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BALANCE OF NATURE

Heather Jarman



POCKET BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney Singapore

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Chapter 1

Fear consumed her, muting her voice, bleeding all color from her vision. P8 Blue clung to a railing as the mother-tree world trembled and heaved. In her mind, she cried out to her friend Zoannah, encouraging her to hold on tight so she wouldn't fall, but her throat trapped the words. A shadow sliding past caught her eye. Instinctively, without thought to the danger, she released one limb, catching the duffel strap before the bag went shooting over the edge. My legacy ...

Indifferent to the chaos, evening breezes wafted lazily through the open sides of the passageway, stirring fine splinters and dirt into blinding breath. Unwilling to release her grip to rub the dust out of her eyes, Pattie blinked rapidly, trying to clear her vision. She winced at the sharp pains caused by the scraping scratch of dirt trapped in her eye membranes. Letting go would be easy. To curl into her protective shell was her instinct, but doing so would certainly mean death. She gripped tighter with each drunken sway.

A flash of flame, a metallic buzz, and all lights within seeing distance were snuffed out. The inky silhouettes of the surrounding rain forest blurred in the deepening darkness. Flickering green power surges crackled angrily, offering only the stingiest light to see by. Even if they survived this quake—the first in her lifetime, the first in several Nasat lifetimes—Pattie worriedly wondered what damage the township had sustained: from cracked struts to bearing beams, delicately balanced between branches, collapsing as structural weight shifted, every possibility was an engineer's nightmare. If I make it through, there'll be work to be done.

The shaking stopped. Silence squeezed into the void left by the quake, swallowing all sound and filling the empty space.

The fleeting pause gave P8 Blue a moment to breathe. And another. She allowed herself to relax enough to consider more than survival. Maybe it has passed. If she's been injured. . . Pattie clicked worriedly. Zoeannah would have been home in her paddock if she hadn't met my transport. She would have been safer there with walls that surround and protect her. She cursed whatever stupid shell architect had decided that leaving a few open-sided corridors contributed to the township's aesthetic. A misstep here would send one careening hundreds of meters through a tangle of vines, fungi, flowers, and animal nests into the understory layer, several kilometers below the township. Zoeannah could have fallen. And what about Tarak? What will I say to him? She shook off the troubling thoughts, knowing that guilt and worry could be paralyzing. If only she could reach the tricorder on her belt, she might be able to scan for Zoë's Betazoid lifesigns—

A tremor erupted, sending the mother-tree lurching from side to side. Each sway dislodged transport carts from the tracks and tossed carrypacks into the air like flotsam. Feeling a slight give in her grip, she strengthened her hold. Her fear-sharpened senses absorbed the sickening crunch of shells hurtling into kiosks, the acrid smoke rising from exploding consoles. Falling building debris hit those Nasat too startled to curl into defensive postures or maneuver out of the way.

She mustered up enough humor to be darkly amused by the placid computerized voice reciting an emergency message over the comm system, alternating between lingual clicks and Federation Standard. "Please remain calm while Central Services examines the situation. Automated systems will be restored to full capacity as soon as possible. Thank you for your cooperation and have a nice dark cycle. . ."

Startled by an ear-shattering crack, Pattie swiveled her gaze toward the forest. A severed tree limb plunged like a battering ram toward their corridor. A quick mental calculation placed impact within thirty seconds. A breath and we'll be obliterated, she thought. Time staggered, slowed.

Please be calm while you're being squashed flat. Resistance is futile. . . she thought, putting her own spin on the computerized message.

There has to be an escape route, she thought. A passageway, less than a hundred meters ahead, cut through the mother-tree core to an adjoining branch sector. Assuming they could reach the passageway without being thrown into the forest, they would be out of the path of the oncoming limb. As the tree deck beneath her convulsed, she nixed that idea. Other options. Heading back up the conveyor to the canopy-side transport station? Same problem. So P8, her friend Zoeannah, and others unlucky enough to have chosen this traveling route were effectively trapped. Nothing they could do would prevent the impending blow. With luck, they might survive impact.

After all she'd been through of late, Pattie had to believe in survival. She stared at the ton of devastation plunging toward them, growing closer, ever closer by the second, unable to look away.

A few more steps. We only need to make a few more steps. Galvan VI should have taken me. To end this way feels like an epilogue, she thought, amazed at fate's arbitrary whims. Any second now it'll hit. . .

The broken limb gained speed and momentum the closer it came. Undeterred by the back and forth swaying, the ridiculous message repeated. If Pattie could reach her phaser, she'd take out the comm system speaker without hesitation. There was something ignominious about facing death while a computer calmly insisted there was nothing to worry about. Breathing deeply, she braced for impact—

The quaking stopped.

With a jerk, the creaking mother-tree righted itself into a solidly vertical position.

The tree's abrupt shift counteracted the limb's momentum; a resounding thwack, a twitch, and it tumbled leadenly down through the surrounding tree layers.

No one moved or spoke.

Relief was slow in coming. Pattie waited. Watched.

The breeze tossed leaves with a silvery rustle. Branches bowed. Avian squawks echoed in the distance, punctuated by the whirr of furrylaito monkeys swinging from vine to vine collecting a nocturnal snack of fruit and seeds.

Time elapsed.

Though it appeared that normalcy had been restored, Pattie sensed that no one—herself included—dared move, fearing the quake would resume. She was loath to be the first to risk it; she would wait.

The sound of limbs shuffling along the floor came from behind a tipped-over maintenance terminal. A panicked clicking from a Nasat looking for a missing friend followed. Rubble fell from the ceiling. Reinitiated conduits whined, gradually revving up until the familiar hum throbbed steadily. The computer message sped up to garble, then halted mid-sentence; a new message replaced the old one. “Planetary science council has issued an all clear. No apparent seismic activity in the area. Repeat: no apparent seismic activity. The cause of the quake is unknown. Please return to your paddocks for safety lockdown and to receive up-to-date reports on township status.”

A fleshy humanoid hand touched her primary pincers.

Inhaling sharply, she closed her eyes, her limbs quivering with relief. She's alive. Pattie's respirations came quickly and irregularly as she at last allowed herself to process the emotions that she'd pushed aside since the quakes started. We're alive.

“Pattie—” Zoeannah coughed, involuntarily clutching tighter “—you all right?” Without letting go of Pattie's hand, she crawled up closer where they could talk face-to-face. Planting her elbow on the floor, she rested her chin in her palm. “Not like I would notice a dent or two in your shell in this light.”

The warm weight of Zoë's hand comforted Pattie more than anything else could have. Gratitude filled her. She's fine, she thought, repeating the phrase over and over for reassurance. Pattie reciprocated the squeeze, touching her antennae to Zoë's forehead. “What about you? Are you hurt?” She twisted her head to get a better view. A piece of plating that had fallen on Zoë's lower body worried her; Pattie pushed it aside. Her acute vision, now adapted to the darkness, scanned her teacher-friend for broken bones, bleeding, or any other evidence that she'd sustained serious injuries. She looked her over again—and again—before allowing herself to relax. Though she needed a tricorder to confirm her assessment, she could discern enough to determine that Zoë had suffered nothing more serious than a few scrapes and a head-to-toe coating of dust and dried moss. Pattie reached over and plucked a twig out of her friend's tangled curls. Humanoids required so much maintenance. What a nuisance it must be to have all your fleshy parts on the outside! “Your telepathy must be short-circuiting if you need to ask me how I'm doing.”

Zoë half-coughed, half-chuckled, her shoulders shaking. “It's always good manners to ask how

someone is feeling—even if I already know, Pattie.” Rolling over on her back, she pulled an arm across her chest in a stretch, repeating the gesture with the opposite arm. “As for being uncomfortable, I just need some ointment for my sore hands. Honestly, I didn’t know whether I could hold on any longer.” She paused, brushed her fingers through her hair, dislodging bark flecks. “And a bath. I’d really like a bath.”

Pattie didn’t know why the fleshy species bothered with their multitudes of cleaning rituals; a coating of rotted bark dust and fungus on their epidermal layer might improve their natural state. In the years she’d served around humanoids, she decided no amount of sonic waves, water, oil, perfume, soap, or scent improved upon the sour musk that permeated every corner of their living spaces. But she’d adjusted. Being tolerant of the quirks native to other species was expected of a member of a multiworld community. There was a reason, however, why the Nasat avoided living too close to Zoë and Tarak’s lab and it had nothing to do with them being noisy neighbors. “The evening rains will start soon,” Pattie said, noting the rising mists, the slight shift in air pressure. “You won’t even have to go back to your paddock. Take a walk on the verandah over there—” Pattie cocked her head toward a porch protruding off the walkway “—and wait.”

“That’s not a bath, that’s asking to be encapsulated in mud.” She massaged her hands, alternating between right and left. “Pattie...do you think you could use your communicator to check in with Tarak? He usually keeps the transmitter on when I’m out.” Her voice quivered slightly.

Pattie touched her combadge. “P8 Blue to Dr. Tarak.”

A crackle, static, and then: “Tarak here. Because you have contacted me, I presume that you have survived the quake in fair condition, but Dr. Xanfer—is she also well?”

“Yes, Doctor. She’s fine. Dirty, but fine.”

“The minimal inconvenience of filthiness is preferable to other, more potentially serious injuries to her person. I wish you both continued health and clear thinking. I will anticipate your presence when circumstances allow it. Tarak out.”

Sighing deeply, Zoë placed a hand over her heart. “I sensed that he was fine, but I couldn’t be certain if my wishes for his well-being had misled me.” Contented, she sighed again, her shoulders slumping with relief.

She’s in love, Pattie realized with happy surprise. She’d seen something of humanoid romantic relationships lately, and recognized the signs. What a time to find out. She had questions for Zoë, but they would wait for a more opportune moment.

Zoë assumed a cross-legged position, brushed dust off her tunic and craned to see what was going on around them. “Are these quakes common? And if they are, will there be more tremors?”

“Haven’t had one in my sixteen seasons—or eight years by Federation reckoning. If memory serves, it’s been more than a score of seasons since we’ve had any kind of serious tremors.”

The groan of circuitry far below announced the power systems restarting. The groan also informed Pattie that she could feel safer about resuming an upright posture. Zoë followed her lead, scrambling to her feet.

Beyond the obstacle of an overturned kiosk blocking their path, Pattie saw some Nasat uncurl; others hobbled toward the closest exits. Most were too dazed to move, let alone escape to safety. A few

cowered against a railing, trapped behind a dangerous power surge arc between computer terminals; either machine could explode without warning.

“You think we should stay put? Wait for security services to evacuate us?” Zoë asked.

“I’m not sure.” Pattie carefully picked her way around the kiosk, holding on to the sides of the structure for balance. Zoë followed behind.

Without the kiosk to block their view, they discovered more than a dozen injured Nasat—a few fatally.

“We’ll need to help,” Zoë said, stating it as a fact instead of a request.

Pattie nodded.

“I’ll start assessing the wounded. My telepathy might help us where our training won’t.” She jerked her head in the direction of the public information terminals. “You see if we have any medical supplies to work with. I wouldn’t have a clue as to where to look.”

Pushing aside debris covering the floor, Pattie searched for any signage that indicated compartments where emergency medkits might be stored. I hope the government implemented the latest building regs in their recent reconstruction. Drawing on her years spent studying Federation construction and building codes, she made a guess where the supplies might be and found them where she would have expected to find them on Vulcan, Trill, or Andor. At least we’ve standardized a few things since joining the Federation. Nasat tended not to fuss over details. She opened up the floor panel and removed a couple of wrist-lamps, the medkit, and a medical tricorder.

Zoeannah took a wrist-lamp proffered by Pattie, clicked it on, and muttered, “What a mess!” when the beam illuminated their surroundings. She knelt down beside an unconscious Red Nasat who had lost chunks of his chorion shell. “Quite a dramatic entry you made, Pattie. Maybe bring a bottle of Ktarian merlot or a piece of Risan pottery next time. Save the theatrics for the engineering corps,” Zoë said dryly.

“And to think I was worried you wouldn’t like the show. I admit that a quake’s a bit dramatic, but the homeworld hasn’t seen one in a while,” she deadpanned. “I always liked to shake things up.”

“I’m not even going to comment on that pun.”

Pattie answered with her equivalent of a wink: curling one of her antennae in Zoë’s direction.

Zoë felt for a pulse in the shell’s forehead. “Sarcasm suits you, P8. I always suspected you’d be witty once you mastered communication basics.” She sat back on her heels, looked over at Pattie, and grinned. “Either that, or spending time around ‘softs’ is rubbing off on you.”

Tamping down a snappy retort, Pattie paused reflectively. Various scenes from her life over the last three years flashed by in an instant; it had been a long journey—not without complications—but she’d triumphed. She said quietly, “If I gained anything from spending time around softs, it would be the belief that I could do anything I put my mind to. Being around softs is what gave me the confidence to join Starfleet in the first place. Thank you.”

Zoë’s eyes smiled. “Of course.”

* * *

They settled into a pattern of business intermingled with small talk as they attended to the wounded. Working with Zoë—to whom she owed so much—made Pattie’s tasks much less stressful. Pattie hadn’t enjoyed Starfleet’s required medical training course when she enlisted, nor had she discovered a natural knack for it during her time in the S.C.E. To have Nasat lives dependent on skills she hadn’t enthusiastically cultivated would have been nerve-wracking without Zoë’s steady, even-tempered approach. Pattie, knowing more about Nasat physiology than Zoannah, focused on the mechanics of fixing injuries while Zoë used her telepathic skills to ease shock and sense pain. Her offer of comfort and kindness to the traumatized made Pattie’s task easier.

Think of them as sentient machines, she thought. Medicine is just engineering the physiology of a biological organism. They had been working almost a half hour when the first security services officer rode down the conveyor from the transport center.

“Evacuate the premises,” the Yellow shell clicked authoritatively. “Township Council wants all open areas cleared. Proceeding to lockdown mode as soon as all public areas are secure. Move along.” The Yellow shooed several limping Nasat toward a mother-tree passageway before meandering over to where Pattie and Zoë had set up a makeshift triage station.

“Proper medical attenders will be dispatched shortly. You can leave them be,” the Yellow said to Pattie, using secondary limbs to indicate those Nasat yet to be examined. “On behalf of the Council, thank you. Be on your way now. Follow proper evacuation procedures and return directly to your paddock by the shortest possible route.”

Pattie continued working. “I’ve had field medic training, Officer. I can be useful until the attenders arrive.”

“Best to comply with the Council’s orders,” the Yellow insisted. Squatting down on his haunches, he plucked the medical tricorder out of Zoë’s hands and dropped it into the medkit. After collecting chemsutures and exo-plaster and depositing them alongside the tricorder, he snapped the kit shut, scooting it close to his forelegs.

With one of her limbs, Pattie nudged the kit across the floor until it rested beside Zoë. How dronelike is this officer? I’d forgotten how mindlessly compliant some shells can be, she thought, reopening the kit. She tossed the tricorder back to Zoë, who continued working. “I’m confident the Council wants to save lives.”

The Yellow’s throat bristles tensed, his antennae curled downward. “Naturally. But they have more knowledge than you or I do.”

“If we can contribute to the emergency efforts, we will. ‘With many small limbs large tasks are done.’” She quoted a Nasat proverb. Sorting through the hypos in the medkit, Pattie settled on one that would stabilize the respirations of the wounded Nasat.

The Yellow waddled past Zoë and tapped her on the shoulder. “Reason with the Blue, or I’ll call for backup.”

Zoë and Pattie exchanged glances. The Betazoid shrugged, yawned. “She’s in charge.”

Pattie appreciated Zoë’s vote of confidence. Her teacher would stand by her if she decided to be stubborn; Pattie knew that from experience. But she didn’t want to cause trouble; few softs lived in this

township. A disgruntled peace officer could make it difficult for Zoë to approach potential subjects or access semirestricted databases. She stood upright; Zoë followed suit.

“Fine, then, but let me leave my paddock code with you so that the Council can contact me when the repairs start,” Pattie said. “My career training will be useful to them.”

“Cocky, aren’t you, Blue?” The Yellow’s mandibles twitched with suspicion as he grudgingly removed a scanner from his utility vest. “Designation?”

She paused for a minute, shifting her thought processes out of standard into the clicks, chirps, and pitch of Nasat. The Yellow wouldn’t find a Nasat record for “Pattie.” “P8 BlueTS27Q6. Starfleet Corps of Engineers.”

He tapped her name and waited for the computer to retrieve her ID file. “Starfleet doesn’t have jurisdiction in local matters, but I’m supposing their training should be mostly applicable here.” Clutching his scanner in his pincers, the Yellow swiveled his eyes from the data on the screen toward Pattie. “Hmmm. Haven’t been home in a bit, P8. Suppose it’s understandable that you’ve forgotten how things are done around here.”

Choosing to ignore the Yellow’s personal insinuations, Pattie persisted in constructively dealing with the emergency situation at hand. Give me a terminal with access to the sensor data and I could map out every weakened bearing branch or cracked floor, she thought. “My training would be invaluable in determining whether the township’s sustained any damage from the tremors,” she protested—though she’d have better luck arguing with a replicator than a Yellow. Eons of natural selection had given the Yellows their steady, methodical ways. From time to time, she’d heard stories of Yellows that had abandoned their larvae instead of finding a nursery, or those who’d up and left the township to hitch a ride on a starship. Those exceptions notwithstanding, you went to Yellows when a task required relentless, often repetitive, perseverance.

