekhov would be able to bring the *Excelsior* and the *Enterprise* out of a direct confrontation with these horrid aliens and their awful technologies in one piece — figuratively speaking.

“I,” she announced to the room in general, “am going back to bed.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Even Shawn Kell, where he sat at the nerve center of the *Blacksnake*, a command chair surrounded by miniature consoles that displayed and reported the actions of all the thousands of departments on the Section 31 vessel, was horrified by the sudden, unannounced appearance of the *Enterprise* saucer section.

The temporal breach through which it hurtled was like a raw wound gnawed in spacetime. Only the presence of the boson null-net around the saucer kept the gamma rays that accompanied it, like the whipping-rods of lictors, from beating the material saucer back into its constituent energy. Pure undifferentiated energy crackled around the ragged lips of the temporal tear, telling all observers that the passage of the saucer had failed to defy general relativity's grim realities, and that a temporal rift had formed somewhere between yesterday and tomorrow.

The sensory matrices of Federation ships saw in all parts of the electromagnetic spectrum, and enhanced ones could even see in parts of the psionic spectrum. The effect was often, rightfully, alarming. It was also continuously enhanced, modified, and damped by

monitors adjusted to the sensitivities of basic humanoid eyesight and the general capability of humanoid brains, so that the ability to see high-energy gamma rays or long-wave microwaves in real-time didn't drive humanoid observers either blind or mad.

The *Excelsior* was two parsecs toward Delta quadrant from the *Blacksnake* — well away from the direct barrage of concentrated gamma rays, torn from elsewhere by the messy temporal passage of the Husnock netships like atmosphere flooding from a hull breach.

Kell didn't pause to consider what the netships had just done to spacetime in the Milky Way galaxy, or whether the appearance of the netships so dangerously close to the *Blacksnake* was a purposeful attempt to destroy the Section 31 vessel, the dark humor of providence, or pure random coincidence; he just barked out an order whose content didn't consciously register in his mind until after he'd given it, "Transwarp jump X-50 Y-13 *immediately!*"

To his great relief, the *Enterprise* B's elegant saucer instantaneously disappeared from the screen. He cast a glance to his right, at the console module that showed navigational readings. It read *X-16 Y-67*. Kell drew a deep breath and let it out explosively; his navigator had begun the act of moving the *Blacksnake* before he'd even given the command to move, hyper-jumping the ship, like a knight on a chessboard, to an alternate safe-spot

than the one he had chosen. A commendation for that navigator was in order; a millisecond's hesitation, and the *Blacksnake* with all her crew would have ceased to exist even as atomic slag.

Kell rose from his seat and squinted at the viewscreen, where gamma radiation was having a grand old time interacting with the magnetons left behind from transwarp relocation. In full X-Y spectral enhancement, the effect was not entirely unlike an LSD experience. But as far as he could tell, the netships were ignoring this flamboyant proof of potential enemy presence entirely, intent on their prey. "Soval, can we use the antimatter projector from here with enough effect —"

"Affirmative," the Vulcan snapped back.

Inspector General Shawn Kell raised a brow at his unwontedly passionate science officer. "Let's do it, then."

The Husnock net brightened fiercely, then winked out, an effect not dissimilar to the baryonic pulse produced by an overstressed warp-field coil conduit before it failed. Cerenkov radiation sparkled around everything in the immediate vicinity of the *Blacksnake*, and the tiny netships began to turn slowly, the beginning of the Brownian tumbling that a vessel without power made in the vacuum of space.

Suddenly, the feed from the *Enterprise's* main

viewscreen, which had only just snapped back on after an impossible trip through a temporal tear in space, was subsumed in a painful shower of brilliance, and the saucer section of the starship lurched and keeled as though it had been hit by multiple photon torpedo blasts. The starship's automated emergency systems switched on with a vengeance. Once the barrage had subsided, Josi forced herself to release her death-grip on the tactical board and apply her attention to it instead.

"*What?*" Ramesh Kanchumurthi demanded peremptorily. It was at times like this that Josi remembered that he hailed from one of the ancient ruling families of India. He'd needed, he had once explained to John Harriman and his two highest-ranking officers sheepishly after they had called him to the carpet for breach of protocol, to have such protocol hammered into him through sleep-hypnosis. It simply wasn't something that his family *knew*. Basic human politeness, he'd admitted, embarrassed, had needed to be hardwired into his brain the same way before Starfleet would ever accept the fiercely intelligent, highly accomplished, proud young Sikh into its cadet ranks. Though all of this had conspired to make him a quiet, undemanding young officer, under extreme stress the demanding behavior he'd been raised with as a child still peeked out occasionally.

