

Contaminant

By Robert Lydford

The U.S.S. *Merlin* dropped from warp.

Vy'ra, the *Merlin's* Caitian Junior communications officer, leant forward in her chair and tapped the computer console with her delicately-clawed hand. 'Captain to the bridge!' she said as a Trill Starfleet Admiral entered the bridge via a side door. 'We're on approach to Starbase four one zero. We're also being hailed by Captain Leigh Brown of the U.S.S. *Rage*.'

Dalen Varr nodded. 'On screen! - Captain Brown, it's good to see you again.'

Leigh returned the Trill's smile. 'I hope this time that we meet in better circumstances.'

Varr nodded. 'So do I, Captain, I remember one hellish fortnight in an asteroid field on the Cardassian border.'

Leigh sighed, as he tapped a button on his command chair. 'The Gal'va pass,' Leigh said, a note of sorrow in his voice. 'We lost a lot of good people, holding on to that floating pile of rocks.'

The Admiral's eyes closed as the Captain spoke. 'Six ships, and more than five thousand people,' the Admiral said, sadly. 'Many of them were friends.'

Leigh said. 'So many lost to the Dominion.' Leigh's voice held its own note of sadness. He pulled himself together. 'Okay, USS. *Merlin*, I'm sending you a course heading of zero two five, mark three nine. You can follow us in.'

Starbase 410 was a massive Federation space station set among the swirling gasses of the Night-fire nebula. Ahead of them, a huge set of doors rolled silently open to reveal a massive hanger.

A female voice spoke over the intercom. 'This is Starbase Dock-master to U.S.S. *Merlin*. You are cleared for docking at platform zero three.'

Admiral Varr acknowledged the call, as the starship *Merlin* was slowly swallowed by the Starbase's cavernous floodlit interior...

Dalen Varr turned to his Vulcan first Officer, T'Pren; 'I'd like you to draw up a shore leave roster. We need only retain those needed to carry out essential systems checks, and to oversee the sensor refit. I see no reason not to allow the crew to let their hair down.'

She nodded her compliance.

'I'll split our essential personnel into three shifts, that way everyone gets a little downtime,' she said, with a nod...

On a small planet, by the name of Ilonaris Prime, located around eight light-years from the Starbase.

'What in the name of Zaal do you mean, "she's gone"?'

The younger man shook his head and hands apologetically. 'It's not my fault. She killed the duty Security officers. And my cracked ribs are still strapped up!' he yelled.

The old man became angered. 'You let her go! She's gone!' he snapped, as he scratched his patterned skull. 'She was due to be sent for reconditioning. We haven't lost one of her kind for more than a millennium.'

The younger man blushed, causing the amber pattern on his skull to blush deep violet. 'It's not my fault!' he said defensively. 'She's an empathic metamorph; She does this mind trick, change shapes using any image from your mind. We should just be thankful that one of her kind is a rarity these days.' The old man became annoyed, and grabbed the younger man by his shoulders. 'Listen. E'ral, There's a creature out there, that in about a week will become mature. Once she becomes an adult, may the Goddess protect us all.'

A tall woman approached them. 'We might not have that problem!' she said in a matter of fact manner.

'What do you mean?' The old man asked.

'She's stolen an old Jir'na class transport shuttle from a warehouse in the planets northern trade sector.'

A look of shock crossed their faces.

'She's gone!' the woman said despondently.

'We've got to find her. Otherwise no one is safe, for when she becomes hungry, she'll drain the blood from anyone she catches.' The old man moaned, as the woman stood to attention. 'We'll have to alert our galactic neighbours. The Klingon Empire, and that Federation base, out near the red nebula. The woman shook her head.

'I disagree Lord Prefect. Let me go after her. I'll kill her If I have to.' The other looked shocked. 'Kill her!' The young man asked, in horror. 'Isn't that a little. . .' She interrupted him. 'Do we really want the galaxy to know that years ago we tried to genetically enhance our children? And in doing so brought the Ra'nok Curse upon us.'

'The Ra'nok blood drinker is back,' the young man moaned, shaking almost uncontrollably. 'She'll kill us all,' he panicked through tear-filled eyes, as the older man tried to comfort him.

The old man then turned to the woman beside him. 'Kor'ta.' She looked up at the sound of her name. 'May the Goddess be with you in your quest. As one of the last members of our warrior caste, I charge you with destroying the Ra'nok!' She touched her palm to her forehead, then ran it down her face to rest lightly on her lips. 'If you'll sign my departure papers, Lord Prefect, I'll leave tonight.'

Twenty one hundred hours... Admiral Jat left the stations holo-theatre. She was still humming a tune from a selection by Verdi as she walked briskly across the neon-lit promenade. She smiled towards a couple of Bajoran monks, as they bowed to her in their deep saffron and orange robes. Rounding the corner, near the Promenade's Security Office, she heard a muffled bleep and reached into her handbag for her communicator.

'Jat here, report!' The sound of the Station's duty Communications officer's voice spilled from the communicator. 'Admiral, I have just received a message from an Alterian freighter. They claim to have found an unconscious pre-teenage girl, four days ago. They believe her to be an Ilonarian. They say that she was found in a battered transport shuttle. They request placing her in our Medical facilities.'

In the Bajoran temple, Ambassador Madia Amme had just finished consulting the orb of prophecy, on loan from its shrine on the planet Bajor. As she moved to close the door of the ornate box, a bolt of golden light hit her. Madia collapsed as images of a young girl with amber eyes, and swirls of blood filled her mind. Thankfully, the horrors were short lived, as she passed out. A few minutes later she came round.

Evad knelt beside her. 'Ambassador Madia!' he panted.