“Confirming ID,” he said, activating the neuro function on his scanner and waving it over her forebrain to confirm her bioelectric signature with the population database. His antennae shot up. “Interesting. Chatty for a ‘quiet’—”

If the officer had continued nattering on, Pattie hadn’t heard it. She froze, rooted where she stood, her blood chilled. She willed her mouth to move. Her thoughts stuck and stuttered. Hearing it again after so many years shouldn’t matter. It shouldn’t matter. One cycling thought refused to go away; she grasped it, clung to it. Quiet? I have conquered that! But her mouth refused to comply with her will to speak, and a sinking sense of humiliation drained her energy. She stood before the Yellow, helpless.

If I can pull up my record in the township database, I can prove to him that he’s mistaken! She stepped toward the officer, gesturing with her limbs, attempting to communicate that she wanted to borrow his ID scanner.

The startled Yellow misread her intentions as aggressive and staggered back. He pulled his limbs tight into his abdomen, preparing to curl into a protective ball; his reactionary behavior further fueled her frustration.

She took another step toward him. I can make him understand. I mean no harm. If only I can find the words. I know how to say this!

At the crest of her frustration, her mind blanked.

In a breath her muscles relaxed, her limbs collapsed to her sides like snapped puppet strings. She breathed deeply, blinked, and shook her head. A wide-eyed Zoë held her tightly with her trembling hand pressed into a soft spot beneath Pattie's mandibles; she hadn't had to do this since Pattie's early learning days. Pattie, as a young Nasat, had been so conditioned to anxiety whenever her fellow Nasat misunderstood or humiliated her, that Zoë had worked extra hard on helping Pattie overcome the emotional reactions that interfered with her cognitive processing.

Today, the technique worked the same on her adult body as it had on her nymph body. Steady pressure on the nerve bundle acted like a circuit breaker, forcing Pattie to relax. Interrupting the anxiety allowed the instinctual emotional/biochemical reaction triggered by the Yellow's words to ebb. If Zoë hadn't intervened...

Cognition of what she might have done dawned on her. She glanced off at an angle, away from Zoë, into the dark rain forest. I've gone and given credence to the very point I was trying to dissuade him from believing: that "quiets" are misfits. She muttered a potent curse she'd picked up from Corsi, doubting if the officer could claim the ability to curse in multiple languages. Ironic.

She winced inwardly when she saw the officer had backed up against a wall, all limbs extended, poised for offense—his aspect indicating he still anticipated Pattie to attack. He clicked an angry warning, jabbing a pincer toward her. He was a shadow of hundreds of other fearful Nasat that Pattie had met in her youngest seasons.

But he had nothing to worry about. Pattie had never intended to harm him—or lay a pincer on him. Persuading the Yellow to believe her was another case entirely. Worried, she looked at Zoë, who still held her loosely. She willed her Betazoid friend to interpret her conflicting emotions.

With a gentle smile, Zoë briefly touched her thumb to the center of her forehead, then placed the same thumb on the thin, sensitive tissue behind Pattie's antennae. That her teacher so easily employed the Nasat gesture of affection comforted her immensely.

Zoë whispered, "Let me handle this." She squared her shoulders and extended a hand to the officer. Tentatively, he placed a limb in her palm, indicating he would listen, though his eyes darted frequently in Pattie's direction.

"P8's not a 'quiet,'" Zoë explained. "At least not as you understand quiets to be. She has full lingual abilities—both of communication and comprehension—after graduating from the Federation's neural-electric linguistics project. A physiological marker might register her as a quiet on your scanner, but I assure you that's a technicality."

The officer's eyes darted between Zoë and Pattie several times before he spoke. "I've heard rumors about that neural-electric memory process. So it isn't just Federation sap and fog. P8 seems to be able to communicate just like the rest of us."

"Obviously," Pattie retorted. "Or we wouldn't be able to have this conversation, would we?"

Zoë shot a warning frown in Pattie's direction, but the sarcastic tone appeared to have been lost on the officer.

"Learn something every day. Guess membership in the Federation has its perks." The Yellow shell clicked his scanner back onto his utility strip.

“You’ll let the Council know that I’m available to assist in the structural evaluations?” Pattie asked.

He tapped his pincers irritably. “Back to that, are we?”

“Well?”

“You won’t go having a fit or anything like you quietes are prone to do, will you?”

Biting back a caustic reply, Pattie waved her antennae, no. Zoë squeezed Pattie’s limb in a gesture of support.

“Assuming you can behave yourself, I’ll give them your paddock number.” He returned the ID scanner to his utility belt. “But I wouldn’t plan on much. While citizen support is greatly appreciated, at a time like this, repair efforts are best left to the experts.” Pattie restrained herself from pointing out that shewas an expert in exactly this sort of repair effort. “In the meantime, return to your paddock and remain there until the ‘all clear’ is issued. Excuse me,” he said, wandering off to shoolaito monkeys away from chewing on exposed power cables. After checking in with the other Nasat tending to the wounded (presumably giving them the same lockdown lecture he’d given Pattie and Zoë), he vanished up the transport center conveyor.

“What about the injured?” Pattie said.

“I think we’ve done what we can,” Zoë replied. “And I’m not just saying that because we’ve been ordered to go. I honestly think we’ve helped those that we could and they’ll be fine until the attenders arrive.”

Pattie curled her antennae in acknowledgment. She checked the duffel where she’d stowed her larvae and, satisfied that the precious cargo was undamaged, followed behind Zoë on the path she picked through the wreckage. With the duffel secured on her shell, she could maneuver with little difficulty, simplifying the five-or-so-kilometer journey they had to the lower-level branch sector where Zoë’s lab/paddock was located. Pausing at the doorway through the mother-tree, Pattie looked back on the wounded they had assisted, feeling grateful that her exit was far less conspicuous than her entrance.

Welcome home, P8 Blue.

Chapter 2

Not surprisingly, Pattie and Zoë discovered that few conveyors and turbolifts had resumed operating. Any functioning automated transport was used to move wounded and security personnel. Voluminous civilian foot traffic moved slowly as thousands of night-cycle shift workers emptied out of work centers to return home. Weak emergency lighting further hampered progress; what hadn’t been bolted down or attached when the quake hit had been dumped on the floor. When an impatient Red pushing past had tripped her, Pattie nearly lacerated her lower limbs on the sharp edge of a dislodged wall plate. The occasional encounter with an anonymous squish or shattered bits continually reminded them to slow down, move carefully.

Though the mess meant inconvenience, Pattie knew their situation could have been far worse. From what little she could discern, the primary township structures had sustained little or no damage. A good cleanup crew could fix the situation. The farther she moved from the transport center, the more it

appeared that new construction zones—near the treetops and spreading out horizontally from the mother-tree—had been hardest hit. Why this was, considering that those zones utilized the latest architectural advances, puzzled Pattie.

Without mechanized transport, traveling between branch levels required that they, and all others returning to their paddocks, climb up and down the peg-poles: meter-wide metal poles with half-circle shaped pegs protruding off opposite sides. Pattie had used Jefferies tubes and stairs on the *Vinci*, but she found she adapted poorly to those designs. The peg-poles were better suited to the grasp of her multiple limbs and her body's weight distribution. For Zoë, the peg-poles worked on the same principle as a ladder would, so she had little trouble keeping pace with the queue of Nasat above and below her. Pattie, as she descended, was reminded of how softs used the ladders connecting bunk beds. Maybe more Nasat might join Starfleet if peg-poles were integrated into starship construction. She made a mental note to suggest her idea to Captain Gold when she next saw him.

The protracted trip back to Zoë's paddock gave Pattie plenty of time to think about her encounter with the Yellow. Though the humiliation had diffused, she still simmered over the Yellow's labeling her as a quiet. Hearing that word—hearing herself labeled that way—again reminded her why she'd joined Starfleet. In the S.C.E., whatever a Nasat computer said she was, whatever her physiology identified her as being, didn't matter. Her accomplishments defined her, not a defect in the language-processing center of her cerebral cortex. Because she had skills and experience the township needed, a label shouldn't matter—especially at a time of crisis.

Instead of locking down the township, why hadn't the Council ordered every available shell out of their paddock to start working? Clearing the rubble, helping the wounded to safety—whatever was needed. A threat to the mother-tree was a collective threat to all life in the canopy, Nasat, tiny-leafed *neophatra*, or multiwinged avian. All should be vested in finding answers as soon as possible. Waiting around for bureaucratic wheels to grind out an official all-clear notification wouldn't solve the power problems or stabilize potentially damaged buttress roots. Whatever force had quaked the township's mother-tree could resume at any time. Pattie wondered what this town-wide lockdown would accomplish; she twitched with impatience. We should be working this problem. Putting our ideas together.

She imagined their invisible foe, be it a natural force or a yet-unknown predator, lurking beneath lichen-covered branches, through vine curtains and nests, perhaps as far as the muddy forest floor. A destabilized fault in the planetary crust. A rotting buttress root giving way. A deadly infection seeping into the mother-tree's xylem or phloem. Her kindred might have to explore new, nontraditional ways of dealing with the situation. But the problem wouldn't be dealt with by sending frightened Nasat back to their paddocks to curl into protective postures.

A dull crunch—coupled with a groan—startled her. A cloud of bark dust and moss emerged from the ceiling. Looking up, Pattie watched as a synth-wood support beam began bowing. The quake must have compromised the structural integrity, she thought pragmatically. She knew the deck above primarily housed residential areas, sparing those below from heavy machinery and equipment, should the deck give way. Still, several hundred Nasat paddocks weren't weightless.

Another groan and the peg-pole jiggled, nearly imperceptibly.

“Wrap yourself around the pole,” Pattie called to Zoë. “The ceiling might give!”

Eyes wide with fear, Zoë complied.

Bowing even more deeply, the groaning beam cracked visibly, sending a shower of splinters into the air.

The peg-pole swayed. Nasat above and below them panicked, scrambling over Zoë and past Pattie. Others shrieked, waving at the ceiling, pointing and shouting.

With a roar, the beam snapped; a flood of debris filled the air. The weight of the collapsing ceiling bent the peg-pole, severing its connection with the pole above it. The pole tipped, swayed dangerously—but slowly—from side to side. Each sway dipped a bit farther, bringing them closer to the paddock structures below.

As they careened toward the ground, Pattie watched the paddock-huts growing larger with each meter. Her mind's eye transformed the landscape and she saw the Orion hurtling toward the da Vinci in the turbulent atmosphere of Galvan VI. A wrenching shudder first threw her head back, then threw her forward, slamming her body against metal.

A blink. They'd stopped falling. She looked around. The scene shifted and she again saw the bend and shimmer dance of leaf tufts on supple branches in the forest outside. She respired humid air, air thick with pollen and orchid perfume, not the neutral, recirculated air of a starship. She knew this place. Or thought she did. She was on the homeworld. With Zoë. The peg-pole they had been climbing had crashed into a building complex that stood a good ten meters above the deck floor. At least that was where she believed she was.

Deceptive dusk light continually recast the shapes in her mind and she half wondered if some latent racial memory had merged with her present reality. Perhaps she was still somewhere aboard the dying da Vinci and in the shock and horror of it all, her brain deceived her senses by offering the comfort of home.

Home? To use that word to define this place struck her as odd. She felt more vulnerable, more exposed—more alone—in this elongated moment on her homeworld than she ever had while roaming the stars. Certainly Zoë must feel similarly. She dropped her gaze and saw Zoë, her expression pinched, her skin pale. A half-dozen escaping Nasat skittered over her on their way to a rooftop, only a few pegs away from Pattie. Even in the wan moonlight, Pattie could see the whitened skin across Zoë's knuckles as she clenched the pole more tightly.

Not all the Nasat were as discourteous as those that had climbed over Zoë and they had politely queued up behind her. Zoë wouldn't move without prompting.

"Zoë, can you climb?"

Tilting back her head, she turned her dark-irised gaze on Pattie, swallowed hard, and then nodded. She reached a trembling hand toward the peg above her. One more step and Pattie would be able to offer her a limb to hold on to.

"Keep coming, Zoë. I'm here and I'll help you." She watched, noting the extreme concentration etched on Zoë's face as her friend raised a wavering arm, and then another, and another, until her hands were on the peg below Pattie's lowermost legs.

"Up one more peg."

Zoë complied, reaching for Pattie, who grasped her hand in her pincers and pulled the young woman up to stand on the peg opposite her. Pattie used her secondary limbs to maintain her own hold on the peg-pole.

"Let's climb to the roof, okay?" Pattie said. "I'll take a step, then you take a step." They inched upward.

Each time the leaning peg-pole vibrated, Zoë clung more tightly to Pattie's pincers.

After reaching the roof, the pair took a brief rest, allowing Zoë a chance to collect herself. Her time in Starfleet had conditioned Pattie to handle ongoing disaster and trauma with relative calm. Steady reactions had become reflexive, even intuitive to her. Working as a civilian scientist provided very few life-threatening experiences for Zoë to cope with. For her, dealing with the ceiling collapse, especially on the heels of the initial tremors, took a bit longer than Pattie.

While Zoë rested, Pattie plotted out an alternate—and shorter—route to the lab. The sooner we have her home with Tarak, the better, she thought. Zoë could be tough, but many more mishaps would quickly deplete her emotional and physical reserves.

Soon, they resumed their journey, using jokes and small talk as a distraction from the chaos surrounding them. The conversation eventually moved around to Pattie's plans for the weeks she would be on the homeworld while the *Vinci* underwent repair at McKinley Station on Earth. As they climbed down the last peg-pole before the turnoff to Zoë's paddock, Pattie called out to Zoë, "I was serious about helping out with the repair efforts, but I'm afraid if I just show up and volunteer, they'll turn me away."

"Pattie, you know your people," Zoë noted sensibly. "They're very focused on doing things a particular way and once they're secure about an idea or a course of action, they don't like making changes. You like to shake things up."

"I'll have to go to the top, then," Pattie said. "What would it take to get an appointment with Governor Z4 Blue?"

"Hmmm. Might be difficult." Zoë paused on the poles below Pattie to look up at her. "This governor has been slow to warm to the progressive reforms that the Planetary Council embraces. He still considers Tarak's and my work to be a little fringe. He moves cautiously. Doesn't like taking unnecessary risks."

"That's what should appear next to 'Nasat' in the Federation database: insectoid species that doesn't like to take any unnecessary risks."

"I'm not trying to discourage you from trying to help out; I'm just being realistic."

"I know that," Pattie said, her antennae curled pensively.

They touched down on the deck. Zoë looked noticeably grateful to have solid ground beneath her feet. She circled her head around, stretched her neck, and yawned. Looking over at Pattie, she said, "You okay?"

Pattie sighed. "Shells sometimes don't make sense."

"Neither do softs if that makes you feel any better."

"That, I know."

Zoë patted her shell kindly and started down the walkway to the lab.

For a few moments, she stood there, watching Zoë walk away, and thinking. The Nasat's reflexive self-interest had always annoyed Pattie. Upon more thought, P8 Blue acknowledged that some of her present impatience with the Nasat might be a reflection of the time she'd spent around humanoids. Her

Starfleet crewmates could be impulsive, but they would never be accused of cowardice. Better to act when you can choose your course than be compelled by circumstance to react—or surrender, Pattie thought. She had learned that behavior from watching her friends.

An unbidden thought came to her and she envisioned Commander Sonya Gomez commanding the *theda Vinci*, carnage surrounding her on every side. Pattie still marveled at Commander Gomez's single-minded determination to save the crew. What would the commander do if she were here? She wouldn't wilt on the floor, waiting for the bridge's ceiling beams to collapse and bury her. Neither would Captain Gold, poor Lieutenant McAllan, Doctor Lense, or any of the others. And Lt. Commander Duffy, Pattie paused to remember. He chose to make a difference. She marveled at the number of lives he'd saved because he refused to put his own interests first.

She could choose to make a difference. A meaningful difference. She could be frustrated with this backward, rural township she called home, or she could put the lessons she'd learned aboard the *theda Vinci* into action.

She resolved to argue with as many Yellows, Blues, Greens, Browns, and Reds as she needed to—from the civil engineers and the bureaucrats to the officers. She would present herself to the township council. She would use every connection she had to land an appointment with the forest quadrant governor.

To have a substantive reason to be here, the potential to accomplish something constructive, excited her. She'd anticipated finding little more than a distraction from her worries about her crewmates. The more she considered her options—in the present and the future—the more sobering reality intruded. Honesty required she acknowledge that her S.C.E. future held a measure of uncertainty.

Realistically, some members of the *theda Vinci*'s crew might be too traumatized to return to starship duty. Corsi and Stevens had struggled mightily when they lost Duffy. Captain Gold faced rebuilding a crew after losing so many, not to mention the heavy repairs his ship required. Even if what was left of the crew reunited, Pattie had no idea whether or not their relationships would ever be as they were before they lost so many comrades. If I can be an individual of action and help my people, then maybe all the events that brought me here might not have been a complete waste. I might be able to help build something good.

For the first time since she'd decided to come here, Pattie felt hopeful.