"Multiple hull breaches..." Josi began, adding;

"Computer, shut off auditory emergency alarm sirens! Microscopic hull breaches, all decks," the executive officer of the *Enterprise* went on in a less strident tone, tossing her head at Ramesh; "tactical board's slow; get over to the science console and see if you can figure out what's happened!"

Kanchumurthi was bending over the science station console before Josi had even finished the sentence. He shook his head at it. "Not used to this board, Commander, but it seems slow to me, too. Here, the count on the breaches is still progressing, above ten thousand so far." He shook his head at the snail-like scroll of data:

"There are so many microscopic tears in the ship's infrastructure that hull integrity's down thirty-four percent and computer activity's down fifty percent, but the emergency force field's holding." He turned to look over his shoulder at Josi, his face pinched and pale. "It was a baryon particle storm, Commander."

I am going to kill that man, Felingaili thought, each word as sharp as if its letters had been etched into glass with acid, and as calm as the waters of a pond stilled by a midwinter freeze. Every station on an *Excelsior*-class starship possessed, to greater or lesser degree, the capacities of all the other stations. Josi didn't order Kanchumurthi back to his station to hail the Blacksnake; she did it herself from tactical.

The board responded with such sluggishness that she might as well, she thought to herself snidely, have sent a carrier pigeon in an avian envirosuit across the vacuum between *Enterprise's* bridge section and the *Blacksnake*. The line was open, however; she waited as long as she could stand it before barking; "Kell! Come in."

The voice of the Inspector General of Section 31 was tired. "Here, Commander. I was speaking to the commander of the *Excelsior*."

Josi spat her question through clenched teeth; "What the hell did that...what have you done to my ship?"

"I assume you're referring to the baryon bombardment?"

"The baryon bombardment you did *not* say would take place inside —"

"I'm sorry about that. It was...unexpected."

"*Unexpected*? You're the one who bombarded us with baryons!" Josi snarled.

"In theory, it shouldn't have mattered. According to Starfleet specs, a starship's basic shielding is resistant to baryons. It was the Husnock net that was susceptible to the actions of the baryons. As we surmised, those *did* act to pull the warped bosons in the net back into their proper conformation.

"Unfortunately, the ratio of baryons to warped bosons *did* matter. It appears that the baryons that have

afflicted the *Enterprise* and the *Excelsior* with hull breaches were pulled *from* the ships themselves by the warped bosons.

"Naturally, the reaction of matter with antimatter will create bosons, over time. It just never occurred to anybody that this might..." the Inspector General of Section 31 sighed; Felingaili could hear the exhaustion implicit in the sound, "*matter*. No pun intended, Commander."

"You'll note that you don't hear me laughing. I don't even know if we'll be able to rejoin the saucer of the *Enterprise* to the hull with this level of damage! Is the *Excelsior* —"

"We're in about the same shape as you are, Commander, though at least we're not in pieces," Chekov's voice was as warped and static-filled as Kell's had been. "We were far enough away to resist the worst of it. I, for one, want to...ah, to *get the hell out of here* before the mother of these ships the *Blackhawk's* monitoring figures out what's going on. Unfortunately, the baryon storm destroyed our dilithium crystals, and nearly caused a warp core breach. We were able to jettison the core before that happened, but now we cannot travel over warp four. *Blyad'*! If we'd been any closer —"

"Or if the battle bridge of the *Enterprise* had been brought here by the Husnock netships instead, none of us

would be having this conversation; the baryon flow would have made the *Enterprise's* warp cores explode. I think we all understand this, Commander Chekhov."

"But not the *Blackhawk's* warp core?" Josi growled.

"That Tholian technology you referenced before protected us again, Commander Felingaili. Quite prescient of you. However, as it stands, we *are* all here. We have disabled and may now take possession of the netships. As Commander Chekhov has noted, our only concern now is the damnable mothership. Husnock! What can we expect?"

'Dan, who had been sitting speechless and obviously frightened at the Ops station ever since Josi had steered the saucer section out from behind the safety of the Conjunction Ships near Vulcan finally spoke up; "Our ships possess the technology to clean baryon particles from any atmosphere. It is a very destructive process, you should be told. We perform it regularly within our netships. *Now* I understand why.