'Are you okay?' he whispered close to her ear.

She pulled a lock of blonde hair from her eyes. 'Thank you Evad, yes, the vision came a little quicker than I was expecting.' she said breathlessly, as the man helped her into a sitting position. 'I wouldn't dream of asking what the prophets revealed to you. But it seemed to unnerve you.' With help, she stood up a little unsteadily. The feeling was not unlike the first time the Klingon Ambassador had got her to drink Klingon Bloodwine. The dulling of her senses, and numbing headache, were certainly a little more than familiar...

Admiral Jat blinked, as she placed the Communicator onto her off-duty clothing. "I suppose you should tell them to bring the young girl here. Then we'll look into what's happened. As soon as Captain Brown returns, he'll be taking the nightshift, for me."

'Understood, Sir!

'Jat out!'

B'Sel moved her hands slowly over the sensor switch that dimmed the lights in her quarters, and moving the Padd from the armrest, she sat down. The Nightfire nebula was just visible from her window. She seemed somehow restless, as she got up and checked on her children who were sleeping in the other room. She wasn't the only one. Ke'reth stood in his quarters; he'd already stripped and cleaned his custom-made disruptor pistol. He then opened its case and disengaged the primary power core.

His uncle, the visiting General Korsh, sat across the table from him. 'Problem?' he asked.

Ke'reth sighed and shook his head. 'I'm not sure, it seems a little unbalanced.'

The elderly Klingon General gestured for Ke'reth to pass it over. Ke'reth stood up and handed it to him.

The General rattled it, turning it this way and that. 'This all seems okay to me! It must be your imagination, boy.' Ke'reth took the gun back. 'I suppose you're right, uncle.' The old man smiled as he took a swig from his bloodwine. Ke'reth replaced the case and placed his pistol in the charger, before raising his own goblet of bloodwine. 'To the Empire, then Uncle?' The old warrior downed his glass. 'Aye, to the Empire, then to bed, 'cause my old bones are tired. Maj ram (*Good night in Klingon.*) Ke'reth.'

Down the Med-centre, a pair of Medical Orderlies brought in a young girl on a medical gurney. Doctor Karen Michaels picked up her medical tricorder from the bench. 'Computer, initiate EMH5 program,' she asked, as an attractive dark-haired woman in Starfleet uniform appeared beside her.

'Please state the nature of my activation?'

Karen then glanced over to a young black man in a Starfleet Medical uniform. 'Daniel, can you bring the medical trolley over here for me? And Doctor,' she said, turning to the EMH. 'I'll need everything relevant on Ilonarian physiology. They rarely leave their Homeworld, and, to my knowledge, only Doctor Zynal of Andoria has ever had the chance to really study them up close,' Karen said as she checked the girl's pupil dilation with a small pen-light torch.

'I'm barely getting a response here,' she said, as she checked the girl's pulse and blood pressure with a medical scanner. 'Well, Doc,' she said to the EMH. 'With readings this low, a human child would be dead.'

The EMH seemed to be grinning in a smug manner. 'Then be thankful, that she's not human. These readings are low, but only a little below the Ilonarian norm,' the hologram said, as it stared into her eyes.

It then leant forward and opened the young girl's mouth. 'That's odd!' The EMH said. 'What do you make of that?' the EMH asked.

Doctor Michaels leant over the patient. 'Aren't all Ilonarians vegetarian?'

The EMH nodded.

'Then why are her primary and secondary Bicuspid or canine teeth extended?' Doctor Michaels took a small plastic paddle from the medical trolley and waved it twice through a sterilising ray. 'If I didn't know better, I'd almost say it looks like she has fangs.' Karen said as she tapped them with the paddle.

The EMH checked its tricorder. 'There's another possible problem. Both her DNA and RNA sequences are incorrect for an Ilonarian.' Doctor Michaels, read the

tricorder for herself. 'A genetic mutation?' she asked. The EMH shook its head. 'It doesn't make sense! Why tamper with the genetic patterns of a perfectly healthy subspecies.' Karen looked up.

'Whoa, Doc!' She exclaimed. 'Subspecies?' The Doctor nodded. 'This level of mutation, does not occur over just one generation, more like a hundred, maybe even more.' Karen lent forward, to check her eyes again, as suddenly the girl sat up and stared at the ceiling, she then glanced around her, as she took in her new environment. 'J'ol-nea esp a camjay, noya at oo te lana?' The Doctor translated, her words. (*Where am I? What is this place?*) The EMH bowed his head towards her and spoke softly. 'Un-es'ka be-a, be-a. Sul et b-n-o'gis al.' Her eyes widened. (*You are safe, this is the Federation Starbase 410.*) She nodded. 'Klee'noyt-a Be'kay et tu-anar.' The EMH frowned,

'She says that she's scared.' Karen caressed the young girl's brow, as she rechecked her tricorder. She was cold to the touch, and the girl's frame had gone from weak to almost approaching muscular, within hours. 'Ee-a natoo, ves-alam, ho-et ya kea artoo Tari nota ve! The Doctor's eyes widened. 'She says she's sorry for killing us, for our blood, but she won't be able to stop it!'

'Ya – ae. Na va Ra'nok. Bol Kew a refgre aq u na masadi'

'She says that she's a Ra'nok, and she'll soon have to drink our blood to survive.'

An hour later, in Admiral Jat's office...

'Admiral, both you and Captain Brown have seen the holo-vid footage. She's getting stronger!' Doctor Michaels warned.

Anarita Jat lowered her eyes. 'Surely the forcefield will hold her.'