Chapter 3

As soon as she'd passed through the paddock archway, Pattie felt safe. With only emergency lighting to see by, she still knew the square shadows of terminals, imagined the computer-generated neural maps marked up with Zoë's notes covering the walls, and recognized the smell of Tarak's favorite zeeflower hip tea seeping in a kettle. While Pattie strolled around, reacquainting herself with this favorite place, she eavesdropped on Zoë quizzing Tarak about what he'd experienced during the quakes.

She shared Zoë's relief that none of the lab experiments or data storage had been damaged; the computer had finished the day's final analysis before the first tremor. Tarak, always methodical, had stowed all their equipment and backed up their data shortly after Zoë had left to meet Pattie's transport. He'd even had time to deal with the lighting problem. Ingenious Dr. Tarak had rigged makeshift lighting using the elements from a spare computer and an old transtator. Anticipating (logically) that they might be hungry, he'd lit an old-style lab burner to warm a leftover pot of stewed kaino root. Pattie lapped the porridge out of her plate, grateful for the nourishment. They spoke little, comfortable in the silence of friends.

After they'd eaten, Tarak flipped on a fuel-cell powered viewscreen so they could see the updates as they came in. All three settled in to watch; Zoë and Tarak sat cross-legged on a rug they'd thrown on the wood plank floor while Pattie sat in a hammock chair suspended from the ceiling. Tarak had wrapped a blanket around Zoë's shoulders; she huddled against him, her visible relief a marked contrast to Tarak's neutral expression.

They watched without comment as footage played and replayed with different expert analysis. As Pattie had hypothesized, the oldest township branch sectors had escaped almost unscathed. Watching the pictures of various township sectors flash across the screen, she puzzled through possible questions. Why had the lab, for example, sustained no damage even though it didn't benefit from any of the latest engineering designs or materials, and why had sectors like the transport center—which had been designed to withstand a quantum torpedo—nearly collapsed? Conclusions were few: the Planetary Science Council had already ruled out meteorological and seismic causes. A worrisome analysis proposed that the host trees' root systems had become destabilized.

They listened to reports for a few hours before the scientists and officials had nothing new to offer. Commentators indicated that investigative teams would be dispatched to the lowest level observation decks at the end of the night cycle.

"They should go to the bottom and get it over with," Pattie muttered as she watched the screen cut between views from various lower-level cameras.

"An interesting thing for a Nasat to say," Zoë said, raising an eyebrow.

"Just because most of my kindred are phobic about spending time on the forest floor doesn't mean I share their apprehensions." Especially when circumstances are serious enough to require it, she thought. And this might be one of those times.

"What about the security service teams that go missing when they have to visit the floor?" Zoë argued. "The flash floods, the quicksand. The countless other legitimate dangers that Nasat, hell, thatsofts face if they go down to the bottom. Can you explain those away by phobias and prejudice?"

"You can't live without taking risks. Walking out your door. Visiting the market." She paused, quirked a smile at Zoë and added, "Picking up a friend at the transport."

Zoë laughed heartily. "Point taken."

Pattie had enjoyed this kind of banter with her crewmates and was glad she could have similar conversations with her old teachers. Though Pattie had spent more one-to-one time with Zoë and Tarak than almost anyone else on the homeworld, most of their interactions in the past had been focused on helping Pattie become a fully functioning member of Nasat society. Their discussions about culture or politics had focused on how those issues related to the lab's research or how they impacted Pattie. Now that she'd "grown up" and become a peer, Pattie sensed the shift in their relationship; she enjoyed it.

"I never would make the mistake of lumping you in with the rest of your kindred," Zoë deadpanned. She winked at Pattie, quirked a gentle grin.

Pattie shrugged. "I understand where the traditions come from. My kindred spent a thousand years struggling to rise above our beginnings in the caves and dark places below. Developing the technology that allowed us to live in the canopy instead of in the mud and dark of the forest floor was our first step in

becoming a space-faring people.”

“Why ‘going to the bottom’ is seen as regression has always puzzled me,” Zoë said. “The Nasat don’t want to preserve their past, their history. Where you’ve come from. In my twenty seasons here I’ve never seen a museum, read a commemorative plaque, or met a historian. If a building has outlived its usefulness, the Nasat tear it down and start again, regardless of how significant the location is.” She looked to Tarak to add his own observations, but his response was limited to a single nod.

“My kindred have always perceived that cutting ties with the past frees us up to progress. Neweris better. If we fully embrace the past, we risk being trapped in it.”

“Do you believe that?”

“You’re asking the wrong Nasat.” Pattie laughed. “I’ve spent the last few seasons working with species who tote four hundred-year-old relics around from posting to posting simply for sentimental reasons. And from what I’ve seen, that’s not such a bad thing. Maybe some of their craziness is rubbing off on me.”

Tarak reached over Zoë’s lap and clicked the viewscreen off. “The comnet is no longer broadcasting any new or useful information. Should the township have further delays in fully restoring power, we need to preserve our resources.” He stood up to stow the portable viewscreen in a cupboard.

Zoë yawned. “Right now, we don’t have any students living here. You can choose any nest you want if you’re ready to conclude your waking cycle,” she said, pushing down another yawn.

“If you require sleep, please don’t stay up on my account,” Pattie offered. “I’m a full cycle away from needing to rest.”

Tarak and Zoë exchanged glances; his eyes narrowed, she shrugged.

“Understanding the situation at hand would be of greater benefit than what would be gained by allowing our physiological processes a regenerative period,” Tarak said. “We will remain awake until such time that the need to rest is equivalent with the need to gain knowledge.”

Grinning gently, Zoë patted Tarak on the thigh. “What he’s trying to say is that we’ll stay up with you if you want.”

“I haven’t heard an update on your research,” Pattie prompted.

“No new breakthroughs, if that’s what you’re asking,” Zoë said.

“It appears that ‘quiets’ hatch at a uniform rate planetwide, regardless of shell color or geography,”

Tarak explained. “When all hatchings are statistically analyzed, one can hypothesize that there will be approximately one quiet in every seven hundred and fifty hatchings.”

Pattie had always wondered whether her own limitations would be passed to her larvae. She felt relieved knowing that her offspring might escape the struggles she had acquiring communication skills. Impressions of her own early days in this lab floated into her consciousness.

Oh how afraid she’d been at the prospect of having her mind probed by aliens. The stories she’d heard! That quiets were being offered to the Federation to be experimented on. In the end, however, her fear of

being condemned to a life of silence overcame her fear of the alien softs. She'd discovered a petite Betazoid redhead who had been the first to give words to her feelings. And Tarak: a silent, methodical Vulcan with his neural scanners and his endless hours in the nurseries, watching the nurturers pass information to their charges.

That was where he'd found Pattie, in the nursery. Two seasons old and still mute. She had only vague memories of Tarak asking a nurturer if he could "talk" with her. The nurturer had laughed at the ridiculousness of the request. And then the gentle probing of Tarak's telepathy had been the first time someone had understood her thoughts and fears, though her mouth couldn't form the words. How many lives had they touched since hers?

She hadn't seen any Nasat around the lab tonight, though. "How many students do you have?"

"We've recently graduated thirty-five," Zoë said, pouring herself a cup of zeeflower tea. "Recruiting has been slow, but I'm confident that the Planetary Council will encourage more quietes to take advantage of our program."

"You'd have more support in the capital township," Pattie said. "The Federation has a stronger presence there—new ideas are embraced with less skepticism. Nasat and alien live side by side and no one questions it."

"But what about those quietes who don't have anything close to the resources offered in the capital? They'll be forever consigned to menial tasks, to being alone. We can't abandon them just so we can go where our work would be better received."

I owe these two so much, Pattie thought. How can I ever repay them? "I'll see if I can search out quietes among the newly hatched. I'm sure the nurseries would be happy to be rid of them."

Zoë smiled. "Now then, why would the nurseries want to be rid of their quietest charges? At least they can find a cycle's rest with the quietes."

"What else are you planning for while you're here?" Tarak asked.

Pattie's mind shifted back to the thoughts she'd had on her journey from the transport to the lab. I will make a difference. "These quakes. I'm confident my engineering training could help in the ongoing repairs. If not my skills, my limbs. I can work a plasteel seamer with the best of the construction workers."

"I could sense your mind moving a mile a minute on our way back here," Zoë said. "But I thought you were on vacation. Your last communiqué was ambiguous—I had the impression you'd been under a lot of stress."

"Our last voyage ended...badly. We lost many crew members."

"Communicate our regrets to Captain Gold when you speak to him," Tarak said.

"I will. In the meantime, the best way for me to work through my experiences is to stay busy."

"We'll help in whatever way we can. Right, Tarak?"

He nodded his head affirmatively. "If your need for our assistance has diminished, would it be

permissible if I retired for the remainder of the dark cycle? I believe I will be more efficient if I can rest before the light cycle begins.”

“Please,” Pattie said, waving him in the direction of the sleep room. “I still have several cycles before I require rest. Don’t stay up on my account.”

Tarak nodded politely in Pattie’s direction. He looked to Zoannah.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to talk with Pattie for a bit longer.” An almost imperceptible exchange passed between the softs—Pattie almost imagined he smiled—and he exited the room.

“So...you’re probably wondering about—”

“How long have you and Tarak been—”

“More than research fellows?” Zoë finished with a wry grin. “About a year, though we’d gradually been heading toward being involved since his mate Tu’vara disappeared with the Cairo near the Romulan Neutral Zone. You never would have known by watching him, but the psychic bonds Vulcans have with their mates...”

“Having touched minds with Tarak as a pupil, I can guess at what might have been between him and his mate. You must have been a great comfort to him.”

“I don’t know about comfort, but our work gave him an outlet, a place to focus his efforts. With both of us so dedicated to our work, developing a more interpersonal connection was a natural evolution of our work relationship.”

She studied her friend, the softness in her eyes, her almost-smile. “You seem happy. Though I wouldn’t have ever put you two together. I have to admit that as soon as I realized that you had feelings for him, I was a little surprised.”

“I knew you had it figured out as soon as I observed your body language when I was talking to Tarak over the comm,” Zoë said, blushing.

“Body language? I’m a Nasat. We don’t really have body language.”

“I’m a Betazoid,” Zoë teased. “I sense body language.”

“Of course,” Pattie said dryly.

She dropped her eyes to the ground. “As you might expect—he was very logical about proposing our...um...uh...partnership.” She adopted a matter-of-fact tone, mimicking Tarak’s speech patterns. “‘Establishing a mutually beneficial domestic arrangement with me is more practical if I decide to live here permanently,’ and so on. Very carefully thought through. Not quite the emotional exuberance that most Betazoids expect from their partners—” she blushed “—but he compensates in other ways.”

“Oh.” Pattie felt comfortable about not asking Zoë to elaborate further. Softs placed an importance on their romantic—and by corollary—their sexual relationships that was completely foreign to Nasat. The idea of emotions and sociological connections forming around copulation wasn’t anything Pattie could figure out. Reproduction was like eating or resting—a bodily function that was carried out at the appropriate time.

Yawning again, Zoë stretched and rubbed at her eyes with her fists. “You mind if I sleep?”

Pattie smiled. “Of course not. I spend all my time working around you weakling softs so I’m used to all the pampering you require. Sleep, food, water—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Zoë said, laughing.

Once she’d vanished into the private quarters, Pattie turned the viewscreen back on, hoping that new information had come to light. During the fifth time through a particularly heavily damaged branch sector, Pattie’s sharp eyes noted something she hadn’t picked up previously. “Computer, save newsfeed TS2, channel 4, 0212 to 0220 to lab database.” The computer squawked an acknowledgment. She replayed the footage, sharpening the resolution on specific shots, pulling the view closer and closer until she could see the rivets in the floor, but the anomalous characteristic was fully discernible. What have we here? Certainly not evidence of seismic activity. Maybe defective building material? Or... something more dangerous. Satisfaction suffused her; she had her first lead. We have ourselves a mystery.

Chapter 4

In my youngest seasons, never would I have dreamed that I would be received into the governor’s office, Pattie thought, taking in the banks of computers, the holo-projected map of the homeworld, the ornately carved planters overflowing with white orchid blossoms and opalescent vines. Mid-sun cycle mists carpeted the lower branches and tree decks. She watched a brilliantly colored keel-billed avian sitting on a knobby branch outside the governor’s window, grasping hard yellowhermoorsia fruits in its beak. Considering how difficult it had been to secure this appointment, Pattie decided she’d better enjoy the experience while it lasted.

Pattie had spent the remainder of the night cycle downloading whatever tremor data she could procure into her tricorder, running various analyses using the Starfleet databases, and studying the conclusions. She hadn’t uncovered much new information by the time the sun rose, but she had determined that whatever had struck her township didn’t match any conventional parameters. The irregular tremor patterns and resultant damage weren’t typical of weakening buttress roots, nor did they appear consistent with past problems with erosion or other ground-based problems. After reviewing the frames she’d found unusual, she did wonder if a new systemic infection might be attacking the mother-tree. If a new virus or parasite had invaded the forest, the mother-tree might be vulnerable to assault. Some organisms could decimate a mother-tree in a matter of weeks. Regardless of what had caused the tremors, Pattie had renewed interest in both identifying the source of the problem and finding a solution.

Beginning with Zoë’s acquaintances, Pattie had contacted every shell she could obtain a comcode for, dispatching messages every few minutes for hours, until she’d determined that none of the local officials would assign her to an investigation team. Their replies sounded remarkably similar to the security services officer she and Zoë had encountered the night before. So she had started in on messaging her contacts in the capital. This had consumed the remainder of the day after the tremor and into her second night at home.

By the following morning, she’d located several Nasat Starfleet personnel, based on the homeworld as part of a Federation detail, who knew of someone who knew someone who might be able to bend the governor’s ear. Apparently, while visiting a nearby starbase several months ago, the governor had become quite friendly with the base’s commanding officer. Commander Emon had been in his first year at the Academy when Captain Gold was graduating and wanted to know how the captain was faring since

theda Vinci's horrific mission to Galvan VI. After an exchange of stories, Emon contacted the governor on Pattie's behalf, arranging for an appointment the following day. She hadn't expected to spend most of her first week on leave working Nasat bureaucracy, but if it gave her the chance to help the township, it seemed like a small sacrifice.

The Green shell monitoring the governor's schedule alerted Pattie that the governor was ready to receive her in his office. She approached the door chime with some trepidation, knowing that she wasn't exactly an awelcome visitor. Here goes nothing, she thought, and pressed the door chime.

The door hissed open.

"P8 Blue," the governor said, clicking his pincer politely. "I am pleased to associate with you." Behind his half-moon shaped console, he stepped out of his seat-hammock to greet Pattie formally.

Pattie reciprocated the polite gesture by clicking her own pincers, and assumed a spot in the visitor's seat-hammock.

"You didn't have to go to such lengths, P8. Contacting Commander Emon. I would have seen you," the governor said as he took a seat behind his console.

"I apologize, sir, but until I talked to Commander Emon and asked him to contact you, I couldn't even procure D5 Green's comcode to ask for an appointment. Those officials beneath you do an excellent job of making sure you aren't bothered."

"Every Nasat believes the problems of his deck sector or paddock group are the most pressing item on my agenda. I would never have a chance to govern if I took every appointment that was requested." The governor scrutinized Pattie from head to foot and limb to limb.

"Point well taken," Pattie said.

Leaning over the console, he looked directly into Pattie's eyes. "I know who you are, P8. You're unusual by Nasat standards, but you're even more unusual in this forest quadrant. A quiet that can speak thanks to some alien scientific tinkering, who then enlists in Starfleet and becomes an engineer."

"That pretty much covers it, sir," Pattie said, unable to read the governor's perception of her life history. Some Nasat—especially those in the capital—found her choices novel, even fascinating. Here, in the rural part of the homeworld, she was seen as one of those crazy shells that wasn't hatched quite right. "But I believe I have something to contribute in this situation. Whatever I've been able to pull off the feeds and out of the databases, I've analyzed. I have an interest in this situation."

"When I heard your chosen profession, I thought you might," Governor Z4 said, fanning his limbs out to indicate the whole of their surroundings. "All this shifting and shaking. You're an engineer, after all. The damaged buildings and broken equipment. Just your type of tree bark, if you know what I mean."

Pattie's antennae curled her assent, hoping the governor would grant her a position on one of the teams.

"Circumstances have become more complicated in the last few days, though," he said. "Consider this latest development." He directed Pattie's eyes toward a bank of monitors. Pattie recognized the comnet footage from the previous days as well as a few pictures taken more recently. He tapped a command into his desk panels, making the commentary audible. Pattie followed the governor's lead, turning her attention to the reports, watching the latest development—a security services investigation—with keen

interest.

Dozens of Nasat had gone missing during the quakes. Whether they'd fallen from the township or had been killed by falling debris wasn't readily discernible from the evidence. Most puzzling to investigators was where the now-missing Nasat had been when they'd vanished. A graphical map indicated that all of the missing had resided on the township perimeter where virtually all structures were enclosed. That the two- and three-hundred-year-old open-air corridors and paddocks near the township center reported no accidental falls from the decks or missing individuals seemed illogical to investigators, and to Pattie, though she conceded that the greater structural damage on the perimeter might figure into the analysis. Security teams hadn't ruled out abduction, though that was the least likely of all their scenarios.

The governor folded his center limbs over his abdomen, flexing his pincers thoughtfully. "Tremors that don't have seismic causes. Nasat, who reportedly had been at home in enclosed paddocks, vanishing. We're seeing strange times, P8."