"Also, our horizon vessel is automated and possesses only weapons of defense. I do not believe it could be programmed to come to where we are..." the Husnock let whatever it had been about to say wander off. Its attention seemed scattered.

"Unless somehow your leader could have told it to go after the netships should they be taken?" Kell prompted. 'Dan blinked each of its eyes asynchronously.

"I do not see how Z'liths'dtor might have foreseen such an eventuality," the Husnock replied meekly. Kell snorted.

"The thing needs to withstand the stresses of interacting with a black hole. What kind of shielding does it have — quantum-phase?" the Inspector General of Section 31 snapped.

"*What* phase?" Chekov cut in. Josi felt her mouth twist wryly.

"I..." 'Dan sighed; the m'han'rt on his face squeaked and writhed. The Husnock writhed in its chair, as though in response; "I do not know."

"Lovely. We'd need quantum torpedoes to have any kind of chance against quantum-phase shielding —"

"The *Tashrun's* equipped with those!" Josi said.

"Which helps us not at all; *Tashrun's* currently a long way away. *Blacksnake's* down too much in capacity to manufacture any currently after acting as an antimatter projector, we'll need some time to reconfigure before we can even think about producing quantum torpedoes. We can at least scan the netships now to see what they contain, but we're leaving them here; I don't think they'll go anywhere unassisted ever again. Husnock! You say the things communicate with the mother-ship using temporal beacons?"

"The slagship responds to biological temporal

beckoning only," 'Dan replied mysteriously. "I do not think I —"

"I'm sick of hearing what you don't know, Husnock! I want to know what you *do* know, and I want to know it *now*!" Kell roared. Ramesh winced and removed his earpiece; from where she sat, Josi could hear it ring. "We're taking that mother-ship, and somehow, we're going make the damn thing give us a ride home if I have to —"

"A m'han'rt chorus only can communicate with the slagship. In this way, only Husnock can ever command one. We have not enough m'han'rt. But shortly, I fear, we shall have enough Husnock. I feel...I feel that I am coming apart."

Josi and Ramesh goggled at 'Dan. The Husnock was trembling where it sat, and its eyes rolled independently in their sockets. "We need to get it back into the Benzite containment!" Josi breathed, awed and horrified at once. Both officers hurried to the Husnock and pulled it bodily from the chair. Its flesh, wherever it wasn't covered by the pressure suit that was, somehow, melded into the skin of the Husnock itself, had taken on an unpleasant, boneless consistency, as if the alien was filled with some sort of thick gel.

'Dan, or perhaps the creature on 'Dan's face, screamed; the sound was like sharpened metal drawn quickly over polished granite, and both humans flinched

physically away from the sound. This was fortunate, as the Husnock partially extended the blunted, but still potentially dangerous, claws of both hands, and swiped at them with a speed that astounded Commander Felingaili.

"'Dan! *Stop!*" she cried; "We're trying to help you!"

"You should have left the damn thing in the Benzite containment!" Kell snarled; the Inspector General of Section 31 had contrived to get the main viewscreens of both starships working again, and he and Pavel Chekhov watched the byplay on the bridge of the *Enterprise* with dreadful fascination. Both Josi and Ramesh ignored this and worked to subdue 'Dan and wrestle the alien into the turbolift.

'Dan complied through the fortunate act of losing consciousness. Reaching out to help Ramesh support the remarkably heavy little alien, Josi nearly jerked away again; the Husnock's doughy flesh crawled beneath her hands, and she could see even its face bulging and twisting, as though creatures were moving under its skin.

Which, of course, they were. She wondered, as she and Ramesh dragged the unresisting, passively writhing form into the turbolift, how the Husnock could possibly survive the genesis of its progeny.

Chapter Twenty-Six

It soon became obvious to Commander Felingaili, after she'd sealed the Husnock into the nitrogen sulfide-filled bariatric chamber, that Inspector General Shawn Kell was concerned about 'Dan's survival for only one reason. His voice emanated from the comm unit in the main sickbay, where she and Ensign Kanchumurthi watched in horrified fascination as the Husnock briskly fell apart.

It had begun to fall apart with from the moment they had put it into the bariatric chamber. No; *falling apart* wasn't exactly what was occurring. It would be more accurate to say that the Husnock was *pushed* apart. Legs, arms, and hands fell away, followed by the advent of new digits; the alien's face was sloughed off by the presence of a fresh face. And the fallen parts continued to swell, to writhe, to differentiate until the fallen face also had hands, and the fallen digits also sported faces. With a nauseated sound, Ramesh turned away from the transparent aluminum walls of the quarantine room.