Karen sighed. 'For now, perhaps. But she's showing the startling ability to read minds. And some ability with telekinesis.' Anarita and Leigh glanced at each other. 'Tonight.' The Doctor continued. 'She raised a hypospray almost ten centimetres from my desk with her mind.'

'That's quite some feat.' Captain Brown said, disbelievingly. The Doctor nodded.

'And that was through a forcefield Captain, How long before she can take the phaser off your belt?' Captain Brown almost managed to hide his concerned look.

'I'm beginning to see your point, Doctor,' the Admiral sighed. 'I'll call a meeting first thing tomorrow. But for now, I'm ordering her to be heavily sedated. I'll also send a security team down to the Sickbay.'

In the station's spacious briefing room, a table surrounded by chairs was set up on a raised dais. Ke'reth walked in, garbed in a black jumpsuit. A large samurai sword hung from a heavy black sash around his waist. He nodded to Captain Brown as he entered the room.

Leigh shrugged. 'Sorry to ruin your morning workout, Ambassador,' the Captain quipped. Ke'reth smiled as he handed the sword to a bewildered Starfleet Ensign. B'Sel followed him into the room. She was already pushing the Doctor for information. 'What's so important about this little girl, Doctor?' The Klingon woman asked with a politely-interrogative tone.

'It's all going to be in the Admiral's report.' The Doctor said calmly. Romulan Ambassador K'hellenbeck entered the room, escorted by his Tal'Shiar advisor. 'I hope this is of some importance.' He scowled. As they sat down the lights flickered slightly above them...

Down in the sickbay, flashes of blue light pulsed out from the young girl's eyes. Sending a pair of Medical orderlies sprawling across the floor. Then standing up she walked towards the forcefield, her hands outstretched as if she was sleepwalking. As her fingers came in contact with the forcefield, she convulsed as she pushed slowly through the barrier. She approached the nearest of the men, and

lifting him, as if by an unseen hand, she raised him to her mouth. As the klaxons blared, she bit deep into his throat. The other yelled for security, as she dropped the first's lifeless body from her grasp. She ran into the corridor, seeming to shimmer as she took on the appearance of the dead orderly. A four-man Security detail barred her path. 'What happened?' a blue-skinned Bolian Lieutenant asked as she ran past them, moving toward the station's central core.

'It's loose!' came her words, imitating the dead man's startled voice.

The Romulan Ambassador stood up. 'I'm not sure what you're telling us, Admiral. 'Are you saying that there's some kind of, what did that Security officer call it?' His Advisor whispered in his ear. '...vampire on the station?' he continued.

Anarita nodded. 'Unfortunately that seems to be the problem. So what do we do?' she asked.

Ke'reth smiled. 'We could all invest in high collars,' he said wryly.

Admiral Jat risked a diplomatic incident and gave his remark an unfavourable glance, as a Terran Ensign ran into the room. 'Sorry to butt in, Sir! But she's broken loose.'

'How!' Admiral Varr said, speaking for the first time since the meeting started.

'I don't know how sir. But she's already killed a medical orderly. Anarita looked at those seated around the room.

Captain Brown stood up. 'We have to seal off all Turbolifts, and confine all persons aboard to quarters.'

Ke'reth nodded, as Captain Leigh Brown spoke. 'As the executive officer, and with the Admiral's permission, I'd like to impose a level one quarantine order.' The others seemed shocked.

The Admiral stood up. 'You understand the implications, of such an action?' she asked.

Leigh nodded.

Anarita sighed. 'How do we maintain our quarantine while we contain this creature, and secondly, with what?'

Leigh glanced at Ke'reth. 'To my knowledge, there are currently three Klingon Vor'cha-class battle cruisers in port. I'm sure the Ambassador will provide these ships to enforce the quarantine.'

Ke'reth nodded slowly.

'I'll have b'Sel contact their commanding officers. Tell them to turn away any vessel approaching the station.' Admiral Jat sat back in her seat.

'Is it possible for us to arrange to bring some Klingon troops onto the station? To aid my Starfleet officers in stopping this thing?' B'Sel stood up, her padd in hand.

'With the Ambassador's permission, I'll get right on it.'

Ke'reth nodded his consent.

Madia the Bajoran Ambassador stood for her turn. 'I too, would like to put a unit of Station's Bajoran security forces forward to augment the Klingon and Starfleet forces.'

Slowly Ambassador K'hellenbeck stood up. He was usually a quiet man; he generally just sat and listened, making notes of who said what, and why, into a small log recorder. 'I must agree with my esteemed colleagues. I too will place a unit of my Elite Tal'shiar Bodyguard temporarily at the Admiral's command.' Those at the table concealed their looks of shock, with varying degrees of success...

Admiral Dalen Varr stood aboard the USS. *Merlin*. He had been one of the few people allowed to leave the station before the quarantine orders had been put into effect. As soon as he had arrived in his ready room, his ship had been ordered sealed. Those of his crew that were already upon the station had been confined to temporary quarters. He scratched his head. The usually busy space dock seemed to

be ghostly and silent through the transparent aluminium of his office window. He picked up a copy of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* that he'd been reading, on and off, for about a week now. But now it seemed somehow Inappropriate...

The IKV. *Hov tel (Star-wing)* moved shark like through the inky void of space. A young Klingon woman stood up. 'Sir.' Her commanding officer approached her. 'There's a small ship heading for the station, sir.'

The Klingon Captain smiled.

'This is Captain Tia Mo'val, of the Imperial Klingon Vessel *Star-wing*. You are hereby ordered to observe Starfleet quarantine conditions.'