"These missing shells, assuming they've fallen, how will they be found unless security goes to the bottom?" Pattie posed the question tentatively, assuming she'd be barraged with the usual list of reasons why Nasat didn't travel to the rain forest floor.

What might have passed as a smile in a soft filled the governor's face. "Since you left for Starfleet, we've installed hundreds of kilometers of security netting. Mostly to keep out the strangler vines and parasitic plants that threaten life in the canopy, but also to catch anything or anyone that might fall from the township decks."

"Netting?" Pattie asked, puzzled.

"Something the Federation developed. A translucent, lightweight, loosely woven fabric. Spun metal threads are virtually indestructible. A force field would be unsafe for avians, monkeys, and many other species that live in the canopy. The netting provides us a measure of protection while allowing air, mist, and rain to circulate, and about seventy-five to eighty percent of the light to filter down to the understory levels. Our scientists assure us it's quite safe. Virtually no impact on the lower level biosphere. We're testing the concept in our township. If it works, it will be implemented planetwide."

Pattie pondered this last revelation. A security net. I suppose it makes sense, but we haven't utilized anything of the kind in hundreds of years. Why now? Something about the scenario nagged at her, but she couldn't identify what. For the time being, she decided to keep her concerns to herself.

"It's possible our missing kindred are somewhere on the netting," the governor continued, "but scouring the nets will take hours—maybe days—depending on how far out they have to go. In the meantime, we have the question of the tremors and their effects."

"Yes, and that's what I want to discuss with you." Pattie slipped a padd off her belt, activated a file and passed it across the desk to the governor. "If you'll examine that newsfeed picture, you'll notice a dark residue on the floors of the paddock. I've improved the resolution so you could better see it."

"Hmmmmmm," the governor said, rubbing his chin with a pincer. "No one has mentioned it yet, but the teams in the field have their hands full trying to prevent decks from collapsing. You think this residue is related to the tremor?"

"I'm not sure. But I took the liberty of comparing that visual with several databases—botanical, engineering, historical—and couldn't find anything similar. From what I can tell, this residue isn't related

to any construction materials or pest infestation—” Pattie paused. “And if you’d give me access—”

“Let’s get to the point, P8,” the governor interjected.

“Sir?”

“I expected you’d ask for a position. Why else the appointment? If I didn’t want to give you the opportunity, I wouldn’t have seen you today.”

“So?”

“So. I’ll grant you a provisional position on the team.”

Her expression must have been quizzical, because the governor continued with an explanation. “Provisional because you’re coming from the outside. Starfleet ways aren’t necessarily our ways. If your presence proves disruptive, I’ll revoke your credentials.”

“Of course, sir,” Pattie said. She searched her fellow Blue’s face, watched his limbs, wondering if he was truly open to giving her a chance, or whether he was merely doing Commander Emon a favor. She sensed no malice or suspicion from him. This might turn out fine.

Reaching behind him, the governor shifted a lever, closing the office shutters. He then tapped in a sequence of commands on his console. A metallic sizzle announced the activation of a privacy shield.

“I don’t need to tell you, P8, how serious this situation is. Whatever you learn out in the forest has to remain confidential.”

She nodded.

“A lot is riding on this investigation. If we can’t assure the safety of the population, the Planetary Council will order an evacuation,” he said soberly. “We have to find the enemy. Whether it’s a mutated virus, an enemy’s weapon, an evolved strain of thec’kh fly—any of these could drain the life from the mother-tree. We can’t take that risk.”

“Excuse me, Governor, but I’m not a biologist,” Pattie said, shaking her head doubtfully. “I know how to reinforce an off-balance deck, but I’m not sure what to do withc’kh fly infestations.”

“I have biologists and botanists and chemists, P8. What I need is a fresh pair of eyes. I’m going to take a chance on yours.” He folded his limbs over his abdomen and leaned back in his hammock-chair. “You’re one of the kindred who have lived on the outside and seen more of life than many in this township. I had Commander Emon check out your Starfleet file. You’ve witnessed stranger things than I can conceive of. Perhaps you can find answers where all my experts cannot.”

Pattie bowed her head. “I will do my best to honor the trust you’ve placed in me.”

“I’ll upload your security clearance and passwords to the networks as soon as you leave. I’ve already informed the team leader you’d be joining him—” he looked down at the screen “—in township sector 9A, deck 6.”

“Would you have offered me this chance without Commander Emon’s intervention?”

“Truthfully? I doubt I would have known you were here had you not been so persistent. That being said, I know how to recognize an opportunity when I see one. Don’t make me regret my decision.”

The governor’s response didn’t surprise Pattie. She was accustomed to being treated like an outsider, an oddity. “So why take the risk, when so much is at stake?” she said at last, seeking to assuage her own curiosity.

Leaning back in his hammock, he placed his hands together and flexed his fingers thoughtfully. “We came out of the same nursery, P8, though I doubt you knew me. I watched you from afar—like when you joined that alien research project—and have been curious what you would become. Let’s hope for the sake of both of our reputations that satiating my curiosity doesn’t prove to be poor judgment.”

Chapter 5

On her way to rendezvous with the research team, Pattie discovered she had a bit of extra time, so she decided to check into a handful of nurseries. The governor had offered her the use of his personal transporter, but she decided she’d enjoy the opportunity to become reacquainted with her hometown. After all, the research team was only a turbolift and a few conveyors away from the governor’s office. She scrolled through the maps on her padd as she traveled, occasionally glancing up to check the signage at each intersection of conveyor with side street, plaza, or branch sector. After passing the markets and the township’s research quarter, she hopped off a conveyor in an older branch sector where the map indicated she’d find a nursery that interested her.

Pattie passed through the security checkpoint without even a curious glance. Maybe the governor’s endorsement on my ID record will simplify my life, she thought. She took a leisurely pace, surveying the neighborhood as she walked, imagining what it would be like to spend the first season after hatching in a sector that predated her own hatching by probably a hundred seasons. But Pattie preferred the red-brown clay plastered walls, wood slabs, and rock floors more than structures that used syncrete and plasteel. Maybe her experience being raised in a modern neighborhood comprised of replicated materials biased her expectations for her own offspring. Will they be successful here? she wondered.

As she walked, she saw a cluster of paddocks abutting an attender health center. Off a side street, she noticed a learning pavilion for shells in their third or fourth seasons. Even the youngest nymph Nasat had been considered. A plaza built around a ten-meter-wide branch was filled with fruit-bearing vines, edible flowers, climbing shrubs—all providing an excellent playground. Crowded food centers bustled with activity as the local workers took their mid-cycle meals. Pattie wondered if these food centers used replicators or whether they cooked their root-aphid puddings and seed-pod pilafs the old way. Climbing up a ramp, she looked down into the kitchen and saw flashes of red, yellow, brown, and blue as the feeder shells rushed between steaming pots and thick casseroles. She knew that neighborhoods that continued to operate without the latest technology did it more out of pragmatic necessity than a reverence for tradition. Retrofitting branch sectors with the proper wiring, power conduits, and equipment was a slow, cumbersome process. Still, Pattie liked the thought of her larvae hatching here, taking early meals in that kitchen where the old ways hadn’t been completely abandoned. The softs are rubbing off on me, Pattie thought, annoyed with herself. I’m starting to sentimentalize the past. She moved past the hungry crowds down the corridor to the nursery.

A retinal scan allowed her to pass through the exterior gate, through an archway, and into a hive of confusion. A Green rushing between hatching sacks, a Red nurturer filling thin plastic feeding tubes (shaped like the flower stamens ancient Nasat young fed on in the forest) with fruit-pollen pulp. A Brown attended to wall-to-floor-to-ceiling hexagon-shaped hatching tubes, a swollen pupa residing in each tube.

The Brown fussed with the temperature/humidity controls in an effort to assure that the maximum number of pupae hatched. Pattie watched interestedly, never having spent much time in the nurseries, and no one noticed her for a few minutes. A Yellow shell, holding a newly hatched charge, clicked the nonsense rhythms of Nasat nurturing songs as he swayed back and forth in his seat-hammock. Pattie had a vague recollection of those chants. All Nasat nurturers knew them; they aided newly hatched shells in language acquisition. I wonder if that young one he's rocking will be able to click back those words, Pattie thought.

The Yellow looked up from his charge. "Greetings, Blue. Can I be of assistance?" he asked.

"I'm examining your facility. That's all I need if you don't mind me observing for a few minutes. Are you taking in any larvae this season?"

"Of course," answered the Brown shell that was tapping commands into the hatching tube console. "While at present our nests are filled to capacity, we expect our young nymph shells will soon move into their own paddocks. Are you ready to deposit today?"

Pattie shook her head. "I'm on shore leave from my starship. I had hoped to find a nursery before I had to return to duty."

"If you're interested, take one of our datachips." She gestured at a bucket sitting beside all the feeding gadgets. "Everything we need to know to properly gestate your larvae. How long since they'd been laid, if you know any information about the fertilizing shell. Fertilization isn't such a big issue unless there are specific genetic markers we need to be concerned with. Once you've filled out the forms, submit the request to our database. You don't even need to be planetside. We can retrieve your larvae from wherever you've stored them."

Pattie removed a chip from the bucket and dropped it into the pouch mounted on her belt. "Fertilization happened so many seasons ago that I don't recall who the partner might have been, but as a rule, I tend to avoid partners with shell degeneration or impaired limb function."

"Always a wise precaution," a Brown shell said sagely. "I hope we can be of help."

She asked a few rudimentary questions, primarily to get a sense of what types of shells her larvae would encounter once they hatched. The odds were against her ever knowing her progeny after they hatched, so she wanted to make sure she could look out for them while she could. When she felt she had enough information to make an educated decision, she said goodbye to the nursery workers and went on her way to the research site.

Though she knew she'd be checking out other facilities, Pattie had a good feeling about this one. One thing she'd learned from softs was to trust intuition. More times than she cared to recall, one of her crewmates had said something along the lines of "I have a bad feeling about this," and the feeling had proved to be an accurate barometer of the situation. As she walked down the corridor, she fingered the pouch containing the datachip. Yes, I definitely have a good feeling about this.

* * *

Noting the cracked floor planking, Pattie stepped gingerly onto the sector of deck platform, wondering how long the damaged structure would hold the weight of all the shells working in the area. She saw a repair team equipped with plasteel seamers hiking up a peg-pole; she supposed they were starting to mend the cracks in the ceilings and walls. Several shells stood around with computers, laying down protective sensor grids that would warn of minute shifts in the structure that might indicate impending

collapse. In the corner, issuing orders, she saw a Green shell—M9 Green was her designation, according to the governor. She had squeezed a plasma clipboard between a pair of limbs and was frantically scribbling notes with a stylus. Pattie watched for a few moments, reluctant to interrupt, when she concluded that this was an individual who would continue working until she was forced to shift gears.

“P8 Blue reporting for duty, sir.”

M9 looked up from her clipboard. “Ah yes. The governor let me know you’d be working on our team. Structural engineer?”

Pattie nodded.

“Tell you what, P8, we’ve pretty much surveyed every damaged paddock for ten kilometers. Why don’t you join the squads rappelling below the decks to check out the mother-tree? Your skills are too valuable to waste with tasks any shell with a seamer can handle.”

M9 produced a security ID that Pattie clipped to her utility pocket, explained the basic layout of the work-site to her, and introduced her to the various team leads. Pattie’s team was headed by a young Brown, Y29, that Pattie instantly took a liking to. Pattie’s job would be to survey the branches beneath the lowest township deck for structural integrity. Though the decks were built from fabricated materials, the architects utilized some of the mother-tree’s massive branches as support struts. A compromised branch could doom a sector to collapse.

Y29 and Pattie passed through rows of ordinary residential buildings to the outermost rim of paddocks. When they passed the last paddock, they turned into an L-shaped hallway with a maintenance door at the end. Exiting through the door, Pattie discovered that she was walking on a narrow plank path that followed along the building’s edge. A railing, about limb height, with thin, fibrous netting was the only barrier between Pattie and the forest.

With wonder, she gazed out into the verdurous curtains, the tangle of scarlet flowers and twig nests, the delicate, mottled petals of fungi growing in branch hollows as slivers of sunlight tessellated on leaves larger than she was. Pattie felt small and alien in this wild, grand landscape. This has surrounded me most of my life, and I feel as if I’ve never seen it before. . . .

While she had lived most of her seasons on the homeworld, Pattie, like most Nasat, had matured from nymph to adult with the rain forest surrounding her. Her earliest nymph-songs had been animal squawks and tweeting and the gentle shush and plink of the late-day rain splashing on waxy leaves. During class, the overripe sweetness of rotting fruits and moldering leaves had wafted through windows. Wherever she roamed, she felt the forest’s presence. But in actual, measurable time, Pattie had been outside the protective township barriers only a limbful of times in all her seasons. The Nasat brought the forest into their dwellings, but rarely ventured out into the open forest. Even with their position as the dominant sentient species on this world, the Nasat remained vulnerable to the aggressive predators that lurked in the world beyond the township. Being a peaceable species, they preferred keeping to themselves instead of aggressively colonizing or controlling the forests. All manner of animal and plant life coexisted, relatively undisturbed by the Nasat presence.

So for all her otherworldly experience, Pattie had never truly known her home planet. This deficit hadn’t been obvious to her until now, as she meandered along the farthest rim of Nasat civilization, gazing out at the gaping maw of wildness.

Y29 provided her with equipment and a brief set of instructions on how to use the gear. A flush of

excitement filled Pattie as she fastened climbing crampons onto her lower limbs, strapped herself into a harness, and waited in line for her chance to go over the edge.

Dozens of Nasat managed the climbing lines. Each line was attached to one of hundreds of hooks mounted along the platform's outer edge. The hooks were ostensibly provided for botanist-attenders (those who cared for the mother-trees) and maintenance workers, who routinely rappelled beneath the township decks. Accessing power conduits or examining the tree's health was more easily accomplished outside the township.

Pattie's turn came. She paid close attention to the orientation when her group assumed the frontline positions.

"We're looking for abnormalities. Evidence of sabotage," a Yellow clicked. "Malfunctioning equipment. Infection. Anything that looks like it isn't supposed to be there." She pointed to a flat computer panel built into the harness. "If you find something that needs evaluation, this sensor panel can take a reader and transmit both picture and analysis to the base team up here. This companel also functions as your communicator. Questions? No. Then good searching."

Pattie surrendered, a little nervously, to a brusque Green who snapped the rope into place on her harness, demonstrated to Pattie how the automated controls worked—how to take up the line slack, how to let out more line—and told her it was time to drop over the side.

Not that different from zero-G, Pattie thought as the air whistled past her ears. She worked her way down the trunk with measured jumps, covering the equivalent of two or three decks of distance before she reached her assigned branch. Peering down the length of the branch, she guessed she had a kilometer or so to cover. Giving herself enough rope slack to move comfortably, she began slow, deliberate switch-backs, surveying the mature branch as she walked, holding her tricorder out in front of her.

Pattie was pragmatic enough to know that her study would take time. Like a complex piece of machinery, a mother-tree's health was subject to more variables than could be swiftly assessed. Minor bark beetle infestations or leaf rot didn't warrant a call to base camp. What Pattie kept foremost in her mind were the images she'd seen on the newsfeed last night.

Pictures of the damaged sectors (the one she presently worked in being the worst) showed evidence of scarification on the building and tree surfaces—almost akin to an acid spill—but the color, pattern, and characteristics of the scars resembled nothing she'd seen in her labs. She looked for the small, almost unnoticeable puddles of the same residue that appeared to be related to, if not the cause of, the scarification. It was a stretch, she knew, to assume such a minor thing could be related to the massive destruction she'd experienced last night; but Pattie knew to never rule out any possible evidence until you had to. Patience, she admonished herself as she walked back and forth.

How long she'd been walking, how far away from the trunk she had gone when her tricorder finally flashed a match, Pattie didn't know. As the permutations of the brown and green landscape had begun to blur to her eyes, the beep startled her. She shook herself back to awareness and studied the reading.

The tricorder had "seen" a marking similar to the one Pattie had noticed on the footage. What if I'm onto something? she thought. Nervously, she squeezed her pincers together. She squeezed her eyelids down hard a few times to help her alertness and then she read the tricorder reading. And reread the analysis. Dropping down on all her limbs, Pattie studied her discovery.

A pocket of dark brown—almost black—stickiness oozed out of a crusty laceration in the branch's

bark. She nudged it with a gloved finger and a puff of smoke erupted. Whatever it is, it's nasty, she thought. Using a small, sterile slide from her harness panel to collect a sample, she ran a preliminary analysis and transmitted the specs to the base team. When they knew how they wanted her to proceed, they'd contact her. In the meantime, she decided to see how widespread this symptom was. She activated the wood adhesives on her crampons, assuring that she could walk the circumference of the branch without falling, and gingerly crawled over the side. Steadying her breathing, she moved one step at a time until she hung, shell down, beneath the branch.

The attack hairs on her neck bristled; she gasped.

For as far as she could see, similar pockets of black-brown ooze dripped off the branch. Thick ropey vines and ferns prevented her from seeing too far into the jungle, but the dark shadows staining the pale ochre faces of upturned flowers that grew below the branch were unmistakable. As the substance dried, scars formed on the bark surface. She activated her computer panel and began transmitting pictures.