"Could you please respond, Commander Felingaili?" Kell's exasperated tone cut like a serrated knife into Josi's fascinated ruminations about the likelihood of 'Dan's survival. She blinked, and tried to remember

what it was that Kell had been saying before. No good.

"I'm sorry, Inspector General, but I was otherwise engaged. What was it you were wanting?"

"Is the creature still wearing that biological breathing apparatus on its face?"

"Uh...no... that...um, it curled into a ball on the floor when 'Dan's face fell off. I think it's still alive, though."

"The Husnock's *face* fell off?"

"It's...hell, it's *breeding*, wasn't that fairly clear? I'd imagine that your face, too, would fall off should you ever manage to find someone willing to breed with you."

Kell cleared his throat softly. "Okay. What I want is to beam you, Kanchumurthi, and the biological rebreather into the *Blacksnake's* transporter buffers."

Josi blinked. "*What?*"

"I mean, I *could* have just gone ahead and done it, but you were busy wrestling with a Husnock whose reproduction was probably brought on by all the baryon activity. More than a little probably, you and your ensign have progressive baryonic mutatory-triggering disease, You don't feel it yet, but pretty soon, you're apt to feel as if you're doing what it is you say the Husnock in the chamber's doing. We can fix that. It'll take a while, of course, since we also have to do it for the entire crew of the *Excelsior*. And in the meantime, the Husnock's breathing apparatus can be cloned."

" 'Dan needs that to breathe!'"

"Not in a Benzite pressure chamber, it doesn't. Well, no, it *does*, but...we *have* to clone that rebreather! 'Dan says more are needed to contact and capture the mother-ship. So, we'll make more. Easier than producing quantum torpedoes."

"You know you can clone it without causing it some kind of harm that will make it or its clones malfunction?"

"Soval tells me there's at least a fifty percent chance of successfully doing that, yes."

"You're fifty percent certain that you can make m'han'rt that won't let the mother-ship know they've been captured by an enemy force?"

Kell sighed. "We're also nearly fifty percent sure that the...what the hell was that word? *M'han'rt*? That they're not sentient. And once they're in the buffer, we'll be able to tell if they're bioengineered creatures in the first place. That'd solve all those problems; we could make them whatever the hell we want."

Felingaili scowled and returned her attention to the quarantine room. Apparently, fifty percent likelihoods and mass bioengineering were acceptable to Section 31. This did not surprise her, not after the baryon storm. Also, they had no other options.

There were seven Husnock young, or the beginnings of the same, in the room with 'Dan. She stared at the eldest — what was once the alien's left foot, scarcely a

quarter of the size of its parent. It opened two of its four eyes and stared back at her.

Its eyes were a different color from 'Dan's.
"Inspector General?"

"Yes, Commander?"

"Aren't these Husnock supposed to be clones?"

"That's my understanding."

"Well, this one's...ahm, young don't resemble it much."

"You were saying they resembled parts of faces."

"No, I mean the ones that have developed their own features. I'm seeing one with differently colored eyes, another with skin that's not gray. Also, they're different sizes. There might be more differences, but those are the only ones that are evident right now." The eldest of 'Dan's young continued to blink at Josi with one eye, while the others took in the rest of its surroundings. Its face...

"These could be differences that are common to Husnock when they're young, like blue eyes in human babies and ravens."

'Dan groaned and turned over. Nothing had fallen off of the alien for the past five minutes. As Josi had been noting from the countenance of its young, the Husnock's regenerated face without the m'han'rt was a terrible thing: A lamprey-like orifice in place of a chin, surmounted by gill-like slits surrounded by the

Husnock's four eyes, these in turn bracketed by the fleshy, multicolored protuberances of its cheeks which, Morell had said, acted as organs of hearing and smell concurrently. When it spoke, the gill-slits of its face fluttered and vibrated:

"They...are not...like me."

"What are they like?" This from Ramesh, who had finally turned back to hazard a glance into the quarantine room. His facial expression screamed disgust. The Husnock were so alien that Felingaili doubted that any potential offense offered by this could ever matter.