'Klingon vessel, please stand down your weapons, my name is Kor'ta, the Slayer. I believe I may be able to aid you.' The Klingon Captain showed her distrust of this strange woman who seemed to be speaking in riddles. 'What do you know, why do you believe we required any aid?' the Klingon woman barked at the slayer.

The slayer took a deep breath. 'The creature that has undoubtedly now killed on your station is called a Ra'nok, and it's getting stronger. I may be the only one who can stop it!'

B'Sel had left the meeting a little early, and after arranging for two units of Klingon troops onto the station and giving the commanders of three Klingon Vessels their orders. She moved her children to Ambassador's private quarters, and sealed the Embassy behind her. She then moved quickly towards her desk in the outer office and removed her Qis, a razor-sharp hooked dagger, and slipped its scabbard into the loop on her belt. She then pulled a disruptor pistol from the other drawer of her desk, and after checking the power coils charge, holstered it. Moving slowly throughout the embassy's lower levels, as she patrolled the darkened outer offices, she felt something damp, on one of the desks. She sniffed at the deep red stickiness on her glove. Blood. She knew the smell only too well. Anyone who'd ever been in combat did. She knelt down and looked at the bloody marks upon the floor. Following them, she drew her disruptor and removed the safety catch. The large storage cupboard in one of the far rooms had been torn open. She then saw the three dead Klingons that had been piled up within, their bodies drained of blood.

'B'Sel to Ke'reth.'

She heard Ke'reth's reply to her hail.

'We've got three dead in the Embassy, where are you?'

She heard Ke'reth curse.

'I'm two decks down from you. She's already killed a couple of Starfleet Security officers, and somehow found a way to override the turbolift's lock-out systems.'

B'Sel blinked. 'This isn't looking good, Ke'reth. She's already managed to get past one of our Security forcefields.' B'Sel put her hand out, and felt the curious tingling sensation that told her the invisible wall of energy that protected the embassy was still in place, for all the good it would do her.

Ke'reth snarled, as he bit his lip while thinking. 'B'Sel, if things become any more dangerous, you're to use my Security Clearance override and beam yourself and your children to the USS. *Rage*.'

'I'm a Klingon warrior!' she snarled, as she felt her pride challenged. 'I won't just run!' she snapped.

'You won't be running, if I decide the stakes have been raised! I'll be ordering you off the station for the good of your children!' She sighed, realising grudgingly that he was right. She hated to admit it, but this time he was right. 'Understood, Commodore!' Using his rank in response. 'B'Sel out.'

Twenty minutes or more passed, as she sat with her back to the only door into the room where her children played. A disruptor pistol lay primed and ready in her hand.

General Korsh and Ambassador Ke'reth entered the Embassy, both carried Bat'leths on their arms. She sighed, as she lowered the pistol slowly. 'I'm going to have to test you both, you realise that?' Ke'reth removed his gauntlet.

'Something else wanting my blood?' She pushed the hypospray against his wrist. There was a hiss, as his blood checked out as Imperial Klingon, likewise the General's. Ke'reth then checked her blood. 'I think it's time to beam your little ones across to the USS. *Rage*,' he said, slowly.

B'Sel removed the security lock-out device and entered the room as the doors closed behind them. At least with her children safe, this would be one less worry on her mind.

Rhahl sat there drawing on the padd balanced on his lap. 'Where are we going?' he asked, standing up. K'regh picked up his jacket, and echoed his brother's question. Little KharlS stood beside Ke'reth, and held his hand.

General Korsh grinned. 'You're all going aboard a Federation Starship, while Starfleet engineers run a test on the station's primary reactors.' He lied. In a few years time, they wouldn't have been naïve enough to take his lie at face value. But for now, it was as good as story as any. B'Sel smiled at the General, The heavysset grey haired warrior, gave her a surreptitious wink, and slight smile. B'Sel smiled as she realised that Korsh was what Ke'reth would look like, if he lived about another forty years. 'Think of it as a secret mission.' Korsh said, as he helped them pack three small bags. 'You're all going to tell me what you see on this Federation ship, when you get back, you understand?' All three children nodded. The old man's words seemed to have a calming effect on her children, which she wished that she shared. Korsh then embraced b'Sel. 'Take care of them, girl,' he said, almost as an order. She repressed the urge to snap off a salute.

Back in the office where b'Sel had made her grim discovery, General Korsh turned the topmost body over. The dead man looked terrified. 'I can't believe a little girl can do this to a Klingon warrior.' The General growled. 'This security officer is a martial arts expert, he's known to me. His name is La'mek, He earned the order of the bat'leth two years back.' Ke'reth's communicator beeped as the General spoke, interrupting his thoughts. 'Ke'reth here! Report!'

'Sir! This is Captain Mo'val, aboard the IKV. *Star-wing*. We have a woman here who wishes to speak to the Admiral. She claims that she's been sent here to kill this vampire thing.' Ke'reth switched his communicator to a Starfleet frequency.

'Admiral Jat, From Ambassador Ke'reth, Please respond.' He heard the bleep, before she answered. 'Please Ambassador, I hope this is important.'

He sighed. 'One of my patrol ships has intercepted a vessel. Its occupant, an alien female, claims she's been sent to kill our monster for us.'

Anarita took a deep breath. 'What do your warrior senses tell you Ambassador?'

Ke'reth's voice came back to her. 'I say, listen to this woman. She claims to have a possible solution to our problem.'

Anarita turned and quietened her bodyguards.

'Then you better put her through, and have her escorted onto the station. We already have reports of sixteen dead aboard the station. Right about now Ambassador, I'm almost ready to ask the Fek'lhr for assistance.'

The voice came through the communication speakers of Admiral Jat's Office. 'Admiral, my name is Kor'ta; I'm a Slayer of such things as the one with which you are plagued. I hunt the Ra'nok,' she said.