After she'd passed most of an hour hanging upside down and accumulating sensor data, her signal receiver crackled.

"P8 Blue, this is base. We want as many pictures as you can manage. Follow the branch as far as the rope line will let you. Copy."

"Acknowledged, base. I'll head deeper into the forest."

Scrambling back on top of the branch, she activated the control that slackened her climbing line and began her hunting expedition.

* * *

She walked until the tree trunk and her teammates had long since passed from sight. In her aloneness, she jumped at the echoing chirps and animal skrees, wondering if a sharp-toothed sloth, prepared to pounce, waited in the next hollow. Rope or no rope, the prospect of dangling in midair, several kilometers off the ground with only a finger-thin rope to hang on to terrified her. Gradually, she acclimated; the hollow thumps of nuts falling from higher branches stopped startling her. She stopped worrying if a misstep would send her careening off the branch so she moved more swiftly, with confidence. Parting tangles of plants, stepping over furry mosses, and skirting the edges of monkey nests, she hunched over her tricorder, diligently taking readings. Life seethed on every side. Instead of fearing it, she found her environs comfortable, cozy.

When she reached a fork in the branch, she decided to take a break. A water seep trickling daintily from the upper reaches had smoothed a hollow in the bark where she could sit. For a late-cycle meal, she ate her fill of orangejahan berries and sipped beads of water off a leaf. Let's see whether all this walking is getting us anywhere, she thought, transferring data from her harness companel to her tricorder.

As the sensor input was received, the data was broken down and cross-referenced with every available Federation database, a time-consuming process. Consequently, Pattie didn't expect conclusive results would emerge until later. The rudiments of the problem, however, had begun to take shape. Sensors identified the unusual substance, not surprisingly, as an organic toxin with no known link to any disease, pest, or invasive organism native to the homeworld. She read the computer's prognosis with concern:

LONG-TERM EXPOSURE TO TOXIN CAN RESULT IN IRREVERSIBLE DAMAGE AND/OR DEATH TO ANY ORGANISM.

A rustle.

Startled, she turned to the side. Must be the wind.

She turned back to her tricorder. NO KNOWN ANTIDOTE EXISTS .

The shadows deepened. She looked up at the sky where clouds had blanketed the sun. But the forest—the forest felt...darker.

Another rustle...scraping twigs...soft squish...fruit falling

Leaves trembled as if a wave had passed through the tunnel of gnarled twigs behind her. Something's here, she thought. Maybe someone caught up with me. Or a team member transported down.

Cautiously, Pattie eased into a standing position, cocking her ear toward the deep forest. At first low and intermittent, a hum rose, gradually increasing in pitch until the sound's acuity made her wince in pain. She tried raising two limbs to cover her ears, to block the horrifically sharp noise, but her limbs stayed fixed—paralyzed at her sides. Unwillingly, she listened and while no words came from the sound, images formed in her mind. Warm dizziness suffused her. Her eye membranes dropped, bounced up, and dropped again. Around and above her, long reeds rippled and waved; the light dimmed as the green ceiling lowered, coming closer....

Abruptly, the hum stopped.

The warm feeling abated. Pattie stirred from the trance she'd been in; panic engulfed her. She spun around, checking the forest on all sides of her; she saw nothing unusual. Whatever presence had been here had departed. Sunlight sliced through the clouds, refracted through mists, and painted sprays of rainbows in the air. Snippets of jewel-blue glowed bright between wisps of clouds. Maybe I drifted to sleep for a few minutes, Pattie thought. I have been awake for three straight cycles. I should probably check in. See if anything new has come up.

She touched her combadge, which she had tied into the companel on her harness. No response. Only a few kilometers separated her from the base station, so distance wasn't an issue. She shrugged off the equipment problem, assuming that her sensor transmissions must have depleted her power supply. Maybe the combination of humidity, minimal nutritional intake, and the stress of the past few cycles had resulted in a little forest madness. Heading back to base before the hallucinations started seemed to be a good idea. She'd only covered a short distance when the companel crackled to life.

"P8. Is that you? We lost you on our sensors for a minute. What happened out there?"

She opened her mouth to speak, but no sound emerged. Not a click or a squeak. A garble of words flashed through her mind. Moving her jaw back and forth, moving her teeth up and down, pushing her tongue against the roof of her mouth—none of it created sound. She massaged her neck in hopes that relaxing the muscles around her gullet would help.

Nothing.

"P8? Are you there? We're sending down a team if you don't copy this message."

Covering her eyes with her limbs, she opened up her throat, willing a squeak, a scream, a click, to

emerge.

Silence.

What's happened to me?

Chapter 6

“Whatever it is that happened out in the forest seems to be temporary,” Zoeannah said, attaching the neural sensors to Pattie’s head. Sitting on a wheeled stool, she scooted back and forth the length of the bed, adjusting the biobed settings and checking the readouts. “You seem to be communicating just fine now.”

“By the time the pair dispatched by the base team found me, I’d regained most of my language skills,” Pattie explained, feeling more than a bit frustrated. “Before that, though, I can’t explain why I couldn’t speak. I tried all my usual techniques, but nothing seemed to work.”

Prostrate on a biobed, Pattie had spent the last hour submitting to examination by Zoeannah and Tarak. Tarak, who had undergone Nasat attender training, had worked her up medically. Not surprisingly, he had found nothing. Tarak had taken possession of Pattie’s tricorder, hoping that her discoveries in the forest might give him a clue as to what caused Pattie’s muteness.

From where she sat at the computer, Zoeannah twisted back and said, “Go ahead and initiate the scan, Tarak.” To Pattie, she said, “No talking. You know the rules.”

P8 pivoted her eyes in annoyance. From where she lay, she watched Zoë’s panel lighting up as a map of her brainwaves appeared on the monitor.

“This is unexpected.” Tarak removed a stylus from a desk drawer and was marking points on the computer screen. “The central cortex has been hyperstimulated.”

“What?” Pattie clicked.

“You.” Zoë placed a hand over Pattie’s mouth. “Quiet. Now.”

Anxiously, Pattie contemplated Tarak’s revelation. Before she learned to speak, her upper brain functions were primarily based in the central cortex. Nasat scientists believed the central cortex was the most primitive part of the Nasat brain. Whatever functions it had served had become obsolete as the species had evolved. In an average Nasat, the central cortex might show low-level brainwave activity a handful of times during a day. As a result of her work with Zoë and Tarak, activity in her central cortex had slowed to normal levels. To have it activated again couldn’t be a good sign.

“My readings are complete, Zoeannah,” Tarak said. “Both of you should examine this data.”

Zoeannah rolled her stool over to Tarak’s terminal, with Pattie following close behind. He projected a holographic representation of Pattie’s brain with color being used to map concentrations of brainwave activity. The hologram showed color variation from blues and greens (mildly active) to reds and oranges (extremely active). Just as Tarak had said, the central cortex glowed red-orange, indicating that it had been heavily stimulated.

“Out there in the forest, you were exposed to stimuli you’d never encountered before, Pattie,” Zoë noted. “It’s possible that your sensory intake was overloaded and it activated this cortex.”

Brow creased, Tarak studied the readout on Pattie’s tricorder. “The toxin, perhaps, when inhaled or touched, could provoke a violent nervous system reaction. I will generate models that will allow us to study the toxin’s effects without having to reexpose you or other Nasat.”

“But it’s the humming thing I keep coming back to, Tarak,” Zoë said, chewing on her fingernails. She shook her head. “Sounds at certain frequency can potentially impact neurotransmitters.” She shook her head. “Too bad your tricorder didn’t pick up any readings.”

“I couldn’t activate it,” Pattie said, throwing out her limbs helplessly. “It was like whatever was there had numbed me up. Lulled me into a trance.”

“You should consider giving up the investigation,” Zoë said. She touched Pattie’s shell.

Pattie knew Zoë was looking out for her interests, but abandoning the investigation when the threat appeared more serious than before went against her nature. “We don’t have any proof that what happened to me resulted from anything in the forest. It could have been a random confluence of factors.”

“Random?” Zoë threw up her hands and drew in a sharp breath. Abandoning her stool to futz over the computer terminals, she moved with a restless energy that betrayed her concerns.

Tarak stepped to her side, calmly placing a hand on her arm. “Pattie is correct, Zoeannah. We can hypothesize the source of her muteness, but we cannot say for a certainty that we know the causation.”

“I don’t want to lose my language abilities either,” Pattie said. “But I think proceeding as normal would be best. At least if it happens again, we’ll know there’s an underlying reason. That it wasn’t random.”

Sighing, Zoë slapped her thighs with her hands. “Fine. But I want all the data from the investigation team. If this toxin has anything to do with your neural readings, more than just you could be in trouble.”

“What do you mean?” Pattie asked.

“If something lurking out in the forest can hyper-stimulate neurotransmitters to the degree we’ve seen in you, every Nasat in this township could be vulnerable. All of our studies have shown, without question, that an overactive central cortex is related to communication deficits. This holds true for any Nasat—not just quiets. With concentrated exposure to this stimulus, the township could regress a thousand years in language ability in weeks, maybe days. Still, I’m not willing to sacrifice you to find out, Pattie. Got that?”

To show affection, Pattie touched her thumb to her forehead, and touched the thin skin behind Zoë’s ear. “What I learn, you will learn.”

* * *

Pattie arrived at the briefing just before it began. Security services had posted guards at every entrance to seal the doors as soon as the meeting started. The discussions had been classified and would not be carried on the comnet.

Her team leader, Y29, waved to her from his seat in the front row. Pattie also noticed the governor reclining alongside the head of the Planetary Council. Other officials from the capital wearing brightly

colored honor sashes chatted with investigation team heads, a few of whom Pattie remembered from this afternoon. The governor's rotunda was filled to capacity, but Pattie located a seat in a back corner. Based on her earlier conversation with the governor, she felt that keeping a low profile would be a good idea. She managed to slide into her row as the chief investigator, T4 Yellow, rose from his seat-hammock to speak.

"We've assembled here this night cycle to review the results from today's investigation. I think I speak for all who have studied this problem when I say that we are facing a threat more serious than any we've seen in a hundred seasons."

Reactionary clicks and crowd noise erupted. Based on Pattie's personal experience in the forest, she wasn't surprised by the announcement. She was curious, however, to see what the team had identified as the threat. The chief investigator hushed the group and began his presentation.

The lights dimmed and a holographic projection of the Nasat township appeared in the center of the rotunda. Each of the twenty decks was outlined in a different color, allowing P8 to distinguish the various township sectors.

"As most of you know," T4 began, "the damage from the tremors occurred in the township perimeter."

The computer filled in an irregular red border around the perimeter, indicating the damaged areas. Pattie could see that the destruction was more far-reaching than she'd previously known. One sector—the most recently built—had collapsed entirely several hours before the meeting.

"Data from our investigation teams indicates the presence of an organic toxin, origin unknown, in and around the damaged areas. Our chief botanist-attender, having received and analyzed the data, has a diagnosis."

T4 moved aside for a Brown shell that Pattie assumed was the botanist. She tapped commands into the rostrum terminal and the picture changed. Pattie recognized the projected pictures as the views from her harness sensor; she felt some measure of pleasure knowing that she'd made a contribution to the discovery.

"Because this substance doesn't have any known match in our databases, coming up with an ID has been challenging," the botanist said. "Several hypotheses have been put forth. Perhaps the toxin is a result of introducing new, off-world construction materials into our buildings. As we've been more actively involved in trading with other Federation worlds, it's possible we've also imported a mutagenic virus or bacteria that our trees don't have a defense for. I assure you all that we're working to find an antidote to the toxin as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, the toxin has already invaded several mother-trees."

The projection shifted, becoming a rendering of the mother-tree overlaid with a graph. More than a dozen sections of the tree glowed yellow, sections in close proximity to damaged decks.

"The yellow indicates necrotic tissue. Under normal circumstances, we can surgically remove the damaged areas and graft healthy tissue in its place. In this case, however, we fear the toxin has already penetrated the tree's circulatory system, thus compromising the tree's immunity. The tree might not be strong enough to withstand the surgery."

The governor raised a limb, requesting to be recognized. "So the mother-tree has an infection. But it can be contained?"

The botanist exchanged looks with T4. “No. I expect we’ll have branch death within the week.”

A collective gasp sounded from the gathering. Pattie glanced at the tree structure and mentally superimposed the township decks. If those branches go, the deck loses critical supports. I suppose we could construct artificial limbs to replace them—the way they do in the capital city—but what if the construction materials are the problem?

“We are surveying the primary trunk and limbs for similar cellular damage. Botanists have been dispatched in hovercraft to study the understory region. However, we are not optimistic. All indicators point toward weakening buttress roots. There are few other explanations for the severity and irregularity of the tremors. We are in danger of losing the mother-tree.”

Pattie, along with everyone in attendance, sat in numb shock. To a Nasat, the mother-tree represented all aspects of living: food, shelter, and protection. When the brutality of life on the forest floor nearly wiped out the Nasat, it was to the trees that they escaped to survive. In the trees, they built settlements where they could finally move past the sustenance life of their ancestors, developing tools and ultimately technology that opened up the stars for exploration. The loss of a mother-tree was unthinkable.

Once the botanist-attender had made her sober pronouncement, few in the audience found the remainder of the presentation nearly as vital. Pattie believed she heard something about security services being unable to locate any of the missing Nasat. A Federation official announced that a research team from the closest starbase had been dispatched and would be arriving in a few days. Finally, a Green shell stood, interrupting the Planetary Council member, and said, “What do we do about the mother-tree?” His inquiry was echoed by hundreds of other voices.

The Brown shell botanist stood. “We don’t have any plan of action until we know the severity of the poisoning.”

“But what about the dying branches? What about the decks built in those sectors? Will all those Nasat have to evacuate?” someone else called out.

“Why aren’t we all evacuating?” another shouted. “The moon base could easily host the township population until this problem’s solved. Why wait until every deck collapses into the forest?”

The last comment provoked controversy. On every side, discussions erupted. Pattie eavesdropped on bits of conversation, but found no one asked the question she felt needed to be asked. In their fear, they’re all being swept away by reaction. We need to take charge—make preemptive decisions.

She waved her hand, seeking recognition from the rostrum. The confusion in the room made it nearly impossible to be noticed. She stood and waited for the chief investigator to recognize her.

Grateful for a chance to distract the crowd, T4 nodded to Pattie, indicating she had the floor. Attempts to shout above the noise proved futile, so T4 waved Pattie up to the rostrum. When the audience noticed a new shell had joined the group, the talk gradually stuttered to a halt, and the attention shifted to Pattie.

The governor gave Pattie a meaningful look, his antennae taut. Pattie understood his meaning: Behave yourself.

“I am P8 Blue. I work as a structural engineer for Starfleet. And while I have a multitude of ideas for how we might construct supports for the weakened decks—even for the buttress root systems, I’m concerned that our focus is too narrow.”

“When we’re literally working every conceivable angle, I don’t know how you can say that,” the botanist said, thrusting her padd at Pattie. “Take a look for yourself.”

“I’ve seen it. Up close,” Pattie said, politely refusing the padd. “I was in the forest today and I saw how widespread the toxin is. Whatever it is seems to have invaded the mother-tree without being noticed until the damage is too extensive to correct. We can’t afford to solely depend on the tried-and-true approaches. Every option needs to be open.”

“Clearly you think we’re missing something, P8,” the governor said coolly.

Here it is. Swallowing hard, Pattie said, “We need to go to the bottom and set up a research outpost.”

Those on the rostrum exchanged glances. Pattie noticed more than a few sets of pincers tightening. A wave of clicks and chirps rose up from the audience.

“We don’t need to risk going to the bottom, P8,” the chief investigator said dismissively, “unless the buttress roots require structural assistance. Our botanist-attenders and security services use hovercraft. Our sensor nets are extensive. What do you believe we can learn from going to the bottom that we can’t learn far more easily? Why risk more lives?”

An unnerving stillness settled over the audience. Every Nasat in the rotunda awaited her answer. She couldn’t read the governor’s mood, though she guessed he didn’t appreciate the controversy.

Pattie considered her reply carefully. She had more arguments against T4’s statement than he would give her time to share. She needed to say the words that would be most helpful. Of all the reasons she had joined the S.C.E., the one that stood out the most was her thirst for diversity, a willingness to explore new methods of solving problems. Now here she was, standing before the elite of her world, confronting the ridiculous taboos and prejudices she’d witnessed her whole life. She could say what they wanted to hear or she could say what she thought. I, alone, can’t fix this. I can only do the best I can. Taking a deep breath, she said, “One of the lessons I’ve learned in my seasons in Starfleet is that you can’t solve a problem from a distance. You have to be willing to get right in the thick of it. This problem is serious enough to warrant exploring every path open to us. Why not go to the bottom?”

“Because we don’t have any evidence that this ailment comes from below the canopy,” one of the investigators said. “And what if we go to the bottom and it spreads the infection?”

“We still need to eliminate the forest floor as the source of the problem.”

The botanist leaped from her seat, limbs gesticulating angrily. “You’re asserting that we are failing to do everything in our power to assure the safety of Nasat and our mother-tree!”