"Themselves," the adult Husnock wheezed. It closed its eyes, and said:

"This is the voice of your Elder Form. Hearken to me! The tale *enjersh'neh prehtan mahak...*"

Josi shook her head, as though to clear it, and shot a quizzical glance at Ramesh. The ensign shrugged and spread his hands in the universal humanoid *I haven't the slightest idea* gesture. "Did you understand what 'Dan is saying, Inspector General? Our translators can't seem to catch it."

"Probably, your translators are showing the progressive effects of baryon disease. Or your minds or ears are. It's telling its young that we're allies, and that we're to be —"

In a cadence that completely drowned out all other sound in the room, the young Husnock responded to

'Dan in a strident, chittering chorus, with the exception of the creature that had once been the Husnock's face. This one snarled and growled, vicious, vaguely mechanical sounds that overrode even its siblings' keening. It tried to stand up on its strangely lanky, multi-jointed legs and arms, but its tiny talons made its movements awkward.

'Dan rolled sideways toward this youngster with surprising alacrity and unsheathed its own talons. These had regenerated along with its hands and glistened like freshly whetted steel knives. Without a significant pause, 'Dan rolled past the snarling clone, swiping at it viciously as it passed. The tiny creature fell into three nearly equal parts, its body leaking silver and gold like some sort of hideous wet-work Christmas ornament. The other young continued to chorus back at their parent. 'Dan said something else, at a level that made both humans present clap their hands over their ears, and the Husnock's remaining six clones quieted.

"All the young but one agreed with 'Dan's terms. 'Dan said it would show them what would happen should they renege on that promise. I'm assuming it killed one of its offspring?"

Both Ensign Kanchumurthi and Commander Felingaili had turned away from the bariatric chamber in horror and disgust. The adult Husnock inside hissed something else. "It...it did, Inspector," Josi

replied.

"It also says its young require food, and that it's provided them that now. Commander, I'm beaming you and the ensign out of there. Then I'm taking part of that Husnock corpse, and the m'han'rt; if we manage to clone and control these things, I'm assuming they'll all be needing to eat for some time to come, and now's as good a time as any to figure out what sort of nutrients they need for survival."

They had left the *Enterprise* saucer behind, along with the *Excelsior*. Both of those ships had been towed by the *Blacksnake* to a safe distance. There would be only one way to tame the mother-ship when it appeared, before the *Blacksnake* wrapped it in Tholian webbing to take away, and there was no way that either hull-damaged starship could withstand another baryon bombardment, from either within or without. No one was left on either of those ships; everyone was aboard the *Blacksnake*.

This is impossible, Josi thought, sitting up and staring around in confusion.

She was in a room whose ceiling was lost in soft, green-hued pulses of computerized light, a room filled with biobeds, transporter pads, transporter consoles, and about a thousand other banks of instrumentation whose use she couldn't even hazard a guess at. All the biobeds

were filled (she was in one herself), and all the transporter consoles manned. The remainder of the instrumentation banks flashed and hummed unattended.

Commander Felingaili tried to force herself to accept the fact that the cavernous room was larger than the total area of the *Blacksnake*, as viewed from outside. Her mind refused the concept.

"Welcome to the *Blacksnake*, Commander," the Inspector General of Section intoned from behind her. The reflex-reactions of the commander of the *Enterprise* took over, and she literally jumped out of the biobed to whirl around toward him, her heart hammering in her chest. He grinned at her wryly. "Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you."

"Am I still suffering from progressive baryonic breakdown syndrome, or is this room actually larger than your entire ship?"

"It's a technology we learned to harness a long time ago," Shawn Kell offered in explanation, without in any way responding to her question. "And your baryonic breakdown's been halted, but it was quite severe in you and your ensign; you've been in the buffers longer than almost anyone else. I admit, I was worried about you. How do you feel?"

"Like I've been transported through the rabbit hole. *Almost* anyone else?"

Kell just smiled.

"Yes, they'll survive. The Section will see to it. We'll also see to it that they've never actually came to this part of the galaxy. This little brawl will have never happened."

"You can erase the memories of an entire planet full of people? And how about the Klingons? The *Cleef*? The —"

"Records and trails will be monitored and eradicated. Prevarications can be devised. Governments and groups are easy to appease. But erasing personal memories? That's almost never necessary. Personal memories alter *themselves*; improvable anecdote becomes legend, and is soon discounted. All people and all myths eventually die." Inspector General Shawn Kell smiled at Commander Felingaili; the expression held more than a little sadness. "If you don't put credence in all that, Commander, just ask your captain and your CMO. They know all this from bitter personal experience. I'm sure they'd be willing to explain in detail."