'So that's what this thing is called.'

Jat grimaced.

The alien woman nodded.

'Then, Korta, I welcome you to Starbase 410. I only wish it were under better circumstances.' The Slayer turned her eyes downward.

'If it were under better circumstances, Admiral. I wouldn't be here!'

The small vessel passed under the USS *Rage* as it approached the station's Executive docking bay. Blinking amber lights lit a small runway.

The slayer's spacecraft was a little smaller than a Federation shuttlecraft, but its shape by comparison could hardly have been more different. It was, on the whole, a slightly-flattened cone-shape with four short jagged wings protruding from its hull in an x-shaped formation. Its cockpit seemed to be raised slightly from its hull and covered with a seemingly-opaque canopy. The whole thing was a dull charcoal grey in colour with blue running-lights at its wing-tips. A clicking sound came from the craft, and the front of the vessel hissed, as some kind of hydraulic mechanism raised the front third of the vessel. Then plumes of smoke or gas appeared from either side of the ship, as the cockpit lowered until it came to rest a few inches above the hanger bay floor. Federation Security officers stood silently, phaser rifles held in the crook of their arms. The pilot was dressed from head to toe in a form-fitting spacesuit. The helmet was, to the eye, little more than an egg-shaped dome, probably made from the same opaque material as the vessel's canopy.

'Which one of you is Admiral Jat?'

Anarita stepped forward as the black-clad creature removed its helmet. Underneath was a young but austere-looking woman, her head slightly-domed and covered in short stripe-like yellow blotches. A shock of scarlet hair formed a bird of paradise crest from her brow to the back of her head. 'My name is Kor'ta; I'm a Slayer of such things as the one with which you are plagued. I hunt the Ra'nok!' she said.

Anarita blinked; everyone present seemed to be hanging on what would happen next.

'Where is the Ra'nok?' the slayer asked. Anarita's eyes were drawn to the metre-long harpoon-lance, which this woman carried with cold confidence. 'It's been driven down into engineering. As far as I can see it's contained for now.' Anarita said. The slayer's amber/green eyes blinked.

'How many has it fed from?'

'It's already killed twenty-two, I don't know how many of my people it's eaten.'

'We may still have time.' Anarita heard the words, but needed them clarified.

'What do you mean, 'still have time'?' Anarita asked. But the alien woman seemed eager to start the hunt...

Down in Engineering, K'hellenbeck knelt down and turned over the corpse of one of his men. As he did so, the man, who seconds earlier had been dead, rolled over. Wild maddened eyes stared dead from his foul fang-mouthed maw of a face as his hands grabbed for K'hellenbeck's tunic.

The Romulan rolled backwards, firing his disruptor pistol at point-blank range into this creature's head, causing it to explode in a gory flesh-filled green haze. K'hellenbeck stood up. He'd seen war before, and had been more surprised than shocked by this new turn of events. 'K'hellenbeck to Admiral Jat.'

Anarita stepped back to take her call. 'Jat here, Ambassador, what is it?' she asked hearing the concern in the man's voice.

'Warn everyone. The victims of this creature seem to be intent on coming back to life.' Anarita looked hard at Kor'ta.

'It seems what you've told me might happen is happening.' Anarita then made a call to her communications chief to display the new information on all computer screens, then transmit an audio feed to all Section Commanders to read the information and pass it on.

Kor'ta sat down, and looked at her boots before taking a deep breath before looking up. 'It's known as the Tari Madness. Tari is our word for blood. The Ra'nok's bite contains a poison that imitates death, and causes an irreversible mutation that makes its victims turn Ra'nok. Legends tell us that it only seems to release this poison after around thirty kills, and then it gets stronger.'

Admiral Jat handed her Phaser to Leigh as took another communicator call. 'Admiral this is Doctor Michaels. One of our corpses just sat up, what the hell is happening?' Anarita explained the situation.

Karen shook her head. 'There's something very wrong here, I believe that there's some kind of induced genetic mutation here. Our little girl knew she was going to change. She tried to warn us.'

'Induced!' Anarita asked.

'There's a secondary string of DNA here, wrapped tightly around the first. Then at all of a sudden without warning, it seems to split the primary strain, and by adding itself it induces mutation. My best guess, Admiral, is that it's induced around the onset of puberty,' the Doctor said.

'It sounds amazing, but how does it help us?' Anarita asked. The Doctor glanced at her padd. 'I believe that someone once tried to use this secondary DNA strain to cure some kind of hereditary illness that probably arrived in puberty. And the treatment probably worked in most cases. Maybe one in every hundred million would mutate. As for, how it helps you? I'll have to get back to you on that one, Admiral, but I can tell you the secondary DNA strain isn't from the same species. It's, as far as I can tell, some kind of insectivorous arachnid. That's why it's feeding off the liquid part of people, and probably turning others into drones, For all I know, that's to help it build a nest.'

'You don't think she's...' The doctor nodded as she spoke.

'I believe that she already had an egg within her. Don't ask me how it got there. I first took it to be a cyst of some kind, but our medical files on this species are incomplete. But after the tests I've been running on the scans and blood samples, which I took earlier. I'm almost sure that this creature is intending to give birth, as soon as it's set up its lair and created drones to serve and protect it.'

Captain Leigh Brown sat down beside her. 'You better get some sleep Admiral.'

She nodded, she knew that sleep-wise that she was already beaten. He stood up, and pointed to three men in gold shirts. 'You! You! And you! Take the Admiral to her quarters, then guard her while she sleeps. I'll have you men relieved in five hours. Good night Admiral, I hope to have this mess cleaned up by the time you awake.'