Before Pattie could reply, many in the crowd scrambled out of their seats, evincing outrage, confusion, fear. Pattie reciprocated their feelings. “This isn’t about assigning blame! This is my home too!” she shouted, but the commotion smothered her words. As Nasat crammed into the aisles and up to the rostrum to make their voices heard, Pattie allowed herself to be pushed to the rear. I’ve done it now, she thought, fully expecting to have her clearances revoked. Quietly, she slipped away as anonymously as she had come.

* * *

From the shadow darkening the floor, Pattie knew that Zoë stood in the doorway. The Betazoid would want to talk. It was difficult to hide a bad mood from a telepath, but Pattie didn't feel like talking. She'd had quite enough discussion, thank you. Upon arriving at the lab, she'd gone straight to a nest. Though she wasn't feeling tired, she wanted a chance to think without being disturbed. Using a padd, she'd conjured up a facsimile of the tree projection the botanist had put up. Repeatedly running her eyes over each branch and leaf tuft, she imagined what type of engineering wizardry would be required to save the township. She wasn't as optimistic as she'd hoped she could be. The circumstance wasn't unlike what happened to a starship when a deck became severely damaged. Once structural integrity was compromised, the safest course was to lock off the deck and shore up protective shielding in the still intact areas. In the township, the seriously damaged areas would have to be dismantled before they weakened more stable structures. What troubled Pattie was how to save the moderately damaged areas. Shifting weight from one branch or installing artificial supports for one sector might require modifications in other sectors. No matter how she played through the scenarios in her mind, they always ended in a chain reaction.

"You can ignore me all night. I'll sleep in the doorway," Zoë said finally. "The bad vibes you're putting out will keep me up anyway."

"Close the door then," Pattie said.

"Very cute. But that doesn't cut it."

"The summary version is this: nothing looks good, for the mother-tree or for me. Whatever I ran into in the forest is more potent than even I imagined."

Dropping down on the floor beside Pattie, Zoë looked over Pattie's limbs at the padd she worked on. "I take it this is a graphical representation of the damaged areas."

Pattie nodded. "And while I seriously doubt that I'll be invited to continue participating in the investigation—"

Zoë's eyebrows shot up.

"—if I can help work a solution on how we can save the township, I'll feel useful."

Peering intently at the graphic, Zoë tipped her head to the side, frowned, and tipped her head to the other side. She reached for the padd. "May I?"

Shrugging, Pattie passed it over.

"I swear I've seen this before." She gnawed on her lip. "I know I've seen this before." Sitting back on her haunches, she thought for a long moment before slapping her thighs. "Got it!"

Zoë disappeared into the adjoining room. The clatter of padds being tossed aside and Zoë's mutters amused Pattie. She returned shortly, grinning triumphantly, with a padd tucked beneath her arm. Thrusting it at Pattie, she said, "I knew I'd seen it before!"

Assuming that Zoë wanted her to activate the tablet, she did so. When a nearly identical township map appeared on the screen, Pattie wasn't surprised, but she wasn't sure what this had to do with their present dilemma. She turned a questioning look on Zoë.

“Several years ago, we worked with a loremaster to find any records that might be pertinent to our research. Census, birth data—anything vaguely anthropological that could give us clues about the quiets. This map you’re looking at might be five hundred years old.”

Pattie studied the maps more closely, noticing that indeed, many similarities existed between them. Each map had similar chunks of the township perimeter outlined. Just how similar is the question. Butting the padds against each other, she transmitted the data from the older padd to the newer one. With a few quick commands, she had pulled up a projection of the maps: the overlaid trees appeared in the air. The highlighted sections appeared as virtual concentric circles, with the younger tree forming a blue perimeter just inside the yellow perimeter of the older tree.

“Even when you figure in tree growth, the resemblance is uncanny,” Pattie said finally. “What was this map for, anyway?”

“Population distribution,” Zoë said. Sensing Pattie’s confusion, she continued, “In previous centuries, quiets tended to be isolated from the general population. Why? I can’t say, but this old map indicates that the quiets’ paddocks are clustered together in the highlighted areas.”

“So, long ago, the quiets lived along the perimeter, but specifically near these areas that have been recently damaged.”

Zoë nodded.

Pattie’s mind raced through possible connections between the events of the past few days and a faraway time. “Can we even make a connection between these two maps?” she said, thinking aloud.

“On the surface, the two scenarios don’t appear to be related, but I think the similarities are too uncanny to be ignored.”

“We might find answers in history—”

“If Nasat were better about keeping their history. Your kindred don’t believe in preserving the past,” Zoë said philosophically. “And yet, here you see that there might be a link, however tenuous, between whatever is happening now and what happened then.”

After her disastrous appearance at the meeting, Pattie had resolved to walk away from the investigation—especially since it seemed like she was bringing more confusion than clarity to the problem. But seeing these maps. . . She considered her options and made a decision.

“So, do you have any other records that might be of use?”

* * *

How far into the dark cycle they worked before the door chime sounded, Pattie couldn’t say. Neither of them had known precisely what they were looking for. Before long, Pattie’s nest area was overrun with padds, hand-drawn charts and graphs, scrolls, data chips, and holos from Nasat history. She had been deeply absorbed in the earliest recorded township map when Tarak appeared in the doorway.

“The governor’s here,” he said.

“I have to apologize to—”

“He’s not here for you, he’s here for Zoë and me.”

Pattie and Zoë exchanged puzzled looks. Zoë shoved aside the census data for Nasat Year 1647 and followed Tarak into the receiving room.

Resisting the impulse to spy, Pattie dropped her gaze to the map she held with four of her limbs. Though the primitive rendering failed to offer a computerized map’s precision, the proportions and scale were such that she could approximate what the mother-tree (and township) looked like nearly a millennium ago. The cartographer had inked in the outlines of where future decks would be built. Pattie noted with amusement that the mapmaker had only anticipated another eight decks after the original four. How could they have foreseen the day when we’d have more than twenty? Nasat pictographs formed the map’s border, providing a narrative or instructions. She was far from an expert in interpreting pictographs, but she could translate enough to figure out the general idea.

“...and on this day, we raise this township, mindful of the promises made by kindred past...”

What promises? Pattie thought.

Muffled voices came from the receiving room. Pattie wondered what problem the governor had brought to Zoë and Tarak. It doesn’t matter to me anyhow. She forced her attention back to the map.

An idea occurred to her. She waved a scanning wand over the old parchment and loaded the scanned record into her padd. It took only minutes to convert the drawing into three dimensions. A press of her thumb and all three map projections—each outlined in a different color—appeared in the air, spinning side by side. Overlaying one tree atop another was simple. Pattie gazed at the intertwined multi-colored lines, muttering aloud, “What am I supposed to see? It’s right in front of me, I know it is....”

“Pattie?” Zoë poked her head around the corner.

She looked up from her maps.

“I need you to come with us. I’ll explain later.”

* * *

Not much was said on the way to the attender health center. No one had offered an explanation on why this was relevant to Pattie. For Zoë and Tarak, however, she would comply without question. The governor had acknowledged her once, briefly, when he said, “You certainly know how to stir things up, don’t you?”

She assumed he was referring to her outspokenness in the investigation briefing. Before she could reply, he’d moved ahead on the conveyor to stand with his aides.

As soon as they arrived, Pattie recognized the health facility as being the preeminent research center in the forest quadrant. Tarak had done his attender fellowship here when he’d first started his research. On their way in, they passed by a pair of security services officers, which struck Pattie as strange. Since when do health facilities require protecting? A turbolift and back hallway later, the group arrived at another security checkpoint before entering a patient’s room.

A Red shell Nasat lay on the biobed, body rigid, neural-feedback sensors attached along the ridges of

his skull. With eye membranes rolled nearly into his sockets, his coal-black eyes stared, unblinkingly, at the ceiling. Attenders stood on various sides of the bed, each monitoring different physiological functions. Tarak approached one of them—a Green shell—and began talking in hushed tones with her.

Surveying the room, Pattie gathered that whoever this Nasat was, he had sustained serious neurological injuries. On a monitor, she studied the color patterns that showed brain activity, discovering that every quadrant glowed red and orange, indicating that every neuron and synapse was firing steadily, without respite. You can't survive that kind of biochemical overload, she thought. She shifted nervously, remembering her own brief encounter in the forest. Maybe that's why I'm here.

Pattie watched as Tarak used his own tricorder to take readings. Gesturing for Zoë to begin her work, he examined the monitor readouts while Zoë wrapped her hand around the injured Nasat's, studying him intently. After a few moments, they conversed quietly. Zoë gestured animatedly with her hands; Tarak shook his head.

"I'm afraid we don't have much to add to your diagnosis," Tarak said, spinning a monitor around for the governor to see. He pointed to the erratically fluctuating brainwaves scrolling across the bottom of the screen. "Resequencing cannot address this degree of neural chemical breakdown. Given time, the brain might be able to restore equilibrium. Time, I'm afraid, is all we can offer."

"What about stabilizing the cortical activity?" one of the attenders asked. "I know part of what you've done in your research involves building new neuro-chemical pathways—"

"With a conscious, willing subject who has the ability to apply focused effort over an extended period of time," Tarak said. "We could work with him if he recovers—"

"To put it simply, Governor," Zoë interrupted, "this Nasat's brain has been so overstimulated that irreparable damage might have been done to the tissues. As Tarak said, waiting is the only option."

Pattie didn't generally consider herself to be obtuse, but she remained unclear as to precisely why she'd been included on this visit. Her soft friends were well-known in the forest quadrant for having neurological expertise. Why the governor would call them was obvious. Maybe they thought she might lend some insight based on her own experiences, including her most recent bout of muteness. Or maybe, she considered cynically, the governor didn't want her to get into trouble if they left her at the paddock unsupervised. The thought tainted her mood with a bit of petulance. Intending to find out once and for all, she leaned forward, raising a limb to get Tarak or the governor's attention—

Zoë shot her a look that admonished patience.

Tarak, Zoë, and the governor clustered with the attenders, talking for a moment longer.

When the group broke, the governor said, "Let's go outside and talk, shall we?"

They filed behind an orderly who guided them to a vacant suite. Once the orderly had returned to duty, the discussion began.

Pattie opened her mouth to speak, when Zoë quickly cut her off.

"Where did you find the Red in there?" She glared meaningfully at Pattie.

"On the security netting about two kilometers from the township," the governor said. "Not much

improvement from when we found him, unfortunately.”

“And you know for a fact that he was one that went missing during the quakes?” Zoë persisted.

Now it becomes interesting, Pattie thought, becoming intrigued.

“We were able to confirm ID when we found him. He had been in his paddock—in his nest. One of his neighbors confirmed that when he vanished,” one of the governor’s aides said. “How he came to be in this state... well, that’s the part that worries us.”

He felt a presence. He felt a presence and heard a sound that pierced him to the core, Pattie thought. And the part where I come in...

“Excuse me, but I think I might have some insight to offer here,” Pattie began. She related her experience while working on the investigation and the resultant symptoms.

The governor didn’t bother hiding his surprise. “Could other Nasat have had similar experiences?”

Pattie waved her antenna. “Possibly. Based on what we saw in the Red shell, I’d say definitely. Any clue what happened to the Red?”

No answer. The governor looked to his aides for a response. They both raised their limbs in frustration. “Fine, then,” he said, “I’ll tell them. Security services discovered several holes in the security netting. Cut from beneath. From the bottom.” He paused to let Pattie digest the information.

“How soon do you want me to go down?” Pattie asked.

* * *

Because of the general population’s concerns about trekking to the forest floor, the governor had ordered the team’s formation to remain secret. The group would meet at Zoë and Tarak’s lab and would head down to the observation decks in smaller groups to avoid incurring public attention. Several from the investigation, such as Y29—who had, incidentally, agreed with Pattie at the meeting—would be going, along with security services. The team risked encountering the same force that Pattie had, so the governor had asked Tarak if he would join the team’s attender in providing health services. Equipment would be beamed down to the spot beneath the break in the security net. Because of unpredictable conditions on the floor, the team would hike on foot to the equipment. The most recent surveys of the floor were loaded into their navigation equipment, but all of them knew that the whims of nature constantly changed the territory.

Pattie, Y29, and Tarak were the last to leave. Pattie had touched her thumb to her forehead, and to Zoë’s ear before Zoë’s eyes welled up. She threw her arms around Pattie’s shell, squeezing her tightly. “Come back,” she whispered, then disappeared into her private rooms, with Tarak following close behind. Pattie pulled Y29 out into the public passageway, offering a little privacy to the couple. After a few moments, Tarak emerged, his carrypack secure, walking stick in hand. “We should be leaving.”

And they began the long journey into the dark.

Chapter 7

The weathered observation deck felt slippery beneath Pattie's feet, the splintering planks wet with dew. Nervously, the team huddled near the center of the deck platform, all of them wanting to avoid the rickety railings. Here, beneath the security netting, the eerie, gray twilight that passed for day had to suffice until night fell when wrist-lamps could be used. None of them knew how far they would travel or how long they would be gone. Even if new supplies could be transported down, the feasibility of doing so was unknown. Conserving resources was a paramount concern.

On the team commander's signal, they began silently filing down the well-worn steps to the bottom. When Pattie's turn came, she descended, all the while marveling at the work of her ancestors. The platform—these steps that had been carved into the tree itself—predated the township by several hundred years. If the stories were true, the Nasat of the last millennium had scrambled up into the trees to escape their predators' pursuit. A lookout, stationed up on a makeshift platform, would warn the kindred of impending danger. They did everything they could to climb up, so we're climbing back down. Maybe we haven't learned as much as we hoped, Pattie thought wryly.

They traveled slowly, pausing occasionally when one of the team members would lose footing. Pattie used these opportunities to study the verdant mosses growing in the crevices of the tree bark. Seemingly innocent vine tendrils crawled tentatively around shrubby brush, twining over and under, slowly strangling their host. Pairs of glowing yellow eyes appeared in the shadows. A noise would send the creature scampering off. The wall of humidity rising around them took the most getting used to. Pattie, in particular, after living in the regulated atmospheres of starships for so long, had some trouble adjusting. The deeper into the understory they traveled, the more sodden, the more thickly dense the sweltering air became. Condensation dripped off the shell of the Nasat above Pattie; she was certain drops rolled off her own shell on the Nasat below her. The sheer volume of decomposing plant life and sour animal wastes, the overripe perfume of rotting flowers and fruit nearly overwhelmed Pattie.

When they reached the bottom, the team leader, a security services officer named D6 Blue, organized the group into smaller units of five, assigning one individual in each group the responsibility for keeping track of the others. He dispatched several security shells into the forest to survey the perimeter. While they were out on reconnaissance, he checked all the tricorders in the group, making sure that everyone had the same coordinates programmed into their navigational sensors. A locating beacon had been attached to the equipment about twenty-five kilometers from where they'd descended, making it simpler for the team to fix on their destination. The plan was to set up camp once they arrived. Where and how far into the forest the team would go the following day had yet to be determined. They hoped that they would find some kind of clue that would help them track whatever had invaded the township, but they couldn't be certain.

The scouts returned, reporting nothing unusual. D6 ordered the group to move out.

* * *

Each step required caution. Low-lying mists carpeting the marshy ground hid elaborate crisscrossing root systems. Pools of algae-laden waters lurked in every hollow and divot. Tarak perpetually kept his hand in front of his face as clouds of gnats swarmed in his eyes, nose, and ears. A constant chorus of neek-breek, breek-neek rang in Pattie's ears until she had little room for her own thoughts. But staying focused on the path was critical. One misstep could result in a soaked carrypack, a broken limb, or other, more serious injuries. Long, feathery leaves shrouded the path ahead. Other rubbery textured fronds were large enough to smother Pattie—or any other Nasat—should they fall. Brimming with sticky nectar, pitcher leaves (the size of starship consoles, Pattie noted with awe), temporarily blinded any kindred unfortunate enough to trip and stumble into a pollen-heavy stamen. Whatever awaited them on the forest floor was well hidden.

Pattie, Y29 Brown, Tarak, and their other team members, F2 Red and W37 Yellow, said little as they walked. The heavy humidity sapped Pattie's energy, and she assumed the others felt similarly. The smallest movement seemed to require such concentration that Pattie felt like she trudged along at askagoh's pace.

A stagnant pool. A reed bed. Step beneath the gnarled root nodules. Careful there—don't lose your pack. Another pool. Duck down to crawl under another root.

Time dragged by. The decaying leaves of the variegated ferns blurred together in one fetid, brown-green swamp.

Over the hours, daylight dimmed slowly, from dank grayness to murky dusk. As the rotting quagmire became more difficult to discern from the mud, Pattie nearly slipped into a peaty bog. She picked wet leaves off her limbs but was unable to scrape the slime out of her joints. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea, she thought. Pushing aside her discomfort, she trudged on, counting on the promise of her tricorder that base camp was only another kilometer away.

* * *

Finding stable ground to set up equipment had proved nearly impossible. D6 Blue ordered most work surfaces suspended between roots or laid over fallen trees. Usually, Nasat sleeping nests could be easily made up using the forest materials. Under these circumstances, however, there was a fear that an unexpected thunderstorm or ground shift would endanger any Nasat resting in a nest. Makeshift hammocks where they could curl up would have to suffice. As an additional protection, Tarak had devised a type of neural shielding, modeled after an instrument he used in his lab to limit the brain's ability to respond to certain stimuli. While not entirely foolproof, the shielding would scatter any large concentrations of specific energy frequencies. He'd chosen what frequencies to protect against based on Pattie's encounter.