Josi shook her head at the pragmatic man sitting at the table with her. Ramesh had eagerly accepted a tour of the ship, which was apparently the size of an *Excelsior*-class starship...inside, anyway. It was still difficult for Josi to believe her own senses. She was

sitting in a lounge large enough to accommodate an entire ship's crew, one that furthermore served fresh food and drinks, overseen by waiters; she and Kell were drinking Bloody Maries made with fresh tomato juice, and eating raw oysters.

"And the damage to the *Excelsior* and the *Enterprise's* saucer section?" Josi drained her drink. Kell motioned a waiter to their table.

"Caught in a baryon storm while inspecting the black hole at the edge of the system. Could you please," he said to the waiter, "get Commander Felingaili another drink?"

Josi snorted. "Why in hell would the *Enterprise* send just the saucer to do that? It has no warp drive! *How* would the *Enterprise* send just the saucer to do that?"

"Didn't send it; *left* it. Wanted to see how the two parts of the ship would function when separated. Never imagined it'd get caught in a baryon storm, of course." Kell took up a piece of sourdough bread, buttered it heavily, laid an oyster on it, squeezed lemon over it, and sat back to enjoy it.

"And you can prove this?" Josi sputtered. The Inspector General of Section 31 shrugged.

"The paperwork already exists."

"You're bluffing!"

"I am not. I mean, naturally it isn't *paper*, it's bits

and bytes in a computer system. Which makes it far easier for it to exist.”

Josi speared and swallowed her own oyster. The waiter returned with her drink.

“My report’s not going to back you up. Neither will Renee’s or T’Dani’s or Rafe’s.”

“Your reports are going to complain about a section of Starfleet that the Federation Council does not believe exists, and that Starfleet refuses to admit exists. They will get shoved into one of the same files where the rest of your daily logs where nothing much happens get shoved. And the Federation Council will refuse you a hearing, because you might as well complain to them that the existence of fairies – “

“It’s not right that you should get away with this!” Josi picked up her drink, then put it back down and glared at it.

“Ask your captain sometime, or her *lover*,” Kell put a vicious twist into this word, “just how much red tape I personally cut through for them regarding escapades on Tres Two. Ask the priests of Selaya whether Renee could have been brought back at all this time without my help. Ask the Senior Security Officer of your ship what Section 31 did to save it from a contract taken out on its life, and your Junior Security Officer? Pretty much the same. Please, by all means, *ask*.” Kell took a swig of his own drink, and changed the subject:

“The fleet’s already been informed of your baryon storm accident, and the freakish luck you all had that the *QhonDoq* showed up, and that it had both the ability to treat you all for baryon bombardment, and the space aboard to lug you all to Vulcan.”

“You just spin stories out of empty space, don’t you?”

“Not empty space. The *QhonDoq* was there; I saw it.”

“And what the Klingons will state happened? They’re going to want some kind of restitution –”

“For scientists? For people they left behind in *Federation* space on a *Federation* planet? Okay, maybe. You think Section 31 can’t supply that?” Again, he changed the subject:

“The *Excelsior* sent out a request for aid, and fleet ships are already on the way to tow it and the *Enterprise* saucer back to Utopia Planitia for refit. You’ll all have a nice long shore leave on Vulcan.” He picked up his drink and drained it.

“And the Husnock have agreed to sing their mother-ship right to you? Why do they trust you?” Josi speared another oyster violently but didn’t pick it up to eat; she just speared it a second time.

“They trust me because they *can*, Commander. I’ve got what I wanted. Those little ships are full of Husnock for me to study, I don’t need ‘Dan and it’s offspring;

besides, they've already helped us. We'll wrap the mother-ship and the Husnock greezah ships up in Tholian nets and – “

“And how do we know somebody isn't going to come upon the greezah ships. and the *Enterprise* and the *Excelsior*, and think they've hit on a prize?”

“The entire system's been taken over by the Tholians. Oh, that's right, you were asleep when the *Blacksnake* set off that particular holographic mirage.”

Josi gaped at the Inspector General of Section 31 for a moment, then let her oyster fork drop onto the plate, picked up her drink, and gulped the rest of it down. Holographic mirages that could encompass entire star systems... “How is this damn galaxy even safe from you people?” the commander of the *Enterprise* B gasped as she set down her glass.

Kell smiled at her. “It's safe because we can be trusted. I thought I'd made that clear earlier.