'Ke'reth to all Unit Commanders, Our monster has moved down to the secondary Jeffries tube, and is moving downwards towards the waste-reclamation centre. Don't ask me how we lost it, but the Romulans and my own team almost pinned it in crossfire. We didn't even faze it. Does our newly-resident expert have any viable suggestions?' A note of irritation was evident in the Klingon Ambassador's voice.

Kor'ta stood close to Leigh. 'Take me to this area!' Leigh nodded as he released the security seal on the turbolift.

On the way down, Kor'ta spoke. 'What is in this waste-reclamation area?' she asked. Leigh checked his padd. 'I've never been down here, but the main computer has it listed as textile waste. Old uniforms, clothing, bedding, towels, worn carpeting etc. . . ' Kor'ta shook her head.

'Then it's intending to nest, I'm afraid your doctor is right.' Leigh checked his phaser pulse rifle for the third time that night, and still felt somehow underdressed.

Anarita woke up, the hands of a man around her throat. Her quarters smelt foul with blood, and she couldn't breathe as she tried to roll away from the grip of what used to be a medical division Ensign. She tried to kick out as its foul breath came closer and closer, as the creature's fang-like teeth moved closer and closer and bit deep into her throat. She then awoke with a start, her heart sounding like a Klingon war drum deep within her chest. She called for the lights, as she stumbled into her bathroom and splashed cold water over her face. According to the clock in her quarters, she'd only been asleep for two hours. But after her nightmare, she didn't really feel like going back to bed.

She accessed her viewscreen. But whom should she call? Captain Brown had almost ordered her to bed, and as he was new to this position, she didn't want it to seem like she was checking up on him. Somewhere far below her, two dead men spiralled backwards into the hallway.

Ambassador Madia and Evad moved through the stations access corridors. Evad knelt down and checked the corpses; this time there would be no getting up.

'Prophets protect us,' he said in Bajoran, holding back the urge to be sick. Madia put her hand on his shoulder. 'It's okay, Evad, these men were already dead.' He shook his head. 'I've always hated killing, even during the occupation, and I hate killing now. I could hardly bring myself to shoot Cardassians. That's why I trained to be a hover-bike dispatch rider. I did my bit by avoiding combat wherever possible.' She smiled. 'You must have been good; your record shows half a dozen commendations for bravery. Not to mention, three medals for the same.'

He nodded as he checked his weapon. 'It wasn't easy for any of us. I too had to learn to protect my friends and family. I had a phaser pistol put in my hand at ten years old. Made my first kill, not long after.' Evad glanced up at her, from checking his rifle. She then continued.

'He was a wounded Cardassian scout. I shut my eyes tightly, took a deep breath and point-blanked him.'

The sound of footsteps rounded the corner interrupted them. They both raised their weapons as a Vulcan woman rounded the corner, her tricorder in hand. 'Follow me, Ambassador, this area isn't safe.' As she turned, a disruptor blast tore the air as the Vulcan woman's head exploded like overripe melon. A few seconds later Ke'reth landed beside them. A black cord had allowed him to propel down from the balcony above. 'Sorry about that,' he grinned, 'but I was on my way to bring you two down to the textile-recycling area. We've caught her. The war is over!' the Klingon joked.

Madia looked concerned. 'How did you know?' she asked, as Ke'reth led them further down a dark access tunnel. 'Watch your step, folks, there's no lighting working down here, they've had to shut it down,' the Klingon replied, seemingly ignoring her question.

'Really!' Madia asked, sniffing the air. 'Ambassador, how did you know the Vulcan woman was infected?'

'Lucky guess,' the Klingon answered.

Captain Leigh Brown knelt down beside the dead Vulcan's body, and turned over what was left of her neck. 'Who the hell shot this one. She's one of us.'

'Are you sure, Captain?' a young sandy-haired Ensign asked.

Leigh nodded, sadly.

'Bloody Romulans.' Leigh cursed. 'The Tricorder says that this woman was shot dead with a Romulan rifle.' He then looked down to the fresh green blood surrounding the body. Two sets of the three boot patterns had Bajoran symbols on their soles; the third print was smaller and barefoot...

Madia continued to talk to Ke'reth, as she typed into her Security Padd. Then handed it to Evad. Who hid his shock well, at the words upon it.

This isn't Ke'reth. It's the Monster.

He deleted the padd, and then glancing up he saw movement ahead. He grabbed his friend's shoulder, and rolled to the left, pulling Madia to the ground and rolling protectively over her, as a barrage of phaser fire struck Ke'reth's now shimmering form, twisting it as it dived over the balcony's safety rail and disappeared into the tunnels below.

Captain Brown's team helped them up.

'You two got lucky, how did you know that wasn't Ke'reth? Captain Brown asked.

The Bajoran woman gazed up at him. 'Haven't you ever noticed the smell of the armour polish that all Klingons seem to use? It's a sweet smell, kind of woody. It's always reminded me of the fruit trees that grew near where I was born. And that thing didn't have it.'

Evad caught his breath. 'Then it must have killed that Vulcan woman, because the Vulcan must have found a way to track it with a tricorder.'

'Something we haven't,' Leigh snapped, holding out the tricorder. 'I think you're right, there's a slight modification here, it's been modified to track any scent it can't match to the scents in its memory.'

Evad brushed himself down and turned his wrist light back on. His face held a look of confusion. 'Was it my imagination, or did that thing have wings?'

Madia sat up from where she'd landed.

'I saw them too!' she gasped. 'Definitely wings!'