The business of organizing camp consumed the rest of daylight. By the time Pattie was ready to take her night cycle meal, darkness had fallen and they were sipping their plates of fruit pulp by wrist-lamps. She and Tarak had been invited to join D6 after their meal, presumably to lay out a plan for the following days. They found the team leader standing behind a table, padds spread out before him, conversing animatedly with a botanist who had come along as a consultant.

"Excellent. P8, Dr. Tarak. Thank you for joining us," D6 said. "As I was just saying to G3 here, I believe our first task is to see if we can find a trail of some kind—any evidence left behind by whatever cut through the security netting."

"Have we come any closer to identifying the toxin?" P8 asked.

G3 shook his head. "No. Because the toxin has already interacted with the tree's metabolism when we find evidence of it, we're having a hard time isolating its unique molecular components—what's the tree and what's the invader."

"We should start looking as soon as possible," Tarak said. "Waiting for daylight could cost us valuable time."

"Agreed," D6 said, "But we've yet to figure out a consistent method for tracking the toxin scars. Down here, the light and the irregular landscape make it especially challenging. We'll just have to start combing

the area—as we did in the mother-tree branches.”

While Tarak and the others continued discussing possible strategies, Pattie mulled the problem over in her mind.

“And if we extrapolate a course—” D6 said.

“Wait,” Pattie interrupted. “You have a molecular analysis of the toxin?”

The botanist nodded, and transmitted the data to Pattie’s tricorder.

Attention fixed on the small screen, Pattie said, as she worked, “If we can figure out what properties these molecules respond to, we might be able to modify some of our equipment to help locate the toxin scars.”

“Such as light frequency or sound?” Tarak said.

“Exactly,” Pattie said. “My guess is, if we can find the right spectrum of light, we can flash our wrist-lamps over the plants, trees, roots—whatever else might be a likely spot—and see if we can ascertain a direction to pursue. I’ll work on this while you all come up with a backup plan.”

D6 looked a little surprised to be on the receiving end of an order from an underling. Pattie quickly amended, “If that works for you, sir.”

With a tip of his antennae, he indicated for her to continue. The others huddled around him, collectively analyzing the sensor data and land surveys.

While they reviewed potential routes, Pattie fiddled with her tricorder, her antennae curled in concentration. Biochemistry had never been her strength, but she knew enough of engineering to be confident in her abilities. An hour later, as D6 was ready to dismiss the group until morning, Pattie had a working model of her idea.

She had reworked the light-generating mechanism in her wrist-lamp to emit a narrow spectrum of ultraviolet light. Based on her calculations, one of the submolecular compounds in the toxin would be stimulated by the short-frequency light rays and start to vibrate. As the compound warmed, it would become luminescent. She had augmented the light beam with enough visible-frequency rays to allow the user to see where the beam was being directed. Since none of the other possible approaches would be feasible before morning, Pattie’s idea was worth exploring.

To obtain the best result, the group hiked away from the large, standing lamps illuminating the camp and found a fern grove—with fronds twice the height of a Nasat—that was a veritable lagoon of darkness. Pattie flipped the switch on her wrist-lamp, tinting her surroundings a washed-out purple. Even after waiting for a few moments, nothing glowed with a distinctive, white shimmer. She took a few cautious steps deeper into the fern grove. Still nothing.

She turned to the botanist. “Assuming the invader descended back into the forest along a similar trajectory to the one it took to initially break through the netting, where would we start looking?”

“Closer to camp, probably,” D6 answered. “I’ll take care of it.” He scurried back to camp and ordered all the lights dimmed.

Slowly, Pattie walked back toward camp, her wrist-lamp sweeping up and down, across the ground, over plants and saplings. She couldn't understand why she hadn't found anything. Laws of physics and chemistry defined the rules of how compounds responded to specific stimuli.

Wait a minute, she thought. I devised my light frequency based on the botanist's analysis and she said herself that the sample was degraded. I need to refine the spectrum. Making a couple of quick calculations, she adjusted the wrist-lamp to higher UVB range. The ultraviolet light winked out for a split second before flickering on again. She held up her wrist-lamp, sweeping the beam across the landscape.

The forest shimmered to life, from the boggy ground, to the blanched roots, to the brush. On every side, the base camp glowed. The botanist raced over to check out one of the lacy, luminous patterns on a fallen tree. A long pause. She turned around, raising her tricorder in the air for Pattie and D6 to see, and nodded.

You can't hide from us anymore, Pattie thought.

Several Nasat had emerged from being curled up, saw the eerie radiance on the bark behind them or the ground beneath them, and shouted out questions to the team leader. Confusion rippled through the group.

Pattie swallowed hard. Imagining something in theory had little in common with knowing something in fact. They had come to this place to find their enemy, whatever it was. To discover that the enemy had been in their midst—might still be in their midst—disquieted her in a way she hadn't suspected it would. Until now, she had been solving a puzzle. The stakes had suddenly become much higher.

"We've found our trail," D6 ordered. "Break camp."

Chapter 8

Pattie's first task, modifying a dozen or more wrist-lamps, consumed her time while the others packed up the camp gear. D6 decided that the group would travel with the minimum amount of equipment: food, phasers, medical supplies, and critical gear like the neural shielding devices. The rest would be secured and left to be beamed back up to the township at the appropriate time.

To avoid being disturbed, she sat apart from the others, her tools spread out on a table, intent on the task before her. Each fearful thought that bubbled up from her subconscious was pushed aside. There was no question in her mind of the potential dangers they faced, but letting her imagination run away with her would hardly help matters. The longer she worked, the more rote the wrist-lamp modifications became; her mind wandered, worried. She resolved to direct her energies toward a more productive topic.

Since her visit to the Red shell in the health center, Pattie had rarely thought of the map project she'd been working on. She'd brought the projections with her, fully intending to further analyze them in her downtime, though now it appeared downtime would be rare, if not nonexistent. Conjuring up a picture of the three township maps in her mind, she let them twirl around in her head while she worked. What's there that I'm not seeing? Each tree is a map of the township, from deep in the past to the present. When you're looking for an answer, focus on their commonalities. Focus on their commonalities, P8.

The perimeter. Quiets lived near the perimeter. The tremor damage and discovery of toxins came in the perimeter. And on the ancient map? She couldn't recall each pictogram and rendering, but she had a vague memory of a specific directive regarding the township boundaries. What was it?...

She had it: the oldest map indicated a ring of territory that was forbidden to build in. No reason was given—at least nothing specific like, “if you build in this area, you’ll activate a latent disease.” The same territory that now sustained damage. The same territory that had been gradually built up, after hundreds of years of being left alone, in the last twelve seasons.

We violated the edict and we’ve stirred up something. But what and why? Pattie made an adjustment to the last of the wrist-lamps. We’d better figure it out fast.

Amidst the neek-breek, breek-neek amphibian choruses, a distracting rustle came from the bushes off to her left. D6 must have dispatched shells to tear down her workspace. Probably eager for me to finish so we can start moving.

“If you’ll let me pack up my...” her voice trailed off.

Not a single shell appeared within five meters of her table. Clusters of them worked on packing up the last of the storage crates. A few scouts emerged from the woods. She twisted to look behind her; she scanned the area but saw only the glints of moonlight reflecting dully off pools of water, the scrubby ground cover, and the scabby buttress roots rising like monoliths. She had a new, keen awareness of her swishing pulse thrumming in her ears.

The forest became expectantly quiet.

A snapping twig refocused her attention. Something was behind her. She sensed it. Like before. Rising from her workbench, she tentatively stepped forward, forcing her leaden limbs to move. She parted the bushes behind her table. Athwupt-thuwpt of wings rushed up into her face and in startled shock, she staggered back, watching the avians become dark specks spiraling through the low-lying trees.

Inhaling deeply a few times to settle herself, Pattie leaned back into her seat-hammock. She closed her eyes....Lack of sleep must be catching up with you, she thought, suddenly feeling warm, drowsy....

A soft, cool pressure curled around her neck—and pinched!

She flew out of her chair, screeching, clutching at her neck, spinning around, searching. “Where are you? What are you? Show yourself!”

Across the now nearly deserted camp, shells looked up from their work.

“I know you’re here!” she cried, continuing to whirl around, trying to peel away, pry away, that thing, the cold fingers—

“Pattie.” Tarak’s soft voice steadied her.

Turning toward him, she stopped spinning; dizziness convulsed her vision.

His hands touched her face; Pattie instantly felt the stability of his mind melding with hers. The surroundings blurred, her body slackened, and her mind cleared as he probed her consciousness. From Tarak’s gentle questioning she instantly knew that whatever she’d experienced had been hers and hers alone, for she felt no recognition from him when she attempted to recall the memory. None of the others had seen or felt it. And for a brief moment she wondered if she was going mad, like quints were often thought to do. That her defective brain had played games with her, tormenting her with imaginary

sensations. Anxiously, she reassured Tarak that she wasn't hallucinating, pleading with him to believe her. And he accepted her thoughts as truth.

Gradually, he broke away from the meld, continuing to gaze deeply into Pattie's eyes. "Be careful," he admonished her. "I do not understand what you see."

Pattie nodded.

A gentle, balmy breath of breeze gushed through the trees. A clatter in the sky warned of a storm. Within seconds, the clouds opened, sending a warm torrent of rain.

Blinking droplets out of their eyes, Tarak and Pattie rushed to gather the adjusted wrist-lamps into a carrypack to give to D6. The team leader immediately distributed them to the security services officers, who took point at the front of the group. Following the spindly line of Nasat, Tarak and Pattie walked hand-in-hand into the dark, blustering forest.

* * *

For a time, Pattie believed she could see ghoulish white-purple shimmers as the wrist-lamps unmasked them. She trudged dutifully behind the others, wondering what horrible place this path led to. Soon, the veil of rain shrouded her view entirely; her world became mud splashing on her limbs, slippery black-green tendrils slapping as she pushed ahead. She kept her eyes down, watching for erupting roots or slippery rock. Tarak walked ahead of her, pushing the low-hanging foliage out of their way. The rain crashed and shooshed, pounding them mercilessly. Lightning crackled, answered by percussive thunder.

Without warning, a Red pushed past, clicking frantically. Pattie couldn't understand what he was saying and stopped to call after him when another shell shoved her aside, hurriedly chasing after the first. Looking up, she saw crisscrossing lavender light streams shooting off in random directions. Muffled Nasat cries pierced the rushing water. Her own wrist-lamp offered short-range illumination, not nearly enough to discern what was happening ahead.

"Sloth!" a Brown hissed as he scrambled past.

She saw vague outlines of shells dropping, presumably into defensive curls, on the pathway ahead; light beams flashed through the trees as the others scattered into the wood.

A guttural howl pierced the air.

Run.

Though her first instinct was for self-preservation, Pattie looked over at Tarak. He had drawn his phaser, but was watching and waiting to see her choice before he moved.

For Pattie, there was no decision to make. She would not abandon a friend.

Indicating the opposite direction from the rest of the group, she shouted over the pounding rain, "This way!"

Without looking back, they picked their way through, over and under every barrier in their path, feet splashing through puddles, limbs scraping on sharp twigs. Y29 Brown chased after, quickly catching up to Tarak and Pattie.

Another howl sounded closer than the first; Pattie felt she had no choice but to pick up the pace. A thorn hedge lacerated her abdomen. Flinching from the pain, she pushed on, with Tarak and Y29 following her lead.

She rounded the corner of a gargantuan bolder when a screech—a Nasat screech—chilled her.

“Pattie!” came Tarak’s call. “Y29 has fallen!”

Breathing hard, she hurriedly retraced her steps, dropping on all eight limbs to scoot under a fallen log. When she found Tarak, he was pushing a sapling palm tree down toward a shadowed bog. And she saw Y29. Sinking fast.

Quicksand.

“Stay still!” she shouted, her words nearly drowned out by the rain. Cupping her pincers around her mouth, she continued, “If you move, you’ll sink faster. Try to pretend you’re floating!”

The ground where she stood thudded beneath her. She smelled the sour, malodorous stench of wet mammal hair. A howl came from around the bend.

Tarak shoved the sapling trunk as close to Y29 as was feasible. Severing the sapling with his phaser wouldn’t work because he needed the springy flexibility of the green wood to give the Brown buoyancy once he grabbed hold. Old wood might snap, sending Y29 deeper into the slippery sand.

“I’m going after him!” Pattie jumped onto the limb, crawling carefully along the trunk, trying to avoid slipping into the quicksand herself. Tarak threw all his weight onto the sapling, using his considerable strength to keep it as still as possible. Moving quickly, yet safely, proved difficult, but she could see Y29 thrashing his limbs, propelling himself deeper into the pit. She reached the end of the sapling.

About one body length short.

She gulped. Not much of a choice. Gripping the bouncing sapling with six of her limbs, she allowed herself to tip over so she was shell down to the pit.

“Grab my limbs!” She reached toward Y29.

“Can’t—breathe—can’t—”

“Brown! Do it!”

Y29 gave up thrashing and stretched for Pattie’s limb.

She saw him straining to touch her, so she kept shouting encouragement.

A thunderous bellow sounded. Pattie glanced over and saw a pair of glowing green eyes through the grasses.

Extending herself as far as she could, Pattie thrust her arm as far as it would extend. Y29 wavered, bob-bled. With one last straining effort, she reached when he reached. Their pincers touched. She grabbed his hand with her own.

“Hold on, Brown!”

Two limbs holding Y29 and six gripping the sapling trunk, she scooted her way back toward solid ground, knowing that the sloth ambled closer by the second. As Y29’s fear subsided, he allowed himself to “float” in the quicksand. Dragging him along became easier as the viscous sand lost its grip on him. With one groaning heave, she shoved him toward the bank. Tarak grabbed the Brown by his hands, lifting him to safety. Pattie scurried down the branch in time to see the sloth rising on two legs, mere meters away.

He swiped his claw-encrusted paws, baring his fangs with a snarl.

Pattie met the creature’s eyes. Without looking away, she said, “Tarak. Take Y29. Move along the bank. I need you as close as you can safely be to the quicksand. I might need you to catch me.”

Dragging the Brown beside him, Tarak ducked into the tall reeds. She heard the rustling as he moved in deep enough to be hidden from view, but close enough that he could see her.

The sloth stepped toward Pattie; Pattie stepped backward onto the bent sapling, testing the bounce with each step. A few more steps and she would be out over the quicksand. While she believed she could jump to shore, she didn’t want to test her luck. Hoping the beast would take the bait, she made a quick, jerking fake to the side, knowing that from the beast’s perspective she would appear to be running away.

A paw swiped at the sapling. Pattie dove into the reeds. The sloth lost his footing, sliding through the slippery mud into the quicksand.

Without looking back, Tarak, Y29, and Pattie ran, paying no heed to direction or rain, seeking the first sanctuary they could find.

* * *

How far they’d traveled when they arrived at the stone mound, Pattie couldn’t tell. It wasn’t until they had been moving for at least half an hour that Pattie realized that, in her rescue of Y29, she’d lost both her Nasat-issued personal communications device and her Starfleet combadge. The storm hadn’t let up in hours. Neither she nor Tarak wanted to check while they traveled and thus risk accidentally losing or damaging a precious tricorder under such poor conditions. Rivulets of water carving through the soil had created unexpected crevasses in the weakened crust, making each step more dangerous than ever.

Tarak had seen the formation first, at the edge of a clearing. In their exhausted state, they had decided finding a safe place to wait out the storm took precedence over locating the other team members. Flash floods weren’t uncommon; as they had discovered earlier, rumors of predators hadn’t been exaggerated.

Dragging themselves wearily inside, they found a dry, sandy interior that smelled musty, as if the cave had been abandoned for a long time. As tired as she was, Pattie had no desire to fall asleep, only to awaken with a meaner, hungrier neighbor than the sloth. Tarak removed his tricorder from the carrypack and took a reading. The cave was vacant. That was the only news she needed to determine if she wanted to stay. Pattie pushed aside her impulse to drop at the first opportunity when Tarak urged them to go deeper inside, assuring that their presence would go unnoticed to the outside world. They trudged another twenty meters before deciding to stop. Neither Y29 nor Pattie had the energy to chew on a ration bar. Throwing down her carrypack, shutting down her wrist-lamp, and dropping to the ground, Pattie curled up to sleep.

Chapter 9

At first, she couldn't tell if a wrist-lamp was on or if the storm had finally passed, allowing the sunlight to seep through the forest. Uncurling her limbs, she stretched, feeling each joint click satisfactorily. She realized she was hungry. Y29 had yet to awaken. Tarak's carrypack sat on the sandy cave floor beside her own, though he was nowhere to be seen.

Fishing through her supplies, she procured a ration bar (normally detestable) that she gobbled down greedily. How about some water? Meandering downward, the farther she went, the brighter the light became until she reached the forest clearing. A quick glance around revealed no imminent safety concerns. She climbed up a craggy boulder that helped her to reach a fruit vine brimming with tempting clusters of bulbous, ripening seedpods. Sipping water collected on one of its leaves satisfied her thirst. Much to her enjoyment, the mid-cycle sun had heated the stone, so she leaned back to absorb the warmth.

"Pattie!"