Ke'reth's combat experience showed as he calmly unwound a length of strong black propelling cord from his belt and tied the end tightly to the banister rail. He then looped it through a figure-eight-shaped ring on his belt. Leigh smiled as another Klingon officer helped him into his propelling harness. He then checked his own cord, as a female Klingon handed him a plasma flamer and briefed him on its operation.

Leigh strapped the weapon to his back, and took his place between Ke'reth and Madia.

Madia glanced at Evad. 'Go with these Klingons, get yourself back to the Embassy.' He paused, looking concerned. 'I can make that an order, if you like?' She smiled.

He nodded his compliance as Ke'reth slid backward off the rail, and fell into the darkness below. The others followed more cautiously.

Anarita watched angrily as the body count rose. She sat at her desk and stared at her rapidly-cooling coffee. She'd left her quarters and moved back to her office. Even here one of her guards had killed one of her own infected crew. As she came out of her office she met the Bajoran known as Evad. 'I've a message for you. It's down in the textile waste pit. Ambassadors Madia and Ke'reth, also Captain Brown are chasing it.' The Admiral cupped her hands over her eyes and cleared her thoughts.

'How many of the infected did you find on your way up? Accurate figures have been a little hard to come by.'

He shook his head slowly.

'Twenty, perhaps more. These Klingons,' he said, gesturing to Ke'reth's Special Ops team, "must have taken care of at least twenty.'

Anarita cursed as she moved back to her desk. A Klingon warrior entered the room, his face smeared with black and grey combat-paint that obscured his features. But the black dagger-shaped emblem that he wore proudly on his sleeve marked him out as one of Ke'reth's Elite Black Dagger Special Operations Unit. She racked her

mind for a name, and thankfully it came to her. Hav'ek, known as Havoc by his friends. She stood up to greet him as he saluted. 'What news, Hav'ek?' she asked.

'This battle does not please me Admiral.' He snarled. She must have shown a look of shock for the Klingon clarified his comment. 'Some of the drones, have been attempting to get up into the habitat zones. We're fighting an honourless enemy, who sneaks around in the shadows and kills the weak and strong alike.'

She scratched her brow. 'What of Captain Brown, Ke'reth and the other Section Commanders?' Anarita asked.

'The Romulans led by K'hellenbeck, have sealed...' He stopped speaking as he gestured towards the illuminated Station schematic on her wall. She nodded her consent. The Klingon tapped his finger on the panel. 'The Romulans have all but sealed off this area. The Bajorans and Federation forces have sealed off the level above them, while our Klingon forces have taken to guarding the stations Jeffries tubes and access crawlways.'

She sighed. 'Are we safe?' she asked.

The Klingon smiled. 'I hope so!' He grinned, as she glanced up at him. 'I have no intention of dying at the hands of a little girl half my size, mutant or not!'

Madia found the switch on her rifle which activated its powerful torch. As she did so the weapon's built-in tricorder came on before her. The weapon was of a heavy solid Klingon design which left her in no doubt of its power. She looked from Ke'reth to Leigh. Both were checking their weapons. Up ahead she could just about make out movement. The now-unmistakable zombie-like shambling movement of a drone. No more than a walking corpse, she reminded herself as she shouldered her rifle.

Ke'reth's hand pushed her barrel down slightly. 'That's a field artillery disruptor, Ambassador,' he whispered. 'You have to aim a little lower than your intended target, these cannons kick, and you don't want to punch a hole through the ceiling.' Leigh smiled at the Klingon's words as Ke'reth allowed them to fire their weapons. Madia rocked backwards on the balls of her feet, as with a burst of neon-blue fire she completely incinerated her target. Leigh had also turned his target to steaming sludge.

Leigh looked a little startled. 'The recoil on this thing is incredible!' he gasped.

Madia nodded, as she saw Ke'reth's grin.

'Remember, Captain, we're fighting something that walks through force fields and can shrug off phaser and disruptor fire.'

The big Klingon gave him a predatory smile. 'So you're saying that we just might need these,' he said patting his gun.

Down and down they moved, occasionally picking off a drone. If they could have used the station's turbolifts, they could have entered the second level of the station's textile reclamation and recycling centre within minutes. And if they were right, they would find the creature's nest. But of course, the Turbolifts had been switched off to protect those locked in their living quarters.

As they moved further down the station. Kor'ta finally caught up with them. She turned to Ke'reth. 'You've done well cornering it, now back off and let an expert work!'

Ke'reth looked her up and down, then gave her his own verbal broadside. 'Listen here, sweet-stuff! We got here first; if you've got any advice, then give it up! If not shut up and fall into line!' The slayer raised a lethal-looking serrated combat knife.

Ke'reth spun, catching her wrist with one hand, and snapping the blade from her grasp with his other, as he flipped her over his right arm and lifted her clean above his head.

'You've never been in combat before have you?'

She screamed something probably an obscenity. As Ke'reth spun around, he dropped the startled Slayer unceremoniously onto her backside. He then pointed his gun at her.

'Bang! You're dead!' Ke'reth growled, as Madia moved to sit beside the now-whimpering Slayer.

'I have been chosen and trained for this!' she sobbed indignantly.

'You've never even seen one of these things before have you?' Ke'reth asked slowly, lowering his voice.

'How did you know?' she asked.

'You don't move like a hunter. Your weapons belt is loose; I can hear it rattling when you walk. You just don't move - ' he repeated himself, ' - like someone trained to be a killer.' She still sobbed as she turned her head to face him. 'I want to know what I'm facing, and please,' he asked softly, 'the whole story this time.'

'My people tried to wipe out an illness, long ago. It seemed to work, or so our history books tell us. Then there came the story of the Ra'nok monster. It was then that the catchers and slayers were trained to take care of the mutations. We learned to find mutant children within weeks of their hatching from their eggs. We took them to another planet. In the old days we just left them there. But for the last three centuries or so, we learned how to operate on them.'

'We did it to make the children well, before returning them to their parents. But every so often, one would be missed, and become Ra'nok. There hasn't been one for ages. But we still train slayers just in case.'

Ke'reth smiled, as he put his hand on her shoulder. 'If we'd had all the information you seem to know, given to us when you first arrived, a lot of people might still be alive. You should have contacted us immediately you found out about the threat this thing posed to this station. Your ship is equipped with a subspace communicator, isn't it?' She nodded as she cried against Madia's arm.

As she stood up Ke'reth tightened her belt. She smiled as he wiped her tears with the back of his glove, and handed her her knife. Leigh stepped forward. 'How did you intend to kill this thing?' She looked up at him.

'It must be burned by a great fire, that's what we are taught. Our ships have shackles mounted over their main engines,' she said quietly. Madia sat forward.

'So your intent was to dart it with that spear gun of yours?' Ke'reth picked her rifle off the floor from where it had fallen, and started to examine it. 'Ah-ha!' he growled softly. 'That's how it works. It's a beautiful piece of work. A rail gun, firing a poisoned steel dart.' The young woman smiled. 'You have a good knowledge of weapons.'

'Target shooting is a hobby of mine.' Ke'reth joked.

Captain Brown scanned the dart with his Tricorder. 'This stuff would knock down just about anything, it's some kind of powerful sedative, alcohol-based I think. It also has a neural inhibitor. With this in you, you couldn't do anything!' Leigh said, quietly.

'That's the idea.' Kor'ta whispered. 'I expected that I could just dart it and roast it, and go home to a hero's welcome.'

Ke'reth held her by the shoulders, and looked her into her eyes. 'In a time of war, all soldiers are called heroes. In a time of peace, they're often an embarrassment, to those whom they served. Few ever get the pleasure of being called hero to their face.' He sighed. 'And after what most have seen, and done,' the Klingon paused, 'few would want to hear it. It's often just too damn painful.'

'Heat! Fire kills it.' Leigh thought out loud, before speaking. 'What about luring the creature down to the station's primary waste furnace, couldn't we force it into that?' Leigh asked.

Madia pushed a wayward lock of blond hair from her eyes. 'It's got to be worth a try, hasn't it?' she said with grim determination,

Ke'reth nodded. 'Sounds like a plan to me.'

Kor'ta sighed. 'What about its wings? The wings come just before the creature gives birth. They allow her to find a safe nest. Then we're taught that mother's abdominal cavity bursts releasing hundreds of spore-like young. It's the wings that prevent the young from being blown too far away from the mother's carcass.' Leigh gulped.

'You mean they eat her?' he asked morbidly.

Anarita must have dropped off to sleep, after her Klingon visitor had left, because her communicator woke her. 'Jat here! What's happening?' she asked.

'It's Ke'reth here, Admiral! I need you to do something for me?'

'What do you need Ambassador?'

'I don't have a lot of time, but I want you to restore power to the station's primary waste furnace.' She blinked the sleep from her eyes.

'Sure, I can do that! But why?' She heard Ke'reth chuckle.

'I'm going to make enough Monster a la Ke'reth for everyone, Admiral. Before it gives birth, and we're all in the soup, Ke'reth out.'

Down through the darkness four figures moved in the eerie silence of the stations lower decks. Then there came a low industrial humming sound, quiet at first, but the sound built up into a hum, then a roaring noise. Then came the smell of burning waste.

Madia opened a small storage-hatch set into a nearby wall, and pulled out some hooded breather-masks. 'These will stop us getting affected by the toxicity of this place.' Then as the red and amber warning lights came on they saw their victim, their prey, for that was what this young girl had become. Her skin was now pale green and waxy-looking, her chest and stomach bloated, almost beyond capacity. Her eyes wild, staring and blood-red in colour; her wings flapped but could no longer lift her swollen body from the textile waste that surrounded her. Ke'reth took the slayer's rifle and aimed. The creature seemed to ignore them as blood trickled from its mouth.

Then without warning, Ke'reth turned and handed the rifle to Kor'ta. 'What ever you do, kid, don't miss!' he snarled, as Kor'ta's hands trembled as she took the rifle.

Madia took her cue from Ke'reth and opened fire, forcing the creature back towards the safety-rail that ran high above the now glowing furnace. As directed, Captain Brown's shot hit the side of the walkway partially severing it, as Kor'ta's dart hit the creature hard in its upper spine. It howled in pain as it fell backwards towards the fiery furnace far below, its limp wings flapping lifelessly as it scratched for purchase on the burning air...

The slayer blinked. 'You allowed me to regain my honour. Why?' Kor'ta asked, her eyes streaming in the dull red illumination of the pit. Her face behind the visor of her plexiglas breathing hood was streaked with tears.

Ke'reth removed his hood as he led her away from the pit. 'To a Klingon, honour is often considered more important than life.' She nodded, somehow understanding his words, and their deeper meaning. 'But you trusted me?' she asked.

Madia smiled as she put her hand on the girl's shoulder. 'Of course, he trusted you, you're a slayer.'

Captain Brown removed his breathing mask and ran his hand back through his hair. 'Next time there's a monster on the station,' he said, clearing his throat. 'I want to be on Risa.' he gasped.

Ke'reth laughed. 'Next time there's a monster on the station, I'll take you!' he joked.

Madia leant her gun against the wall. She was glad to be relieved of its weight. 'I hope you've got room for me on this pleasure trip of yours. Because I never want to see another monster ever again.'