She opened her eyes and saw that Tarak had emerged from behind a boulder on the opposite side of the cave mouth.

"I believe I have discovered something of interest. Come quickly. I would appreciate your input."

* * *

Hiking a switchback trail carved out of the stone, Pattie followed Tarak into a smaller cave, not far from the larger one where they had spent the night. He activated his wrist-lamp, since Pattie hadn't brought hers. At first, the cave resembled the larger one, but as they went in deeper, Pattie started noticing flashes of color, smoother walls, flattened areas that could serve as tables or benches. I am in a place of my ancestors, she realized. Her heart quickened at the thought. The path we walked to reach this place had not been worn away by rain—tools carved it.

Tarak paused, raised his wrist-lamp, and illuminated a wall etched and painted in colorful pictographs, the earliest written language of the Nasat. Once upon a time, she knew, these drawings would have been tinted in brilliant hues of green, umber, ochre, and indigo, the colors of rain forest plants and berries. Her trembling hand hovered over the etchings.

"This is astonishing," she said after a long moment.

"I believe it is also relevant to our present predicament." Tarak pointed the light on a section of pictographs and used his other hand to direct Pattie's attention to the text he wanted her to study.

Her eyes flickered over the pictures: swaying trees; an anatomically perfect rendering of a Nasat, but lacking a mouth; clusters of plants with elongated, graceful leaves; ripples emitting from the plants; Nasat, prone on the ground, dead. More pictographs showing destruction. Like Tarak, her knowledge was imprecise, but she, too, could discern a narrative. "This looks like a war," she muttered.

"To me also. It appears the Nasat of long ago were engaged in a great struggle."

She looked up at him. "How far back do these date?"

“Sensors put the paint decay at about seven, perhaps eight hundred years.”

Before the maps. Before the promises made by kindred past.

“Who were they fighting? And where did they go?”

“Perhaps they have not gone anywhere, Pattie. Perhaps they are among you still.”

Her mind raced through the possibilities. Promises made. A boundary. She paused. When factions made war on each other, one of the most oft-disputed causes was territory. Depending on how the conflict was settled, the victor either claimed all, or a treaty dividing up territory, equipment, and resources was agreed to. In the case of the Federation’s relationships with her Alpha Quadrant neighbors, demilitarized or neutral zones were established to prevent further altercations.

The realization struck her. What if my ancestors established a neutral zone and my generation has violated the agreement?

What if we are at war?

Frantically, she scanned the pictographs, searching for clues to their foe’s identity, if indeed, a shadow from the past had once again emerged.

A lost tribe of Nasat, living deep in the uncharted quadrants of the forest? Or perhaps an alien species that once coexisted with the Nasat, but had become extinct, or abandoned this planet for another? She reviewed the pictures repeatedly. Nasat. Tree. Plant. Death. The ripples. And the drawing of the Nasat without the mouth. A mute Nasat.

A quiet.

Among the thousands of pictographs on the wall, not one of the Nasat depicted among the dead had been mute. Somehow, the quiet had played a role in this conflict, she decided. A split second later, she shook her head, dismissing her own illogical reasoning. Of what use would a shell that couldn’t communicate be in a war?

With an enemy who didn’t use language.

Snippets of images and sounds fired rapidly, blending together in a soup of confusion. A high-pitched hum coming from deep in the forest. A rustle in a bush. The sense of being watched. A cold, dry arm wrapped around her throat.

Hot...wet...rain...run...fear...dizziness...trance...

A throbbing ache began in her neck, and she dropped to the ground.

“We have to find the others,” she whispered. “They won’t see them coming.”

Chapter 10

She had done all she knew how to do.

Her relief at seeing most of the team members safely returned to base camp had been quickly supplanted by frustration. In light of her discovery, she had pleaded with the team commander to call for reinforcements, or at the very least, begin the trek back to the observation platform where it might have a safer base. They might have to hike through the night, but considering what they risked facing if they remained on the forest floor, the difficult trip would be worth it.

D6 was unmoved by her arguments. “Pictures on cave walls and old maps?” he clicked derisively. “I have an enemy I can track. Following the trail deeper into the forest will bring us closer to the toxin’s origin. That’s why we’re down here, P8.”

“Do you even know what you hunt?” Pattie asked, chasing after him while he unpacked the weapons locker. He slapped phasers into the pincers of every Nasat on the team while she stood by, watching helplessly.

“We don’t always have the luxury of knowing the face of our foe,” he said.

“But I do know what we’re searching for. At least I think I do. And we’d do better to—”

“We stay where we are. At dusk we go deeper into the forest. Come with us. Stay behind. Skitter like a little nymph back to your nursery. The choice is yours,” he said, “but keep your crazy ideas to yourself. I don’t want you panicking the others.” In his hands, he held a plasma clipboard where he’d outlined the night’s journey, having traced the previous night’s efforts with a stylus. Pattie saw that the team would be nearly fifty kilometers from base camp if D6’s plan went smoothly.

Too far to escape to the township.

Too far to retrieve protective gear.

Too far to defend themselves if they came under unexpected attack.

Pattie’s head had ached since they left the cave; confronting D6’s stubbornness only magnified her suffering. As long as the throbbing pain had persisted, she couldn’t think or reason clearly. She talked with Tarak about what to do.

D6 had given them permission to leave, though they would have to reach the observation deck before they could call for an emergency beam-out. Flash flooding during the previous night had brought down many trees in the base camp area, including one that had crashed into their equipment storage. Because D6 had no intention of calling for additional support or an emergency beam-out, the communication unit, along with power generators and computer monitors, had remained buried beneath a half-ton of tree trunk and branches. She had lost her personal communicator and her combadge. Y29’s was buried in the quicksand bog, and Tarak had used the transducer in his to repair a damaged neural shielding device.

And they had concerns about what would happen if the other team members saw them breaking away from the group. Pattie wouldn’t be able to offer an explanation of their behavior without violating D6’s order to avoid involving the others.

The three of them were on the verge of making their decision when the last vestiges of natural light guttered, almost imperceptibly at first. As if a dark cloud passed over the setting sun, a strange, syrupy half-light enshrouded them, gradually dimming until dense grayness swallowed them whole. And the ache...

Pattie hadn't known she could remain conscious and endure such relentless pounding. If only it would go away. She had cradled her head in her hands. A sharp pain stabbed through her forehead; she collapsed on the ground.

Above her, the leafy ceiling dropped, pressing down.

On every side, gaps of light between trunk, root, and bush filled with opaque black-green.

They had come.

* * *

A low, dull hum pulsed and it was as if the forest had fallen silent at the command of the invader. Words slipped away, her voice muted; Pattie wondered if she would forever after live in this place of silent, wrenching pain or if this enemy would take pity on her and end the suffering.

From where she lay, Pattie watched Tarak dive for his carrypack. He fumbled for his neural shielding. The hum sharpened, became louder. He pressed his hands to his ears, reflexively curling his legs and arms close to his body. Other Nasat looked on helplessly, paralyzed, teetering and wavering where they stood. D6 reached for his phaser but gave up when the piercing sound became too physically painful to withstand. He tried raising trembling limbs to cover his ears but his pincers locked up, frozen. Drooping, he fell and reflexively curled into a ball.

I can't just lie here and not do anything. Pattie willed her pincers to move. Down. To her side. Where her phaser was hooked to her belt. The excruciating effort took every ounce of strength she had. She found the safety. Deactivated it. Each draining movement took a lifetime. She maneuvered the weapon out to the side, pushing it across the dirt. Tilting it up, she aimed for the trees.

Flame erupted, crackling and smoking. For a brief moment the humming stopped. She fired again, and again, until the perimeter branches flickered yellow-orange. She took advantage of the respite to scramble to her knees so she could face the assault head-on.

She saw them for the first time.

And yet not for the first time, for she had seen them etched into the cave walls. Long, gaunt leaf-limbs, rippling frenetically, their oozing, pseudopod-like feet propelled them forward. She didn't need to see the ground beneath them to know they left pools of toxin in their wake. Her ancestors had not named these creatures; they had only waged war with them. Through her pain, she sensed their fury and saw evidence of it: the skeletal remains of a Yellow, desiccated and thrown aside. Another terrified shell was plucked from a hammock, tossed into the air, and bounced across waving limbs until he vanished in a whirl of green.

Once again the hum rose, this time a rhythmic, wordless chant. They closed in, surrounding the base camp. She knew all chance of escape had been lost.

An agonizing sting ringed the circumference of her head. Dropping her phaser, she stumbled forward, clutched her limbs tight against her shell. The noise pushed into her ears and vibrated her eyes, invading each fragment of her consciousness. She resisted, but her will wavered as the assailant pressed on.

A hand touched her lowest limb and she looked down to see Tarak, who had crawled along the ground.

He touched her. She sensed a flash of telepathy. Dropping down where he could better reach her, she felt his hand fumbling on her shell. He touched her cheek.

Don't...resist...them.

But I have to, she answered. Or they will destroy me.

Let them...he stammered...speak. Hear their voices.

She mustered a protest. They have no voice.

They have your voice. Listen.

Trust was instinctive between her and Tarak. He who had first given words to her thoughts and had known her. And yet in this thing....

She doubled over in pain.

Don't resist them.

She yielded.

* * *

A flood of images washed over her. Prismatic light spinning through misty treetops. Slender leaf-arms opened to receive the beneficent warmth. Quiet groves near cascading water. And the light...precious light. Shadow falling. Traveling through the dark. And where is the light? They have taken it. The promise. They have forgotten. Take back what has been lost.

Shaking off the reverie, she came back to her own mind.

Their circle tightened; they squeezed in so close that she knew within moments she could face the fate of the Yellow and who knew how many other shells who had been plucked from their paddocks. The shells that had been devoured by a species starved for light, light that had been taken from them by the Nasat, who had violated their promise to never build beyond a certain boundary. We have betrayed them.

Reaching backward, she fumbled for Tarak's hand. She found it: cold, limp. She pressed his fingers to her cheek and felt only dullness. How can I speak to them without Tarak? A thought bubbled up. An image of herself as a nymph shell. She had not touched Tarak: he had touched her. And she must do the same.

She took this risk or all of them were lost.

Weakly, she crawled toward the sea of black-green, uncertain whether they would even give her a chance. Their conflict was palpable. There were those who would destroy her as they had the others. Those who questioned her motives and were consumed with anger. Those, like her, who wanted answers. She pressed on. Extending a trembling limb, she reached toward them, willing one of them to trust her enough to reciprocate her risk.

One leaf emerged, unfurling tentatively.

They touched.

A questioning, frightened consciousness connected with Pattie's. She projected her own fear to the alien. The fragile connection continued as the minds moved in wary circles around each other. Pattie learned their name: the Citoac. You are named to me, she said. The Citoac mind named her in kind.

She could not speak for the others, or her kindred in the township. So she spoke for herself; she imaged her sorrow for what her kindred had done. We have not known of your kind in hundreds of years. The memory has been lost, as has the promise that we would allow the light to pass through the canopy without interference.

The Citoac she touched wanted assurance that the light would be restored. She caught flashes of the others demanding immediate reparation. Some seething minds would only be satisfied with revenge. Pattie could not sense who would win this struggle of wills. I cannot speak for my kindred. I can only promise that I will speak for you. I will give you a voice so that this wrong to your kind can be undone.

A long, silent moment elapsed for Pattie as the Citoac shared thoughts among themselves, determining whether to trust her. She looked around the base camp to see what destruction had been wrought and was sickened by what she saw. If they rejected her...

A leaf-limb rippled toward her, touching her hand. Closing her eyes, Pattie opened up her mind to receive their images. Another curled around her forehead. And another, and still others until she yielded fully to an embrace of cool green.

She smiled. I am named to them. I am named to them all.

Epilogue

"Are you going to have time to help supervise the deck disassembly?" Zoë asked as the conveyor continued chugging along.

"I gave them my designs," Pattie answered. She switched her duffel from one limb to another so she could better grip the railing. "Most of the paddocks can be easily integrated into other decks. The expansion wasn't really necessary. More like, the township's existing space needed to be allocated more efficiently. The forest quadrant builders can handle it."

"I'm surprised. As an engineer, I figured you'd be jumping at the chance to rebuild the structure."

"The engineering part is fine. I'm just in the mood to do something different for my last week here." Since their return from the forest floor, she had felt like she'd spent more time in politics than she had in engineering. Making a case for the Citoac before the Planetary Council had consumed every waking cycle she had until yesterday.

The Nasat indifference to history had made providing the background of the ancient Citoac-Nasat treaty challenging. She had beamed down to the cave mound with a Federation anthropological linguist and a Nasat loremaster to try to make enough sense of the pictographs to offer a narrative to the Council. Pattie had even transmitted them to Bart Faulwell—en route to Earth from an assignment he, Abramowitz, and Soloman had taken to Vrinda—for his input. Once all the pieces came together, a story, not unlike the softs' fairy tales, emerged.

Together, they determined that the Citoac and Nasat had once had a protectorate-type relationship. A typically gentle species, the Citoac had no inclination to develop technology or civilization while the Nasat had been more assertive about colonizing the planet. Fearing that the Nasat would overrun their territory, the Citoac had initiated strikes against the Nasat. A truce was made between the two species, allowing the Nasat to build their townships without Citoac interference as long as the Nasat confined their expansion to a predetermined area. Requiring sunlight to maintain their photosynthetic processes meant that the Citoac needed the rain forest canopy to remain in a more primitive state. The Nasat had promised that the Citoac habitat wouldn't be encroached upon. As time passed, the acquisition of technology and the advancement of knowledge dominated Nasat concerns. Maintaining ties with the past became less of a priority; memories of the Citoac faded. Once they became spacefaring, the Nasat joined the Federation's destiny. That they had once had an obligation to a quiet sentient species had been forgotten.

Until the time when Nasat forgetfulness threatened Citoac existence.

Between the security net and extending the township perimeter, the Citoac had been forced into smaller, more hostile territories. Photosynthetic processes became inadequate for feeding; the Citoac had been forced to become carnivorous to survive. From poisoning the mother-tree and penetrating the security net, to invading the paddocks, they had waged war on the Nasat to make themselves known.

What held the most meaning for Pattie had been what she and Tarak had puzzled through after the siege at the base camp. Instead of being genetic misfits or anomalies, quiet existed among the Nasat as nature's way of facilitating communication with the Citoac. Tarak had hypothesized that the quiet concentrated their paddocks on the township perimeter as a way of giving the Citoac easier access to them. How many centuries the quiet had facilitated communication between the two species had been lost. Whether through words or pictographs, the ancient quiet had served a vital role that had helped the Nasat survive into their spacefaring age.

Pattie clutched the handle of her duffel more tightly. What legacy will I pass to my offspring? she thought, regretting for the first time that nymph Nasat were raised without knowledge of, or connection to, their parents. But if her nymphs inherited her quiet mutation they would be connected to her, and to all the quiet who had gone before. If she took nothing else with her from her visit home when she returned to S.C.E. duty, it would be a sense of belonging to the past. She had never known why soft sentimentalized mementos, old holos, and data chips containing communiqués and journals. Now she thought she might start keeping a personal log once she was back on the *Vinci*.

Zoë touched her arm when they reached the deck sector. Stepping off the conveyor, they both ran their IDs through the security scanner and entered the crowded plaza. Pattie liked the look of this old place with its clay-plaster walls and playground even more than she had the first time she'd seen it. Inhaling deeply, she could smell the gourd paste cakes being readied for the mid-cycle meal. Maybe they can find a seat for us. I'd like to meet my offspring's future neighbors.

"You ready to drop off your young ones?" Zoë asked gently.

Pattie nodded.

* * *

The nursery was in much the same chaotic state as it had been when Pattie had visited before. Shells raced around, attending to Nasat larvae in every state of hatching.

Pattie located the director and after a brief interview (a formality), reluctantly passed off her data chip and the duffel bag carrying her larvae. I hadn't expected to feel...empty, she thought as she watched the director deposit her larvae into a holding chamber. She wanted to leave as soon as possible, to distance herself from her discomfort.

Upon leaving the director's office, she noticed Zoë in intense conversation with a Green carrying not one, but two nymphs. I hope she knows I want to leave. Now.

"Pattie!" Zoë waved her over. "Come on over."

Obviously not. She sighed.

Zoë scooped one of the nymphs, a Red, out of the Green's limbs and before Pattie could protest, deposited it in her arms. She took the Green's other charge, a Brown, for herself.

Who have we here? Pattie studied the nymph thoughtfully, guessing he was three or four weeks old. She gave him her pincer to grip; he intuitively clutched at her with all his limbs. In spite of herself, she smiled and clicked nonsense rhymes to the nymph, knowing that he was too young to respond. Will you be a quiet, little one? she thought, watching how his eyes focused on her moving mouth and tongue. If you are, I know exactly who can take care of you.

Their eyes met and linked. For a long moment, she stared down into the Red nymph's tiny face, wondering who this little one would be two or three seasons from now. She touched his face with one of her limbs. I name you, she thought, willing him to feel her words. Whatever was ahead of him, she wanted him to sense that someone, somewhere, knew him.

As she was known.

About the Author

HEATHER JARMAN is the author of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine: Mission Gamma Book 2: This Gray Spirit*. She is currently working on several *Trek*-related projects in addition to an original YA spy novel. She lives in Portland, Oregon, with her husband and four daughters.

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